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THE ROLE OF VISUAL CULTURE IN BRAND IDENTITY AND
COMMUNICATION: A CASE STUDY OF LOEWE

Dissertation submitted to Universidade Católica Portuguesa to
obtain a Master's Degree in Communication Studies –
Communication, Marketing and Advertising

By

Roman Karpov

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Under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Nelson Ribeiro
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Abstract

This research conducted in this dissertation aimed to analyze how a modern brand utilizes visual practices in its activities, contributing to a broader social and cultural discourse. For this purpose, we developed a case study of the luxury brand Loewe, in which its visual content analysis was executed.

The topic of visual culture is explored along with its historical development and contemporary social applications, focusing on complex dynamics of visuality from the viewpoints of art, culture, society, and business activities. In the second part, modern media theory, with an emphasis on the complex process of message formation and interpretation, and the theory of contemporary art as the key domain for broad social discourse, are researched. This is especially significant in the realm of advertising and branding, as brands today are intertwined with these multifarious cultural conversations. Branding theory itself is covered in the third part of the theoretical framework, as we discuss the role of visual entities in shaping brand identity and communications, notion of contemporary luxury and cultural narratives behind storytelling.

The methodology part sets the direction for a case study, explaining the research purpose and coining a definitive research question. The research concludes with a practical exploration of the Spanish luxury brand Loewe as a case study, presenting how a modern brand builds its visual narrative, operates with cultural and artistic influences, and positions itself within a global cultural context. This study demonstrates the vibrant and ongoing connection between the cultural background of the past and contemporary culture and suggests that Loewe strategically uses visual content in its branding to reflect evolving societal values and reinterpret cultural heritage within the modern socio-cultural context.

Keywords: *visual culture, media theory, brand identity, luxury branding*

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Introduction

The purpose of this dissertation is to analyze the visual communications of a particular brand through the theoretical and historical context of visual culture, understanding its role in perceiving, reflecting and constructing the world around, and the way its functions are utilized in contemporary society. Inspired by the thoughts and assumptions stated in John Berger's book *Ways of Seeing* (1972), this work aims to examine the notion of visuality in its artistic, social, cultural and commercial manifestations, considering the ongoing relationship between society and visuality as well as the assumption of the persistence of our shared cultural heritage in the form of symbols, images, allegories, and associations. The study's emphasis is on how visuality, communication, and identity are intertwined. Thus, visual culture, media and branding constitute the three primary research areas.

Drawing from the key researchers of the area – Rogoff (2002), Sturken and Cartwright (2001), Mirzoeff (1999), Mitchell (1995), Dikovitskaya (2014), among others, this study is based on the dominant position of the image in modern society and aims to investigate how exactly visuality is involved into cultural, social, artistic, and commercial spheres of our life. The extensive studies of Rorty (1979) and Jay (1988), among others, demonstrate the historical importance of visual forms of expression in shaping the worldview and cultural landscape of Western society. The ability to trace a certain line of continuity from the Renaissance era to the late modernity of the early 20th century can be seen in the works of Bryson (1984), Crary (2001), and Brettel (1999). Extending this line further, this work aims to explore the forms of expression that visual culture adopts today, considering the use of contemporary media and in the context of an evolving consumer society.

It was decided to conduct a case study of a specific brand in order to comprehend the nature of visual culture in the context of commercial communications while taking into account theories of contemporary media and branding, presented in the works of Lelis and Kreutz (2022), Aiello and Parry (2019), McLuhan (1964), and Gripsrud (2002), among others. This way, we have a chance to combine the three areas of research – visuality, communication, and identity – into a single system by looking at and analyzing its operations. The main objective is to comprehend how a specific brand interacts with visual culture in its operations and

communications, as well as the position it claims in the modern social and cultural environment. To achieve this goal, the methodological framework of this research is built on a case study of the Loewe brand. By examining its visual communications, in terms of its visual content analysis, we will delve into several examples of the cultural narratives and themes it uses to establish its market positioning and communicating with its audience. A separate perspective opens then on the concept of luxury, with its mechanics of value creation in modern conditions, when standardized concepts of luxury, quality and exclusivity don't work on their own without a solid emotional appeal (Lelis & Kreutz, 2022).

The initial part of the study examines visual culture as a whole, occasionally focusing on just one of the two components that make up this concept. For a comprehensive understanding of the notion, the first chapter explores both the fundamental theory and the historical context of its formation, outlining the enormous impact that visual culture has had on the development of Western society since the Renaissance. The purpose of this part is to trace and justify the dominant position of visibility in contemporary Western culture which has expanded from outdated, purely academic limitations of painting, sculpture, design or architecture to encompass all types of social shifts and cultural processes (Jenks, 1995; Dikovitskaya, 2014).

The second part of this study focuses on contemporary media theory, especially emphasizing their role as the means for visual communication. In addition to brief positions about classic media theory, special attention will be paid to the process of formation, transmission, reception, and interpretation of the message, as this process takes on particular variability and is subject to many modulations when the object of the message is a visual element. Thus, the theory of visibility studied in the previous chapter is combined and analyzed together with media theory, exploring themes of objectivity and personal perception, cultural codes and representation. Particular attention is also paid to the phenomenon of contemporary art – not from the perspective of its aesthetic characteristics, but as a phenomenon that has brought sharp social issues into broad public discourse. More than just a critical or reflective mirror, contemporary art has evolved into a product that produces and conceptualizes social discourses related to identity, gender, race, and power, among other topics (Aiello & Parry, 2019). Distinguishing contemporary art's position within the larger ecosystem of

commodified discourses is important in relation to the sphere of modern advertising, branding and publicity, as contemporary brands are involved into diverse cultural dialogues and therefore operate within the same social and cultural critique.

Dedicated to the theory of modern branding, the third part examines visual culture from the standpoint of its practical application in commercial communications. Using the collected theoretical foundation from parts about visual culture and media, we will explore how exactly visual communication meets the demands of brands for competitive positioning in today's society, finalising the visibility-communication-identity triangular framework of the study. What role does visual identity and visual language play? What is expected from a brand that seeks recognition and understanding in a global cultural context?

Detailed visual content analysis of several Loewe advertising campaign constructs the methodology part of the research, as we attempt to interpret their visual language and its symbolism, media aspirations and culturally enriched artistic expressions. Summing up the complex intersections and interaction from the covered theories, we obtain a clear understanding of how Loewe utilizes contemporary visual practices to shape its brand identity what communication strategies do they utilize, and how does a modern brand interact with a broader discourse on media, visual culture, and social values.

1. Visual culture

1.1 Introduction

In the following part we will examine the variety of meanings and notions behind the field of visual culture. Approaching the topic, researchers usually explore both the term as a whole, then focusing on its constitutive terms and the relation between them. We might assume that strict separation of notions might distort its contextual meaning, so hereby we will present theories and findings of various authors without focusing particularly on ‘culture’ or ‘visuality’, but rather on the general field of visual culture. The reason to explore this subject and its overall importance for the research is defined by the general perspective of the study, which considers the predominance of the image in contemporary society (Mitchell, 1995) as a foundational basis for the investigation of the case. While this research will also closely investigate the topic related to media and contemporary branding theory, it is all going to be approached through the optics of visual culture. Thus, a comprehensive overview of visual culture, its theory, historical context and current state, and the role played by visuality in the Western society is in the focus of the first chapter.

1.2 Theoretical framework of visual culture

Visual culture refers to a field of study that explores the role and significance of visual images, artifacts and phenomena in our daily lives and broader society (Mirzoeff, 1999). Unlike art history, with its precise focus on the formal qualities of artworks, visual culture encompasses a wide array of visual expressions – from advertisements, digital media and architecture to film, photography and can even a regular everyday object (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). Rooted in the recognition of the all-encompassing presence and influence of images in contemporary life (Mitchell, 2002), visual culture aims to examine how visual representations reflect and shape cultural beliefs, social norms and individual identities (Mirzoeff, 1999). In its basis, the study of visual culture emphasizes the interdisciplinary nature of visual analysis, sourcing from fields such as sociology, anthropology, psychology

and media studies, employing theoretical frameworks and notions of semiotics, postmodernism, feminist theory, globalised society and other (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001).

Rogoff (2002) theorises visual culture with the focus on its “centrality of vision and the visual world in producing meanings, establishing and maintaining aesthetics values, gender stereotypes and power relations within culture” (Rogoff, 2002: 24). Such approach, which inclines the notion of visual culture more to the actual cultural side, is supported by many other key researchers of the field, such as Sturken and Cartwright (2001), Crary (2001) or Dikovitskaya (2014). Rogoff also insists that visual culture goes far beyond the basic study of images and puts visibility as an ‘arena’ on which cultural meanings are constituted, analysed and interpreted, which exposes any visual encounter we experience to countless contexts, meanings and subjective interpretations (Rogoff, 2002: 24-25).

Introducing the idea of visual culture, Bal (2003) places the concept within the complex interplay between seeing and knowing, at the same time theorizing it within cultural context (Bal, 2003). Her theory of visibility is based on the critique of visual essentialism, a “purity-assuming cut between what is visual and what is not”, emphasizing that images are not self-contained entities with fixed meanings but are instead deeply embedded in and shaped by cultural, historical and social contexts (Bal, 2003: 6). In this respect, Bal presents visual culture as not merely a study of visual objects but a critical analysis of the cultural processes and practices that intersect with them. Following this logic, visual culture studies must delve into the underlying narratives, ideologies and power relations that are embedded within and at the same time shaped by visual phenomena. In its relation to social discourse, visual culture studies must then challenge master narratives that are presented as natural and universal, critically examining their connections to nationalism, classism, imperialism, racism and realism (Bal, 2003).

Speaking of the media or other possible carriers of visual encounters within society, Jenks suggests that visual culture should be referred to “all those items of culture whose visual appearance is an important feature of their being or their purpose” (Jenks, 1995: 16). Taking into account the dominant position of visibility in Western culture, and thus the possibility to encompass almost any object within the category of ‘important visual appearance’, we might

assume that such positioning underlines in a way the detachment of visual culture from the notion of 'high art'. As noted by Jenks himself, the visual culture field should be definitely broaden from outdated, purely academic limitations on painting, sculpture, design and architecture (Jenks, 1995: 16).

Dikovitskaya describes visual culture as an interdisciplinary field which emerged in the late 1980s at the intersection of various disciplines like art history, anthropology, film studies and linguistics with cultural studies and poststructuralist theory. The terms itself is described as a "research area and a curricular initiative that regards the visual image as the focal point in the processes through which meaning is made in a cultural context" (Dikovitskaya, 2014: 107). The author considers visual culture as a discipline developing after the 'cultural turn' of 1980s – sociological paradigm, which emphasizes human subjectivity and contextual meaning within interpretative and hermeneutic tradition, not just a model of natural sciences (Dikovitskaya, 2014: 109). Further explaining the transformation which lead to the emergence of visual culture within the culture as a whole, Dikovitskaya (2014) recognizes two paradigms, similar to those developed by Williams (1998), Mirzoeff (2002) and other researchers of cultural theory.

The two paradigms mentioned above emerged with the rise of cultural studies in the humanities from the early 1980s and represent the following approaches to visual culture:

1. Natural sciences model: this paradigm organized the study of society as a whole along the lines of natural sciences, mostly applying quantitative methods to understand social categories. The issue about this approach was the lack of attention from the researchers' side to individual motivation within social formations and questions towards the meaning of social categories as they are (Dikovitskaya; 2014: 111-112).

2. Cultural turn: the paradigm rooted into interpretative and hermeneutic traditions, emphasized more on human subjectivity, contextual meaning and the exploration of cultural contexts. Unlike the previous paradigm, this approach gave importance to the interpretation of symbols, rituals, discourses and other social relations within its subjective perception. In this paradigm, culture is seen not as a mere reflection of social, economic or political forces

but also as causation of these processes. This paradigm is characterized by interconnections between power and knowledge, treating art and visuality as a discursive system rather than an autonomous entity (Dikovitskaya; 2014: 112-114).

Respectfully, the shift from the first to the second paradigm signified a major transformation in the study of culture and constituted the foundation for the emergence of visual studies as a modern discipline. A deeper understanding of the complexity of cultural phenomena, taken as a reflection of relationships between images, power, ideology and representation, the cultural turn set the way to a different field of study which shapes the notion of visual studies.

The connotation of culture proposed by Dikovitskaya (2014) as the ‘model of natural sciences’ can be considered as corresponding to Williams’s (1998) ‘social’ definition which presents culture as a certain way of life through which values and meanings are manifested through institutions of art, learning and behavioral norms (Williams, 1998: 48). An approach “belonging to the interpretative and hermeneutic tradition” (Dikovitskaya, 2014: 109) carries a meaning similar to Williams’s ‘documentary’ cultural category. Following this logic, culture is presented as a body of intellectual labor and imaginative processes which holds the record of human thought and experience (Williams, 1998: 48).

Following Williams’s findings, culture includes into itself ‘a whole way of life, material, intellectual and spiritual’ (Williams, 1958: xiv). In any case, it can be theorized through interpretation of personal experience and the role of subjectivity in social relations. Within the track of constant human evolution, we can then consider culture as a medium to facilitate the newly perceived meanings and values. Deeper interpretation of symbolism behind those values showed a leading role of ideological preconceptions in human approaches. In its turn, it made us consider culture as a trigger to social, economic and political shifts rather than its reflections or aftermath (Dikovitskaya, 2014: 110).

An approach to defining culture through the analysis of social practices is described by Sturken and Cartwright (2017) in their work *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. Introducing modern cultural discourse, they date its initial formation back to 1960s, particularly emphasizing the occurred transition from ‘high versus low’ cultural aesthetics’

coordinates which used to dominate the discussion in the first half of the 20th (Sturken & Cartwright, 2017). Also referring to Williams (1989) and his proposition of culture as something “fundamentally ordinary”, they present contemporary perception of culture as a set of practices and processes by which individuals and communities create, consume, and interpret cultural phenomena, including their own sense of self. Previously hegemonic ideas of solely aesthetic perfection and ‘classic’ artistic expression within culture are set aside in the contemporary discourse (Sturken & Cartwright, 2017: 5).

At the junction of global media environment and personal subjectivity, visuality is theorized by Mirzoeff (2002). His approach represents visual culture as a highly diverse and interdisciplinary field, directly related to social, cultural, and political dimensions of modern life. Beyond just images and media, visual culture includes the notion of power, representation, social and racial theories etc (Mirzoeff, 2002). Claiming the fundamental interconnection of various disciplinary units within the field of visuality, he describes visual culture as a constantly evolving matter, dependent on contemporary visual media and their uses (Mirzoeff, 1999: 7).

Mirzoeff introduces the concept of visual events as an act which describes the interplay between the visual object, the technology that facilitates and maintains the image, and the viewer who perceives and interacts with it (Mirzoeff, 1999: 12). As an act of interaction, the visual event is less affected by its medium but carries an essential component of sign. In its turn, the system of those signs – semiotics – opens significant potential for analyzing cultural phenomena via the duality of signifier, which is the visible element, and signified, which is the intended meaning behind it (Mirzoeff, 1999: 13). Obviously, the described duality causes limitless possibilities for interpretation of any visual image, shift of meanings behind objects and general dependance of an act of seeing against an act of interpretation.

The act of looking or seeing, discussed under the term ‘gaze’ might be considered among the essential notions in the field of visuality. Widely theorized by Bryson (1988), Jay (1988), Sturken and Cartwright (2017) etc., the gaze distinguishes between the act of observing and interpreting what we see from the purely physical seeing, and more importantly implies that our perception is shaped by social, cultural, historical contexts, as well as power dynamics

and identity politics. In Bryson's *The Gaze in the Expanded Field* (1988) we can find one of the clearest explanations for the phenomenon: "When I look, what I see is not simply light but intelligible form: the rays of light are caught in a nets, a network of meanings, in the same way that flotsam is caught in the net of the fishermen" (Bryson, 1988: 91). In this manner, the visual experience is shaped by socially agreed connotations of an intangible, making vision a social process, a cultural construct of visibility, which differentiates itself from mere vision and is created by the sum of discourses inserted between the subject and the world. Between the world and an eye emerges a screen of signs, meanings and discourses which build vision into social arena (Bryson, 1988:92).

Another crucial reference to the notion of the gaze is its gendered aspect, as was illustrated by Mulvey's concept of the 'male gaze'. This idea expands upon the previously described understanding of the gaze, incorporating a specific lens through which women are viewed, objectified, and often reduced to mere visual elements serving male desire in the mainstream cinema (Mulvey, 1975). The male gaze, however, does not only operate within cinema, as it extends into everyday visual culture, influencing how women are depicted in advertising, art, photography and even how they perceive themselves. Similar theory on gendered gaze was expressed by Berger, who emphasized that men act and women appear, meaning that men are often portrayed as doers, whereas women are positioned as objects to be looked at (Berger, 1972). This dualism between looking and being looked at perpetuates a power dynamic where the male gaze shapes not only how women are seen but how they see themselves, reinforcing patriarchal values within society and male dominance. The intricate interplay between visibility, power and gender provides a complex understanding of the gaze as not merely an act of seeing but a culturally and historically situated practice that carries significant implications for identity, power relations and social structure.

Other complex interrelations arise behind the act of looking itself, which for Mirzoeff carries an implication of power, emerged from the difference between what is 'to see' and what's 'being seen' (Mirzoeff, 2002). Mirzoeff himself analyzes these relations, referring to Descartes's "I think therefore I am", and turning it into its visual adaptation – "I am seen and I see that am I seen" (Mirzoeff, 2002: 10). A concept of perfect prison – panopticon – broadly known from Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975) in this context would represent

a good spot of intersection of visibility and social power, in other words – the mechanics of power implication through the prism of visual studies. As expressed on the same subject by Sturken and Cartwright – “the right to look is not simply about seeing” (Sturken and Cartwright, 2017: 2). As we can suppose, in such hierarchy a right to look shall carry power over the object of sight. Being restricted in one’s a right to look back might also be considered as a limitation to one’s will.

Many have debated the system of signs (semiotics) and its role in visual culture, including Bal and Bryson (1991), Van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2004), and Rogoff (2002). Within the social theory of visual culture, semiotics represents a theory of signs and its usage in human culture (Bal and Bryson, 1991). Within visual communication, semiotics focuses on identifying and describing the various semiotic resources available in various communication modes, as well as exploring how people use these resources to transfer meaning and how such meanings can be interpreted (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2004: 2). In this respect, both a highway sign and a child’s drawing represent a semiotics’ resource. The difference is that a highway sign operates by following strict codes and prescriptions, while children’s drawings (or modern art) do not carry predefined codes and instead rely on creative perception, cultural norms and other influences (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2004: 3).

According to Bal and Bryson, semiotics theory is based on the definition of the factors that contribute to the constant process of sign-making and interpretation, along with the development of conceptual ground for understanding this process within various cultural domains (Bal and Bryson, 1991: 174). Just like the previous description, it can be easily referred to artistic practices and generally contribute to accessing visual culture through art as the carrier of both visual subjects and signs, as well as the network of meanings behind it. This way the key value for cultural research comes from the assumption that our culture is composed of signs, and since each represents something beyond itself, people are constantly involved in meaning generation and interpretation processes (Bal and Bryson, 1991).

Another crucial aspects about understanding of signs and meaning generation is presented in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure. His distinction between the ‘signifier’ and the ‘signified’ has profoundly influenced the study of visual culture and semiotics. According to Saussure, the signifier (the form of a sign) and the signified (the concept it represents) are arbitrarily

linked within a system of signs, thus their meanings are defined relationally within that system (Saussure, 1916). This theoretical framework has enabled a deeper exploration of how visual culture operates, as it recognizes that the meanings of visual signs are shaped not just by individual interpretations, but by complex cultural conventions and discursive practices. The understanding that signs are arbitrary and relational set a path for a nuanced analysis of the ways in which visual signs are used to convey and negotiate meanings in various cultural contexts.

An example of synergy between cultural and artistic practices can be found in Cartwright's work *Art, Feminism and Visual Culture* (2014), in which the scholar investigates the effect of feminism theory on visual culture and the way it was represented via various forms of art (Cartwright, 2014). The acceptance of feminist discourse into the field of visual culture is seen possible through the expansion of the list of cultural practices and experiences embodied into this field. Moreover, such expansion was actually caused by feminism and its critique of dominant discourses of power and value (Cartwright, 2014: 422). Eventually, the field of visual studies still includes 'the standard' study of fine art, but it no longer assumes that fine art has greater value than other forms of visual expression. Various forms of representations and practice are considered within visual cultures with equal importance, whether they are of professional, institutional, everyday, popular, subculture or other nature. In the end, a broader range of human practice gets wider recognition in forms of imaging and visual practice (Cartwright, 2014: 423). We can infer that similar mechanics of interactions between social discourse and visual culture can be traced in other cases, such as ethnic minorities or gender theories, in the form of promoting alternative, diverse representations of culture. In this case, visual culture would play an important role in shaping our understanding of different cultures, including our own.

Catherine Soussloff (2014) also develops her theory of visibility placing the image and the technologies for its mediation at the center of "the culture at large" (Soussloff, 2014: 136). Similarly to Cartwright (2014), her approach to visual theory tends to be socially applied and practical, as she builds a theoretical basis on mechanics of visibility claiming their relation to broader fields of cultural anthropology, sociology, community studies, communications, aesthetics etc (Soussloff, 2014: 137). Also backed by Mitchell's (2005) and Mirzoeff's (2009)

views on the role of media and object within visual culture study, such approach manifests almost purely a social approach to visibility. While some might consider visual culture a “history of images, handled with semiotics notion of representation” (Bryson et al. 1994: xvi), researchers like Soussloff (2014), Cartwright (2014), and Mirzoeff (1999), enrich the subject instead with a social inclination in the first place.

Summarizing this section, we can highlight a distinctive and important interrelation between the two constituent concepts of visual culture, as they mutually influence and shape each other through the course of the constant development. Visibility can both reflect and shape the social and cultural manifestations of a given place and time, and similarly, society is capable of reflecting on its surroundings through visual manifestations, documenting and influencing ongoing processes within itself. This perspective allows us to confidently assert that the study of visual objects is key to understanding society and the cultural processes occurring within it at a given time. Putting vision on a dominant position on top of all other senses would be an exaggeration, detached from the real-world experience. But to put visibility, its communication versatility and meaningfulness, at the head of our multi-sensory perception of the world – it tends to be a justified and logical decision. By doing it we would only highlight the influential role that visual culture plays in shaping our broader culture as whole. The next chapter will contribute to our understanding of the culture and visibility tandem by presenting a historical overview of the development of visual culture in Western society.

1.3 Historical Context of Visual Culture

1.3.1 Early Modernity

The following part of the chapter aims to investigate modern visual culture in its historical context. Here we will observe the notion of visual culture within early period of Western modernity and overview the concepts and phenomena via which it has been theorized by different researchers. The early period of Western modernity laid the groundwork for how we perceive, interpret and engage with visual symbols today, thus by investigating its foundational mechanics we are aiming to gain insights into the forces that have shaped our

visual landscape and continue to influence contemporary visual practices. Particularly, the chapter explores the profound influences and interactions between visual culture and social institutions. Moreover, this chapter serves as a prephase to study contemporary visual culture, drawing a historical line that connects past and present, thereby providing a comprehensive framework to evaluate the evolution of visuality.

In his book, *Vision and Visuality*, Hal Foster (1988) unites several essays of different authors into a single study, which investigates modern visuality through the history of society and its artistic expressions (Foster, 1988). One of these authors, Martin Jay (1988) dedicates his chapter to scopic regimes of modernity, focusing primarily on its origins in European Renaissance (Jay, 1988). For him, the roots of the theory of visuality as a dominant perception of Western culture can be traced to the beginning of Renaissance. It is a starting point to investigate the various implications of visual theories and practices (Jay, 1988). The most dominant theory of all is presented under the umbrella term of ‘Cartesian perspectivalism’, which unites the two fundamental concepts behind the early modernity’s visual model: Renaissance notion of perspective and Cartesian ideas of subjective rationality in philosophy (Jay, 1988: 4).

The significance of the notion of perspective is also underlined by Ivins (1946). In his book *Art and Geometry*, Ivins refers to Leone Alberti’s essay *della Pittura* (1435), in which the initial method of perspective in painting was described as ‘the most interesting and the most influential Renaissance treatises on art’ (Ivins, 1946: 64). He also particularly underlines the role of perspective theory as a final accumulation of Medieval thoughts of art. A benchmark so important that Ivins sees the whole further history of art, lasting over five hundred years after Alberti’s invention, as ‘little more’ than diffusion of his ideas through peoples of Europe (Ivins, 1946: 67-68).

The Cartesian intellectual model, in its turn, represents a highly complex construct based on René Descartes’s philosophy. The position of this construct as the dominant visual model of early modernity was based on the assumption that it expresses the most natural experience of seeing, in accordance with the scientific view of that time (Jay, 1988: 5). Descartes’s ideas go back to the mind / body dualism and the discrepancy between ‘truth by convention’ and truth

‘confirmed by sensory experience’ (Rorty, 1979: 194). When applied to the scopic field, this construct describes Descartes’s conception of visible, in which the Inner Eye of our consciousness inspects entities modeled as retinal images of our eyes, while the image itself being just the representation of our own mind (Rorty, 1979: 45).

In his work, Jay gives no further explanation about Descartes’s philosophy in particular, using it further only within his Cartesian perspectivalism equation. It is worth mentioning that he is unifying the notions separated by over 200 years—invention of perspective took place in the 15th century, Descartes lived in the 17th century. We might assume that by doing so he is underlying the hegemonic state of Cartesian ideas of subjective rationality during the whole period of modernity. Combining it with the idea of perspective, he gets a master term which helps him operate with vision as the omnipresent sense of modern era (Jay, 1988: 3). It is also worth to mention that the scientific semiotics behind the Cartesian ideas, as they viewed the world in a logical and regulated manner opposed to the old-fashioned interpretations of the world as a divine text (Jay, 1988: 9).

Behind the primary scientific notion of perspective theory in painting lies the layers of metaphorical sense, from aesthetic and technical to psychological and religious. Thus, for the people of 15th -18th centuries, it was a symbolic manifestation of the Divine light, metaphysical harmonious combination of the laws of optics and God’s will itself (Jay, 1988: 6). This religious basis eventually lost its former meaning over time, but the idea of isotropic and uniformed space, as it transfers from three-dimensional world to two-dimensional surface of the canvas, was to remain the dominant correspondence to external reality. Such technique of depiction of the world implied not only the canvas – as a ‘window’ on which the space emits from the viewer – but the eyes of the viewer itself. To be more precise – the eye (Jay, 1988: 7).

The concept of the beholding eye as a static, fixed and lacking any dynamic comes as yet another component of the Cartesian perspectivalism paradigm. It comes in the aftermath of the Renaissance visual order, in which emotional enlightenment or any participation of the painter was eliminated from the equation in favor of unmuted synesthesia between the spectator and spectacle on the canvas. The spectator himself is not implied as a person

looking on the painting, as in this mode both painter's and viewer's bodies were forgotten "in the name of an allegedly disincarnate, absolute eye" (Jay, 1988: 8). Referred in the same text, this idea comes very close to Bryson's notion of gaze as an eternalized visual act outside any fluidity of time, put within the eternal presence (Bryson, 1984).

In his work *Vision and Painting*, Norman Bryson (1984) gives an interesting perspective on meanings and attitudes behind early modern visual modes. His findings combine both technical and rational reasons behind Medieval oil painting after perspective invention. Bryson (1984) theorizes the logic of Renaissance visual culture through the opposite notions of Gaze and Glance, and while the core action behind these processes remains the same, the crucial difference in their essence causes the dualism of these terms (Bryson, 1984: 94). For Bryson, the Gaze represents a prolonged and contemplative vision with a sense of aloofness and disengagement. As he applies this semiotics to art history and culture, it becomes the basis for his interpretation of Renaissance and post-Renaissance art.

Bryson's theoretical construct is built on logic: that in Western tradition both artist's and viewer's bodies were supposed to be reduced to their purely optical function. The cognition of phenomena comes at the point outside mobility or duration, and through the act of Glance the vision becomes disembodied and decarnalized (Bryson, 1984: 95). This logic is later developed and formulated into two major laws: reduction of the body down to the spot on the retinal surface and non-durational nature behind the process of Gaze, whether executed by artist or viewer. As an aftermath of these processes comes strict hierarchy of visual order, eradication of rhythmical and movement dimensions, elimination of the activity (Bryson, 1984: 96).

Bryson's approach to visuality tends to be too materialistic. We also might assume his scheme cannot fully cover the relations between the perception of reality by an artist and the depiction of that reality via an act of art. Reducing a picture to a 'sign' (Bryson, 1984: 131), whose meaning cannot be perceived outside its social context, Bryson seems to deliberately ignore the matters of style, skill, medium, personal vision and other variables of reality depiction. As reasonably noted by Ebitz, art history discourse can hardly ignore the

mentioned notions, same as neither painting nor viewing practices are fully explained when the dynamic of technical process is ignored (Ebitz, 1987: 157).

Nevertheless, both Jay's (1988) and Bryson's (1984) theories provide valuable angles on the very origins of modern Western visual culture. Firstly, their findings highlight the mechanics behind initial seeing and further recreation. The hierarchy and order, religious in its origins and immanent to the European outlook, have logically found its manifestation in stability, eternity and dissolution of the bodies in favor of the ephemeral eye. Berger (2008) expresses the same opinion towards the role of perspective and points a sense of religious inspiration behind it. In his metaphoric expression, he compares the perspective pyramid scheme to the beam of a lighthouse, only with the light travelling inwards to the center. The center itself is represented through the same metaphor of the beholding eye to which everything converges; a "vanishing point of infinity" with the reality aiming to it (Berger, 2008: 16). Correlation of this construct to the Western idea of God is obvious: an imprint of visible world is being arranged for the spectator just like the whole universe would be arranged for God. No reciprocity is implied within the scheme, the only aim is to address the image to a single spectator that "unlike God, could only be in once place at a time" (Berger, 2008: 16).

Summing up this part of the chapter, we shall mention an apparent interrelation of visuality and society, art and cognition, as a multifaceted and rich field of inquiry. The presented findings have illuminated how early Western modernity, from the Renaissance and onward, has shaped our ways of seeing, interpreting and recreating reality via visual symbols. This relations of perception, where the scientific, aesthetic, psychological and even religious realms intersect, has profound implications for the way we engage with the world around us. From the invention of perspective to the subtle distinction between the gaze and glance, we observe an unfolding narrative where vision becomes a cultural construct deeply embedded in the fabric of society. It is through this lens that we can presume how the historical evolution of visuality influences both the artistic expressions of the time and the broader cognitive frameworks that guide our interaction with the world. The analysis thus contributes to an enriched understanding of the multifaceted dialogue between visuality and society in its early modern stage, at the same time bridging the discourse further to modern and postmodern eras. In the context of the upcoming research, this section also helps to

understand the processes that supported the formation of cultural aspects behind the vision. Considering the presumed connection between the traditions of early modernity and contemporary visual culture, if not in the form of the final object, often in the form of a similar mechanics of working with symbols and objects of the external world, this information might be useful for a comprehensive understanding of the visual analysis in the final part of this work.

1.3.2 Late modernity

In the following part of the chapter we will continue to explore the parallels within interconnected development of society and its visual expression, focusing on the period of late modernity. Covering the period from the mid. 19th century and closely related to the inventions of new media and shift in the global social landscapes, visual manifestations of the late modernity will connect our research to its phase of exploring the contemporary state of visual culture.

When we refer to modernity in terms of a historical period, we shall keep in mind the segmentation within the notion itself. Thus, the early modern period, on which we focused in the previous part, is mostly referred to Renaissance in Europe as its culminating epoch (Berman, 1983). The period of classical modernity is highlighted by the French Revolution and the ideas of the Enlightenment, which have set the basis for Western ideas of humanism and individual rights (Alam, 2009). The end of this period is notable for technological advances as a result of the Industrial Revolution, which affected all spheres of people's life (Allen, 2011). The late modernity period includes Modernism as a movement within various arts and cultural institutions, most commonly allocated from the 1860s up to the 1970s, until the postmodern era of nowadays flourished (Smith, 2010: 374; Sturken & Cartwright, 2017: 97).

Over the course of 18th-19th centuries the cultural development has eventually changed the attitude towards both Cartesian intellectual model as a method to cognize reality and perspectivalism as a hegemonic approach to depict reality. A path to the modern state of

visuality led through numerous pivotal moments, which represented significant changes in the socio-cultural landscape or technological advancements. Particularly, Berger (2008) describes a significant influence and consequential shift of visual culture which was caused by photography. He opposes the early modern perspective-based approach towards the newer one, which emerged after the invention of the camera. These changes manifested themselves through the differences in the artist's positioning within the surroundings and their regime of seeing. Contrary to the idea of the stationary position from which the visual field develops in its perfect proportions, aiming to the spectator as the center of the world, the camera brought a fragmented, variable and highly personal vision (Berger, 2008: 16-18). This approach was expressed by Dziga Vertov:

I'm an eye. A mechanical eye. I, the machine, show you a world the way only I can see it. I free myself for today and forever from human immobility. I'm in constant movement. I approach and pull away from objects. I creep under them. I move along side a running horse's mouth. I fall and rise with the falling and rising bodies. This is I, the machine, manoeuvring in the chaotic movements, recording one movement after another in the most complex combinations. Freed from the boundaries of time and space, I co-ordinate any and all points of the universe, wherever I want them to be. My way leads towards the creation of a fresh perception of the world. Thus I explain in a new way the world unknown to you. (Vertov quoted in Berger, 2008: 17)

Eventually, the advent of the camera significantly altered the perception of reality and our approach to visuality, encapsulating a shift that went beyond mere technological innovation. By isolating momentary appearances, the camera demounted the idea that images were static and timeless, tying the experience of the visual in actual fact to the passage of time. This differed markedly from paintings, where time seemed to stand still. As Berger illustrates, visual perception became relative to one's position in time and space – the idea, which is clearly related to the theory of the cultural basis of visuality described by Sturken and Cartwright (2001), Mirzoeff (1999) and others.

Scharf (1986) is another author tracing and investigating the influence of photography on young Impressionist movement of Paris of the 1860s. Confirming that other factors may have played a role in shaping the character of Impressionist painting aside photography, he claims at the same time that the recognition of the importance of personal expression in art grew in tandem with the rise of photography and the adoption of photographic techniques in art

(Scharf, 1986: 179). Relations between the two camps is perfectly described by the author himself:

It is hardly possible that they [painters] were not affected by it. They were on one hand the progeny of a long tradition of naturalism culminating in an absolutist conception of realism; on the other they were heirs to a legacy of cynicism towards all imitative art. Both attitudes were undoubtedly germinated and exacerbated by the existence of photography. (Scharf, 1986: 165)

These examples demonstrate the mechanics of changing the visual aesthetics of an entire generation of artists under the influence of new purely technical factors. Such as the Impressionists' interactions with photography went through qualitative change and eventually fostered the fundamental ideas that shaped Post-Impressionist styles. The Cubists, on the other hand, embraced a multiplicity of perspectives, treating the visible not as something faced by a single eye but as the sum of all possible views around an object or person. Way different from strict and motionless construct of perspectivism, artistic movements of the modern era were focusing on depicting rather transient and momentary manifestations of a rapidly changing world (Brettell, 1999: 7). Various modern art movements had their own approach to challenge old techniques and principles, and some of those new approaches affected visual culture far beyond solely artistic environment. Brettell particularly underlines the importance of Impressionism as the major pivot from realists' tradition and a defining point for the whole modern art, due to "fetishized subjectivity of the act of representational transcription" (Brettell, 1999: 16).

A highly interesting approach is presented by Krauss, as she theorizes the modernist paradigm via the grid as the most distinctive structure of new visuality (Krauss, 1986). On the one hand, its geometricized and order functions might remind us of the perspective structure, but in its nature the grid represents an embodiment of completely opposite spacial and temporal functions. Unlike perspective, the grid does not aim to allocate spacial relations of the real world on the surface; the physical qualities of the real are mapped into a different aseptic dimension. Distinctive from anything actually seen in nature, the grid "crowds out the dimensions of the real and replaces them with the lateral spread of a single surface" (Krauss, 1986: 9-10). Such determined materialism, manifested in the works of Mondrian, Albers, Kelly, etc., has eventually settled a new discourse within visuality, serving as model to a rather post-modern narrative of 'anti-development' and 'anti-narrative' (Krauss, 1986).

Aside of shifts happening in the artistic environment, several researchers, including Crary (2001) and Brettell (1999), present the second half of the 19th century as a starting point for social transformation processes which have direct impact on shaping modern culture. Visual culture of that period was developing under a huge influence of cultural shifts, not limited to the invention of photography or the emergence of new media, but embracing various repercussions within physical and social, economic and technological spheres (Brettell, 1999: 2-3). Further development of visuality within modernity and postmodernity represent a process of a deeper interconnection between mentioned spheres on all levels.

Within social and scientific spheres, the Cartesian mode of cognition was challenged by modern scientists and philosophers, from Freud and Marx to Foucault and Lacan. Sensory perception and observation were no longer left aside as unrelated to 'actual' experience of the world, while a human individual was no longer considered as a fully autonomous entity of complete self-conscious and knowledge about their own (Sturken and Cartwright, 2017: 101). Logically, such approach brings us to the point where no universal truth can be found behind the things, and reality is carried within our perception similarly to Schopenhauer's (1969) 'world as a representation'. "The art does not reproduce the visible; rather it makes visible" as remarked by Paul Klee, an expression to represent the new paradigm of thought, in which a visual object should not be limited to reality depiction, but can be perceived as a carrier of symbolic meaning (Walker, 1997: 23). It is not that the classical art of previous centuries has not interacted with visual perception and embodied allegorical narratives, but rejection of preconceived notions and illumination of subjective experience has never been on a same degree as during our time. This way, as we can see, both constituents of the Cartesian perspectivalism have been surpassed and reconsidered by paradigms of modernity.

Eventually, during the late phase of modernity the landscape of visuality began to undergo a profound metamorphosis, marked by a growing complexity and a shift away from a solid grounding in the perception of reality. These transformations were not isolated incidents but part of a broader socio-cultural movement that sought to challenge and redefine the relationship between the observer and the observed, while the stable center of perspective gave way to a more dynamic, decentralized and personalized interpretation of visuality,

informed by both technological advancements and an increasingly complex societal context. As we might assume, such changes can be seen as portending the postmodern paradigm, where reality itself is understood as a multifarious and ever-changing construct. In this complex and interconnected evolution, the late modern era serves as a crucial bridge between classical constructs and the postmodern landscapes, laying the intellectual and cultural groundwork for the contemporary state of visual culture. The shifts within visuality during the late modernity period thus not only signal a change in aesthetic understanding but reflect a more profound reconceptualization of human perception, consciousness, and interaction with the world.

The consequences of these changes can be traced in contemporary visual culture both in the field of modern art, where, as we will see later, the social context plays a significant role, and in the realm of commercial communications and design. The visual language in these areas has been enriched largely by the techniques of late modern art. Minimalism, as a development of Krauss's (1986) idea about the 'anti-narrative' alienation of art, the subjectivity of vision as a new norm that allows for the use of highly abstract images when addressing the viewer in advertising, and the influence of technical aspects on media - these examples demonstrate how contemporary visual culture has adopted some tenets of late modernity, thus contributing to a more complex analysis of Loewe's visuality.

1.4. Contemporary Visual Culture

In the following part we will investigate the features and traits of contemporary visual culture, logically developing definitions and processes described in the previous parts of the chapter.

At the core of the new relationships between society and its visual culture lies the extent to which the general perception of objects of visuality has changed. As stated by Dikovitskaya, in our contemporary era visuality has become increasingly governed by the rapid, ubiquitous and logical nature of the electronic screen. This dominance has led to our collective acclimation to swiftly scanning images within an environment inundated with sensory stimuli

(Dikovitskaya, 2014: 107). The current cultural condition has underscored visuality's central importance, fostering new academic approaches to its exploration. This trend is often referred to as the 'visual turn', traversing diverse domains of humanities and social sciences (Jay, 2002).

The concept of the 'pictorial turn,' introduced by W.J.T. Mitchell in the 1990s, has become another focal point for theoretical debates on images, which hold a unique status lying between a 'paradigm' and an 'anomaly' (Mitchell, 1994: 13). Mitchell's further insights suggest the emergence of an interdisciplinary field of visual culture that intersects critical theory and philosophy. Following Mitchell's argument, modern visual studies were born from a union between art history, characterized by a theoretical object and cultural studies, resonating with social movements. This relations is considered to have been made possible by the 'cultural turn' (Dikovitskaya, 2014; Mitchell, 1995).

As cited by Dikovitskaya, contemporary visual culture can be considered as a notion that includes all human creations which possess a strong visual aspect, no longer limited to objects classified as art. Termed as 'visual studies', it democratizes visual artifacts, assessing them for both aesthetic and ideological complexity. However, it goes further than just putting things together, aiming to understand the importance and order of different objects. This way, W.J.T. Mitchell likens visual culture to linguistics, connecting works of visual art to literature despite fundamental differences in visual imaging and linguistic expression. Mitchell's advocacy for popular imagery and his approach for understanding images as figures of knowledge reinforces his broad view of the subject (Mitchell, 1995).

What truly distinguishes Mitchell's approach is his shift in focus from the viewed objects to the very process of seeing. This perspective treats visual representations as interwoven within various practices and discourses. Artworks, images and representations do not set the boundaries of visual culture, when instead visual culture encompasses more and more visual objects, like buildings or landscapes (Dikovitskaya, 2014). Mitchell emphasizes that the way one perceives the world matters now more than ever, making the visual field a site where social distinctions are mapped. Those researchers aligning with Mitchell's definition frame visual culture as the cultural construction of visual experiences across everyday life, media,

and visual arts, tend to completely intertwine ‘cultural’ and ‘social’ (Barnard, 1998; Mirzoeff, 1999).

Another notion widely theorized within the framework of contemporary visuality is representation. In the age of digital media, representations have evolved into complex, multifaceted constructs that blur the lines between the personal, social and visual (Jay, 2002). These representations now serve as arenas in which identity is negotiated and explored through a wide array of visual mediums ranging from traditional art to electronic screens (Mitchell, 1994). This system of representation is not described by mere static depictions of subject, but involves active engagements and performative aspects (Butler, 1990). Identity, particularly in regards to gender, becomes an ongoing act of creation through continuous, stylized performances. Such performances of identity shall not be considered solely as acts of self-assertion, but also as a process of constant navigation through social norms and constructs, echoing Foucault’s (1995) analysis of power dynamics. In addition, the democratization of visual culture has opened the door to a broader exploration of aesthetics and ideologies, enabling a more nuanced examination of various social artifacts (Aiello and Parry, 2019). Visual studies, therefore, now ventures into assessing the hierarchy of objects and their inherent significances, rather than simply levelling them into a monolithic category (Mitchell, 1995).

The discourse of visual culture has never been limited solely to products of visuality on its own, but always aims to study it as a manifestation of social processes. However during the modern and postmodern eras, these tendencies have been intensified, as the levels of understanding, representation and perception within the current society is shaped by a variety of discourses, such as philosophy, social sciences, popular culture and art. As a result of their interaction, the understanding that gender, race, and sexuality play a crucial role in representation, recognition, and reception has been increasingly influencing visuality in art and media from 1980s and till the present days (Ross, 2008: 4). Such broad commodification of social representations within modern visuality can be explained, for example, by the distinctive capacity of media to transmit and reproduce the symbolic forms within the process of constant mass communication (Thompson, 1990: 165-166). On the other hand, same media space can be seen not as a solid ground for symbolic exchange, but rather as a

battlefield of power relations, on which the production and consumption of meaning carries an aftermath of discrimination, misrepresentation and distorted cultural experience (O'Donnell, 2020: 203, 205).

On the role of media in the contemporary culture, Thompson extensively writes that about shaping the notion of culture itself as a sphere of social life which is being greatly affected and deformed by the innovations of mass communications (Thompson, 1990: 12). This way, if we consider modern cultural landscape as a space of constant circulation of symbolic goods, we might find it inseparable from the media and its fundamental role in Western societies (Thompson, 1990: 163). The field of the visual within this circulation is represented by all sorts of products, like films, advertising, graphic design, photography, comic books – in other words, any possible visual expression which is able to facilitate social ideas, beliefs or customs in the form of visual expression (Rampley, 2005: 12). Just like Thompson (1990) and Mirzoeff (1999), Rampley arrives to the conclusion that the visual image in the Western contemporary cultural practice occupies a central position (Rampley, 2005: 14).

Building on the complexity of representation within contemporary visuality, art has historically been a lens through which societies interpret, challenge and converse with their identities, norms and power dynamics (Jay, 2002). If we finalize the line of theorizing visuality through the prism of artistic expression, as we did in the previous part of the chapter, we can assume that in the postmodern landscape the engagement of social matters into art has taken on a new dimension. Contemporary art has become more than just a reflective or critical mirror, but has transformed into a commodity that produces and conceptualizes social discourses, including identity, gender, race and power etc. Thus, approaching the topic of contemporary art, it is crucial to distinguish not just its aesthetic and symbolic value but also its position within the larger ecosystem of commodified discourses (Aiello and Parry, 2019). This commodification shows how powerfully art can capture socio-cultural narratives, positioning it as one of the most important media that bring the most urgent issues into the cultural mainstream. However, both the topic of media and a detailed analysis of the medium of contemporary art will be presented in the next chapter of this thesis.

Concluding this chapter, we shall emphasize the special role attributed to visual culture, not only as a method of studying or evaluating art, but as an important optics for understanding our culture and social structures, our place in the world and reality around us. Visual culture simultaneously acts as a reflection and a catalyst for cultural changes and social shifts, maintaining a close connection with progress in its various manifestations. The contemporary stance, which examines all manifestations of visibility without differentiating them into “high” and “low”, aligns well with the image of modern thinking and will aid us in the subsequent study of the case.

2. Media and visual culture

2.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter of this study, we investigated the field of visual culture and were able to identify a significant role of media within it. To gather more information on the phenomenon of contemporary media and their role in the process of visual communication, this chapter will focus on various types of media and their implications in cultural and commercial environments. Following the ideas of Sturken and Cartwright, who prioritise the role of various media as communication channels and visual entities as agents within the network of social interactions (Sturken and Cartwright, 2017: 6), we approach the subject from the idea of complete interconnection of images and media within modern society. A wide variety of media and their degree of influence on nowadays' visuality have been mentioned by both Dikovistkaya and Mirzoeff, as they highlighted the role of technological impact and its influence on postmodern era of visual culture, characterizing the whole current state of visuality as "dominated by the speed, the logic and the ubiquity of the electronic screen" (Dikovistkaya, 2014: 108). In the same manner, Mirzoeff claims that "modern live takes place onscreen" and gives credit to all the technological advances of the 20th century – from television and film to Internet and videotape – for bringing an image to absolute dominant position within postmodernity (Mirzoeff, 1999: 2, 9). Further in this chapter, we will theorize the relations between media and the interconnection between media and visual culture.

2.2 Conceptual framework

In the strictest sense, 'media' should be understood as the plural form of 'medium' and understood as a "channel or conduit for the transmission of some kind of communication" (Spitulnik, 1999: 148). Traditional examples of this include television, print media such as newspapers and radio. More contemporary forms encompass digital and multimedia channels (Spitulnik, 1999). Hartley presents a similar perspective, defining media as "any means by which a message can be transmitted" (Hartley, 2002: 142). Following this logic, it is plausible to consider any form of communication as media, particularly given the vast range of human interactions and our inherent capacity for meaning-generation. Thus, a modern approach to

media studies often emphasizes mass media and the ‘mediasphere’—a realm encompassing the entirety of mass media’s outputs (Hartley, 2002; Hartley & McKee, 2000).

Within academic circles, discourse about media grades from the previously mentioned ‘everything is media’ (Hartley, 2002; McLuhan, 1994) to ‘there are no media’ (Horn, 2007). Behind the initial categoricity of this approach, its logic is justified with fairly practical and rational aiming on mechanics and functions of media as it is, investing less effort into defining their essence and their ideological, communicational and even social functions (Horn, 2007: 7). Therefore, media should be perceived as dynamic, evolving processes and events. The emphasis should be on their impacts and effects, rather than solely their technological forms or ideological content. As posited by Vogl and Hanrahan, we cannot find an adequate explanation of media solely through their material basis, semiotic systems, communication forms, or distribution techniques (Vogl and Hanrahan, 2007). Media are regarded as distinct and systematic study objects, primarily because everything they store and mediate occurs under conditions that the media themselves create and are thus enveloped by those conditions (Vogl and Hanrahan, 2007: 6).

The approach described might seem compelling, especially given its aim to investigate an unspotted essence of media within itself, however we can consider it unsuitable for the context of this research. As it was presented in the previous chapter, investigation of modern culture in general and visual culture in particular seems hardly possible unless media are taken into account as a subject of social interactions and a carrier for cultural manifestations. As we are aiming to explore the visual interrelations between society and its cultural symbols, media shall be considered as an inalienable attribute, if not a causation of social existence in its current state. Saying that “everything they [media] store and mediate is stored and mediated under conditions that are created by the media” (Vogl and Hanrahan, 2007: 18), they effectively echoes McLuhan’s (1964) key statement of “medium is the message”, even though McLuhan’s media theory lies in a field opposite to those proclaimed by Vogl and Hanrahan and Horn.

In describing the modern approach to media studies, Real (1996) highlights a shift from traditional media such as television (not to mention newspapers) with their sociological

connotations, towards an exploration of new media types and the more personal experiences they offer (Real, 1996). Constant media-to-person interaction provides both sides' effect; on the one hand, it reveals the pervasive nature of modern media, its profound social influence, and its capability to either stabilize or disrupt various institutions of social life (Ambirajan, 2000: 2141). Conversely, this same interaction helps shape a global media culture and curate a shared experience stemming from universally consumed cultural products, like the Olympics or artists such as Madonna (Real, 1996: xiv). We can assume that in terms of their influence on public opinion, newspapers and television have not been - and arguably still aren't - any less impactful than contemporary media forms. However, new media introduce unique exchange processes between consumers and producers, elevating the degree of interaction and engagement to a novel plane (Sturken and Cartwright, 2017: 220).

A degree of involvement of media in human life relates us to a common media-society-culture unit, with each notion theorized in close relation or even through one another, such as done for instance by Gurevitch et al. (1982), McLuhan (1964), Gripsrud (2002) and others. Gripsrud, in particular, bases his media cultural theory underlying the role of mass media not solely as a tool of cognition or cultural exchange, but rather as an extremely influential communicative channel, 'the long arm of society' which contributes to our knowledge, and most importantly – our interpretation of the world and ourselves (Gripsrud, 2002: 5). Media suggest us what is important or irrelevant, what is good and bad, what is entertaining or dull. Being receivers for these categorized notions, we shape our opinions and relatively our own identity (Gripsrud, 2002). The concept of identity, with its collective, social and personal dimensions, deeply influences how media reflects and maintains these dimensions. This interaction forms the idea of representation, a central cultural narrative within the media domain (Gripsrud, 2002: 11). Without a doubt, the subjects of identity and representation will be explored more extensively in this study, especially given their paramount importance in visual semiotic systems.

Closely related to human perception and cognition processes, and focusing on the aggregation of these processes on a global scale, media theory was explored by McLuhan (1964). Since written almost 60 years ago, his key book *Understanding Media* does not cover the emergence of any new media in the dawn of the Internet era, however still offers relevant

and foundational ideas. The range of spheres and items McLuhan associates with the media – from TV sets and typewriters to automobiles and clothing – underscores his “everything is media” perspective (McLuhan, 1964: 119, 217, 258). McLuhan’s focus on the human body and senses, viewing media as extensions of them, is taking on new meaning now when the greater amount of physical processes and communication exchanges is facilitated in the virtual media space. “The medium is the message” proclamation become even more relevant when applied to the commercial sphere of visual communication, brand identities and value creation (McLuhan, 1964: 7). His anticipated concept of the global village emphasizes the relevance of modern media studies in the context of an interconnected global cultural sphere, shaped by the media and their ability to influence how we perceive and relate to our surroundings (McLuhan, 1964: 93). In this way, the telephone augments our auditory senses and allows us to communicate across great distances, while the transformative nature of electronic media, particularly television and later the internet, effectively collapses traditional temporal and spatial boundaries and does away with the need for physical proximity for visual communication. The interaction of cultures, which is based on a deep awareness of interdependence and global consciousness, the immediacy of world events, and the emergence of online communities all reflect his vision of a connected and media-transformed world.

2.3 Media as carriers of visuality

Having already recognized the paramount role of visuality in the cultural field, we can similarly justify the dominance of the visual within the media sphere. As noted by Jay and Jenks, the project of modernity reached its present state by prioritizing vision (Jay, 1992; Jenks, 1995). The modern culture in its turn elevated the visual to the position of being both the main medium for communication and the exclusive means of accessing our accumulated symbolic wealth (Jenks, 1995: 2). However, what exactly granted the visual a position as the main medium? In theorizing about photography – a medium that perhaps best represents the visuality of the modern context – Slater links visuality with the cognitive mode characteristic of modernity (Slater, 1995). ‘Seeing is believing’ – a motto which marks visual as a ‘vehicle

of knowledge and truth' which is able to accommodate both scientific and artistic vision of the world (Slater, 1995: 220).

Building on this premise, Slater outlines the modern tendency to distill the world to its visible attributes and observable characteristics such as color, mass, and shape. Reflecting on early Enlightenment ideals, this reductionism can be linked to the principle of visibility: we trust only in what we can observe (Slater, 1995: 220). Modern vision intertwines with progress and modernization, it governs the physical behavior of an object by understanding it and simultaneously sidelines the object's intrinsic meaning – its subjectivity. In this context, the mechanics of vision become instrumental to modernization (Slater, 1995: 221).

If we put this complex interrelation in a more simple way, on the one side this encapsulates a characteristically Western method of categorization and empirical observation as a means of grasping reality. Here, the visual serves as a tool to present the world in its practical form, reflected as physical entities that can be labelled and specified. Conversely, visibility can convey the more nuanced and subjective meanings of an object, the ones lying aside of its physical conditions. These meanings carry abstract values and senses which are unique on cultural and personal levels and thus can be read similarly or differently depending on particular case. If media is a means for informational exchange, visibility is able to embrace a great spectrum of meanings and connotations, establishes its prominence within the media landscape.

At the foundation of any communication is the practice of encoding information through semiotic systems, followed by its transmission and subsequent decoding by the receiver (Paxson, 2010: 2). This exchange operates as a cyclical model, with both parties actively involved in encoding and decoding each other's messages. Schramm (1954) conveniently captured this process in his communication model.

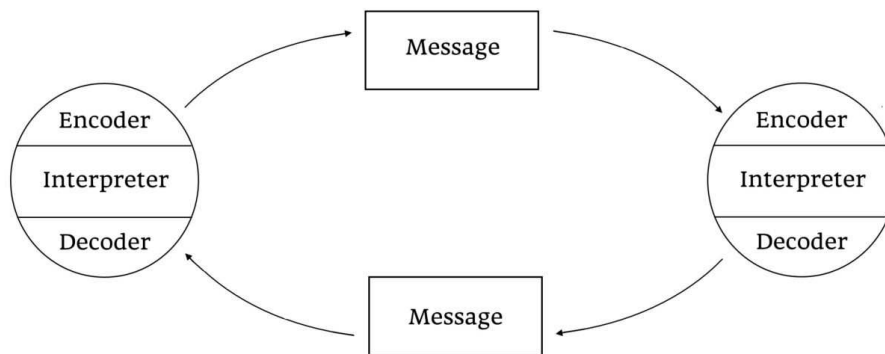


Figure 1: Schramm's communication model (based on Schramm, 1954).

When we apply this model to interpersonal communication, the discrepancy between the 'message sent' and the 'message interpreted' is expected to be relatively minor, especially if the receiver's response or reaction is directly conveyed as feedback (Paxson, 2010; Narula, 2006). However, when this model is applied to mass media in a social context, various factors can interfere at all stages of the communication process. One of the arguments arise around the nature of the media itself and the distortion it brings to informational exchange. The matter of such distortion particularly discussed by Bennett as he argues the position of media as a 'mirror held up to society' (Bennett, 1982). This mirror analogy is relevant not only due to the presumed reflective nature of the media but also because of the discrepancies between actual reality and its representation. In this perspective, the media are not viewed as active agents shaping the societal landscape but as passive instruments merely reflecting or reproducing social realities (Bennett, 1982: 285).

When applied to visuality within contemporary mass media, we can trace a similar duality of communication process. On one hand, visual elements are deeply entrenched in the process of information exchange, and in many cases, lend a sense of credibility to the message, adhering to the "we can only know what we can see" principle (Slater, 1995). In this case, photography is rightfully named a modern vision in every sense as it simplifies the world to objectively described surfaces, lacking any inherent meaning and reduced to pure fact (Slater, 1995: 223). On the other hand, the inherent nature of our perception prevents us from ever viewing a presented object devoid of our subjective interpretations. Similarly to a duality

between the world of signification and that of ‘reality’ is granted by distinction between the sign and the referent, visual messages also undergo processes of construction, interpretation and meaning negotiation as they are decoded by the viewer (Bennett, 1982: 285; Dunleavy, 2020: 155).

Discussing the matter, Dunleavy (2020) also refers to the theory of visual semiotics, claiming that images are equal to messages and can be analyzed and interpreted using the same methods applied to any other sign systems (Dunleavy, 2020: 155). Alongside with Sebeok, Dunleavy emphasize the meaning-generation potential brought up by visual elements, placing them on a perceptual field which goes beyond regular linguistic systems (Sebeok, 2001; Dunleavy, 2020). Within this framework, the act of ‘deciphering’ (as termed by Bennett) or ‘meaning determination’ (as articulated by Dunleavy) occurs as we delve into the symbolic connotations embedded in various representational forms and codes within messages. The ultimate interpretation of this process is significantly shaped by our aesthetic, cultural, moral and emotional perspectives (Dunleavy, 2020: 157).

Following this logic, the modern approach to visual elements in media – the one combining both its defining characteristics and abstract features – tends to be shifting towards the latter. Theorizing the evolution from modern to post-modern thought and its influence on visual representation, Landers (2020) disagrees with the modernist paradigm which allowed the possibility to distinguish between the objective and the subjective (Landers, 2020). According to his findings, post-modern discourse claims that the understanding of images happens within a huge cultural context, thus making both processes of encoding and decoding of each image a subjective experience. Photographs or video are considered as a mix of ‘real’ and ‘hyperreal’ and contain a particular amount of ‘true’ elements which are either manipulated or interpreted (Landers, 2020, p. 153). Getting back to Dunleavy (2020), a similar notion was expressed by him as well: “Meaning does not reside in the object itself, but in how people act toward what it stands in for. Meaning is based on shared human interactions, experiences, and interpretations” (Dunleavy, 2020: 159).

We might assume that placing the meaning of the image into the eye of the beholder to that degree oversimplifies things and reduces the intention of a creator to actually express what had been intended. Researchers like Kress and van Leeuwen, Aiello and Parry expresses a

more moderate approach to this matter, stating that the meaning is not fixed, but still present in the visual media object and can be comprehended when placed in its specific social context and the discourses that accompany it (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006; Aiello and Parry, 2020: 17). In the perspective of this research, as it includes the study of commercial design, brands' identity and other media – where the conveyed messages are crucial for public comprehension – it is rational to adopt a similar nuanced approach towards the interpretation of contemporary media messages. This perspective also emphasizes the pivotal role of the 'sign maker' or the visual message creator, highlighting their responsibility to select the most effective and apt form of communication to accurately convey their intended message.

Following the studies of Aiello and Parry, we can get more insights about the very up-to-date state of things in the field of contemporary visual communication, as they apply cultural and social theories on nowadays media cases in the broadest sense of the term – from photographs to visual design and physical space (Aiello and Parry, 2020). Similarly to Landers who highlighted the importance of recognising contextual meanings behind images for its proper interpretation, Aiello and Parry mention the matters of declining authority of images' truth-value generation and depiction of social reality (Landers, 2020: 154; Aiello and Parry, 2020: 16). Accordingly, visual language of the present days requires precise and highly empirical approach regardless of the commercial communication or social networking field we are dealing with. Factors such as distinctive themes or styles, representational practices, and the broader semiotic context must be considered when decoding a wide array of visual messages (Aiello and Parry, 2020: 16-18).

Summing up this part of the chapter, we shall note several important points which would help us further down the theoretical findings and especially methodological analysis. Particularly, we would once again notice the proposed median approach to balance participation of both sender and receiver within the process of visual communication and exchange, such as described by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) and others. In the same manner we can balance the discourse between the consistency of visual message and possibilities for its interpretation, claiming that the initial meaning can and should be understood within its cultural context, if the medium and the message itself is expressed properly and effectively. Finally, as proposed by Aiello and Parry, we will accept the empirical approach – the one “ranging from gathering evidence on how visual images are framed or shared to talking to

people who make or use imagery” – in order to evaluate and decode communicative practices in the context picked for the case study within this research (Aiello and Parry, 2020: 15).

2.3 Types of visual media

The purpose of this part is to get insights on how contemporary media are used as communication channels. Following the McLuhan’s ‘the medium is the message’ approach, we will delve into the intrinsic influence exerted by the medium on the communication process. Further, we will seek to unpack how such influences can be strategically harnessed by creators in their visual communication endeavors. This chapter will be segmented into two sections: the first one will cover a generalized ‘artistic’ media, the second one will focus on its commercial counterparts. The reason artistic expressions will be included in this chapter is that contemporary visual art remains a massive carrier of social and cultural expressions, serving as a source of inspiration and being regularly referred and appealed to by visual creators from other fields.

2.3.1 Contemporary art as a medium

In this section, our primary goal is to comprehensively examine and crystallize insights concerning the intricate relationship between art and its socio-cultural intersections. While sidestepping traditional discussions of aesthetic appreciation or art criticism, we will focus on the pivotal processes of liberation, globalization and conceptualization which have made art a social phenomenon strongly tied to the cultural theory (Ardenne, 1995).

As we examine contemporary visual art, regardless of its exact form or field, we can mention a certain degree of appropriation of postmodern cultural narratives within it. Several researchers, including Smith (2013; 2019), Aiello and Parry (2020), Giunta (2013) and others ground their theories in contemporary art, emphasizing its role in social and cultural critique and its engagement in diverse cultural dialogues, setting contemporary art as a medium for social and cultural manifestations. In the described manner, Smith (2013) is building a solid contextual framework around the notion of contemporaneity and its artistic manifestation

directly referring its formation to social shifts, which marked the transition from modernity to postmodernism and shaped key narratives of the contemporary cultural landscape (Smith, 2013). As the starting point Smith (2013) mentions a fundamental transformation of world's arrangements and balances of power, caused by the transformation of European ideas towards decolonization and anti-globalism. Additionally, events like the decolonization of Africa, Asia's economic rise and rapid modernization, Middle Eastern protests against autocracy, and revolutions in South America further enriched this landscape (Smith, 2013: 17).

In his other work on the subject, Smith refers to contemporaneity as to the most prominent characteristic of the present world, which encompasses its unique qualities ranging from the relationships between humans and the environment and the diversity of cultures to the dynamics of global politics and the internal experiences of individuals (Smith, 2019).

According to the author, contemporaneity is shaped by three sets of major forces: globalization, inequity and 'global infoscape' as a mediated communication within a regime of representation. This way, Smith suggests that, just as contemporaneity is influenced by these forces, contemporary art too is sculpted in response to the development and flow of these major trends (Smith, 2019: 57-59).

Aiello and Parry focus their research on a more generalized approach to visual communications, operating with the notion of representation and mediation, in which a similar contemporary mechanics unfolds the matters of collective identities in the globalized world (Aiello and Parry, 2020). Referring to the work of Hamilton (1997), they underline the social impact made by works of humanist photography during the 20th century, such as the most iconic shots made by Cartier-Bresson or Robert Capa. In this light, photography emerged as a pivotal medium, mirroring and articulating universal human experiences and subsequently shaping collective identities. Similar to other visual arts of the modern era, photography played its role in constructing collective memory by evoking shared emotional responses to specific events and employing universal symbolic appeals associated with broader humanists values and ideals. Powered by foundational ideals like equality, solidarity, and community, this form of art fostered an inclusive notion of collective identity, striving to bridge cultural and societal differences (Aiello and Parry, 2020: 91).

On contemporary art – this time a form of activism, – writes Giunta, once again highlighting a complex interrelations that have developed between artistic intentions and cultural, and

political institutions during the 20th century, a connection that remains influential today (Giunta, 2013: 234). Tracing the evolution of modern activism back to the 1960s, Giunta particularly mentions the conceptual practices within artistic discourse, which helped art to expand from its previous centers to the new geographies, such as Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America, turning it into an attribute of a globalized society. At the same time, conceptualism opened art to embody both thought and action, a creative gesture which was aiming to dissolve art within life (Giunta, 2013: 235-236). In this respect, we can consider activism to be a prism, a partial concept through which we are able to explore a broader landscape of social interplays in which art performs as media.

Within the discourse of activism in art, Giunta (2013) mentions the feminist movement of the 1970s-1980s which questioned and settled masculine canon within Western society and proposed a different view on body and sexuality; activism focused on human rights in Latin America; civil acts of disobedience in various Western countries as a manifestation against the course of modern capitalism (Giunta, 2013: 237, 239). Singerman (2006) and Meyer (2006) further explore the feminist discourse, emphasizing its critical role in shaping the direction of Western society during the 1970s and 1980s. They highlight its focus on representation and sexuality, asserting its undeniable influence on the art of that era. Doyle contributes to the topic by examining queer representation in contemporary art. This form of representation solidified its presence during the same period, is situated within the broader framework of identity-based movements of the 1970s, alongside with other radical social shifts, characterized by the rise of radical feminism, the gay liberation movement and expansive civil rights demonstrations (Doyle, 2006: 349).

Souza contextualizes contemporary art focusing on the issues of how the subjects of identity – including the identification of class, ethnicity and race, gender and sexuality – is related to contemporary visual practices. The 1970s and 1980s are also referred to by the author as the decade of identity redefining by artists from non-Western backgrounds, their increased interests to own ethnicity, which emerged as a dominant cultural term (Souza, 2006: 360). In this respect, the late 1980s are marked by a significant shift in theorizing racial identity and culture in both Britain and US, with black art movement interacting with the discourse and introducing a more nuanced models of identity, which differed from previously strictly categorized cultural difference rooted in race (Souza, 2006: 361). Within this evolving

discourse, visual culture and various manifestations of contemporary art became a means to comprehension and reconceptualization of history of black slavery, at the same time dealing with the actual issues of the racial antagonism and enduring influence of colonial beliefs about race.

As we sum up the studies cited above, we might assume that regardless the exact form or type of artistic expression, contemporary art presents itself as a full-fledged medium which expresses the essence of contemporaneity and encompasses almost any type of discourse modern society finds crucial. Clearly, social and cultural matters are far not the only themes presented in the contemporary art agenda, nor is this first time in history artistic expression has stood for concrete humanities problematic (Dada movement of early the 20th century would be the first protest-art movement to come to mind). However, the general degree of social commitment, reflection and critique, involvement into cultural dialogue which is taken by the art of nowadays could be hardly reached by the arts' movements of the past. Indeed, the socio-cultural fabric of today finds a resonant voice in contemporary art. Similar to other media, contemporary art handles a vibrant connection to social and cultural manifestations, and facilitates actual discourse of various fields – from political critique and willingness to change the current balance of power, to fighting social injustice and misrepresentation. Notably, starting on the contemporary art topic many researchers and authors, such as those mentioned in this section, emphasize exactly its socio-cultural aspect above its academic or aesthetic value.

Simultaneously, the “predominantly visual” nature of contemporary art, as put by Smith, carries the narratives of modern and postmodern culture “driven by image, spectacle, attraction and celebrity” on a scale far beyond than ever before (Smith, 2019: 29). With all the complexity and comprehension ability of visual communication, as we figured during this research, art of nowadays encompasses a highly significant amount of symbolism, meaning-generation and representation wishing its messages. The ‘dissolution’ of art within life, mentioned by Giunta (2013) is actually happening on a full scale, meaning that contemporary art can be treated as a major carrier of cultural values and discourses. Within the scope of this research, such a state of affairs is noteworthy to us because a similar methodologies and techniques found in contemporary art can also inspire commercial communication strategies. This insight paves the way for innovative approaches that brands might adopt in the

marketplace and in cultivating relationships with their audience. As we proceed, this chapter will delve deeper into the present landscape of commercial visual media.

2.3.2 Commercial visual assets and their media

The functions of commercial visual assets – such as brand identity systems, imagery styles, graphic elements, and other visual features – shapes a general framework of an enterprise representation to public. As put by Lelis and Kreutz, the essence of such communication is a process of storytelling, reflecting the key values and beliefs which shape a brand's narrative (Lelis and Kreutz, 2022: 134). These visual elements encompass a wide range of components, from logos, typography and packaging, to printed or online advertising and photography style. When disseminated across various media channels, these elements become instrumental in conveying a story and amplifying a brand's conceptual message (Lelis and Kreutz, 2022; Muller and Wiedemann, 2022).

From a historic perspective, the emergence of commercial application of visual communications can be traced back to last quarter of the 19th century, however a need for customized marketing of products and services came up later in the beginning of the 20th century, alongside with the emergence of the working class as the main consumers group in several European countries (Muller and Wiedemann, 2022: 7, 56). The subsequent standardization and industrialization of graphic design began as an innovative printed posters with a distinctive imaginary became a foremost advertising medium. By the 1910s, it was standard for companies to employ design and advertising experts, solidifying these fields as established professions (Muller and Wiedemann, 2022: 86).

The non-artistic implication of visual communication is not solely limited to serving business purposes, but also covers the spheres of culture, politics, science, public sector, etc., as their functioning can hardly be imagined without properly created design solutions (Muller and Wiedemann, 2022: 7). However, it was primarily advertising campaigns that used different media the most for commercial purposes and created a channel of contact between the general public and corporations. The media involved into this process ranges from standard print media to commercial radio and TV broadcasting, followed by Internet and its technical

options for mass communication (Paxson, 2010: 36). In this respect, the process of informational exchange which aims for commercial purposes shall not be much different from those aiming for other ones, e.g. in artistic or solely cultural fields. Keeping in mind the predominantly visual character of advertising communications, we can expect them to encompass the same degree of diverse interpretation capabilities in their semiotics systems as the ones presented in other forms of visual exchange.

Speaking of advertising as an umbrella term and a foundational mechanism of commercial communication, we shall first mention its distinguished intention to sell a product, a ‘persuasive intent behind advertising’ (Eagle, 2007: 101). Such aim compels the creators to keep in mind a general image of their potential customer and shape their message in advance, in order to achieve a desired effect of it (Paxson, 2010: 38). The duties of visual communication planning and execution is covered by designers, who are not being directly involved into the promotional stage of a products’ marketing cycle, but make sure the core message is correctly expressed and conceptually transferred to the visual field (Newberry, 1997: 12). This way, a commercial communication can be presented as a two-fold process which, on the one hand, deals with a concrete and rather rational aim of product or service sale, and oppositely consists of less tangible realm of emotional appeal, aiming to resonate with potential buyers through compelling design solution (Sanders, 2002: 2).

As it has already been mentioned, from the brand’s point of view such process of meaningful and purpose-oriented visual communication can be represented as a process of storytelling with a clear narrative function. Aside from Lelis and Kreutz (2022), this aspect is investigated by Jensen (1996), Sanders (2002), Aiello and Parry (2020) etc. The main essence of storytelling, as put by Gershon and Page, is able to encompass and express cultural identities and social values, along with the behavioral models and common experiences, which made it the most effective, influential, and probably the oldest form of interpersonal communication (Gershon and Page, 2001: 34). For brands, a similar approach serves in crafting their value propositions to resonate with potential customer segments. In every aspect this process is investigated by Lelis and Kreutz (2022), as they describe the very modern approach in visual communication which heavily relies on the power of narratives and storytelling – an essential elements of the human-centric design.

Following the ‘start with why’ concept by Sinek (2011), Lelis and Kreutz (2022) differentiate an approach to engagement with an audience into two: WHY – as an appeal to the inspirational sense of purpose behind the product, and WHAT – as a more traditional leaders’ approach to represent a product or a company’s story. In the intersection between WHY and WHAT lies the HOW – a target point of visual communication planning which creates a narrative to take a potential customer to their desired experience (Lelis and Kreutz, 2022: 132-133). Analogous to other facets of contemporary culture, contemporary commercial communication and branding are viewed as visual-driven experiences with sight being the primary addressed sense. Moreover, echoing the overarching cultural shift from a traditional structuralist approach to narrative, contemporary designs in visual construction have evolved from coherence and predictability to embody dynamic entities, introducing variations that challenge the boundaries of the narratives they convey (Lelis and Kreutz, 2022; Neumeier, 2006). As we might assume, such an approach once again situates visual communication, irrespective of its intent or field, within the broader socio-cultural landscape, its symbolic structures and codes.

Theorizing advertisement and its visual communication methods within the so-called ‘promotional culture’, Aiello and Parry refer to several other researchers of the topic, including Davis (2013) and Wernick (1991). The generalized statement expressed in their work indicates that the techniques and imperatives of promotion have been adopted by organizations beyond just advertising, public relations, marketing, lobbying and branding, ultimately reshaping the work of other sectors of society as well, including charities, social movements, political parties, and basically any other social domain (Aiello and Parry, 2020: 240). Holm is another author who explores the role of advertising as both a crucial component of our capitalist economy and, at the same time, as a form of artistic expression. Following the authors logic, advertisements would sometimes face a critical and suspicious attitude, especially within the fields of media and cultural studies, however it is important to recognize a significant cultural and artistic role that advertising plays in the modern society (Holm, 2017).

In this way, we can perceive advertising not simply as tools for selling products, but a powerful communicative form that reflects and shape cultural values, desires and aspirations. As it participates in the construction and generation of social meanings and contribute to the visual and discursive landscapes of our everyday lives, it gets involved into the process of

exploring various artistic techniques and visual aesthetics. It relates branding and commercial entities to the general framework of visual culture, making it a competent participating party of modern cultural exchange. Additionally, we shall particularly assume the similarity between branding and advertising storytelling narratives with the social and cultural narratives brought up by contemporary art discourse. The engagement with similar social and cultural themes can be characteristic of visual communication and expression employed by both brands and contemporary artists, assuming that both art and advertising interact within the same cultural context. However, a more detailed exploration of this hypothesis will be handled further in the methodological part of this study.

In the following sections of this chapter, we will concentrate on the visual communication strategies used by contemporary businesses to connect with their target audiences and convey their vision, values, and messaging. Visual communication is an essential aspect of brand identity and plays a significant role in shaping the perception and recognition of a brand. Through carefully crafted visual assets such as logos, typography, color schemes, imagery, and overall design aesthetics, brands strive to create a visual language that captures the essence of their identity and resonates with their desired audience. Below we will build a brief theoretical framework for two major visual assets exploited by brands and explore the its mechanics as a media for brands' communication.

2.3.2.1 Logo

According to several researchers, including Keller (1993; 2003), Keller and Lehmann (2006), Aaker (1997) and others, logos rank among the most pivotal elements of branding communication. Being a powerful visual symbol, they create a lasting impression in consumers' minds, facilitating easy identification and association with a specific brand. By encapsulating brands' essence and values in a concise and appealing visual manifestation, logos play a crucial role in fostering trust, loyalty and a sense of familiarity among consumers (Keller and Lehmann, 2006: 740-743). Also referring the logo as a part of the construct within brand personality construct, Aaker describes it as a symbol, a 'product-related attribute' which distinguishes brand personality traits. Thus, aside from being simply a design artifact, a logo serves as a visual embodiment of the brand's identity and is a powerful tool for conveying its core messages and beliefs (Aaker, 1997: 347-349).

Kelly (2017) who have analyzed the subject, referring to a set of influential researchers analyzed the very basic purposes and functions of logos in branding. Evolving Milton Glaser's statement of logo as 'the gateway to the brand', Kelly explores the logo as a powerful tool that efficiently unlocks a multitude of associations that are carefully crafted and built over time, forging a strong connection between an organization and its target audience (Kelly, 2017: 19). Highlighting the visual nature of the logo, both Kelly (2017) and Wheeler (2012) mention the swiftness of evoking perceptions and associations it is able to provide, surpassing the capabilities of any other communication medium (Wheeler, 2014: 56). By encapsulating the essence of a brand in a visually appealing and instantly recognizable symbol, a logo has the unique ability to convey messages and elicit emotional responses within a second.

Lury (2004) provides an intriguing perspective on logos, evaluating it in the context of generalized semiotics structures which combines both cultural and commercial implications. According to them, logos (and branding in general) serves as a dynamic medium, and serving the key media function ensures information flows between the producer and the consumer, forming a complex process of exchange that unfolds in various fragments (Lury, 2004: 74). This way, brands – including their logos – play a crucial role in representing not only the quality of products or services but also in shaping social and cultural identities. The significance of the signs and symbols within branding emerged and evolved through their interconnectedness with other signs, contexts, and cultural frameworks (Lury, 2004: 75). The interpretation and construction of meaning are intricately tied to the interplay between various signs, forming a web of associations and cultural codes that shape our understanding of brands and their broader cultural significance.

Continuing with the exploration of the multifaceted nature of logos, Moore and Reid delve deeper into the psychological impact of logos on consumers. They suggest that logos are not just mere visual symbols, as they tap into the subconscious of consumers, influencing their purchasing decisions and fostering brand loyalty (Moore and Reid, 2008: 521). By carefully crafting aesthetics and skillfully choosing the display manner, logos can trigger a range of emotions, memories and connections, contributing to forming a complete brand impression in the consumer's perception. Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) highlight the emotional aspect of branding, emphasizing that logos serve as emotional cues for the brands which often aim to foster an emotional connection with their audience. Consumers' resonance with a logo often transcends beyond the product or service to evoke broader feelings of trust, security and a

sense of belonging (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001: 82). This emotional resonance can substantially elevate the brand's value in the market, making it more than just a commercial entity.

The cultural dimension of logos is further explored by Baudrillard, who points out that in our postmodern society, brands, and especially their logos, have transcended their initial commercial intent. Logos have become emblematic of the societal values, aspirations and even anxieties, and no longer reflect the information about products or services but are signifiers of our time, capturing the spirit of the time they depict (Baudrillard, 1998).

2.3.2.2 Imagery and photography

Similar to logos and their vital role in establishing visual consistency and authenticity for a brand, the use of images, video and distinct photography style further contributes to the brand's overall visual coherence. Brands quite often adopt a specific style or aesthetic for their imagery and photography, encompassing decisions regarding the selection of visuals, composition techniques and approaches, and the overall atmosphere conveyed. Consistency in imagery not only underlines the brand's personality but also reinforces its visual identity, ensuring that each visual element aligns harmoniously with a brand's values and messaging.

Following the research of Aaker (1997), Diamantopoulos (2004), Schroeder (2008), etc., we can evaluate how exactly a particularly consistent style in imagery and photography enhances the recognition of the brand, creates a cohesive visual narrative, and cultivates a sense of familiarity and trust among their target audience. The selection of photography style and tone in branding plays a crucial role in shaping the perception of a brand. Going beyond mere aesthetics, different photography styles possess the ability to evoke a wide range of emotions and establish a distinct brand identity and directly interact with the brand's personality (Diamantopoulos et al., 2005: 132). From a functional point of view, photography and imagery attributes of the brand then follow a similar path as the logo — aligning with the brand's values, personality and target audience, they effectively communicate the brand's message and establish a visual narrative that resonates with consumers (Aaker, 1997: 348).

At the same time, an interesting perspective opens up as we investigate the cultural context behind the visual entities used in branding and advertising. Following Schroeder's (2008)

findings on visual rhetoric, we can see a perception of visuality that places commercial and artistic imagery into a single environment and treats them quite similarly. Schroeder situates images within a cultural context and presents brands that use them as complex entities embedded in culture, ideology and visual rhetoric, rather than just products or services (Schroeder, 2008: 279). This perspective broadens our understanding of the relationship between consumers, advertising, and mass media, highlighting the influence of cultural codes, ideological discourse, and rhetorical processes within this dynamic interaction. By acknowledging the cultural context and the intricate interplay between visual imagery and branding, we gain a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of visual communication in the context of contemporary culture.

Similarly, the subject is researched by Rodner and Kerrigan (2014), as their study investigates the implementation of social and cultural capital in advertising and branding activities (Rodner and Kerrigan, 2014). The various types of capital – such as social, cultural, and symbolic – might be used by advertising professionals when shaping communication messages and media. In the modern world, brands act as cultural intermediaries, facilitating the transfer of cultural meanings and reinforcing their status within the social landscape (Rodner and Kerrigan, 2014: 9-12). This perspective can also be clearly traced in the work of Berger (2008). In his findings, the correlation between the history of oil painting and modern ‘publicity images’ such as advertising becomes the central narrative and logical outcome. Moreover, a significant portion of the semiotic variety of contemporary visual language is presented as a direct successor of Western post-Renaissance cultural heritage. As stated by the author:

The continuity, however, between oil painting and publicity goes far deeper than the ‘quoting’ of specific paintings. Publicity relies to a very large extent on the language of oil painting. It speaks in the same voice about the same things. (Berger, 2008: 135)

Publicity is the culture of the consumer society. It propagates through images that society's belief in itself [...]. Publicity is the life of this culture - in so far as without publicity capitalism could not survive - and at the same time publicity is its dream. (Berger, 2008: 152, 154)

2.4 Conclusion

Concluding this chapter of our research, we observe a clear logic in the interaction between media and the contemporary culture they convey, as well as its visual representation in commercial media and contemporary art. The operational logic of modern media, described in the first part of this chapter, unveils the potential for transmitting experiences and information in today's world. Here, media serve as the nerve center of contemporary discourse and hold vast potential. However, more intriguing, and forming the foundation for our methodological exploration, is the interaction between methods of contemporary art and commercial media. As previously highlighted, only a handful of authors have tackled the description of contemporary art from a visual standpoint, instead emphasizing its socio-cultural function and its role as a platform for introducing new meanings and concepts on pertinent themes like personal freedom, postcolonial power dynamics, gender equality and the embracing of new identities. We might hypothesize that it is contemporary art to which we owe the introduction of these themes into the cultural mainstream. Just as Renaissance art, discussed in the previous chapter, acted as a means of understanding the world and subsequently paved the way for the conceptualization of new Western ideologies, contemporary art has evolved into the channel for the most pressing discourses of our society, offering a logical evaluation of our current society and its ongoing transformations.

Berger's (2008) perspective on the link between traditional painting symbolism and modern advertising culture is inherently fascinating and can be expanded upon. A potential area of exploration might be that contemporary visual culture, regardless of its objective, interacts with, and derives inspiration from a plethora of symbols and cultural artifacts. These have been enriched and redefined largely due to the influence of contemporary art, starting from the 1970s up to the present. Therefore, a deeper examination of this interaction within the visual lexicon of a contemporary brand, understanding the expressive methods it uses and pointing the semiotic systems originating from the conveyed visual elements, will be among the subsequent goals of the research.

3. General theory of modern branding

Defining the general concept of branding, researchers often approached it as a complex phenomenon which has undergone a transformative evolution and is currently expressed within the scholars' community through a diverse set of definitions and interpretations. Over time, the understanding of branding has evolved from a simple act of labelling products to a multidimensional phenomenon, which penetrated all spheres of our life – from economic and social to cultural and even religious ones (Klein, 1999). This diversity of perspectives reflects the complex nature of branding and the recognition that it extends beyond mere visual elements, such as those discussed in the previous chapter of this research, and encompasses the entire spectrum of everyday social interactions, including the elements of marketing, psychology, sociology, and design to effectively communicate its values and shape the perceptions and preferences of consumers (Kapferer, 2012: 7).

Developing the idea of multiple perspectives within branding, Kapferer (2012) claims that brands have emerged as prominent symbols within our economies and postmodern societies. Alongside with the development of the society itself, the methods and objectives of branding evolved alongside. Definitions of branding have continuously shifted over time, reflecting the changing contexts and perspectives of each era. Thus, each definition would represent a snapshot of the prevailing understanding of branding during a specific period (Kapferer, 2012: 11). In this manner, if we address Keller's traditional definition of brand as "a product that adds other dimensions to differentiate it in some way from other products designed to satisfy the same need" (Keller, 1999: 4), we might characterise it as a definition which does not disentangle the product and the brand, and so refers to the years of mid 20th century when brand building mostly meant linking a name to a single consumer benefit (Keller, 1999; Trout & Ries, 1981). Opposed to that, contemporary concept of brand has shifted its focus towards fostering emotional connections and consumer loyalty based on engagement, with a brand's success no longer solely reliant on the benefits it offers – it must actively cultivate and develop its community (Kapferer, 2012: 11-12).

Prominent scholars in the field of branding, such as Wood (2000), Kapferer (2012), and Keller and Lehmann (2006), have extensively explored the concept of brand equity. As a term, brand equity refers to the additional value that a brand generates, which can be viewed as a distinct asset of a company, a cumulative collection of associations and emotional

connections forged with consumers. This notion highlights the idea that a brand name is not just a label but a strategic business asset that can provide companies with a competitive edge and enhanced business advantages (Wood, 2000: 662). Such advantages can specifically include more effective advertising and promotional efforts, based on resonating and tailored marketing messages. A well-established brand can also create a level of insulation from competitors, as consumers develop a sense of trust and loyalty towards the brand, making them less likely to switch to alternative options (Keller & Lehmann, 2006: 740-745). Thus, by capitalizing on these benefits, companies can establish a competitive edge and achieve sustainable competitive superiority in their respective markets.

The described communication between brands and their consumers, such as the storytelling concept described in the previous chapter, can be further examined within the framework of relationship theory. Relationship theory provides a theoretical construct for comprehending the dynamics of consumer-brand interactions and investigates various factors that shape them. At its core, the theory emphasizes the pivotal role of trust in establishing and maintaining brand-consumer relationships, and offers a comprehensive perspective that integrates various marketing variables which are typically studied in isolation. Such trust is cultivated when a brand consistently delivers on its promises and meets the expectations of its customers, fostering a sense of reliability and dependability (Fournier, 1998: 14-15). Further on, as consumers engage with a brand and accumulate experiences over time, they develop a sense of loyalty and emotional attachment, which in turn can influence their purchasing decisions and overall behaviour (Reichheld & Schefter, 2000: 108).

Such a manner of 'humanized' brand-to-consumer relations can be implied both ways, especially within our value-driven era of Marketing 3.0 – a term used among others by Jiménez-Zarco (2017) and Kotler et al. (2010). Emerging in the face of challenges brought about by globalization, this approach recognizes the shifting values and demands of consumers in the current era, where individuals aspire to be treated as more than just mere consumers, but instead seek to be acknowledged as whole human beings with intellectual, emotional, and spiritual dimensions (Kotler et al., 2010). This approach reflects this desire for self-expression, creativity, and a connection to cultural values, as it encourages companies to proactively position themselves as active agents which demonstrate respect and earn

admiration through their brands (Jiménez-Zarco et al., 2014: 220). This way, the Marketing 3.0 paradigm encourages organizations to better engage with consumers on a deeper level, acknowledging their holistic needs and aspirations while addressing the evolving landscape of contemporary marketing.

3.1 Brand Personality

As the previous part of the chapter implies, nowadays, consumer-to-brand relationships may be perceived as a process of communication between two parties, both of which carry their own traits of self-presentation and communicate their own distinct personalities. Such a perspective suggests that brands, like individuals, may have a unique set of characteristics and qualities that shape the nature of their interactions with consumers. As such relationships go deeper, a meaningful type of connection develops, encompassing some dynamics similar to those experienced in human relationships.

Brand personality, as put by Aaker, represents a framework that helps companies shape consumer perceptions through communication activities and refers to the human-like characteristics associated with a brand, thus allowing it to develop a unique and relatable identity (Aaker, 1997: 347). As added by Phau and Lau, brand's distinctive personality do not only translates the values and generate meaning of the brand itself, but at the same time help consumers to express their own identity or experience the emotional benefits associated with the brand (Phau & Lau, 2000: 52). Such approach highlights that modern brands developed further from a standard functional entities boundaries, as their essence is not solely derived from the product or physical attributes but is complemented by intangible characteristics. According to Leelayudthyothin (2022), brand personality refers to the distinct set of characteristics and traits associated with a product or brand, which in a similar way can be linked to both human and organizational personality. Brand personality, in collaboration with brand identity, helps to shape and communicate a company's image to the public, highlighting appealing attributes and forming a connection with customers and their personalities, thereby stimulating brand preference, building brand equity, fostering brand commitment, and encouraging brand loyalty (Leelayudthyothin, 2022: 82).

A group of researchers have made attempts to theoretically define the notion of brand personality. Kapferer (1997) theorized brand personality as an integral aspect of the “brand identity prism”. He emphasized that brand identity represented the essence and unique characteristics of a brand, which can allow companies to create a distinct and compelling brand image that sets them apart from competitors (Kapferer, 1997). The NEO model of personality traits developed by McCrae and Costa (1989) and John’s (1990) Big Five system were other attempts to define traits that are related to the personality of brands. However, a common limitation of these models, as acknowledged by Phau and Lau (2000), underlines that their primary focus lies on describing the personality traits perceived by consumers, rather than presenting a comprehensive and consistent set of personality dimensions that can be applied to multiple brands. In other words, these models do not necessarily provide a universal framework for assessing brand personality traits across different brands (Phau & Lau, 2000: 54).

A commonly acknowledged framework to cover this theoretical gap was developed by Aaker (1997). This framework is based on the idea that brands can have human-like qualities that can be perceived by consumers. According to the author, brand personality can influence how consumers perceive and interact with the brand, as well as their purchasing decisions and overall behavior. By understanding and leveraging these dimensions of brand personality, marketers can create a brand identity that resonates with their target audience and helps to build long-term relationships with customers (Aaker, 1997). Additionally, the exploration of brand personality dimensions can shed light on the emotions evoked in consumers when they interact with a brand. This analysis can provide valuable insights into the impact of brand personality on consumer behavior and emotional responses (Biel, 1993). Below is presented the table based on Aaker’s brand personality scale.

BP Dimension	Facets	Traits
Sincerity	Down-to-earth	down-to-earth, family-oriented, small-town
	Honest	honest, sincere, real
	Wholesome	wholesome, original
	Cheerful	cheerful, sentimental, friendly
Excitement	Daring	daring, trendy, exciting
	Spirited	spirited, cool, young
	Imaginative	imaginative, unique
	Up-to-date	up-to-date, independent, contemporary
Competence	Reliable	reliable, hardworking, secure
	Intelligent	intelligent, technical, corporate
	Successful	successful, leader, confident
Sophistication	Upper class	upper class, glamorous, good looking
	Charming	charming, feminine, smooth
Ruggedness	Outdoorsy	outdoorsy, masculine, western
	Tough	tough, rugged

Table 1: Aaker's brand personality scale (Aaker, 1997: 354)

Analyzing the logic of the brand personality table, we can assume that the personality of a brand plays a significant role in shaping consumers' perceptions and the subsequent desire to be associated with it. The examples given by Phau and Lau in their work include Guess and Esprit as they symbolize youth, Marlboro cigarettes evoke images of masculinity, Gucci and BMW signify sophistication, Hewlett Packard conveys competence, Hallmark and Kodak relate sincerity while Nike represents fitness and athleticism (Phau & Lau, 2000: 54). The actual state of brands' personality perception is more complicated in real life, since many researchers suggest that the development of a brand's personality can often be additionally influenced by factors such as consumers' own personality, self-congruity, cultural influences, and demographic characteristics (Kassarjian, 1997; Sirgy, 1982). Bosnjak highlights that the number of dimensions extracted and their meaning vary across studies, while several authors

identified the variables in dimensions of brand personality throughout different countries (Bosnjak et al., 2007: 305; Ferrandi et al., 2000: 8; Sung and Tinkham, 2005: 36). We might then assume that it is evident that the measures of brand personality may vary from its initial notions and require additional adaptation for different geographic regions, demographics, and exact research contexts.

Among other researchers, the matter of variables influencing a brand's personality was studied by Foscht, whose study presents compelling evidence that the perception of a brand can vary across different cultures, even when its positioning remains the same (Foscht et al., 2008). Following Hill's (2002) assertion that culture encompasses various elements, including language, religion, values, and norms, researchers assume that these components play a crucial role in shaping individuals' perceptions and evaluations of various aspects, highlighting one of culture's fundamental functions as a framework for perceiving and evaluating different phenomena. In the context of marketing, this implies that brands have a higher likelihood of being well-received by individuals belonging to a specific culture if they align with the cultural perceptions prevalent within that culture (Hill, 2002; Foscht et al.,: 132).

The highlighted cultural variables in Foscht's study include the dimensions of collectivism/individualism, masculinity/femininity, power distance and performance orientation (Foscht, 2008: 132-133). As the outcome implies, despite the identical positioning efforts, cultural nuances shape significant differences in consumers' brand personality perceptions within the study's countries of focus – the UK, Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, the US and Singapore. On the one hand, the obvious difficulties caused by the nuanced landscape of every country arise when developing brand positioning strategies that accentuate the traits enabling consumers to perceive the product in a comparable manner. On the other hand, a brand can benefit by highlighting a specific characteristic that is highly desirable in a particular market – even if it may not be as desirable in other countries – in order to enhance the brand's relevance to that market's self-concept. In any case, working towards an understanding of cultural context and tailoring brand messaging and imagery to resonate with specific cultural values tends to be the most adequate way to bridge the gap and foster a

unified brand perception, cultivating consumer engagement and loyalty across diverse markets.

Summing up this section of the chapter, we can observe indications of the interaction between commercial and cultural aspects in the modern world, which opens up intriguing possibilities for further research on the influence of Western cultural heritage on contemporary commercial culture in its material and non-material aspects. From a firm's point of view, this highlights the importance of cultural sensitivity and adaptation in global brand management strategies, as a key to navigate within the diverse context of globalised contemporary society. From the perspective of our research, it's interesting to examine the possible connections between the historical context of culture and brand communication (in its verbal, visual, and other forms) as one of the media of today's age.

3.2 Modern perception of luxury

The notion of luxury is frequently employed in branding, yet defining it proves challenging due to its subjective and dynamic character. It might be assumed that the concept has not been given significant attention within the context of social theory, being labelled as a purely economic notion without further exploration (Mortelmans, 2005). Conventionally, luxury has been linked to men's secondary needs and desires rather than their essential requirements, leading to perceptions of it being excessive and superfluous. This interpretation has been utilized to criticize and stigmatize the use and display of luxury, resulting in the multifaceted nature of luxury and its potential implications on social, cultural, and economic aspects not being properly showcased within academic discourse of the past century (Rodrigues & Borges, 2021). And while it doesn't seem possible to define luxury in its absolute way due to its high volatility and dependence on cultural and life conditions during a given period of time, a significant effort has been made to research into the notion of luxury as applied to marketing and branding.

In recent years, the concept of luxury and the perception of luxury brands have experienced significant transformations, particularly in the last two decades (Kapferer, 2017; Kapferer &

Laurent, 2016). As mentioned by Ko, Costello & Taylor (2019) and Rodrigues & Borges (2021: 6), in the past, luxury goods were considered exclusive and limited to a privileged elite, while today, they are present in a broader high-end market. Advancements in communication technologies and their role played in the globalization and democratization of many luxury products have resulted in blurring the lines of exclusivity and making them more accessible to a wider audience. In this respect, some assume that the concept of pure luxury must have evolved in connection with the prominent global luxury brands of today (Nobre & Simões, 2019: 329).

At the same time, Kapferer defines luxury within the branding landscape as a concept, primarily based on exclusivity, exceptional quality and high price. It is a term that is often associated with high-end fashion, jewelry and automobiles, among other products and services (Kapferer, 2012: 335). Regardless of the ongoing changes, these qualities behind the perception of luxury might still be considered as an important aspect of branding and a factor influencing consumer behavior and purchasing decisions. As stated by Aaker (1996), luxury brands have an elevated status and value compared to non-luxury brands, thereby generating higher demand and a greater willingness among consumers to pay premium prices for them. Thomsen also mentions that contemporary consumption styles have undergone significant changes due to shifts in society and rapid technological advancements which cultivated a more intangible and subjective view of luxury within younger, connected, and global consumer groups (Thomsen et al., 2020: 441).

The shifting perception of luxury as a result of ongoing changes within the social and cultural landscape is also described by Yeoman and McMahon-Beattie (2011). For them, luxury is a highly adaptable notion which varies significantly across different time periods and cultures. With the increased overall prosperity of today, the definition of luxury has evolved and became more ambiguous, and is no longer confined solely to the elite. As material comfort has become more accessible to a broader audience, traditional values of nobility and heritage have diminished in importance, with a global cultural shift leading to a trend where individuals seek more for personal fulfilment and aspirations through meaningful experiences (Yeoman & McMahon-Beattie, 2011: 73). Yeoman et al. (2005) thus argue that modern luxury becomes increasingly focused on the value of experiences and authenticity rather than

being solely based on the monetary worth of a given item. Danziger expresses an opinion that this transformation can be characterized as the ‘feminization’ of luxury, where the emphasis has moved away from male-oriented achievements and status symbols to experiences and self-gratification (Danziger, 2005: 17).

In this respect, the perception and dimensions of the modern luxury experience are unfolding as a complex and multifaceted matter. Some may suggest that the traditional definition of luxury — the one revolving around scarce products that possess objective or symbolic value, along with a higher standard of quality – should remain the primary and concrete basis upon which producers can attribute a sense of luxury value to an object (Mortelmans, 2005: 516). And while we can agree that the traditional concept of luxury characterized by exclusivity and conspicuous consumption continues to exist, an opposing viewpoint challenges this notion by asserting that modern luxury is no longer solely about scarcity and exclusivity. Similarly to other cultural and social manifestations of the past, luxury has evolved from a solid and exclusive category of excessive purchases made by higher social classes into an object of a rather immaterial value within the post-modern world of signs.

From the cultural perspective, if we recall the disappearance of boundaries between high and low art, a similar mechanism can become evident in this field as well. Within the contemporary globalized and interconnected environment, society is now operating and interacting with a whole new set of symbols and values, allowing even the most common objects to transform into distinctive signs of taste and class in certain contexts, regardless of whether they are considered luxury products by the dominant culture. We might assume that, similarly to other objects of artistic or commercial nature, the semiotics of luxury in branding could not remain the same as in the 19th-20th century, with its inclination toward demonstrative consumption and social stratification through possession of various goods (Mortelmans, 2005: 517). The confluence of technology, globalization and evolving societal values has propelled luxury into a nuanced sphere. As we’ve established, the luxury of today bears a dual identity, with the traditional materialistic narrative coexisting alongside a more evolved, experience-centric perception. This duality presents an interesting conundrum for modern luxury brands, as they are not just selling a product or a service but are instead marketing an idea, an emotion and experience (Pine & Gilmore, 2013).

In today's context, the modern consumer is exceptionally well-informed of the state of things of the market, often gathering details about the origins of their purchases, the ethical stances of the brands they endorse and the cultural narrative behind them. This informed consciousness has fundamentally reshaped the landscape for luxury brands, as they now find themselves tasked with not only ensuring their values and practices to accord with those of their customers, but also crafting a brand narrative that resonates both locally and globally (Tsai, 2005: 489). The concept of sustainability, for instance, has been lately transformed from being a niche concern to a mainstream expectation. Contemporary luxury consumers are not solely captivated by a product's visual appeal or its brand heritage; additionally they are profoundly invested in its ethical sourcing, environmental footprint and societal contributions (Joy et al., 2012: 358). Brands like Stella McCartney and Gucci have proactively applied sustainability into their brand philosophy, appealing to a new generation of consumers that perceives luxury as a marker not only of affluence but also of ethical and ecological accountability (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009). Additionally, in the evolving landscape of accessible global markets, luxury brands are confronted with a delicate equilibrium between upholding global uniformity while staying relevant to their local significance. Respectfully, brands need to be sensitive to local cultures and traditions while retaining their core brand identity, ensuring that their luxury proposition remains appealing across diverse consumer demographics (Zhan & He, 2012: 63). In the next part of this chapter, we will investigate the new and more subtle, culturally enriched, way of value creation utilized by modern luxury brands.

3.3 Mechanics of value creation within luxury brands' segment

At the beginning of this chapter, we examined the standard functions of contemporary brands, which also included the process of creating value for customers by engaging with them at a deep emotional level. In the context of this section of the research, we will attempt to analyze how the value generation process occurs in the environment of brands belonging to the luxury segment. This question logically follows from the previous section, which revealed that the realities of modern society and the changing perceptions of luxury compel

brands to express their values in ways somewhat different from before. In the realm of modern luxury brands, value creation takes on a distinctive character, as it goes beyond the mere provision of products or services. Similar to generalized brands, luxury brands are esteemed for their ability to encapsulate a captivating and exclusive experience that transcends the material realm, but doing so in a more pronounced manner. In this respect, it's intriguing to explore precisely where this excessiveness originates and which attributes generate it.

Conceptualising the topic of value creation, a group of researchers including Tynan et al. (2009), Payne (2009), among others, introduce the term of value co-creation to emphasize the importance of interaction and dialogue between a brand and its active customers in the process of value creation, contrasting it with the outdated traditional view of firms solely creating and delivering value to passive customers (Tynan et al., 2009: 1158). Related to luxury brands in particular, Tynan et al. particularly presents the findings of Smith and Colgate's (2007) which identified four distinct types of value creation. Two of these types are self-oriented: 'excellence' (quality), which is considered a utilitarian value, and 'aesthetics' (beauty), which is a sensory value. The remaining two types are other-oriented: 'status' (impression management) representing a desired value and 'esteem' (possessions) (Tynan et al., 2009: 1158; Smith & Colgate, 2007).

Smith and Colgate's (2007) original framework was further expanded and reclassified by several researchers in order to compile a more comprehensive typology of value for luxury brands. This way, a category of 'craftsmanship' is introduced by Kapferer (1997) who pointed it out as a significant source of value for luxury brands, related to its utilitarian value category. The concepts of 'signs' (Kapferer, 1997), 'prestige' (Dubois & Czellar, 2002), 'social identity' (Vickers & Renand, 2003), 'uniqueness' and 'authenticity' (Beverland, 2006) correspond to their relative mechanisms of cultural codes, self-expression, social identity, and authenticity in modern luxury consumption (Tynan et al., 2009). Eventually, by reclassifying and extending the types of meanings, as well as adding new sources of value, the authors created a comprehensive framework that enables a deeper understanding of the complex nature of value creation for luxury brands. In contrast to the more traditional connotation of luxury, such as the social status-related "Veblen effect" coined by Leibenstein (1950) in the

mid-20th century, these modern concepts correspond to the more psychological, experiential, and cultural aspects that contribute to consumers' perceptions of luxury value.

As expressed by Roux, the demand for luxury goods can be attributed to the unique characteristics of luxury brands and the perceived benefits associated with owning and using them (Roux et al., 2017: 103). Additionally, luxury offerings are known for their quality and visually appealing designs, setting them apart from non-luxury products. Features such as premium materials, expert craftsmanship, and innovation contribute to the exclusivity, rarity, and distinctiveness of these products, which respectively justifies their premium price point (Choo et al., 2012). Due to that, luxury goods are often considered unattainable and inaccessible to the majority of consumers. This exclusivity enhances the status of those who can afford them, making luxury a symbol of privilege and social standing through the visible brand marks associated with luxury products (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012: 1400).

Another valuable insight on the subject is presented in the research made by Kauppinen-Räsänen et al. (2018) in which the authors build a conceptual framework around modern luxury brands, focusing on more person-oriented traits of brand-to-consumer relations. According to the authors, modern luxury consumption is experiencing a shift from exclusivity and inaccessibility towards the preferences of new luxury, where consumers are influenced more by their personality, values, attitudes, interests, and lifestyles rather than just their income levels (Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2018: 73). Consequently, it's pointed out that exploring the specific traits and motivations of luxury consumers from the perspective of their demographic backgrounds might be a crucial step for a comprehensive understanding of the evolving luxury market.

Atwal and Williams delve into the interplay between contemporary luxury consumption and the postmodern phenomenon. Beyond its initial philosophical implications, the broader marketing realm recognizes that consumption occupies a pivotal role in postmodern societies. In the landscape of experiential marketing, the postmodern discourse highlights two elements: hyper-reality and image (Atwal & Williams, 2009: 338). Berthon and Katsikeas define hyper-reality as a pervasive loss of authenticity, indicating that individuals grapple with discerning what is truly genuine (Berthon & Katsikeas, 1998). In the realm of

consumption, this leads to uncertainty about the authenticity of experiences or products. Consequently, consumers often gravitate towards the imagery, sometimes without probing the deeper meanings or narratives behind them. This dynamic fosters a culture prioritizing appearances and impressions, occasionally eclipsing the fundamental essence or reality (Atwal & Williams, 2009: 340).

This line of thought unveils a compelling perspective on consumer-brand relationships in postmodern societies. While we shouldn't assume consumers solely prioritize surface-level appearances, neglecting the inherent value of luxury items, it's evident that symbolism and visual expressiveness play a dominant role. Referring to Aaker's definition of a brand as "a set of assets linked to the brand, its name, and symbol" (Aaker, 1991: 13), the emphasis on symbols extends beyond mere material or functional attributes. In our contemporary society, brands serve not only as sources of emotional connection but also as vessels of cultural and social significance. This understanding propels us towards viewing cultural heritage as an interconnected tapestry, where semiotics instills meaning, whether in contemporary art or a fashion collection. The subsequent section of this chapter will explore the visual language of modern brands, contextualized within the postmodern Western shift from traditional, functional, and rational paradigms.

3.4 Role of visuality in value creation

At the end of the second chapter of this study, we discussed the general theme of using visual assets in commercial communications. However, the aspects described there, such as logos, photography style, etc., primarily included their technical evaluation and application. In this section of the research, we will revisit the topic of the visual component of branding, but specifically focus on its role in generating value and engaging with customers. Considering visual communication as a vital component which plays a pivotal role in shaping consumers' perceptions and experiences, we will attempt to better understand the interplay between brands and its cultural context, highlighting the strategic importance of leveraging visual elements to build an authentic and engaging brand image and experience.

In the realm of advertising, brands, and mass media, it is widely recognized that cultural codes, ideological discourse, and rhetorical processes hold significant sway over consumers' perceptions and interactions. Given that brands themselves operate as cultural, ideological, and rhetorical entities, researchers of the subject should focus on a multidisciplinary approach that combines the study of culture, ideology, and rhetoric with traditional branding concepts such as equity, strategy, and value (Schroeder, 2008). Such an expanded conceptual framework offers a more comprehensive perspective on the intricate interplay between brands and consumers, along with the broader cultural and ideological landscapes in which they operate. Following the idea of the highly visual profile of contemporary culture and state of society – such as expressed by Sandywell and Heywood (2014), Ross (2008), Stunken and Cartwrite (2017) etc. – the visual culture of today's commercial society has become the primary way people engage in aesthetic practices. Visual aesthetics, in their turn, are particularly pronounced in the business community, aligning with the global development of the commodity economy and the emergence of consumer culture (Zhao & Luo, 2016). In its turn, visual consumption stands out as one of the most significant aspects of consumer culture. It extends beyond traditional shopping and encompasses various fields and places, shaping consumer behavior in an image-driven society.

Schroeder (2008) extensively theorizes the application of photography as a primary source of visual images. Photography, encompassing various forms like digital, film, and video, continues to hold significant importance in the realm of information technologies. The development and influence of photography were greatly shaped by the longstanding traditions of painting, impacting both its commercial and artistic aspects, as well as its reception and recognition among audiences (Schroeder, 2008: 279). As a result, photography plays a profound role in shaping consumers' perceptions of identity – a phenomenon that has been explored by scholars like Cotton (2004) and Sobieszek (1999). The interplay between photography and the visual arts has contributed to the dynamic and multifaceted ways in which consumers perceive, interact with, and interpret visual information in contemporary society. Borgerson and Schroeder (2005) additionally point out that, within marketing communication, images frequently take on the role of representing experiences, particularly when other sources of information are less prominent. For example, perceptual codes and factors like relative size, shape, color, and symmetry influence consumer cognition, even if

individuals are not fully aware of these factors' impact. These factors play a significant role in visual information processing (Borgerson & Schroeder, 2005). Such perceptual cues might be considered essential in shaping our perception of brands, products, and advertising messages, making visual communication a tool that works on subconscious, emotional levels.

The generalised framework of brand visual communication theorised under the notion of 'brand identity' can be characterised as a unique combination of characteristics and attributes that a company aims to establish and maintain (Phillips et al., 2014). Those characteristics, presented as visual stimuli, are encountered by consumers when they engage with brands, and include logos, colours, shapes, typefaces, characters, styles, and other elements that form the brand's image (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2008; Schroeder, 2004). As researchers investigate visual brand representations, they tend to follow an experimental approach, focusing on the manipulation of individual visual elements independent of other brand aspects (Phillips et al., 2014). In this context, the significance of selecting visual elements that align with the desired brand meanings is highly emphasized. Examples of such alignment include using functional colours for functional products, employing strong typefaces to convey brand strength (Bottomley & Doyle, 2006), utilizing contrasting packaging for exciting brands, incorporating angular shapes for acidic brands (Spence, 2012), and employing white space to communicate prestige and power (Pracejus et al., 2006).

Schroeder (2005) theorizes brands as being intrinsically tied to visual representation, as they rely on various visual materials (such as the ones listed above) and their combination to establish unique brand images and create a unified visual representation while expressing the desired brand associations. Even though brands incorporate various elements beyond visuals, it is essential to recognize the significant role of visual aspects in branding that can be enriched by an art-based approach. Exploring the interconnections between art, branding, and consumption and incorporating art history and criticism into consumer and marketing research can benefit from gaining a comprehensive understanding of contemporary marketing practices (Schroeder, 2005: 1293). In this logic, by bridging the gap between art and marketing, we would be able to explore the dynamic relationship between visual culture, branding, and consumer behavior. Embracing this interdisciplinary approach allows us to

grasp the complex interplay of artistic expression and consumerism, shedding light on the evolving landscape of contemporary marketing.

It is important to note that by considering the visual arts as an impressive cultural referent system for branding, we can examine the approach to value creation from the perspective of engaging with the cultural heritage of visuality. The historical separation between art and business, with their distinct categorizations as high and low forms, respectively, of communication and culture, has significantly influenced how both parties are perceived by researchers, cultural critics, and consumers. By adopting an art-centered approach, it becomes imperative to reevaluate this research tradition and recognize both the commercial mechanisms inherent in the art market and the significant role of advertising, as the brands' visual medium, in shaping global culture (Fillis, 2000; Schroeder & Borgerson, 2002). In this case, we can assume that the branding process and meaning creation are influenced by and reference the visual aesthetics from the pre-modern era, while also incorporating narratives derived from contemporary art of the past decades, which have become part of the cultural mainstream.

4. Methodology

In the following chapter, we outline the methods employed in this study, articulate the main aim of the investigation, the central research question, and the objectives of the research. Moreover, the selected research approach and data evaluation are described and justified.

4.1 Research purpose

From the outset, the idea of this dissertation was to investigate the history and current state of visuality and its pivotal role in our society. Within the context of the modern and postmodern eras, the dynamics of visual culture have undergone significant transformations, influenced by a variety of interconnected discourses. The prominence of visuality and its profound influence on social perceptions can be traced back to the invention of perspective, which laid the foundation for modern visual culture (Mitchell, 2005). Up to the present day, the dynamics of artistic expression have seen significant transformations, deeply rooted in cultural exchange and serving as a reservoir of ideas, symbols, codes, and messages. The intricacies of visual communication in contemporary art extend far beyond mere aesthetics, encompassing symbolism, meaning-generation, and representational messaging. With the globalization of media, the rise of interrelated and interactive platforms, and the complete digitization of culture, the roles of gender, race, and sexuality in representation have become even more pivotal. Additionally, they impact recognition and reception (Ross, 2008; Thompson, 1990; O'Donnell, 2020). The 'dissolution' of art into daily life is occurring at an unprecedented scale, enabling contemporary art to act as a primary carrier of cultural values and discourses. This is seen as a logical continuation of the original cultural mechanics of Western society, which has its roots in the Renaissance (Giunta, 2013).

Within the context of modern and postmodern eras, the dynamics of visual culture have seen significant transformations, influenced by a variety of interconnected discourses. Particularly, the interconnection between media, society, and culture forms a cohesive unit that has been integrated into the theoretical framework of this work. The idea underscores the role of mass media not merely as a conduit for cognition or cultural exchange but as an immensely

influential communicative channel. It reaches far beyond the simple transmission of information; it shapes our knowledge, values, definitions of the world, and ultimately, ourselves (Gripsrud, 2002; Gurevitch, 1982). The way media categorizes its content guides the construction of our opinions and identity (Gripsrud, 2002). This multifaceted concept of identity, containing collective, social, and personal aspects, molds the idea of representation when viewed through the lens of media - a pivotal cultural narrative within the media sphere (Gripsrud, 2002: 11). Recognizing the pervasive influence of imagery, artwork, and visual culture, we note a transformation. What was once a specialized field of academic research has now become a global practice, indicative of the dynamism of visual culture and the ever-evolving media landscape. These multifaceted tendencies spotlight visual culture as a transinstitutional phenomenon and an essential hallmark of our era. Moreover, the intersection between identities and representations within media introduces layers of complexity to systems of visual semiotics, forming the foundation for a comprehensive investigation later in this study.

Turning to the more commercial inclination of visibility and culture, we further investigate the contemporary notion of branding and its involvement in the current cultural landscape. At the intersection of visual culture, media, and communication, brands rely on understanding how visual representations reflect the brand's history and values (Mirzoeff, 2015). They create connections between consumers and the brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) and build symbolic meanings (Baudrillard, 1998). On the other hand, managing these brands involves cultivating a unique identity and emotional appeal (Okonkwo, 2007) and enhancing their symbolic value through an aspirational image (Keller, 2009). Specifically, in the luxury segment, this strategy enables brands to command premium prices and deliver exceptional value to customers (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009).

For luxury brands, such as Loewe, the synergy between visual culture, media, and branding strategies is crucial. These elements aid in constructing the brand's identity (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009), conveying a sense of luxury, exclusivity, and craftsmanship that aligns with consumers' aspirations (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). Moreover, the role media plays in shaping these brands' communications, especially in handling cultural, racial, gender, and other social issues, adds layers of complexity to how the brand is perceived (Couldry &

Hepp, 2017). In summarizing the constructed framework, our goal is to delve into the intricate interactions between visuality, communication, and identity. We'll examine their influence on a brand's commercial communication, specifically referencing Loewe's strategic alignment with these prevailing trends and influences.

4.2 Research question

Building on the concepts and fields mentioned earlier, I formulated the key research question as follows:

“How does Loewe utilize visual practices to shape its identity through branding and communication strategies, aligning with the broader discourse on media, visual culture, and social values?”

This research question encompasses the interactions between visuality and visual culture, identity and branding, and communications and media. Each of these fields will be scrutinized through the lens of visuality. This approach is designed to keep the dissertation focused, objective, and in alignment with its theoretical trajectory.

Throughout the research, every study field from the theoretical framework was interconnected and interpreted to explore Loewe's visual practices. Particularly concerning visual culture, we will investigate how Loewe's visual practices reflect Western visuality's historical evolution and determine how these practices capture and adapt characteristics of modern visual culture, pulling from both historical and current trends.

Transitioning to media and communication, the study delves into how Loewe uses visual practices across different media forms to communicate and craft ideas, especially in the realms of contemporary art and societal topics. A primary goal is to discern the role visual practices play in shaping Loewe's media and communication strategies. Additionally, the research will consider how Loewe incorporates contemporary art forms into its communication strategy, such as integrating art into its brand identity or product range. In

this context, the convergence of visuality with media and modern artistic expressions became a key focus, shedding light on the intricate ways visuals and art discourse's social inclusivity are approached by a brand.

Lastly, concerning branding and identity, the research probes into how Loewe's visual practices within its brand environment align with modern branding's general theory and luxury branding nuances. The investigation seeks to understand the strategies Loewe uses to create value in the luxury brand segment and their influence on luxury perception. Furthermore, how does Loewe's branding articulate modern visual aesthetics, and how does it incorporate aspects of its identity, such as logos and photography? Addressing these questions offered a deeper understanding of visual practices' pivotal role in branding strategies and their influence on brand identity.

4.3 Case study

Case study methodology is acknowledged as a vital instrument for the thorough investigation of complex real-world phenomena within a specific context (Zainal, 2007). By enabling a complete and multifaceted exploration of the research question, case studies often utilize diverse data sources, contributing to result triangulation (Rowley, 2002; Yin, 2003). This approach allows researchers to employ both quantitative and qualitative methods, rendering a comprehensive perspective of the problem through various lenses (Baxter & Jack, 2008). A single case study is also considered appropriate when scrutinizing an object that is representative or typical of its category, with conclusions that might be generalized to similar instances (Yin, 2003).

In the context of this research, a single case study approach was chosen, focusing on the prominent Spanish luxury brand Loewe. This brand exemplifies the fusion of the historical evolution of Western visuality and modern visual culture. Loewe's strategy in visual communication and branding reflects broader trends in contemporary branding, excelling in areas such as visual identity, media and communication, and branding and identity. The examination of Loewe's approach provides insights into the roles of visual culture and media

in shaping branding strategies, offering valuable implications for other brands operating within the luxury segment.

Case studies, as a research method, provide a rich, context-dependent understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Despite criticisms for a perceived lack of rigor and objectivity, the case study approach offers unparalleled insights that other research methods might overlook (Rowley, 2002). In the context of this research on Loewe's approach to visuality in media, communication strategies, branding, and identity, the case study method's strengths are particularly fitting. Considering the aim to delve into the intricacies of visuality and communication within a luxury branding context, the application of a case study approach is anticipated to yield a detailed understanding of Loewe's strategies. As noted by Eisenhardt (1989), case studies are especially well-suited for new research areas or those where existing theory appears inadequate. This compatibility aligns with the examination of Loewe, especially since conventional theories might fall short in elucidating the intricate interplay between historical evolution, contemporary trends, and Loewe's innovative methods of interaction with the cultural landscape.

Furthermore, the case study approach allows the researcher to answer 'How?' and 'Why?' questions, enabling both exploratory and explanatory research (Rowley, 2002). This capability is particularly relevant in examining how Loewe leverages various elements of visual culture and media, and why these strategies are effective in shaping its branding and identity. Although the number of units studied in a case study might be fewer, the depth of detail and context-sensitive insights can enrich the understanding of the specific case of Loewe. The flexibility of such approach would enable a comparative and systematic exploration of different aspects of their communication, allowing for a nuanced, comprehensive understanding of the various points that constitute its interaction with visual narratives. Thus, the choice of a case study for this research is not only justified but advantageous in providing a robust, multi-dimensional exploration of Loewe's strategies within the broader context of modern visual culture.

4.4 Qualitative content analysis

The utilization of qualitative content analysis as a method for investigating Loewe's visual practices within its branding and communication strategies is deeply rooted in the nature and objectives of the research. As described by Richards and Morse (2007), a sufficient qualitative research employs a meticulous approach aimed at answering questions about experiences, feelings or the rationale behind certain phenomena. Such an approach is particularly suitable for the study of visual practices, especially when integrated within branding, contemporary art, media, and social contexts. The approach involves grouping and arranging data, a step that is consistent with the analysis of Loewe's visual components to classify and individually study each. This approach also creates categories and themes and offers a structure that preserves the richness and depth of the original material (O'Cathain et al., 2010).

Further elaborating on qualitative content analysis, it represents a systematic and objective way of describing and categorizing the given phenomenon (Schreier, 2012). For instance, in this study, the phenomenon under investigation relates to Loewe's visual practices. A prerequisite for effective content analysis is the reducibility of data into concepts describing the research phenomenon (Cavanagh, 1997; Elo and Kyngäs, 2008). For instance, Loewe's visual techniques are related to the phenomenon being investigated in this study. Reducibility of data into concepts defining the research phenomenon is a requirement for efficient content analysis (Cavanagh, 1997; Elo and Kyngäs, 2008).

In the examination of Loewe's utilization of visual practices within its branding, communication strategies, and contributions to visual culture, the textual analysis method, as theorized by Fürsich (2014) and others, becomes particularly insightful and relevant. Aligning with the theoretical underpinnings of semiotics and poststructuralism, this method emphasizes the importance of language in constituting social relations and the materiality of discourse (Barthes, 1972; Derrida, 1976). Generally, using a semiotic analysis in the context of Loewe's communication materials offers a critical path to understanding the intricate interplay of signs and symbols that govern the brand's visual narrative. Drawing from the findings of Dunleavy (2020) and other authors presented in the theoretical chapters, we

addressed the images for analysis and interpretation using the same methods applied to other sign systems, considering their potential for meaning-making that transcends traditional linguistic systems (Dunleavy, 2020; Sebeok 2001). As presented by Barley (1983) in the context of organizational studies, ‘culture’ has often been associated with terms like ‘assumptions,’ ‘expectations,’ ‘interpretations’ or ‘perspectives’, indicating a link to social cognition and contextual sense-making (Barley, 1983; Schein, 1981; Schwartz and Davis, 1981). From this viewpoint, the relationship between visual artefacts as cultural manifestations and the culture itself tends to be evident. When applied to Loewe’s communication materials, semiotics provides the methodology to unravel the underlying cultural narratives, visual metaphors, symbolic elements, artistic origins, and other categories of signs which influence the synthesis of elements defining Loewe’s brand image.

It’s worth mentioning that in the perspective of cultural studies, every cultural practice or product, not just written material, can be analyzed as text (Fürsich, 2014). Thus, in this context, analyzing Loewe’s visual content is not just an objective examination but rather a nuanced “reading” that recognizes the autonomy of cultural practices or objects as signifiers, independent of the creators’ intentions or audience reception. This hinges on the inherent power of visual elements to convey complex meanings, connecting them to the broader cultural, aesthetic, and emotional landscapes in which they are situated. Consequently, this approach facilitates an in-depth exploration of the ways Loewe’s visual practices convey meaning and contribute to wider cultural and social discourses. Through the use of semiotic, narrative, genre, or rhetorical methods for qualitative analysis (Real, 1996), the research will capture the complex interplay of visual practices within Loewe’s branding and communication strategies.

4.5 Approach to visual analysis

The general approach applied in this study to the analysis of visual material was inspired by the research and findings of Aiello and Parry (2019), who described methodological methods of visual communication research, examining in detail the approaches of content analysis and semiotics. The study has partly adopted principles of critical discourse and visual analysis,

such as the ones articulated by Wodak and Meyer (2016) and van Dijk (2009). Relating these principles to the research classifications employed by Fairclough (1995) – representations, identities and relations – Aiello and Parry (2019) assumes that these categories can be universally applicable across various media genres. Thus, by investigating the brand's representation of the world, relationships and identities utilised, I expect to perform a critical examination of how Loewe constructs meaning through various media outputs, intertwining cultural narratives, artistic references and historical context.

I found particularly interesting to refer the research to the cultural studies tradition, engaging with the 'circuit of culture' approach (du Gay et al., 1997), which allowed me to further investigate how Loewe's visual materials are encoded with meanings and interact with media culture. By focusing on five key elements – representation, production, identity, regulation, and consumption – this approach allows to consider a given product a 'cultural artefact' (Aiello & Parry, 2019: 36). This again has enhanced the understanding of how visual materials are interwoven with various cultural and social processes, both reflecting and shaping dominant ideologies, social interactions and consumer perceptions.

In the realm of semiotics applied to visual analysis, the core focus revolved around the mechanisms through which meanings are constructed and comprehended. Semiotics, in its essence, delves into the study of entities regarded as signs, justifying the idea, that any element can assume the role of a sign, given that it is perceived and interpreted as representing or denoting something distinct from its immediate self within a specific cultural or societal context (Bal & Bryson, 1991). This interplay of meaning, often termed connotation (Aiello & Parry, 2019: 42), is anchored in context and encapsulates the symbolic or ideological dimensions of an image as shaped by dominating cultural codifications. These codifications or codes can be perceived as the underlying conventions or 'unspoken norms' (Sturken & Cartwright, 2017) that define the frameworks through which both image creators and consumers perceive and derive meanings from them. Central to this discourse is the notion that within a unified cultural context, most individuals possess a collective setup of shared 'vocabulary', enabling them to interpret and absorb the essence of images in largely consistent manners.

Drawing from the foundational logic of semiotics, social semiotics offers an expanded toolkit for the nuanced analysis of visual artifacts, with a marked emphasis on the pivotal roles context and practice play in interpreting visual meanings. The origins of social semiotics can be traced back to a confluence of structuralism and the systemic functional linguistics proposed by Halliday (1978; 1985). Characteristically rooted in functionalism, this approach revolves around the concept of choice, positing that all activities related to creating signs are inherently aimed at fulfilling distinct semiotic tasks or functions. While still focusing on the core aspects of traditional semiotics – like studying the inner structures of images and multimodal texts – social semiotics takes a different route by blending in the ideas of critical discourse analysis. This mix highlights how form and the socio-cultural factors behind sign creation are interconnected, along with the discussions surrounding them across different historical, cultural and institutional settings (van Leeuwen, 2005). A highly relevant approach has been found in the work *Reading Images* by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) in which they outline a comprehensive social semiotic framework for analyzing images, organized into three primary metafunctions: representational, interactive, and compositional meanings. A social semiotic investigation generally revolves around three central questions:

1. What narratives or ‘stories’ are conveyed by an image or a collection of images? Who are the central ‘participants’, would they be individuals or objects? How are they depicted, as archetypes or components of a larger narrative? What actions or interactions are they engaged in, whether amongst themselves, with specific products, or within their surroundings?
2. How do images create a connection or engagement with viewers? This can take various forms, including the gaze of a portrayed person, camera angles, or framing methods.
3. How is the arrangement or layout of an image or set of images organized? This encompasses analyzing the placement of different visual elements within the frame, their level of importance, how they are interconnected or isolated, and how they are presented in terms of realism (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Aiello & Parry, 2019).

Eventually, attempting to employ the approach described above, I extensively explored the aspects related to representational meanings, seeking to uncover the narratives or stories Loewe aimed to convey through its images. Identifying key participants, setup, cultural or artistic references etc, I examined how they were positioned within the larger brand narrative and what actions or interactions they manifested. This approach not only revealed Loewe's artistic intentions but also exposed the broader sociocultural narratives the brand aligns with or challenges. Going beyond simple representation, I also delved into the interactive meanings, aiming to understand how Loewe's visual elements attempted to initiate a conversation with its viewers, applying brand's general strategy for interaction and the desired dynamics of its relationship with the audience. Lastly, my analysis extended to the compositional meanings as I attempted to 'decipher' visual elements and their organisation, referring to the Western artistic traditions of depiction and encoding the meaning. This detailed examination helped to reveal Loewe's artistic inclinations and brand's positioning within the larger socio-cultural context.

4.6 Content segmentation

Before conducting the content analysis, the digital content produced by Loewe was divided into four categories. These categories were designed to offer a comprehensive, multifaceted, and logically consistent overview of the brand's visual communications:

1. Loewe's visual identity

This encompasses elements that shape Loewe's visual brand identity, primary logo, typography, packaging. The goal was to explore the visual narrative of Loewe as a brand within the contemporary landscape and estimate the way they visually encoded the brand's message and values in its visual symbol.

2. Photography

The use of photography in luxury brand communication is essential for conveying the brand's aesthetic and vision. It also stands as the most powerful channel for conveying meaning, given its unparalleled capacity to integrate and resonate with cultural symbols and values

across diverse contexts. Thus, using the visual material from several advertising campaigns as examples, we were able to see how Loewe leverages these opportunities in its business.

3. Art projects and collaborations with modern artists

This segment aims to highlight Loewe's position within the wider cultural and artistic context. Analyzing these collaborations provides insights into the brand's values and its connections with the artistic realm and show how it utilizes cultural influence, positioning itself at the crossroads of art and fashion. Factors such as the choice of artist, the nature of the collaboration, and the end products were explored to determine how they reinforce the brand's image and serve as distinguished media.

5. Case study

5.1 Brand introduction

In this section of the methodology, we introduce the case study brand: Spanish luxury fashion house Loewe. This case study presents a compelling exploration into the dynamics of visual culture, communication, and branding within the luxury market. By delving into Loewe's photographs, design solutions, logos, and other visual assets across various communication materials, this chapter aims to unveil the complex layers of symbolism, artistic influences, and narrative themes. This analysis aims to offer insights into Loewe's branding strategies and also contribute to a broader understanding of contemporary visual culture in its intersections and implementations with advertising and brand identity.

5.1.1 Background and history

The inception of the Loewe brand is deeply rooted in the rich cultural and historical background of Spain. Tracing back to 1846, a crucial year when Madrid was celebrating two royal marriages, a group of Spanish craftsmen began their journey with a leather goods workshop in downtown Madrid on Lobo Street, later renamed Echegaray Street (Gardetti, 2016). This initiative led to the establishment of the brand in 1876 when Enrique Roessberg Loewe, a German craftsman specializing in leatherworking, allied himself with the workshop owners (Loewe, n.d.-a).

Being a combination of German precision and Spanish creativity, Loewe established itself as an epitome of elegance, creativity and expertise in leather from the very beginning. A significant milestone was reached in 1905 when Loewe became the "official supplier to the Spanish Royal Crown," and the familial connection between the brand and the Spanish monarchy continued through the years, with Queen Victoria Eugenie and others being patrons of the brand (Dates, 2019). The early 20th century witnessed Enrique Loewe Hilton's leadership, under which the brand achieved considerable success, leading to the expansion of business with the opening of stores in Barcelona and Madrid. By the 1920s, Loewe's

reputation for quality and elegance was firmly established, and expansion continued through the Civil War period, with a particularly notable store opening on la Gran Vía Madrileña in 1939, known particularly for its unique window design (Gardetti, 2016).

In the mid-20th century, Loewe's transformation, guided by the creative leadership of José Pérez de Rozas who served from 1945 to 1978, was marked by the introduction of iconic products such as the Amazona bag and the development of signature fragrances. The brand's expansion into ready-to-wear began under de Rozas's guidance in 1945 and continued with various other designers throughout the upcoming decades (Dates, 2019). The latter half of the 20th century was marked by innovation and growth – by the 1970s Loewe had further diversified into perfumes and fashion, leading to the creation of the Loewe anagram logo by Spanish painter Vicente Vela, and collaborations with designers like Giorgio Armani and Laura Biagiotti allowed Loewe to grow and reinvent itself according to the new standards of high fashion (Loewe, n.d.-a).

The acquisition by LVMH in 1996 provided a platform for global recognition, but it was Jonathan Anderson's appointment as creative director back in 2013 that redefined Loewe's identity and influenced the brand the most. He revitalized the house with a fresh design and launched cultural initiatives like the Loewe Foundation Craft Prize (Loewe, n.d.-a). Eventually, his innovative approach enabled Loewe to top Lyst's Hottest Brand Index in 2023 (LVMH, n.d.). Loewe's commitment to culture was also manifested through the Loewe Foundation, established in 1988 by Enrique Loewe y Lynch, the great-grandchild of the brand's creator. Recognized with a Gold Medal for Merit in the Fine Arts in 2002, the foundation established itself as a consistent supporter of cultural events and exhibitions (Loewe, n.d.-a).

Primarily emphasizing its core competency in leathermaking, Loewe yet offers a diverse product range that extends beyond traditional fashion. The brand offers products for both women and men, including bags, shoes, and clothing, again with particular emphasis on leather goods. Accessories, personalized charms, fragrances, and home products further illustrate Loewe's capacity to translate its aesthetic into varied applications, maintaining its status as a classic luxury brand while underlining its unique inclination towards bags and leather goods (Loewe, n.d.-a). In recent years, Loewe has experienced remarkable financial growth, reflecting a successful alignment with contemporary shopping trends and a

diversified market strategy (Herrera, 2022). The brand achieved an increase in total sales revenue, particularly showing improvements across different segments like retail, multi-brand sales, and online sales. Adopting the to various cultural and economic landscapes, Loewe expanded its presence across different regions, including Asia, Europe, and the U.S. Loewe's current business model demonstrates a stable market presence, significantly contributing to the LVMH group portfolio (FashionNetwork, n.d).

5.1.2 Brand image

As a distinguished Spanish brand, Loewe possesses a longstanding dedication to quality craftsmanship and innovative design. The brand's mission is deeply rooted in its commitment to the finest leatherwork, particularly its use of "Cordero entrefino español," a premium lambskin obtained from lambs bred in the Spanish Pyrenees. Only a small fraction of the available leather meets Loewe's exacting standards, resulting in products with unparalleled softness, elasticity, and overall quality (Gardetti, 2016). The interplay between heritage and innovation serves as a defining feature of Loewe's approach to shaping its communication and brand image. In their production and operation, they strike a balance between centuries-old techniques and current design sensibilities, aiming to create luxury products that resonate with modern consumers while retaining a connection to its historical roots. This synthesis of tradition and innovation is emblematic of Loewe's broader ambition within the global luxury market. The leitmotif of craftsmanship and heritage distinguishes Loewe's brand character, underlined in their pursuit to blend centuries-old techniques with contemporary designs and new technologies, where the 'old' aspect plays an obviously crucial role as a solid basis. As put by Jonathan Anderson, Loewe's creative director – "Craft is the essence of Loewe. As a house, we are about craft in the purest sense of the word. This is where our modernity lies, and it will always be relevant."(Loewe, n.d.-a).

Loewe's traditional targeting of the upper middle class and elite sections of society resonates well with the characteristics that define the luxury goods market. The demand for these goods can be justified by their unique attributes and the associated prestige that comes with ownership (Roux et al., 2017). Luxury offerings, such as those provided by Loewe, are distinguished from non-luxury products by their exceptional quality and visually appealing designs. Specifically, features like premium materials, expert craftsmanship, and innovation

not only contributes to their exclusivity, rarity, and distinctiveness in the eyes of the public but also justify their premium price point (Choo et al., 2012). Within this context, Loewe's consumer base comprises individuals seeking high-quality luxury items to enhance their image of prestige and prosperity; this is reflective of a broader societal trend. The association with luxury items aligns with the brand's historical appeal to the bourgeoisie, offering a modern interpretation of timeless values of status and sophistication. Thus, Loewe's product offerings and market positioning align with the overarching characteristics of the luxury segment, emphasizing quality, exclusivity, and a connection to a heritage with a sense of royal elegance.

Conversely, a global and contemporary brand of Loewe's kind can hardly be represented solely from the traditional perspective of established notions of luxury based on the physical aspects of the product. In this way, Loewe moves beyond merely the physical or functional aspects of its products and interacts with contemporary society on deeper emotional and cultural levels. This nuanced perspective on luxury can be aligned and referred to Aaker's (1991) view on brands, as they serve not only as markers of quality or prestige but also as sources of emotional satisfaction and attachment, and as markers of strong cultural and social resonance.

Beyond mere product quality, Loewe encompasses a holistic approach to sustainability, craftsmanship, and cultural preservation. Thus, since 2012, Loewe has been implementing a multifaceted sustainability program which focuses on all branches of its operational process – from design, development, supply chain, and logistics to sales, after-sales, employee welfare, and stakeholder engagement. These dimensions of sustainability reflect the aim of CEO Lisa Montague to have sustainability “embedded in Loewe's DNA,” as outlined in the Loewe-Sustainability Report 2013 (Loewe, 2013). The company's commitment to gender equality is evident in its gender-aware employment policy and its endorsement of the United Nations Women's Empowerment Principles. By late 2013, out of 1140 employees, the company employed over 750 women. The company's values extend to nurturing and preserving craftsmanship through its Leather Craft Training School and Leather Innovation Center, working in collaboration with various institutions such as the Community of Madrid, Town Council of Getafe, and the European Commission's Social Fund (Imanova, 2022).

In recent years, Loewe has also celebrated and supported contemporary crafts and arts globally. The Loewe Foundation Craft Prize and initiatives like the “Weave, Restore, Renew” project at Milan Design Week reflect the brand’s reverence for traditional crafts. The concept of repair and renewal resonates with sustainability and provides a profound philosophical layer to Loewe’s business practices (Loewe, n.d.-e). Similarly, Loewe’s strong commitment to ethical considerations in its supply chain aligns with its vision and values. For example, every supplier of the brand is obligated to follow a strict code of conduct that aligns with international guidelines, including those related to animal welfare. Specific restrictions are also imposed on the use of certain furs, illustrating Loewe’s commitment to ethical sourcing and responsible luxury (Imanova, 2022).

As we can see, Loewe’s overall positioning as a brand, its vision, and values are manifested and clearly translated in its commitment to quality, sustainability, craftsmanship, and ethical considerations within many stages of its operational processes. The described principles guide not only the creation of luxurious products but extend to the brand’s interactions with its employees, suppliers, and the broader community in general. In essence, Loewe’s practice illustrates a keen and up-to-date approach to luxury branding in the modern era, where a blend of materialistic excellence and cultural involvement constitutes deep and resonant brand communication. At the same time, we should keep in mind that the information presented in this section is gathered mostly from the brand’s own documentation and website articles, and we shall not consider it as the only truth about Loewe. In a way, this information might not reflect the actual picture but rather portray the company in a favorable light for its stakeholders.

5.2 Visual content analysis

5.2.1 Visual identity

Loewe’s visual identity is primarily represented by its logo and famous brand anagram. The current versions of these were developed by the Paris-based studio, M/M, and introduced in 2014, marking the beginning of the brand’s reinvention era under the creative direction of Jonathan Anderson. While working on this project, the designers at M/M looked back to the

initial logotype, which was originally created in 1900 using a variation of the Bembo font (Bertoli, 2022). For the renewed logo, they drew inspiration from historical artefacts and chose the Pegasus font, which was developed by Berthold Wolpe in 1937.

In a retrospective examination of the brand's history, the designers discovered a certain parallel between the life of Wolpe, who immigrated from Germany to Britain in 1935, and that of Enrique Loewe Roessberg, the German-born founder of the house who moved to Spain. The freshly designed typography in Loewe's logo serves as a tribute to Wolpe's enduring legacy and the contemporary relevance of his artistic contributions. The new logotype is inspired by his 1937 Pegasus font, a once-forgotten typeface that the designers discovered in the archives of the Victoria and Albert Museum, which served as the foundation for the new font in the current logo version. Providing further insight into their process, the designers said, "We adapted his font structure, leveraging digital tools to enhance intricate details and fortify it, intending to bestow upon the brand the sense of authority it truly deserves" (Bertoli, 2022).

The image shows the word "LOEWE" in a large, bold, black serif font. The letters are closely spaced and have a classic, elegant appearance with thick strokes and sharp serifs.

Figure 2: Loewe logo.

The selection of a typeface in branding has a definitive significant influence on the way a brand is perceived, as the chosen typeface has the power to evoke emotional responses, trigger cognitive connections and mold impressions of a product or brand. Similarly to any other visual entity, this is achieved through the semiotic significance embedded in the visual attributes of the chosen font (Childers & Jass, 2002). Being a crucial symbol to narrate a

story and magnify a brand's conceptual communication (Lelis & Kreutz, 2022; Muller & Wiedemann, 2022), Loewe's logo is encoded with clear message which lacks casualty or informality. Contrary to the prevailing trend of adopting simplified typeface logos, Loewe's logo leans towards a more classic, formal message. The famed craftsmanship narrative, mentioned and proclaimed by Loewe in their communication, can be traced here as the ability to opt for a simpler solution, but choosing instead a more refined, precise and artistic decision. This choice seems even more intentional given the general trend towards simplified typeface logos in fashion branding. Loewe's logo deliberately diverges from oversimplified designs in favor of a refined and artistic representation. This nuanced decision not only sets Loewe apart in the luxury fashion sector but also emphasizes its legacy and future aspirations.



Figure 3: Loewe logo and anagram on package.

The original Loewe anagram, another crucial part of their identity, was developed in 1970 by Vicente Vela and represents a distinctive quadruple-L insignia. When reconstructing this sign, M/M studio managed to draw inspiration from a unique source – the 1919 book *Cattle*

Brands and Licensed Slaughterers and the sketches of the cattle branding irons depicted therein. This discovery led the design team to study branding irons from various parts of the world, paying particular attention to how metal is folded to create these unique structures. Through the analysis of these sketches, both artistic and functional factors influenced the creation of a more contemporary version of the symbol, adding a new perspective and depth to the brand's identity. As put by Michael Amzalag of M/M:

We came to the conclusion that, because this is one of the oldest luxury houses, if not the oldest, in the world and you have this burden of tradition to deal with, then rather than looking at it through the parameters of heritage and tradition, we should translate the idea of time into something cultural. We needed to excavate the heritage and find the moments that are relevant for us to address now. Loewe was originally a cooperative; it was never about a style; it was just a group of people working with leather as craftsmen. Then you have this German guy, Enrique Loewe Roessberg, who came in the 1870s, and gave his name to the cooperative. The first thing we saw when we visited the archives was a pile of brands – there was a new one every eight or nine years. It was very interesting to see the trajectory of the story like that. It justified our approaching it in a certain way. The previous logo was inspired by the brands used on cattle; it was designed by a Spanish painter in the 1970s. We came up with a much simpler version that returned to the source (King, 2016).

The recurring theme of merging traditional narratives and sources of inspiration, tied directly to the brand's history and acting as a visual metaphor for its identity, alongside modern design trends, is vividly apparent in the visual language of the anagram. On the one hand, the symmetry and consistent repetition in Loewe's anagram can be seen as a reflection of harmony and balance – qualities often associated with high-end fashion and luxury goods. The use of the letter 'L' serves as a clear reference to the brand name, but its repetition in a fourfold circular pattern results in a significant symbol – a highly ornate, Baroque-influenced artifact that embodies ideals of excess, intricacy, and emotional intensity (Buci-Glucksmann, 1994). This style is not common in contemporary design. Its inclusion in Loewe's logo goes beyond mere decoration; it's a deliberate and nuanced visual statement that infuses the brand's identity with a certain level of grandeur, reflecting a rich aesthetic and artistic complexity.

Despite the aforementioned complexity of the visual embodiment of the textual logo and anagram, Loewe, of course, cannot be criticized for being outdated or losing touch with

contemporary trends. A relevant complexity and embellishment of the visual entities is set against the backdrop of the overall minimalist aesthetic in which the brand's visual identity is maintained. The black-and-white palette, classic for cases of contemporary identity of nowadays presents the brand's "facade" as a minimalist monolith, where negative space plays an integral role in the visual impact. Being synonymous with a sense of elegance, power, leadership, honesty, trustworthiness, modernity and refined taste (Pracejus et. al, 2006), negative white space often aligns with attributes associated with higher social tiers, making it a reasonable choice for luxury brand communication. In this respect, Loewe's decision to incorporate white space in their visual identity isn't merely aesthetic, but carries a profound message, reflecting the brand's commitment to elegance and sophistication.

An interesting perspective opens up, as we attempt to relate such ultra minimalistic visual solutions to the historical perspective of modernism paradigm. Certain associations arising from the sense of terseness and ornate simplicity of this visual solution refer to Krauss's (1979) theory on the phenomenon of the grid in the avant-garde art of the 20th century. Perceived far beyond its use as a visual or compositional tool, the grid embodies a rich tapestry of meanings and implications that have evolved over the course of art history. Rooted in the dynamism of pre-War cubist paintings, the grid emerged as a potent symbol of modern art's determined silence and aversion to the narrative, literature and discourse. For Krauss, it was a barrier to the encroachment of language, firmly placing visual arts in a realm of pure visual expression (Krauss, 1979; 51-53). While Loewe's packaging doesn't directly employ a grid, the brand's visual philosophy echoes the sentiments expressed by Krauss about artistic purity.

This description of visual impact applies both to the phenomenon of the grid in art and to the utmost simplicity of Loewe's visual branding. Both have flattened, geometric characteristics that sharply diverge from natural representation, an rather than being an imitation of the real world, this aesthetic command instead eliminates the depth and dimensions of reality and replaces them with an expanded singular surface. And if, in the case of the grid, the visual impact left the viewer in the space between matter and thought, seen and sensed, then the white space might amplify this sensation even further, transitioning the communication to another level – from a comprehensible and explicit message to the realm of associations. At

this level of communication, the interaction between the visual entity and the viewer transitions to a more abstract plane. In the absence of any decorative elements, patterns or colors, it is assumed that the Loewe symbol itself elicits a greater response in the viewer's mind than other elements might convey. The visual simplicity opens up a vast spectrum of interpretations, allowing for richer associations than a more defined message could offer.

As expressed on the logo topic by its creator from M/M:

[the old logo] was too fancy, too expressive, with too much feeling. The idea was to find something that simply brands an object without giving too much taste to it. It says where it comes from, but it doesn't add any flavour. With the type and the logo, we wanted to create an identity that could encompass many different elements. The visual language is as important as the logo itself. I don't want to say that we invented the white background, but somehow we have used it to be more like a sign. And even the silhouette can look like a sign, and the images from the past are also becoming more symbolic. We were trying to implement a structure, a system, that is invisible. It has more to do with architecture than decoration; it is like an architect working in a city (Bertoli, 2022).

An opinion on the logo, confirming the variety of available interpretations, was expressed by Jonathan Anderson himself:

What really fascinates me is that you can put anything on a page below that word and you own it. When I first saw it, I was really struck by the O, which I think looks like an eye, an all-seeing eye – you hate me saying that, I know! I think you really need the O to help you pronounce the word. The O breaks it; it makes you stop. We did a whole collection covered in 'Loewe'. There was this moment when we were like, 'OK, I am now at one with it, now I feel that I am allowed to use it, that it can be everywhere'. I think that's when people started to understand where we were going (Bertoli, 2022).

Loewe's visual identity can be characterised by a clear message, a distinct style and a precise approach to positioning, built on a mix of accents and a pronounced contrast of its components. Grounded in the brand's origins and the journey of its founder, Loewe's logo elegantly blends nostalgic royalty with meticulous detail, set against a backdrop of postmodern simplicity. The current version of the identity can be considered a successful attempt to find an unconventional solution that instantly conveys the brand's DNA. Without overloading with excessive information and imposed narratives, the Loewe logo stands as a symbol, a signal, a message in itself. In its simplicity, one can discern a new stage in the

development of visual art. The adaptability of this solution to the surrounding world, media and carriers is especially evident when this identity system interacts with other visual content types. To one of the most crucial types – photography – is dedicated next section of this chapter.

5.2.2 Photography

Like for many other fashion brands, Photography plays an instrumental role in defining Loewe's visual narrative. The brand's exploration of photography under the guidance of Jonathan Anderson established itself as a diverse journey marked by an innovative approach to representation and a strong emphasis on artistic collaboration. Since Anderson's 2015 debut with Loewe, the brand has revitalized its image by juxtaposing nostalgia with lush contemporary visuals, breaking away from its prior perceived stagnancy (Stoppard, 2015). The most distinctive collaborations with Jamie Hawkesworth and Steven Meisel started from 2015 and set up a trend in which the art of photography is put on the first place to define the historical essence of Loewe's collections. In their works, Loewe's identity is constructed through visual mediums and becomes a manifestation of the brand's personality, as it can be traced in the consistent use of minimalistic yet profound imagery across ad campaigns, lookbooks and social media (Loewe, n.d.-f).

As the most multifaceted and capacious means of visual expression, photography can manipulate a countless number of symbols, images and metaphors to create a powerful emotional message. On the other hand, one of the most intriguing tasks when analyzing a photograph can be an attempt to understand the images, objects and compositional means employed by the photographer from a more rational side. In the context of this research, of particular interest is the interrelation between contemporary images and narratives, taken from Loewe campaigns, with cultural narratives of the past, stretching back centuries to the European Renaissance. The primary reference and inspiration for this approach can be considered the aforementioned *Ways of Seeing* by Berger, in which the author draws a direct parallel between the narratives of European oil painting and the visual techniques of 20th-century advertising campaigns, directly stating – “It is a mistake to think of publicity

supplanting the visual art of post-Renaissance Europe; it is the last moribund form of that art” (Berger, 2008: 139).

On the other hand, not every photoshoot or advertising campaign is exclusively inspired by images taken from the culture of the past. As in many forms of contemporary art, ambiguity and the abstract nature of the message often comes to the forefront, stressing a more irrational impact triggered by emotional, peculiar and at times shocking image. In such conditions, where ambiguity and polysemy become key, interpretation becomes a unique act of creativity for each individual. Personal experience, cultural background, life values and even one’s current emotional state play a decisive role in the process of decoding the visual message. Speaking of Dunleavy’s (2020) ‘meaning determination’ in this respect, we would emphasize more on the aesthetic and emotional aspects of the process. Similarly, we can assume that particular attention must be given to images and identities that emerged in the arts and wider public discourse only in the second half of the 20th century, and thus rarely can be rooted in narratives of the past – feminism, the liberation of sexual minorities, freedom of representation, issues of gender and race, and the civil rights movement (Doyle, 2006).

5.2.2.1 Steven Meisel’s archive photos

Guided by Jonathan Anderson’s vision to integrate diverse visual elements into Loewe’s ad campaigns, Steven Meisel provided his previously unreleased photos from the personal archive to be a part of the Loewe Fall Winter 2015 campaign’s material. *Untitled (Self Portrait #1)* and *Untitled (Self Portrait #2)*, undated black-and-white images which were re-photographed by Meisel himself became the central objects of the whole visual imagery. In the following year of 2016, Meisel continued the series with two more similar works, including the iconic shot *Untitled (Self Portrait #4)* as part of the Spring Summer 2016 advertising campaign (Silver, 2015). Finally, the concluding elements of the series to date are the works *Oscar as me* and *Nora as me*, presenting photographs of other people in Meisel’s likeness, taken by himself for the Spring Summer 2019 campaign (Loewe, n.d.-g).

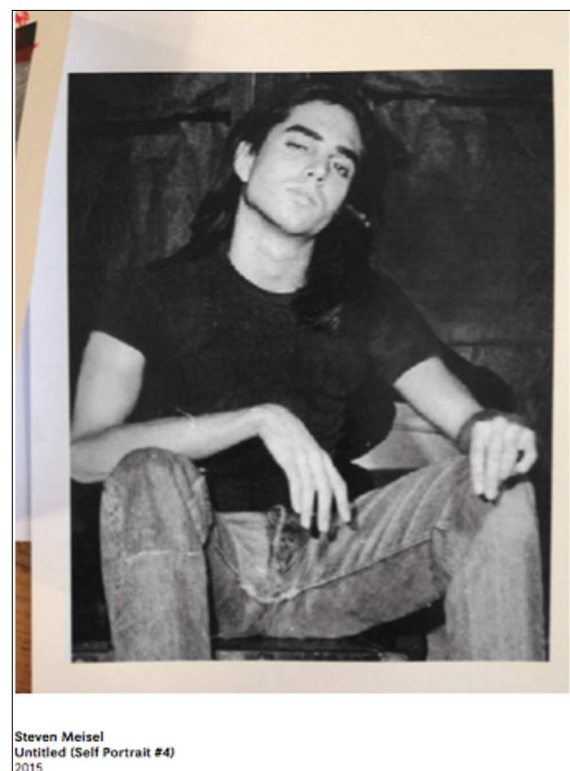
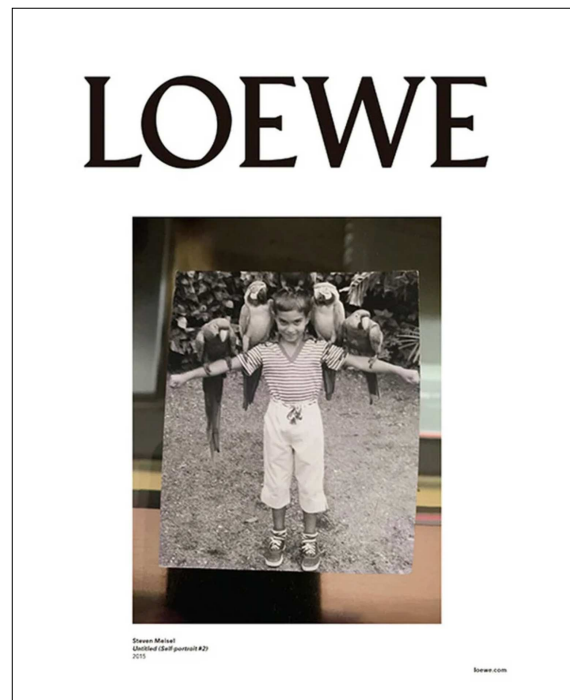
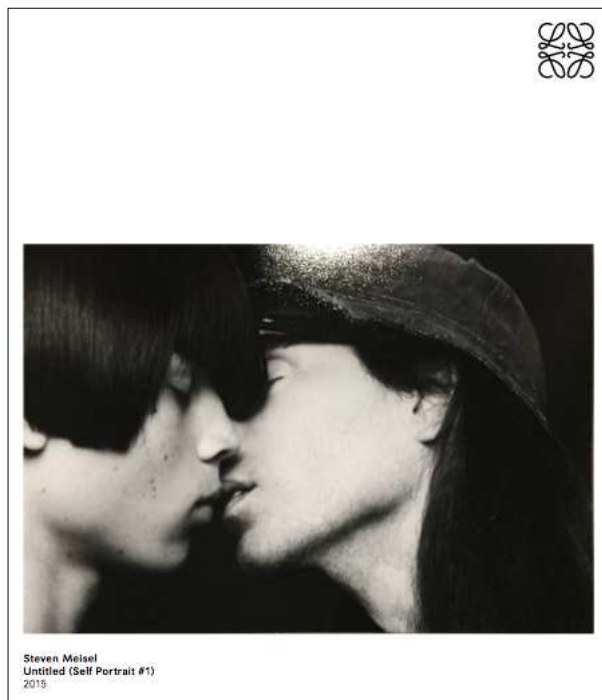


Figure 4: Untitled (Self-Portrait 1-4) photography



Figure 5: ‘Oscar as me’, ‘Nora as me’ series

Analyzing this series of works, it is essential to first highlight the unconventional approach that essentially allowed the artist working on his creation to become a part of that creation. The figure of the artist himself in this context is also an important matter to consider – Meisel is an outstanding fashion photographer, having significantly influenced the contemporary look of fashion photography. This collection of photographs can be interpreted as an instance of introspective self-reflection by the photographer on his significant body of work that has left a mark in the industry. Disclosed to the public from a private archive, both in form and content, they represent a kind of private revelation to the audience, where a fleeting and unscripted moment of an individual’s life intertwines with the fabric of a highly curated, staged visual aesthetic of fashion photography.

Speaking of the artist’s presence in his work, it would be hard to avoid comparing it to Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* (1656), especially in light of its interpretation by Foucault in the book *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. The described idea of

nuanced dynamics of gaze, brought into the context by the painter's presence in the artwork, adds complexity and intertwines the concepts of observing and being observed, creating layers of interaction between the subjects, extending this interaction to the viewers themselves and drawing attention to the act of observation itself (Foucault, 1966). Similarly, positioning himself within his artwork both as the creator and as an observer, Meisel inserts himself into the commercial scene, complicating the viewer's understanding of the campaign. In the fashion advertisement, which is primarily a medium to sell and promote, Meisel's presence forces viewers to engage with the campaign on a more reflective and contemplative level. We can assume, that with raised questions about representation and observation, mass and personal, Meisel encourages viewers to contemplate the essence of fashion advertising and the artist's role within commercial realms, highlighting increasingly blurred boundaries between art and commerce.

Delving into the creation of the object itself, special attention is drawn to the fact that the original photos were not scanned or digitized, but were re-photographed by the author himself. Such a method undoubtedly opens up more intriguing perspectives and interpretations, adding depth to questions about the boundaries of the personal and public, repetitive and authentic, and also delving into the discourse on reproduction in art. At the forefront of these interpretations is the interplay of past and present. By choosing to use an archived image, Meisel doesn't just present a captured moment from the past but also effectively bridges the temporal gap, suggesting a consistent and progressing depiction of one's identity over time. The photograph becomes more than just a still, as it echoes the idea that our identities do not represent a given fixed entity, but are constantly morphing with their perception and interpretation reshaped by the eras and contexts they find themselves in. An additional dimension to this process is added in *Oscar as me* and *Nora as me* photographs, in which Meisel's identity becomes apparent through distinctive clothing choices, poses and hairstyle of the models, shaping a visual that entice a deeper exploration of the concepts of portrayal, in which one's identity can be expressed by the means of the other's.

Furthermore, Meisel's choice to transfer a profoundly personal image into a commercial domain challenges the historically clear distinctions between the private and the public – a matter of particular interest in the era of digital media, when the boundaries become

progressively blurred and shifted. Having personal memories effortlessly and directly transform into public displays, Meisel gives a different interpretation of the phenomena. Simultaneously, his action clears the path for numerous potential processes of reinterpretation and the creation of fresh significations, coinciding with the circulation of content within modern media.

When discussing the process of reproduction, this case can be correlated with the theory of Benjamin (1935). Recalling the concept of the “aura” of the original work, it is worth considering the relevance of the notion of uniqueness to contemporary society. In this case, a theory that the act of reproduction might diminish the aura of the original piece can be challenged by Meisel’s decision to re-photograph and repurpose an archived image within a new context. Placing it into an unusual environment of fashion visuality, Meisel opens a different discourse, suggesting that in the process of reproduction, an image’s value and meaning aren’t necessarily weakened but oppositely can evolve, morphing into something equally, if not more, profound.

The special significance of the visual message is highlighted in *Untitled (Self Portrait #1)* work, where Meisel is depicted kissing another man. A private and closeup scene, with a gleaming flash occurred during the re-photographing action not only translates into deeply intimate experience but opens a broader social and cultural perspective on the subject. Following the degree of social commitment, critique and identity reflection brought up into cultural mainstream by contemporary art, Meisel’s intimate self-portrait audaciously challenges and overturns the ‘traditional’ paradigm of dominant narrative in art and media, which traditionally showcased heterosexual love. By boldly positioning a homosexual act as its focal point, the image not only presents viewers with an alternate perception but also prompts them to contemplate and potentially challenge the deeply rooted heterosexual-centric norms they have faced within society. In this unfiltered depiction the universally common human desires for connection, love and inclusion, surpassing the confines of sexual orientation, are highlighted directly and clearly. The portrait goes beyond being solely an artistic manifestation, as it also functions as a powerful social declaration. In a time when conversations regarding LGBTQ+ rights are increasing in influence, Meisel’s image stands as

a proclamation of identity and a strong appeal for acceptance, challenging any remnants of societal prejudice or discrimination.

Lastly, we must highlight the very capability of integrating this visual content into several Loewe advertising campaigns, which undoubtedly characterizes it as a brand relevant to the new era with a unique, experimental approach to visual communications with the audience and a distinct message. Behind Jonathan Anderson's intention to include completely new visual materials in Loewe's advertising campaigns, we can trace his multifaceted vision for Loewe as a brand of different formation, which inclusive and innovational environment is broad enough to incorporate new approaches in visuality. This emphasis on the unorthodox underscores Loewe's commitment to individuality and authenticity, suggesting a shift from traditional fashion norms to a celebration of genuine self-expression.

5.2.2.2 Loewe Fruits series

As another example, conveying a more emotional and metaphorical message, we can refer to the photographs from the Fruits series, shot by Meisel for the Loewe Spring Summer 2018 collection. Featuring Vittoria Ceretti as a single model for all 5 shots, the series intriguingly places her alongside a variety of fruits positioned either in her mouth or on her face, additionally enhancing her with an extremely bright makeup. Launched as an invitation for Loewe 2018 show in Paris, they were placed in the show venue itself, as well as distributed on 500 kiosks throughout the city. Described as "propaganda" by Anderson, he also mentioned this campaign to be an embodiment of a new minimalist era for Loewe, transitioning from previous collections' themes of domesticity and diving into the concept of reduction, set within a pristine, oval space (Watson, 2017). Even though the propaganda terms hasn't been directly explained in the interview, its message applied to this particular case emerges from the general context – a deliberate use of controversial and provocative material, putting its viral effect on the first place and counting on it the most.



Figure 6: 'Fruits' series by Steven Meisel

As rightly noted by several reporters covering the campaign, such visual language is a rare occurrence in the fashion world. Echoing the fruit-focused artistic interpretations of Maisie Cousins and Stephanie Sarley, who place fruits in the centre of their visual reflections on

gender and sexuality, these images also delve into deeper themes, reaching to everything from nature and biology to disguise and desire. Yet, according to an official Loewe release, the essence of the imagery is “neither symbolic nor literal” but rather serves as provocative arrangements that hint at various concepts. Relating to the above-mentioned propaganda effect, Anderson also underlines the desired media effect of the campaign, which appears to be well-positioned for widespread popularity, aligning with the visual trends that have gained momentum on platforms such as Instagram in the digital age (Newton, 2017; Cusumano, 2017). Thus, one of the main mechanisms of this visual series is its deliberate reference and strategic adaptation to the distinctive features and capabilities of specific media, particularly social media platforms like Instagram.

Drawing upon McLuhan’s foundational media theory, the very nature and characteristics of the medium itself shape the form and essence of the content it carries. “The medium is the message” applied to this case is not merely a saying, but a reflection of how messages are inherently connected with the platforms they occupy (McLuhan, 1964). In this context, Loewe is adapting their message to resonate within the constraints and opportunities of the digital medium, utilizing the required characteristics to enhance and amplify their message. This conscious crafting ensures that their visuals are not just passively absorbed but are actively engaged with, shared and discussed, thereby solidifying the brand’s presence in the rapidly evolving and overloaded digital landscape. Certainly, the emotional component of content plays a significant role in its memorability and impact, being a result of the aforementioned crafting and adaptation. Counting on the likelihood of higher virality of an emotionally charged content, whether positive or negative, inspiring or shocking (Berger & Milkman, 2012), Loewe employs vibrant and sensual imagery, strategically planning a deep resonance and engagement it will cause.

At the same time, the aspect of rational calibration of the advertising campaign does not diminish the value of the content used in this visual communication, and even a “neither symbolic nor literal” approach to shaping a message cannot restrict its figurative and metaphorical effect. Taking a direction focused on engaging the emotions of the audience, Loewe opted for a multifaceted visual narrative, merging the long-overused “sex sells”

approach with the symbolism of fruit imagery in art, brought together in a rather modern and bold form.

In the rich tradition of oil painting, fruits have often carried more than mere aesthetic significance. Within the era from Raphael (1483-1520) to Caravaggio (1571-1610), many painters have integrated the sexually suggestive forms of fruits and vegetables into their compositions, where fruits like figs, peaches, melons and squash were often associated with erotic connotations during this period (Varriano, 2005). Such a nuanced approach to still life arguably peaked with Caravaggio's *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* around the year 1600, as this particular artwork stands out for its bold and unmistakable sexual subtext. The strategic placement of fruits, not only emphasizes their natural vibrancy but also evokes themes of intimacy and desire, subtly yet powerfully hinting at a deeper sensual narrative (Spike, 1995). Certain sexual analogies and erotic undertones related to fruits can also be found in the works of Dali – *Dream Caused by the Flight of a Bee Around a Pomegranate a Second Before Awakening*, Gauguin – *Woman Holding a Fruit*, Kahlo – *Fruit of life*, and others.

This analogy is evident on the very surface of this series of photos. Caravaggio's melon and Dali's pomegranate, ripe and juicy, covering half of the model's face, leave virtually no room for a second interpretation. The overall effect of the photograph is enhanced by the positioning of the model's face – front and centered in the frame, hair hidden under a band, neither emotionless nor frozen expression in the eyes, conjuring an atmosphere of surrealism and a 'doll-like' quality to the scene. Despite the vibrancy of the palette, the feminine image here transforms more into something inanimate and submissive rather than into something experiencing emotional freedom, pushing the overall message more towards a somewhat dark subconscious sexualization. These elements can be seen as a contrast to the more classical, easily digestible, and less aggressive forms of expressing sexuality in visual culture, especially in its commercial connotation. Popular narratives of sensuality and desire, formed at the dawn of the advertising era in posters promoting bath soap, established attributes of sensual natural femininity and its nurturing and life-giving narratives give way here to more aggressive forms and images, where a sliced fruit in the mouth rather evokes an association with a gag.

The resulting set of elements encompasses an expressive and professionally executed form, as well as a reinterpreted approach to symbols and images in the content, which undeniably has a potent emotional impact. The conditions under which the viewer's attention is captured and the image seen remains as a strong impression are met, and a rational interpretation of the storyline is unlikely to significantly influence this perception. Exoticism, vitality, life, gaze, – all of this resonates as intended and is associated with the Loewe brand, thus the propaganda goal is accomplished. At the same time, the novelty of the means by which this goal was achieved can be called into question. Once again referring to Berger's work, we can tell that advertising frequently employs sexuality as a tool for marketing, not for its natural value but as an attribute of a more aspirational, luxurious life. This narrative often implies that the act of purchasing equates to sexual allure, since in many instances the underlying message is that ownership of a product increases one's attractiveness, while the absence of such ownership diminishes it (Berger, 2008: 146).

As evident from Berger's book, first published back in 1972, the ideas presented there still remain relevant to today's visual advertising campaigns. Cultural imprints from past narratives and images continue to be adapted and shaped to the framework and aesthetics of contemporary media. Loewe skillfully employs available tools to articulate their brand image and spirit. Importantly, their commercial intent in crafting visuals does not isolate them from the broader cultural milieu, just as it doesn't lessen their artistic significance. Public acceptance, on the other hand, indicates that contemporary viewers and consumers are not merely passive recipients of information, but instead, they actively analyze, interpret and associate it with familiar cultural images and concepts. Consequently, advertising campaigns, such as those crafted by Loewe, transcend their role as merely marketing instruments and emerge as both contributors to cultural discourse and reflections of the cultural ethos.

5.2.3 Art Projects and Collaborations with Contemporary Artists

Loewe's engagement with the world of contemporary art constitutes yet another significant aspect of its brand activities. Various collaborations with contemporary artists, the development of collections inspired by their works, the preservation of the legacy of former

generations of masters, participation in exhibits of art, and other activities are included in this. In general, luxury brands have long acknowledged the connections between art and luxury, collaborating with artists to highlight attributes like exclusivity, timelessness, originality, and craftsmanship, as well as promoting their goods as cutting-edge works of art that exude class and inherent value (Jelinek, 2018). Many designers, such as Alexander McQueen and Raf Simons, include art into their creative processes, reflecting aesthetic preferences in their brand identities and erasing distinctions between various artistic professions (Kubler & Smith, 2013). On the contrary, luxury companies like Louis Vuitton use art mostly as a strategic tool to improve their brand image, remain up-to-date and gain an advantage over competitors. These businesses partner with artists and hold exhibitions to simulate the experience of purchasing art, since in the end the modern luxury landscape has moved towards giving enjoyable experiences by defining luxury goods as signs of self-gratification (Doran, 2013; (Kubler & Smith, 2013; Jelinek 2018).

In the case of Loewe, their involvement in the arts can be conditionally divided into two branches: collaborations with artists to produce limited collections based on their works, and interactions with artists directly. The Loewe Foundation interacts with artists by giving out grants each year to recipients of their Craft Prize. Since its establishment in 1988, the Loewe Foundation has been taking a role in fostering innovation, supporting educational programs, and protecting cultural heritage in a variety of fields, including poetry, dance, photography, art, and craft. As an affirmation to their commitment to the arts and contribution to the field, Loewe was awarded with the Gold Medal for Merit in the Fine Arts from the Spanish government in 2002. Loewe Foundation Craft Prize, founded in 2016 by Jonathan Anderson, by their own expression “aims to celebrate and support working artists whose talent, vision and will to innovate promise to set a new standard for the future.” (Loewe, n.d.-g). At the same time, a general motivation behind Loewe’s commitment to art, started, as many other shifts within the brand after Jonathan Anderson’s appointment as a creative director, was the creation of a radical new chapter for Loewe by fusing a prismatic and varied range of artistic influences with the world of fashion (Loewe, n.d.-h).

Clearly, the significance of such interactions between a brand and an artist originates from the resonance between the parties, showing the company’s creative approach and multifaceted

attitude towards positioning. By aligning the virtue of preserving artistic heritage with its dedication to craftsmanship as its greatest asset, Loewe goes beyond the mere physical or functional aspects of its products, engaging with contemporary society on deeper emotional and cultural levels. This nuanced view on luxury branding is consistent with Aaker's (1991) theory, depicting brands as sources of emotional fulfillment, attachment, and powerful cultural and social resonance in addition to serving as indicators of quality or prestige. While some of Loewe's art projects, such as the Art Basel Miami Beach (2019) installation and the PHotoEspaña (2022) initiative, represent distinctive blends of art curation and brand portrayal, delving deeply into them would distract this study from its primary theoretical focus, as it would necessitate an artistic background for a thorough analysis. Conversely, other collaborations, aimed at a wider consumer audience, provide a more suitable and relevant subject for analysis, being within the broader cultural and media discourse.

One of the standout examples of creating a collection inspired by the motifs of a specific artist is the Ken Price capsule collection, created by Loewe in 2020. Being a renowned contemporary American artist, Ken Price (1935-2012) created distinctive small-scale ceramic sculptures that helped him establish a special place in the world of art, as these works stood out for their richness of imagination and surpassing craftsmanship, frequently conjuring images of organic blobs, sliced geodes, and fantastical teacups. Additionally, Price's work expertly combined elements from Mexican folk pottery, the complex world of geology, the allure of erotic artifacts, and the vibrant narratives of surf culture, drawing inspiration from a wide range of sources and cultural manifestations. This eclectic fusion of influences not only demonstrated Price's wide range of artistic expression, but also cemented his reputation as a visionary who could go beyond convention to produce works that were both symbolic and profound (Artnet, n.d.).

Inspired by a series of 20 unique, hand-painted ceramic plates, this collection primarily highlights the harmony between Price's eclectic and free style and Loewe's favor for close interaction with the world of art. As described by Jonathan Andersson:

I have always been drawn to artists whose practices expand, push and challenge conventions. Over the past few years, the Loewe capsule collection, which comes out right before the holiday season, has allowed me

to delve into my passion for art imbued with the materiality of craft. I have long admired the work of Ken Price who once said, 'We've been cited as the people who broke away from the crafts hierarchy and substituted so-called 'total freedom!' This is utterly inspiring. Price is the subject of this year's collection (Rikhy, 2020).



Figure 7: Loewe bags from Ken Price capsule collection

Variety and saturation of visual elements implemented in the collection, as well distinct combination of strong cultural influences, shapes catchy and vibrant visual expression. Additional perspective is added by the choice of the artist, justified not only with his distinct craftsmanship approach, but also the cultural themes in his art. The final images depicts the scenes of distinctly Southern narratives and symbols, establishing strong association with Mexican or Californian culture, interwoven in real life in a same way, as in these art pieces. This way, Mexican visual narratives have been reshaped and re-conceptualized by an LA-born artist, making a distinctive fusion of cultural narratives. Placing these images in the centre of their capsule collection, Loewe adds yet another dimension to comprehension and implementation of cultural symbolism, moving the partnership between Loewe and Price beyond standard fashion move or a simple pursuit of beauty. As a powerful illustration of the company's esteem for artistic variety and preference for universal inclusivity, this artistic partnership serves as an indicator demonstrating Loewe's deeper engagement with the nuances of cultural fusion and the celebration of lasting legacies. By incorporating Price's distinctive artwork to its wearable pieces, Loewe not only honors his legacy but also reinforces its position as a rightful participant of international cultural scene, willing to maintain and highlight the visual artefacts of the globalized cultural environment.

In planning strategic brand interactions of this kind, Loewe obviously pays close attention to the nuances of collective identities in the current global environment. By doing so, the brand advances the idea of a globally interconnected society and acknowledges the influence of media on the shaping and visual representation of cultural symbolism. Moreover, allowing their products to serve as media, Loewe enters a broader discourse on the media subject, offering its own perspective on the fluidity and universality of media in the modern world. Their example highlights media as a dynamic, ever-evolving channel rather than static objects, carriers of visible attributes and thus a platforms for cultural expression, as it facilitate and even trigger the ongoing conversation between culture, art and society.

It is also important to consider the perspective in which Loewe treats and interprets the notion of luxury and the new meanings that come to light when applying it to this case. While Loewe's collaboration with a modern artist aims to uphold its prestigious status as a brand, the result significantly departs from traditional Western notions of luxury. Undoubtedly, visual arts and motifs from various cultures have been admired thought the history, but under the Western perspective they have occasionally been reduced to an air of "exotic curiosity".

Exclusiveness, European heritage and a distinctive set of symbols that displayed wealth and elegance rooted in European cultural ideals happened to be a central themes in Western luxury narratives (Berry, 1994). In contrast, Loewe's approach in this case offers a luxury product that stands free of connotations of being European-centric and conveys a sincere appreciation of cultural traits without making the culture it portrays appear exotic.

In an even more democratic and creative manner for a top-notch fashion house, the collections were released in collaboration with the Japanese Studio Ghibli, inspired by the animated films *My Neighbor Totoro* (2021 collection) and *Spirited Away* (2023 collection)



Figure 8: Loewe bags from Spirited Away (left) and My Neighbor Totoro (right) capsule collection

Beyond the cultural perspective comparable to the one described above, this example even more clearly demonstrates the brand's acceptance of art in all of its manifestations and its equal collaboration with it to produce unique results. Without challenging the legendary

status of either work that served as the foundation of the collections, we shall still notice the adaptability, brightness and ease with which these visual narratives were woven into the brand's overall concept and production. In the same way, without contesting the popularity of the anime genre or attempting to categorize it as 'non-high' art, we can once more point out the blurred notion and characteristics of contemporary luxury. Operating on a broader cultural perspective and relying on emotional connection, Loewe transcends traditional boundaries of luxury that previously put an emphasis on exclusivity and nobility. As instead, it showcase luxury's evolving nature by incorporating elements that resonate deeply with a wider audience and encompass way broader range of visual entities. In this perspective, Loewe follows the course of a modern brand, examining various spheres of expression without categorizing it, and working in a shared space of relative and ephemeral notions of 'low' and 'high'.

5.3 Results and discussion

The analysis of visual content conducted in the previous section allowed us to examine from various angles and perspectives the communication and positioning practices used by the Loewe luxury brand. As anticipated at the beginning of this study, the approach to examining the case was based on the triangulation of the spheres of visibility, identity and communication, all of which are encompassed within the general study of the history and contemporary aspects of our society's visual culture.

When it comes to the brand itself, there are a number of factors that made it appropriate for this research. Behind the generalized image of a clothing and bag brand, that is undoubtedly well-known but not as well-known as Chanel or Dior, possesses itself as an ultra-modern, rich and textured company that successfully operates in their well-established niche. Given a new life in 2015 by creative director Jonathan Anderson, it became an intriguing illustration of how broadly and extensively a single company can operate if it starts interacting with adjacent areas of cultural and artistic activity. Undoubtedly, the fashion industry is advantageous to this, and Loewe has taken full advantage of this opportunity. By weaving various cultural narratives, symbols and meanings into their aesthetic, collaborating with some of the best contemporary photographers, they were able to naturally yet artistically

construct their visual narratives, properly communicating and adopting their message to various media' needs.

Analyzing the case, the brand's dedication to the traditions of craftsmanship and the legacy of centuries-old leatherwork culture, which serve as the foundation of its activities and its primary value, can be instantly seen. The importance of Loewe's legacy is emphasized in all available company descriptions and is often mentioned in their interviews, while the visual identity of the brand, which serves as its main visual expression, clearly shows these ties to its history. By analyzing the elements of the logo and researching interviews about the process that created the brand's current image, it is possible to see the extent to which a sense of history and cultural heritage appreciated and placed within the DNA of the company. In this respect, the easily readable and expertly expressed sources of inspiration that have been integrated into the clear symbolism of visual aesthetics are especially valuable. An overall mix of elegance and simplicity, the font inspired by early 20th-century typography, an anagram based on cattle branding patterns – this degree of attention to details creates a credible and strong foundational narrative of communication, from which the answer the 'why' question – as an appeal to the inspirational sense of purpose behind the product – is clear and evident (Lelis & Kreutz, 2022).

On the contrary, another perspective of Loewe's identity expresses the brand's clear ambition to be at the forefront of contemporary culture, fashion and aesthetics. Far from acknowledging the heritage of the past as self-sufficient in itself, Loewe uses its background rather as a foundation for attempts to redefine norms and experiment. The visual language of their brand, which, as we've already seen, has traditional shapes and a typeface that is extravagant by contemporary standards, contrasts with the overall minimalistic tone of the statement. The white backdrop, which stands for material simplicity while still leaving room for associative interpretations, seems to reflect the natural development of visual culture, which once begun to simplify in order to emphasize its own authenticity (Krauss, 1979).

Reflecting on Loewe's advertising campaigns, we can recognize them as the primary realm of activity in visual creativity, artistic expression, and audience engagement via images. The cases examined in this research represent some of the most bold and standout examples, and clearly and not every brand collection comes with similarly eye-catching images. However, we might assume that through these exceptional examples the most interesting

aspects of visual communication can be explored, thus contributing to the study. Speaking in general, Loewe's visual narratives lack a unifying theme, a continuous narrative about the company's history or its founders, same as explicit references or direct allusions to the brand's core principles. The consistency of the techniques employed and the overall impression produced by the pictures, which are mainly left within the control of the photographer, serve to transmit symbolism and underlying meaning more delicately and abstractly, than an emphasized story would do. Referring to the theory of Landers (2020) and Dunleavy (2020), we can place Loewe's advertising campaigns at the crosspoint of the 'real' and the 'hyperreal', considering every photograph as a carrier of the tangible elements of 'truth', but at the same time being layered with cultural, social and emotional circumstances, making interpretation of the image fluid and dynamic. Within this approach, brand's choice to avoid using a chronological or linear narrative in its visual ads seems justified – Loewe chooses a more ethereal, evocative landscape instead, allowing for a broader, more nuanced audience interpretation.

At the same time, we shall conclude that Loewe's imageries are far from being arbitrary, and while each image can be interpreted in a variety of ways, it remains deeply rooted within a particular social and cultural context. Aware of their function as 'sign makers', Loewe and their artists have skillfully incorporated multiple levels of meaning into its visual media, ensuring that even if the message may initially seem obscure, it gains a strong resonance when placed within the larger discourses around the brand and culture (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Aiello & Parry, 2020). In this regard, the company's work with Steven Meisel seems to be a good example of a creative partnership in which the freedom offered for inventiveness was completely justified. In an interesting way, images from his personal archive that had little to do with the collection's actual subject of advertising campaign – in one he's a child posing with parrots on his arms, in another he's kissing a lover or taking a self-portrait in a mirror – were intertwined in the collection's advertising material. Similar to this, the *Fruits* campaign uses just close-ups of women's faces across the full frame instead of showcasing any company items.

This decision can be interpreted as a faith in the brand's authority, knowing that the Loewe sign at the top of the poster will be speaking loudly to the majority of viewers. Clearly, no business is able to disregard its primary objective – to sell its products, but how the buyer's desire to buy this products is fulfilled remains the key question. In the example of Meisel's

ads, Loewe's communication to potential buyers appears to be an expansive statement on occasionally abstract subjects, but it leaves out the precise emotional context that the brand needs to communicate its view of the fashion industry and the world at large, therefore influencing consumers decision on irrational, emotional level. These choices could be associated with theoretical perspectives on the role of emotions in brand's communication, the story it tells and the personality it depicts, all contributing to loyalty and emotional attachment (Reichheld & Scheffer, 2000).

Artistically enriched visual communications transcend the boundaries of solely aesthetics and promotional objectives, moving into the sphere of emotional resonance and connection. With its artistic style Loewe starts a dialogue, introducing ideas about gender, personality, identity and self-representation, engaging free-thinking, open-minded people in their conversation. Referred to Kotler's (2010) theoretical framework, this strategy is representative of the change in modern branding and marketing paradigms, especially in the wake of problems brought on by globalization. As today's consumers seek for recognition that goes beyond their ability to pay, they wish to be recognized for their intellectual, emotional and spiritual aspects, creating demand for a new aesthetic communications strategy. Loewe's artistic communications strategy mirrors this paradigm, merging measured media effect with high-quality artistic expression and rich cultural context.

The richness of this context is primarily linked to engaging, complex visual images that combine the ongoing relevance of Western artistic cultural ideas with social issues introduced into public discourse by contemporary art of the 20th and 21st centuries – Guinta's 'dissolution of art in life', presented in a contemporary style that meets modern media's demands (Guinta, 2013). This approach offers an intriguing perspective on the historical background of the function of visual art in society. The cases we looked at owe their significance to both historical allusions and equivalent symbolism, as well as the use of representations from global contemporary mass culture. They come together to form a rich picture that reflects the changes and demands of the time, which renders them suitable and relevant. Aligning with Rogoff's perspective of visual culture as the 'arena' for cultural discussions and interpretations, meanings and representations, Loewe's examples fit into the context, as their visual communications not only reflect but also actively participate in, shape, and absorb the dominant cultural narratives (Rogoff, 2002).

Sturken and Cartwright's theory can add to our discussion by arguing that the field of visual culture is not based solely on aesthetic appreciation but rather on the social practices that enable the creation, consumption and interpretation of these aesthetics (Sturken & Cartwright, 2017). The nowadays' departure from the traditional divisions of 'high' and 'low' aesthetics indicates a democratization of cultural discourse, which in our case can be traced to the reexamined notion of luxury, which once used to be related and associated solely to highest manifestations of art, production or possession. Loewe's incorporation of mass culture into their design (anime characters on luxury hand-crafted bags), paintings' and pottery' inspired motifs of the American contemporary artist (Ken Price collection) indicates their willingness to interact with a wide range of cultural artefacts regardless of their status or origin, as far as they are means to translate the true human expressions. This shift emphasizes a shift away from a rigid notion of aesthetic perfection and toward an expansive, all-encompassing view of culture as a dynamic, ever-evolving system. Culture is rooted in the widespread, in everyday practices, experiences, and interpretations (Williams, 1989). Such a perspective finds its encouragement in the visual communications of our modern era, where brand messages and commercial representations draw on this vibrant cultural environment, weaving together historical allusions, modern symbolism and universal cultural motifs.

In this particular context, Anderson's statement from an interview – "You can't just be a fashion designer; you have to do everything" resonates differently (King, 2016). In a culture that is global, interconnected, and constantly changing; where visual communication serves as the primary tool for comprehension and reflection and where no one aesthetic or cultural ideal reigns supreme, it's difficult to build a successful brand that strives for global recognition by just making a product. If commercial photography is regarded as a work of art and a bag can be a full-fledged medium, a complete and multifaceted integration with the society and culture is required. We might assume, that Loewe is befitting on its ongoing integration.

Conclusion

This dissertation aimed to study how an individual brand can interact with the general legacy of the visual culture of our society. As mentioned earlier, a particular source of inspiration, as well as the leitmotif of the entire study, was Berger's theory about the inheritance of the visual language of modern commercial communications from the history of Western painting, thus implying a consistent connection of our culture over time as a kind of repository of references, metaphors, themes, and narratives. By examining the historical and social context of visual culture, we came to a conclusion supported by leading researchers in the field – Rogoff (2002), Mitchell (2002), Mirzoeff (2002), Jay (1988), and others – that visuality occupies a dominant position in our society as a tool for understanding and reflecting on reality, transferring experience, interacting, and bringing social issues into the cultural field. The inseparable interconnection between visual objects, the cultural code of society, media, and all spheres of life – from artistic to commercial – allows us to consider visual analysis as an effective tool for cognition.

Following the theories of Thompson (1990), Rampley (2005) and Mirzoeff (1999) on the inseparable connection between visuality and media, the second chapter of our research was dedicated to media and its functionality as a means of visual communication. The idea was not to review only the historical evolution of media or discuss its functions, but to explore them as the carriers of visuality and the facilities of social discourse in the modern environment. From this perspective, it was interesting to investigate the medium of contemporary art, whose social impact is sometimes dismissed behind its aesthetic functions. Yet, we shall emphasize that contemporary art played a huge role in bringing the most controversial and once 'uncomfortable' social topics into the sphere of mainstream cultural discourse, causing and empowering significant social shifts. The aftermath of these shifts can be seen, for example, in Steven Meisel's homosexual narrative used in one of Loewe's campaigns – a once tabooed topic that can be now freely used in commercial campaigns. In the same manner, we can assume that discussion and reflection of cultural, racial and gender matters through the medium of contemporary art has contributed to building a more open-minded and aware global society. Examples of how Loewe logically and fairly incorporates elements from other cultures into their work and products can be used to illustrate this.

The study's investigation into the role and worth of contemporary brands, their influence and integration into the cultural environment, as well as a redefinition of luxury, was another interesting benchmark. Based on our findings, we can emphasize the crucial part that emotional and cultural components play in the brand-to-audience communication process, which is based on involving both parties in a contemporary socio-cultural context. In this situation, visual communication plays an essential role as a means of exchanging information, since it allows for the use of a huge variety of culturally relevant symbols and narratives. Loewe's visual content analysis allowed us to witness these mechanics and interactions applied to the real case, in which the brand presents itself as a full-fledged creator, engaged in the process of reinterpreting cultural heritage and contemporary culture.

Analyzing Loewe brand in various manifestations of its visual practices, we were attempting to answer the key research question: "How does Loewe utilize visual practices to shape its identity through branding and communication strategies, aligning with the broader discourse on media, visual culture, and social values?". Eventually, visual content analysis contributed to our understanding of mechanics of contemporary brand's communication. We were able to trace classic archetypal narratives in the visuals of Loewe's collections and understand their connection to the current context and culture, as well as its adaptiveness to media and brand image needs.

The rich texture and complexity of the cases studied here gave us the opportunity to touch upon the socio-cultural context in which a modern brand with global positioning exists. Collaborations with artists and art projects from different countries, from Japan to Mexico, whose material is organically and equally woven into Loewe's activities, allowed us to see behind the company not just a firm selling items, but an active participant in the global socio-cultural discourse, committed to the values of art and creativity in their humane, constructive manifestations. Such an approach not only inherits the best motivations of our cultural heritage, but presents itself as an active participating agent in constructing the new contemporary context of our society.

Thinking about further research on this topic, we could suggest evaluating the same processes from the consumers' side. While this study explored visual culture and the brand's communication strategy from the company's perspective, another insight could be gathered from analyzing how consumers evaluate, perceive and interpret the brand's messages, positioning, and visual communication strategies. The comparison of differences between a message encoding on one side and its decoding on the other could shed light on the actual flow of cultural exchange from a different angle.

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