



A produção semiótica de significados num espetáculo de estilo: linguagens culturais e criativas

*The semiotic production of meanings in a show
of style: cultural and creative languages*

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[resumo] O estudo da moda permite-nos compreender a cultura e as diferentes formas de expressão individual. A revisão de literatura deste trabalho indicou que existem várias perspetivas de análise da moda e dos seus objetos, o que lhe confere um carácter dinâmico. No que diz respeito à sua relação com a semiótica, a revisão de literatura enfatiza a análise de marcas, publicidades e fotografias. Isso enaltece uma lacuna nos estudos de outros tipos de produção cultural, como os desfiles. Ao compreender os desfiles, podemos decodificar novas dinâmicas no sistema de moda, pois eles são ricos em significados e representam a cultura onde as marcas estão inseridas. Dessa forma, o principal objetivo desta pesquisa é compreender os padrões de significado representados em desfiles de moda unificados. A pesquisa seguiu um roteiro metodológico baseado principalmente na abordagem semiótica barthesiana. Para tanto, recorreu-se a uma análise semiótica de um estudo de caso composto pelos desfiles unificados Gucci. O roteiro analítico destacou a existência de elementos específicos nas narrativas essenciais para a compreensão do DNA da marca. Também podemos observar que os elementos de um desfile unificado não retiram o impacto das mensagens nas narrativas da marca. Ao explorar essas articulações, pudemos perceber os locais de sentido em signos específicos dos desfiles, destacando o seu papel como significante cultural.

[palavras-chave] **Produção Cultural. Semiótica da Moda. Espetáculo de Moda. Gucci. Desfiles.**

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[abstract] The study of fashion allows us to understand culture and different forms of individual expression. The literature review we carried out indicates that there are several perspectives in which fashion and its objects can be analysed, which gives it a dynamic character. Regarding its relationship with semiotics, the literature review emphasizes the analysis of brands, advertisements, and fashion photographs. This underlines the gap in studies of other types of cultural production, such as fashion shows. By understanding fashion shows, we can decode new dynamics in the fashion system, as they are rich in meaning and represent the culture where brands are inserted. The main objective of this research is to understand the patterns of meaning represented in unified fashion shows. The research was carried out through a methodological script based mainly on the Barthesian approach. For that, we resorted to a semiotic analysis in a case study context composed by the unified Gucci fashion shows. The analytical script underlined the existence of specific elements of the runway narratives that are essential for understanding the brand's DNA. We can also understand that the elements of a unified runway show do not remove the potential of the message in brand narratives. By exploring these articulations, we were able to see the location(s) of meaning in specific signs in the fashion shows, highlighting its role as a cultural signifier.

[keywords] **Cultural Production. Fashion semiotics. Fashion shows. Gucci. Runway.**

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Introduction

Fashion is a dynamic system transversal to other areas and works as a representation environment for society and its cultural and material production (Black et al., 2018; Kaiser, 2019). The nature of fashion and the cycle for creating objects and products within this system seems to be a fruitful setting for semiotic analysis (Barthes 1977, 2006), given the rapid need for sign recycling (Baudrillard, 1993) of products and brands. In this work, fashion is seen in a social and paradigmatic scope (Crane, 2000; Crane and Bovone, 2006). Regarding cultural production and its relationship with fashion, we approach it as the process of creating meanings between subjects and the socio-cultural environment (Saussure, 1961; Eco, 1991; Barthes, 2006; Chandler, 2017). As we can see in Freire (2014), observing communication and fashion production allows us to understand their ability to create and imprint meanings on objects (Freire, 2014).

Fashion production takes place in different ways, one of which is the fashion show. As a communication element, it is broad and rich, and unites various characteristics such as movement, light, sound, and narratives. We are interested in studying fashion shows as communication channels, highlighting a gap that exists in their analysis within the semiotic scope (Barry, 2017). In this context, and because fashion is a complex cultural system, we emphasise the study of the unified fashion shows (see Yotka, 2020), which play an important role as they characterize a performance rich in meanings, specific within culture (Evans, 2001) and within the brand under review: Gucci. When stating that Gucci will overhaul the fashion industry with a combined men's and women's runway show, Vogue uses the term "unified fashion show" to refer to this type of production (www.vogue.com/article/gucci-unify-mens-womens-runway-show). In a paradigmatic moment for the brand, the entry of creative director Alessandro Michele increased the interest in the brand and its communication became more appealing for several media. One of the most significant changes made by Alessandro was joining both male and female fashion shows, making it possible to visualise fashion presentations from a different angle. Bringing both presentations together encourages us to think about the role of fashion and its importance for different audiences.

This research, anchored in the understanding of the runway as a mediating channel between brands and audiences, aims to answer the following question: "which patterns of meaning are represented in Gucci's unified runway shows?". On one hand, this case study allows us to review the combination of male and female fashion shows, on the other, it underlines the flow of meanings in this period (2017-2019) and in this type of production. We developed the analysis through the reading of various fashion shows as semiotic resources. Our analysis is based on a script built considering several authors, highlighting semiotic analysis in the prism of denotation, connotation, synchrony and diachrony (Barthes, 1977, 2006; Fidalgo and Gradim, 2005; Berguer, 2000, 2005, 2010; Oswald, 2012 and Chandler 2017).

This research is divided into three phases. The first being the contextual analysis of the objects of study. The second is the logical and structured in-depth explanation of the methodology used for the analysis. The last is the cultural and individual interpretation of the various objects that make up the case study. The results of this research show how the

brand can absorb symbolic culture and transform it into fashion, articulating different concepts and creating new meanings. Several concepts are present in the cultural production under analysis, which are different from each other. They highlight the malleable identity of the brand, and the use of several concepts such as: mythology, fetish, gender representation, and fantasy. Through this research, we can see that there is a flexibility of concepts in these fashion shows, changing each season. At the same time, this reflects the narrative of the brand, which also is very dynamic and malleable.

The fashion system as a dynamic cultural field

The concept of “fashion” has different nuances for both academics and the public that operates it. Reinforcing Simmel’s (1904) ideas, Crane and Bovone state that fashion and culture operates at the same social level (Crane and Bovone, 2006). Consequently, ‘fashion represents the variables and contrasts existing in the way of living’ and embraces the idea of ‘value’. The acceptance of fashion in different cultures influences the perception of artefacts by society (Simmel, 1904, pp. 139, 150- 151). In the context of this research, we approach the garment as the main object of analysis. However, we do not discard its importance in the cultural system.

The mention of symbolisms imprinted in the context of fashion is recurrent. Its interpretation as a social system and cultural phenomenon is frequently present in several authors (Simmel, 1904; Barthes, 1983; Lipovetsky, 1987; Crane, 2000; Barnard, 2007; Tungate, 2005; Miranda et al., 1999; Entwistle, 2016, 2019; Kaiser, 2019; Varley et al., 2019). The same authors also suggest that the concept of fashion and clothing are similar in their use. On the definition of fashion, Crane and Bovone state:

It is most frequently used to connote highly visible styles of clothing and, less often, other types of material or immaterial culture that are highly valued at a particular moment in time. The term is also applied to systems that produce new styles of clothing and attempt to make them desirable to the public. (Crane e Bovone, 2006, p. 320)

Fashion materializes itself in different objects and is a cultural phenomenon and system with relevant social impact. The objects that represent it underline moments in time and we can see this both in terms of brands and society. Some cultures have specific meanings that are transposed into the fashion system. This importation of meanings allows for a deeper identification of culture(s) and the understanding of different mindsets (Evans, 2001). Baudrillard states that “today, every principle of identity is affected by fashion” (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 88). Identity is seen as something in constant change which ‘continuously has a new life’ and fashion is recycled as an instrument for the materialization of identities. We believe that Baudrillard refers to the constant changes in taste that lead to a constant resignification of identities. This temporal elasticity requires a reflection about fashion and its identity role as a “social sign” (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 88-91). Thus, fashion must be understood as a manifestation of identities. This has been evidenced by several authors such as Davis (1992);

Crane (2000); Sant'Anna (2009); Entwistle (2000); Black et al. (2018); and Entwistle, et al. (2019). Clothing conveys messages at the imagery, sentimental and discursive level (Barthes, 1983, 2004; Turner, 2012). Individual expression to the world occurs through what we wear and what fashion represents. Personalities are composed in the culturally constituted world (McCracken, 1986) through practices and representations (Hall, 1997).

To relate fashion and its social role, Barnard (2002) and McNeill (2018) place clothing in the category of consumer goods, reinforcing its role of individual expression. This can also be observed in Evans (2001) and Kaiser (2019), who state that the issues of fashion representation towards the world are inseparable. Thinking about fashion objects as semi-otic signs contributes to new interpretive readings and connotations that locate subjects and objects in the “culturally constituted world” (McCracken, 1986). It is innate to consumer society to give meaning to everything that surrounds it, and clothing takes on a representational role as it transcribes a symbolic language of a given culture (Evans, 2001; Barry, 2017) and of individuals (Crane, 2000; Crane and Bovone, 2006).

The cultural analysis of fashion meanings allows us to approach a social and interpretative axis, which reinforces the study of cultural manifestations and artefacts. It is important to work on this approach to social representation, underlining fashion shows as elements that facilitate the dissemination of meanings and as rich resources for qualitative analysis. Barry says that many researchers hesitate to research fashion shows because they are related to superficiality (Barry, 2017, p. 4). However, the runway is seen as a vehicle for disseminating information between creators, socio-cultural agents and consumers and it is the vehicle that conveys meanings in the industry through various other means of communication.

The runway has assumed the role of a social spectacle that moves the fashion branding structure and stimulates society through new cultural productions, in this case, clothing (Hesselblein, 2019). The role of fashion shows on promoting the artistic creations from designers is important and we also see them as one of the most important moments in fashion communication. They are performances that express concepts and ideas for the collective imaginary of fashion brands. Regarding the fashion show as a mediator of the fashion system, Ben Barry defines it as “an art form that presents clothing through narratives enhanced by the performing arts with the aim of circulating new ideas to the public” (Barry, 2017, pp. 8-9). The fashion shows contain meanings from society/audiences where brands are inserted. Carolina Evans suggests that the fashion show is a resource of expression, seduction, and spectacle, and discusses this as a favourable place for the dissemination of fashion (Evans, 2001, p. 271).

Understanding fashion shows is grasping a core system that connects the fashion system with audiences, culture, and brands. It is important to study its complex relations, as these are current reflections and are often associated with disruption, serving as clues for the research of cultural patterns (Evans, 2001; Sudjic, 2010; Hesselbein, 2019; Barry, 2017 and Entwistle 2009). In this sense, fashion shows, as cultural productions, can be indicators of changes in society and culture. They can contribute to the identification/confirmation of emerging trends, allowing us to understand fashion communication, cultural narratives, and identities.

Methodology: semiotics and the unified fashion shows

The semiotic resources (Van Leeuwen, 2015; Kusters, 2021) that are part of this analysis are all Gucci's unified fashion shows. Through semiotic analysis, we seek to observe patterns of meaning in semiotic resources, answering the following research question "which patterns of meaning are represented in the unified runway shows from Gucci?". The analysis was carried out based on the theoretical framework of the various authors and was oriented towards the interpretation of denotative and connotative meanings and in synchronous and diachronic perspectives (Barthes, 1977, 2006; Oswald, 2012; Freire, 2014; Berguer, 2000, 2005, 2010; Chandler, 2017). The observation of the objects highlighted some signs that were the most representatives of show narratives, and those were selected for the analysis.

Regarding the definition of "unified fashion show", it is firstly referred to by Vogue, when it indicates that "Gucci will shake up the fashion system with a single men's and women's runway show" (www.vogue.com/article/gucci-unify-mens-womens-runway-show). In this sense, we refer to the "unified" fashion shows as being the ones that bring together both men's and women's collections. The unified fashion shows that are part of the clipping of this research took place between 2017 and 2019 (pre-pandemic Covid-19³) and belong to Gucci. These shows were selected since they are relevant communication objects (important for both the brand and the fashion system), in addition to having been all directed by Alessandro Michele, creative director of Gucci since January 2015⁴. These shows are performances that represent Alessandro Michele and are mentioned in the media as objects that encouraged a moment of rupture for the brand. Along with this, Segran (2018) states that there is a moment of exact change in the paradigm at Gucci that occurs with the entry of Alessandro Michele, bringing an 'eccentric' view. This justifies the study of this brand and underlines the changes that the creator brought to its communication. In 2017, when the first unified collection is presented, we see a detachment in the fashion paradigm, that later was interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic, in 2019. In 2020, due to this unexpected context, the brand was forced to redefine the production of its fashion shows, creating the digital event (fashion film) At Home⁵, to reconfigure and reduce the impact of change in this type of performance.

³ During the Covid-19 pandemic there was an adaptation of the brand's fashion shows, which created a digital production (www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-2021-ready-to-wear/Gucci).

⁴ It is important to underline that this article was written while Alessandro Michele was still the creative director of the brand. In 2022, the creator left the post, being replaced by De Sarno, in 2023. (see www.vogue.pt/alessandro-michele-abandona-a-direcao-criativa-da-gucci; www.publico.pt/2023/01/30/impar/noticia/gucci-nomeia-sarno-director-criativo-tarefa-reavivar-marca-2036833)

⁵ The fashion film "At Home" is available on the brand's official website: www.gucci.com/pt/en_gb/st/stories/article/guccifest-episode-1.

Gucci is at the top of the three most consumed brands since the second half of 2017 (Business of Fashion, 2018). Some studies⁶ pointed to Gucci as being the most popular fashion brand in the world, with special emphasis on some quarters both in 2018 and 2019. The “Lyst study” (2019) also mentions the growth of the brand’s revenues, technological developments, and the presence of the brand’s creative director as co-chair of the Met Gala in 2019. It is interesting to note that the need to manage costs, people, and production itself requires deep and strategic management of new possibilities, as is the case with the merger of some fashion shows. This makes the brand under analysis relevant to understand this phenomenon.

Analytical approach

We understand that the study of cultural phenomena requires an ability to decipher codes and symbology that go beyond a process that is replicable. Semiotics, here more in a semiology approach, is based on the study of language and the understanding of the sign field in which we live: culture (Barthes, 2006). As a discipline, it brings a set of tools that facilitate the analysis of textual content (Fidalgo and Gradim, 2005, pp. 9-15; Oswald, 2012, p. 50). Freire (2014, p. 2669) states that the use of semiotics in various areas such as advertising, management, consumer behaviour or marketing contributes to a better understanding of experiences, of the created narratives. The connotative language requires an apparatus - semiotics - that allows translating ideas that are communicated in a broad way (oral, written, iconographic or gestural). At the same time, as an interpretative approach, semiotic readings target specific signs that carry specific messages. We selected the most prominent and visible signs in the fashion show that represent the brand narrative in question.

Regarding semiotic analysis, two concepts are recurrent in authors and, in the same way, are important in the sign deconstruction process: connotation and denotation. Both are essential in the individualized analytical context that Berguer (2010) and Chandler (2017) refer to. Reading meanings through denotation brings descriptive understanding of objects. Barthes states that denotation is associated with objectivity and the ‘analogue fullness’ of the image in its main form (Barthes, 1977, pp. 18-19). Likewise, Berguer brings the idea of a descriptive reading of objects, as denotation portrays the direct and explicit meaning of words or phenomena, as follows: it “[denotation] involves a literal and detailed description of the meaning of a word or the measurements of objects” (Berguer, 2010, p. 15). The denotative function of discourse creates recurrences of meanings that indicate concepts as facts or direct associations to texts (Oswald, 2012, p. 54, 162) and thus, this “literal meaning” tends to describe the obvious in semiotic readings.

It should be noted that, in the case of connotation, we deal with inferences and suggestions of meaning (Berguer, 2005, p. 17-18). In this case, Barthes indicates that meanings

⁶ Lyst (2019) indicates that the surveys they carry out are global. The platform analyses the online consumption behaviour of more than five million consumers in contact with around twelve thousand brands and designers. Lyst’s data analysis process takes shape through an interpretation of data from Google search, analysis of brand sales conversions, social media and statistics analysed in four cycles of three months a year, respectively, Q1; Q2; Q3 and Q4 cycles.

act in an invisible layer and are dependent on phenomena and cultural interferences to be transmitted at the level of messages (Barthes, 1977, p. 19). The connotation “involves the cultural meanings and myths connected to words and to things” (Berguer, 2010, p. 15). It should be emphasized the importance of analytical contexts that carry embedded meanings that are wrapped in symbolic, historical, and emotional material (Eco, 1991; Bezemer & Cowan, 2020). Connotative readings impose a second message in communication, and this can be seen as a subjective system of meaning transmission (Barthes, 2006, p. 96, 1977, p. 20). For Berguer, the connotation involves the cultural meanings that are embedded in objects (Berguer, 2000, p. 40, 2010, p. 15). From an applied perspective, Oswald mentions that the connotative function confers meanings that can refer to marks and certain messages, having a cultural basis that conditions the understanding of signs (Oswald, 2012, p. 55). Although these meanings are malleable, the connotation refers to associations that are understood by groups, cultures, or subcultures (Chandler, 2017, p. 162-163). So, understanding the relationships of meaning and the specificities that each object carries at the semantic level, not only contributes to the understanding of group mindsets but also to decode messages and meanings that are inert to collectivises.

On the issues of synchrony and diachrony, we consider the ideas of Oswald (2012) and Berguer (2005) to portray these approaches. For Oswald, synchronic analysis refers to specific micro-discourses. There is a perception of the unique message that the brand conveys to social subjects and in an individualized way (Oswald, 2012). In turn, Berguer takes it as synonymous with analytic (Berguer, 2005). On diachronic analysis, Oswald presents it as a macro-discourse (broader than the synchronic) and which takes shape through the contextual framing of signs (Oswald, 2012). For Berguer (2005), diachronic means “historical”. Thus, both concepts are relevant in the scope of this study because an analysis that guides this axis permits the framing and positioning of meanings in the current context, facilitating the decoding of possible symbolic patterns. In this phase, we developed the semiotic analysis of Gucci’s unified fashion shows. We decided to analyse semiotically to deconstruct the narratives of the fashion shows through the observation of their institutional videos.

*Gucci Spring Summer 2020*⁷

Some elements of this cultural production have their connotative meaning imprinted on concepts such as “life” or “the human mind”, topics present in Gucci’s narrative⁸ since Alessandro Michele assumed the position of creative director of the brand. On the representation of the “human mind”, we can observe it through the presence of the sign “strait jackets”, which is highlighted at the beginning of the show and underlines the dichotomy between both concepts. The concept of “riding” is present and relates to the brand’s history, being represented by the use of various elements that illustrate this sport, such as: “horse-bit buckles”, “buckles

⁷ Available at <https://youtu.be/AX0fw9x-hVw>.

⁸ See Bowles (2019). Available at: <https://www.vogue.com/article/gucci-alessandro-michele-interview-may-2019-issue>.

in horseshoe shape”, wooden notes (such as the “suitcase with a wooden flap”), the “Gucci stripes” (which refer to the saddle of horses), the “riding whips” and the “crosswalk” (alluding to horse racing track and speed/motion). Likewise, the symbolic construction of fetishism and sensuality is visible throughout “bondage” elements. Several signs are also related to the “sensuality” of the erotic practice, such as the latex and black finishes. The construction of a sensual narrative through these signs underlines the duality that exists between the seduction of fashion and the human body. This can also be seen in the bracelets and “anklets” (which carry lipsticks), with the “flower-shaped cuts” of some pieces, the “whips”, the “chokers”, the “gloves in latex” and the “pillow backpack”.

On a diachronic level, Gucci stands out in the fashion sector using elements that visually identify it (such as the “monogram buckle”; the “diamond pattern”; the “Gucci stripes” and the “horse-bits”). These inseparable components make it possible to distinguish the brand in the sector, facilitating a direct association with the insignia. Although the narratives related to “riding” and “bondage” guide the fashion show narrative, these become topics that transcend the brand’s universe and can be replicated by others. We must emphasize that, in this context, they assume a surrealist character and cross with the design of daring accessories and help with the symbolic elements of the brand, becoming unique representations (such as the “pillow backpack”, the “gloves in latex” or the “latex chokers”).

In the context of a synchronic analysis, the brand’s micro-discourses assume a and specific role when it comes to the representation of Gucci (see Oswald, 2012; Berguer, 2005). The web of meanings formed by the narratives in this cultural production allows for a better understanding of the brand’s culture and its position as a symbolic entity, underlining a differentiating and prominent role within fashion and the irreverence of its creations. We see that there is a cultural stimulus adjacent to the creation of images and products with high content of analytical complexity. This brings to the brand’s narrative the idea of intellectual cultivation and nostalgia for the historical representations it absorbs. In this case, the highlights are the ornaments, the friction between the concepts that guide the narrative of the parade and the presence of identity elements. Likewise, the catwalk builds a luminous setting and participates in the fast-moving utopia⁹ represented by the fashion show’s narrative. In the form of a crosswalk, the performance stage takes on a differentiating role in the brand, as it represents the space that configures the path/running track, both through the side protections and accelerated movement of this object. Gucci Hub is Eterotopia’s¹⁰ space and reflects a field of creative freedom, imagination, and the maturation of unusual ideas. It is in this space that the principles that guide a ‘new fashion society’ take shape and are assimilated by Gucci production.

⁹ In this case, utopia is a concept worked with intensity by Gucci (see www.vogue.pt/utopian-fantasy-da-gucci).

¹⁰ The concept of Eterotopia was approached by Alessandro Michele for the exhibition No Space, Just A Place. Eterotopia (2020), at the Daelim Museum, Seoul (available at <https://nospacejustaplace.gucci.com/>). The CPP Business of Luxury website reflects that one of the main criticisms arising from this exhibition is related to speculation about future environments destined to the creation of new identities, forming a conceptual web between Seoul’s urban spaces and the concept of ‘heterotopia’, by Michael Foucault (see www.cpp-luxury.com/gucci-an-exhibition-in-seoul-entitled-no-space-just-a-place-eterotopia/).

Note that there are signs that assume a neutral position, as is the case of the “silver butterfly”, which seems to represent spring (the fashion season) and, at the same time, co-exists in Michele’s Eterotopia — an enchanted place where the butterfly represents freedom and ephemerality. The brand protects signs that belong to the collective imagination, referring to historical moments and the concept of “nostalgia”, perceived through elements that make up the symbolic framework and that carry Gucci’s cultural heritage. These signs anchor their meanings and narratives through various elements (such as the “horse-bits”, the “diamond pattern”, the “Gucci stripes” and the “monogram buckles”). They also take on an identity position, permitting the creation of a direct association with the brand, becoming part of a symbolic heritage built by the patron (Guccio Gucci), which is what Oliveira (2018) and Mollerup (2007) define as the “5th. Element”. Its function seems to be related to a continuous revival of a symbolic heritage that embraces solid and historical foundations of brand communication.

Gucci Fall Winter 2019¹¹

In a connotative context, the messages present in this cultural production represent several concepts also present in other shows, such as “surrealism” or “bondage”. In the case of “surrealism”, it is represented by elements such as “knee pads”; the “goat embroidery”; the “transparent bag” or the “futuristic hats”, which illustrate a symbolic construction that expresses innovative/irreverent ideas and concepts, and not as an artistic movement. These signs can also be observed as elements of tradition rupture, becoming components that represent the complex narratives of the brand. Regarding the concept of “bondage”, this idea is communicated through “thorns”, “skins” and some “masks”. These elements are also articulated with the idea of “identity”, which is born from the fragmented representation of the brand’s expression, that is, an entity in constant adaptation. This is also reflected in the use of various masks that help both individual expression and the camouflage of the models (see signs “mask with thorns”; “white masks” and “animal masks in metal”). These narratives are present in this production through artefacts that humanize the brand (see the sign “tears”) and other representations of art and human expression, as is the case of the “plot in Chinese ink”. These narratives are encapsulated by traditional elements for Gucci, such as the “horse-bit”, the “Gucci stripes” and the “Gucci monogram”. These signs represent patterns of symbols and assume a representational character (5th Element), extolling Gucci’s history, myth, and identity.

In the scope of diachrony, the brand emphasizes the use of elements that visually identify it (such as “Gucci stripes” and “horse-bits”). These symbols distinguish itself in the fashion sector and contribute to its association with the brand. Although some elements appear frequently in the runway (such as the “masks”), these are not signs that consolidate the recognition of the insignia over the years. However, the narratives that describe “surrealist” moments or the practice of “bondage” should be highlighted as signs of an identity under construction. These elements are not enough for the immediate identification of the brand

11 Available at https://youtu.be/IoHY-f_bh44.

but carry a robust message that contributes to a correlation between products and brand in specific contexts. About the synchronic approach, some signs have an impact on Gucci's symbolic communication, as they assume a posture of identity representation of this narrative in which they are, such as the "masks", "knee pads" or the "golden ears".

*Gucci Spring Summer 2019*¹²

Within the scope of a connotative analysis, this cultural production has its meanings imprinted in various signs that represent the brand and whose basis is both historical and idealizer of concepts and narratives that guide the production. In this sense, we see objects whose messages are expressed through the idea of "surrealism", such as the "Mickey bags", the "strawberry patterns" or "the white bird". Such elements suggest provocation within communication¹³. The use of these signs is recurrent in the brand and in this case study. Thus, the creative freedom and authenticity that these objects bring contrasts with the elegant and conventional traditionality of the fashion show. Still, the idea of seduction and domination (fetish) is present through signs such as "high waist shorts", "eye blindfolds", or "jockstraps". This idea is related to the brand, as several elements that have the same meaning are used, which contributes to its characterization.

We can also see the existence of the concept of a "glamorous party" in this production, which is directly related to the advertising of this performance¹⁴. The construction of this message becomes clear through various signs, such as "party clothes", or "jewellery pieces". Alongside this, luxury and "glamour" can be seen through "jewellery studded with diamonds", "party clothes", or accessories ("bois" and "ostrich feathers"). Regarding monochromatic necklaces with large beads (see the sign "bead necklace"), their meaning seems dispersed and their choice in the decontextualized production of the main narrative, becoming just an ornament. However, we see a recurrence of the necklaces in various pieces of clothing, which indicates a daring environment. Along with this, we are facing a moment where celebrities are praised that have a symbolic correlation with the party represented by "Jane Birkin" and "Janis Joplin" signs¹⁵). The architectural space that embraces performance is "Le Palace", a house with a historical reputation and which becomes a place of fun and entertainment. The idea of "party", "freedom" and "elitism" is articulated with the "class" and "nostalgia" of the golden times at Le Palace, underlying historical icons (see the signs "bois" and "feathers") and extolling space as a place of past narratives. This melancholy is even transferred to the production through elements that identify Gucci's history and contextualize it, such as the "Gucci stripes" and the "diamond pattern" (5th. brand element). These signs remain unchanged and consolidate an identity charged with cultural heritage.

¹² Available at https://youtu.be/K3_kN6VjAXg.

¹³ Alessandro Michele mentions the following: "I feel very close to the concept of intermixing beautiful things, between high and low culture" when referring to the SS 2019 collection (see www.gucci.com/us/en/st/stories/runway/article/spring-summer-2019-details).

¹⁴ See the "Gucci Showtime" campaign available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNxp0thmvbI&t=52s.

¹⁵ See Gucci's official Instagram: www.instagram.com/p/BoHuZe1HtBs/.

In the diachronic scope, the brand represents ideas that hover around the concepts of “bondage” (sign “eye blindfold”) and “surrealism” (signs “mala-Mickey”, “strawberry pattern” and “pig pin”). These are elements that build the brand’s collective imagination today. We must be aware that there is a continuous attempt to crystallize these ideas and build an image that communicates the respective messages, but that is still under development. Still, and regarding the “brand heritage”, we can observe a set of sign patterns that are repeated throughout the individual narratives (the fashion shows) and in a broad context (the various communication objects). The elements that are part of this historical and identity construction are, for example, the “Gucci stripes” or the “diamond pattern”. The presence of these elements allows the stabilization of the brand’s roots (“riding”) and transfigures a coherent image of Gucci throughout its cultural production (anchor elements for the recognition of the insignia).

In the synchronic scope, the signs that make up the symbolic structure of this production have an emblematic component that allows its framing and the construction of narratives. We see, for example, the idea of “party” and “glamour” that are represented through a set of signs such as “*bois*”, “jewels studded with brilliants”, “feathers”, or “celebrities” (Janis Joplin and Dolly Parton). These symbols also contextualize the fashion show and do not allow us to understand the narrative outside this context, that is, they are not identifiers of the brand, but of this production (the concept of this fashion show).

*Gucci Fall Winter 2018*¹⁶

The connotative meanings that guide this fashion show are present in the set of signs that make up this cultural production and are presented in different ways. It is worth noting that the concepts of “identity” and “identity malleability” seem to be the core of this production. This can be verified through the signs that refer to the metamorphosis of the subjects’ expression of identity (signs “operating room”; “chameleon” and “androgen model”). The liberation of identities underlines the importance of emancipation from the traditional canons of fashion (male *versus* female), of individual choices (sign “mask”) and highlights the need to have symbolic anchors that guide the creation of narratives contextualized in time. This approach of cultural representation in the fashion show allows us to identify different narratives that are exalted with the idea of “excess”, present in the various accessories that make up the symbolic framework (signs “necklace with beads” and “shiny accessories”). We can also observe that the use of animals enables the symbiotic relationships of the brand with its history and identity, as is the case of the sign “snake” or the sign “chameleon”. This first is part of one of Gucci’s (dated) graphic brands and connotes the message of intrigue and glamour associated with fashion, reinforcing an old identity element of the brand. The second, in turn, is related to the identity changes and adaptations of individuals, an idea present in this parade (see the signs “androgyny” and “operating room”).

Within the scope of subject identification, the construction of identity cards is also born out of fashion, which makes this parallelism relevant (signs “*manga* characters” and

¹⁶ Available at <https://youtu.be/rTiziX53Czc>.

“operating room”). The narratives that transcribe various cultures and are underlined using very striking adornments that have a clear inspiration in cinematographic media, and even in brands - objects of high significance (signs “dragon”, “*manga* character”, “Paramount logo” and “New York Yankees logo”).

When it comes to diachrony, the various elements that make up this complex narrative have no relevance to building a visually impactful brand. However, we must pay attention to two points of interest. One, regarding the use of cultural elements that serve as symbolic anchors that continuously highlight the brand’s imagery and representations (historical representations). This highlights the cultural and symbolic heritage of the brand (signs “horse-bits”, “Gucci pattern” and “Gucci stripes”), as previously mentioned in other analyses. We must also underline the existence of narratives dense in meaning (complexity) and without a delineated logic.

In the synchronic scope, the various elements presented in this production are essential in building the fashion show cultural expression. They touch on several key points related to Alessandro Michele’s artistic creation. We highlight the scenic stage (the “operating room”), the “masks”, the “androgyny”, and the “chameleon” (and their relationships with the construction of identity). At the same time, the set of all elements transposes complex messages, such as “excess” (signs “bead necklaces” or “shiny accessories”) and narratives anchored in different cultures (visible in the signs “hat with Chinese roof shape”, “Paramount graphic stretcher print” and “New York Yankees logo”, among others). In this way, this cluster of signs draws the narrative of this cultural production, contributing to the development of an individualized concept.

*Gucci Spring Summer 2018*¹⁷

Regarding the connotative message of this fashion show, the representations of excess through ornamentation (signs “bead necklace” or “bone necklace”), together with signs that represent glamour, such as “shining props” or “golden gloves”, represent the concepts of “joy” and “party”. The ornaments are related to Michele’s aesthetic. Even though these do not fully correlate with the narratives that are expressed in the show, they are constructions that show the ‘symbolic excess’ that guides the brand. Still, we see traces of surrealism, which is seen as a broad concept. At the same time, this show embraces other ideas such as “bondage” (sign “choker”) or “childhood” (signs “Snow White”, “Bugs Bunny” or “embroidery bunny”). The “classic statue” that is at the centre of the runway stage enhances a historical perspective that is mirrored in the brand¹⁸ as a symbol of classical culture. This concept is also associated with the idea of “nostalgia”, represented by symbols such as the “vintage Gucci logo” or the “heart-shaped glasses”. This multiplicity of meanings reveals that the message conveyed through this production is complex and indicates that the identity

¹⁷ Available at <https://youtu.be/uTmrV8JnntY>.

¹⁸ The multiplicity of approaches that Gucci has taken lead to a new creative direction on the part of Alessandro Michele as referred to at <https://www.vogue.com/article/gucci-alessandro-michele-interview-may-2019-issue>.

construction of the brand is still under the definition, as there is no established theme in its fullness and the set of concepts that guide this production is vast.

In the diachronic context, Gucci makes use of various elements that represent it and shapes it, such as the signs “horse-bits”, “Gucci stripes”, “Gucci pattern” or the “starboard buckle”. These signs also have the function of building symbolic anchors that continuously highlight the brand’s imagery and representations (historically), praising the cultural and symbolic heritage. Along with this, we can observe that the concept of “bondage” is present in this cultural production. It should be noted that this has been highlighted within Gucci creations. Thus, the symbolic construction that guides the brand tends to be guided by some signs that anchor ideas and Gucci’s communication. From a synchronic perspective, this fashion show is structured through a set of signs that make up a complex network. This means that, uniquely, these elements do not represent the brand and given its complexity, hardly the concept of the fashion show. However, it should be noted that they can construct a web of messages that structures the complex narrative that characterizes the brand.

Gucci Fall Winter 2017¹⁹

Concerning the connotative elements that are present in this fashion show, they evidence messages such as “fantasy” or “surrealism”, represented by signs such as “nose piercing”, “spear” or “black pyramid”²⁰. These concepts are manifested in various moments of brand communication and in this production. The same happens with the 5th. Element of the brand (which takes shape through the signs “diamond pattern”; “Gucci stripes”; “Gucci monogram” and “horse-bits”) and with the concept of “extravagance” (represented by signs such as “shiny glasses” and the “pattern” snake”). It is possible to observe (with less evidence than in other shows) the approach to the idea of “bondage”, which is represented by the sign “choker” and the concept of “gender”, which in this case is worked through the sign “hood transparent with sparkles”. The main concept that guides this parade is defined by “The Alchemist Garden”. This is represented both by an abundance of flower patterns on the garments, and through messages present in signs such as the “dress of white roses”, the “flower basket” or the “butterfly print”. According to the brand, this concept is born through the creation of a set of fragrances²¹ developed exclusively by Alessandro Michele, which are articulated with the concept of “garden” (see signs “dress with white flowers” and “butterflies props”).

¹⁹ Available at <https://youtu.be/ydWM9nxtn3c>.

²⁰ About the black pyramid, Vogue International mentions the following: “Behind them was a giant set of a black pyramid, topped with a weathervane. The Strands of Michele’s taste for surreal, occult-tinged symbolism are hard to fathom. He likes to throw things off, here and there – this time, by encasing some looks in sparkling crystal bodysuits, faces and all. Not that it really matters” (<https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2017-ready-to-wear/gucci>).

²¹ See the official website: https://www.gucci.com/pt/en_gb/st/stories/runway/article/fall-winter-fashion-show-2017-18-details-w.

In the diachronic scope, this show has an impact on the fashion sector as it is the first Gucci show to unite male and female shows in a concept of “unified show”²², which breaks with the structural tradition of the shows. At the same time, he represents the complex world and the multitude of meanings that are imprinted on the production (which has been happening since Alessandro Michele joined the brand as creative director). This type of representation consolidates the brand’s history, as it weaves a blanket of meanings that help build Gucci’s conceptual universe. However, even with the existence of a large set of signs with complex meanings, we see the existence of elements that are present to enhance the identity and heritage of the brand, such as the “diamond pattern”; the “Gucci stripes”; of the “Gucci monogram” and the “horse-bits”. These elements evoke history and allow to build the myth of riding that accompanies Gucci. About the synchronic extension, it should be noted that Alessandro Michele’s personal taste guided the creation of the various texts in this production²³. These intimate representations impact the creation of a complex narrative in meanings. Despite this, on the official website that promotes this show, we see the creation of a cohesive narrative that highlights the Alchemist Garden²⁴ as a conceptual unit that brings cohesion to this production.

Results

Through the diachronic analysis, we can observe that the represented mentalities describe the invisible cultural layer, that is, the sociocultural dynamics that contextualize Gucci (the brand mindset) over time. In communicating with this audience, Gucci uses, for example, narratives with broad meanings, such as ‘mythology’ (FW2019) and ‘social criticism’, related to contemporary problems (mental health or gender issues; see the shows FW2018 and SS2020 analysis). Given the speed of information today, the concepts that inhabit fashion shows also change quickly. The ornaments and details in clothing and accessories are elements that undergo constant changes both in their form and in their meanings. This indicates a malleable nature on the part of Gucci and how it is a brand capable of adapting to cultural moments and stimuli. We see that Gucci is a representation of excess both in terms of the brand’s visuality and the plurality of meanings it uses to communicate. The abundance of representations in the brand reflects the power of irreverence, see the issues of excess in the size and quantity of jewellery pieces (SS2018), in the design of various props (FW2017; SS2018), in the game of patterns and details in the clothing (FW2017) and the excess of narratives worked simultaneously in the various fashion shows.

²² About this show, Vogue International mentions the following: “Gucci announced today that it will combine its men’s and women’s runway shows into a single presentation, beginning with the Fall 2017 collections” (<https://www.vogue.com/article/gucci-unify-mens-womens-runway-show>).

²³ About this production, the author refers to the following: “It’s a big trip in my personal garden which is mine but also Gucci’s, and it expresses all the ideas of me, all of my obsessions” (www.gucci.com/pt/en_gb/st/stories/runway/article/fall-winter-fashion-show-2017-18-details-w).

²⁴ See the official website of the Alchemist Garden production (www.gucci.com/pt/en_gb/st/stories/runway/article/fall-winter-fashion-show-2017-18-details-w).

The brand communicates between extremes: it adopts a classic style and maintains coherence between the clothing, and at the same time it composes a complex and decontextualized symbolic framework that breaks with the brand's discourse. The idea of 'plurality of concepts' ends up representing Gucci. We see it both at the level of the plurality of concepts forementioned, as well as the vast number of stories that cross high culture signs with popular culture signs (SS2019; FW2019; FW2018; SS2018; FW2017). The symbolic codes that represent Gucci and circumscribe trends can be seen through the 5th. brand element. It serves as a 'symbolic anchor' for everything Gucci stands for and for its memory and cultural heritage. These elements also stand out, as it strengthens Gucci's visual identity and consolidates values and meanings that build the brand's imagery, positioning it in a visually saturated market. On these issues, we can also notice how the disruption of 'traditionality' in the fashion system is addressed through bold narratives (such as the 'bondage' in fashion shows SS2020; SS2019; FW2019; SS2018; FW2017) or the deconstruction of high culture (SS2020; FW2018). Gucci is characterized by the preformistic narratives that reflect the experiences of everyday life (SS2019) and individual choices (SS2020; SS2019; FW2019 and FW2017). The brand's aesthetic (as an element of representation of its identity) is changeable. Finally, we can also glimpse the portrait of various cultures and times through signs from various places, such as Paris (SS2019) or Hollywood (SS2019).

We can see that Gucci is a brand that expresses itself in a spontaneous and irreverent way. The various concepts present in the fashion shows are unusual and the brand communicates with a high connotative density. This plastic style is the reflection of a society in constant flux of transformation and fashion accompanies this phenomenon. The idea related to Hypermodernity (Lipovetsky, 2004) seems to emerge as an explanation for the 'fast' cultural speed that guides concepts and to explain the excesses that are present at various times, both in terms of material culture and meanings. Mindsets at Gucci fluctuate. This means that we have a brand that is malleable and responds to culture with relative fluidity. Nevertheless, it owns and cherishes its classic symbols like the horse-bit, the colours green and red, and the monogram prints. In this way, Gucci imprints these elements on its fashion image. Regarding Gucci's participation in the field of collective ideas, the brand has a great capacity to adapt to sociocultural flows, as it manages to maintain a diversified communication. In short, we see an identity that enhances the characteristics of the environment more clearly, making this brand an excellent object of study to understand the mindset that makes up the changing cultural fabric, a reflection of today.

Conclusions

Having the notion that fashion is not just the object of clothing, this research studied it as a system of socio-cultural manifestations. On one hand, fashion represents society through material culture and social practices, on the other, it is a complex field where meanings roam, forming a favourable place for cultural communication. By studying unified fashion shows we can understand plural representation practices and their dissemination in the social strata. In this sense, we were able to analyse culture through material and immaterial representations latent in the cultural production in question.

In the applied item of this investigation, the fashion shows were selected as an object of study given their relevance in the context of the presented themes. The runway has always presented itself as a channel of symbolic exchange, that is, as a mediator of meanings between material culture and the individuals of society. We were able to recognise the role of semiotics as a method for interpreting meanings, the possibilities for studying patterns of meaning and the creation of a cultural understanding that explains the brand's culture and narratives. This research brought contributions at the level of innovative analysis of the object of study. This proposal for articulating semiotics and fashion shows, according to the gaps in literature, contributes to the understanding of fashion expressions and their meanings. As we saw in Barry (2017), catwalk studies deserve a greater emphasis and an attempt was made to enhance this typology of cultural production, which is a stimulus for further research to follow. Specifically, this research helped to understand the phenomenon of unified fashion shows in the Gucci brand; to understand how meanings in fashion production reflect the culturally constituted world and how this impacts the way brands express themselves. About Gucci, as an object of study, it is emphasized that it stands out in the context of representations and the creation of mindsets given its expressiveness and irreverence.

The main limitation of this work was related to the extension of the case study. Because fashion show is a dynamic and long (time duration) communication object, this makes the analysis more complex than static communication pieces. This analysis can be performed in other brands, to better understand the cultural production in the sector. We also encourage the study of unified fashion shows for other brands, to decode more meaning behind them. Further investigation can be undertaken to explore other types of fashion shows, for instance, menswear or womenswear. It will provide more conclusions regarding this typology of fashion show.

The post-pandemic scenario (Covid-19) must also be studied so that meanings can be compared and mapped and the impact of the pandemic on Gucci and its. Finally, the analysis of different objects and media is also something to be considered, such as commercials, fashion films or social networks, as this may contribute to new interpretations of brands, their relationship with semiotics and as a possibility of study communication in fashion largely.

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