Values underlying the consumption of perfume:

Social-semiotic approach

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7th International Marketing Trends Congress

ESCP-EAP Paris and University Ca' Foscari Venezia.

Abstract

This study aims to better understand what lies beneath our shopping and consumption habits of luxury products. We have tried to understand how the different messages about perfumes (as a luxury product) could be organised to build a consonant discourse with the different kinds of consumer expectations. It is based on interviews with perfume consumers, which build the *corpus* of a social-semiotic analysis.

Key words

Luxury, perfume, semiotics, consumption expectation, consumption values

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The luxury market, of little economical importance mid past century, has evolved, accordingly to BOSTON CONSULTING GROUP, into a market of over 400 billion American dollars, and is expected to reach the trillion American dollar mark at the end of this decade (Meyers, 2004). Although the actual dimension of luxury cannot be measured, given its inaccurate limits, it is believed, according to the data from the COLBERT COMMITTEE,[4] that the recent growth in sales is moderate (Roux, to be publicised in 2007), and that the market is still suffering from the poor performance of European countries.

The act of buying and/or using luxury products has a meaning, since it goes beyond the tangible uses the product category has to offer, and the consumption of luxury products is frequently motivated by what they symbolise, representing one of the most elaborate forms of expressing the values of each individual. The symbolism behind the act of buying and using a luxury product is the common element that makes it possible to talk about a luxury market, despite the great heterogeneity among products and services that build it (Falque, 2005).

Thus, luxury is, based on research of semiotics and luxury developed by Elyette Roux (Dano & al., 2003a, b; Letzelter & al., 1996; Lipovetsky and Roux, 2003; Roux, 1991, 1994, 2002a, b; Roux and Floch, 1996), the "articulation of an ethics, a vision of the world as a refusal of the whole economic and of an aesthetics, which recognises luxury, in its unique form of communicating an emotion by its coherence of meaning"[5] (Roux, 2002a, p. 6).

It is therefore important to have an insight of the consumption of the luxury brand in the point of view of its significance, a process by which it acquires and conveys meaning and differentiates itself from the regular product of the category in analysis, deepening the way in which it produces meaning for those who buy and use it. The luxury (products of its categories) is one of the areas in which, semiotics was effectively used several times, (Dano & al., 2003a, b; Letzelter & al., 1996; Lipovetsky and Roux, 2003; Roux, 2002a, b; Roux and Floch, 1996). Notwithstanding these works, there still seems to be a wider field within this theme where its use may reveal itself to be interesting.

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[4] The COLBERT COMMITTEE was founded in 1954 by fifteen luxury enterprises and gathers nowadays sixty nine.

[5] Original version: « articulation d'une éthique, vision du monde comme refus du tout économique, et d'une esthétique, ce à quoi le luxe est reconnu, dans sa façon unique de communiquer une émotion par la cohérence des sens ».

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This present work aims to, following the path already outlined by Dubois and Duquesne (1993), explore in depth which consumption values underlie the act of buying and using of perfumes, one of the most wide-spread luxury products categories[6]. We intend to present an interpretational model of structures of expectations and representations of consumers referring to that luxury product category, as well as the formal definition of discourses corresponding to those expectations, contributing to the comprehension of the luxury sector and of the processes inherent to the consumption of products that integrate it.

Following this line of thought, an empirical study was carried out with an exploratory purpose and a qualitative methodology, using, in its data analysis, tools developed by the Paris school structural semiotics. We tried to identify, through a semiotic study of the discourse from consumers, the structural correspondence between the wanted values (as logic of consumption) and their expectations related to a luxury products category (perfumes).

This analysis basis was the texts corresponding to the transcription of nineteen semi-structured interviews with perfume consumers. Each individual was asked to express his opinions and analyse his behaviours based on a reflection of his consumer habits[7]. The interviews were conducted between the 1st and the 16th September 2004, outside perfumeries in Lisbon and Porto, and a convenience sample of twenty three[8] consumers of products for their own use was used, maximizing the differences regarding the most common social demographic variables.

Projection of the values found in the semiotic square of consumption values

The analysis of the elements that reveal differences between the consumers' discourses has allowed us to detect two kinds of diverging discourses as far as the consumers' expectations are concerned:

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[6] Perfumes and cosmetics are one of the thirty five sectors identified by MCKINSEY in its study about luxury requested by the COLBERT COMMITTEE. It is one of the luxury product categories accepted by the CONFÉDÉRATION FRANÇAISE DÊS MÉTIERS D'ART (CFMA) and is certainly the one that most contributes to the "democratisation" of luxury, suggesting products that display signatures of prestige recognised by the whole world at affordable prices (Letzelter et al., 1996).

[7] The interview guide, as well as the sample details, is in Attachment 1.

[8] Four interviews were considered inconclusive.

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- The consumers who refer to the **values** they associate with the brand as a preponderant factor to the valuation they make of it. The reflection of personal characteristics or values on those of the brand is determinant in these discourses: "…I like this brand's style…"; "…I identify myself with the brand…";

- The consumers who refer to the level of the brand's diffusion or its status as a main guide to their choices by the **guarantee** they provide, show a practical and utilitarian point of view of the consumption of these products: "…that it is a known brand…"; "… I always try those I have seen on TV…".

By using the "generative process of signification", one reaches the deepest level of the consumers' discourse, where a structural correspondence between the consumers' expectations and the system underlying them is established. The semantic category we resorted to organise, at this deep level, the consumers' discourse identifies itself as "utilitarian values *vs.* existential values", widely used by Floch in several of his works and which can be represented by the semiotic square in picture 1. This category is considered to be a fundamental contribute of structural semiotics to its practical application to marketing, once it allows us to apprehend the very distinctive fields of the lives of brands, products, communications, etc.. It can even be seen as a "minimal grammar of positioning and segmentation of markets" (Heilbrunn and Hetzel, 2003, p. 22). The use of this category also reveals that the act of buying a perfume is not a thoughtless and inconsequent action, but is an entry into the brand's universe, subscribing to the values it conveys (Kneebone, 2002).
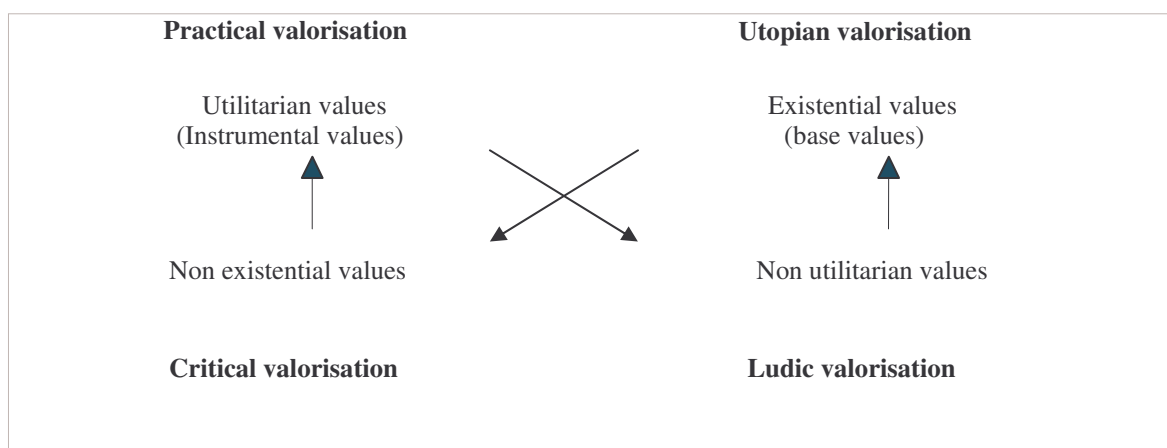
Picture 1: The "semiotic square" developed from the category "utilitarian values vs. existential values" (adapted from Floch, 2001, p. 120).

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The values presented on this "semiotic square" match the deep values sought by individuals in their consumption of products, building the fundamental orientations that sustain the consumers' evaluation, expectations and choices in relation to the products they buy and consume (Dano, 1994).

The projection of the values referred on the "semiotic square" reveals four valuations that, in Floch's works (1985, 1995, 2001), were defined in a more or less arbitrary way (and with some criticism to the used designations) as:

- **Practical** valorisation: corresponds to the values of use, conceived as opposing the existential ones, also possible to be designated as "utilitarian values" (Floch, 2001). Its aim is eminently concrete and utilitarian and the product will be appreciated for being practical, functional and adequate to its function;
- **Utopian** valorisation: corresponds to the basic values, conceived as opposing the practical ones, also possible to be designated as "existential values": identity, life, adventure, etc. (Floch, 2001). According to this valorisation, the product will always be the accomplishment of something, touching expectations such as self-fulfilment or identification;
- **Ludic** valorisation: corresponds to the denial of practical valorisation and centres itself on values of gratuitousness (of pleasure or aesthetic) such as luxury, refinement, impulsive act or "small act of madness" (Floch, 2001, p. 120). It lays at an emotional and sensorial level, the product having to provide pleasure, amusement;
- **Critical** valorisation: corresponds to the denial of the utopian valorisation, seen as a withdrawal from the existential values through the logic of calculation and interest, characterised by separation and comparison (Floch, 2001). Quality/price, economy, innovation/cost will be important criteria, frequent in critical evaluation.

The positioning of these valorisations in the "semiotic square" allows one to obtain a typology of the relative positions and, even more importantly, of its relationships.

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Virtual semiotic typology of consumers

Using semi-structured interviews the consumer was able to openly express what he/she looks for in perfume consumption and why his choice was oriented for one brand and not another.

Separating the consumer's discourse in signifying expressions (units) it was possible to detect the unchanging themes to all the discourses from those that showed differences. In the latter the importance of the brand, the experimentation criteria (the way the brand is known), the recognition of the brand used by others and the values associated to the brand are constantly present. Using these topics it was possible to group the consumers with similar significant units, and enabled us to recognize different consumer groups generated by the different expected values in the perfume consumption[9].

According to what the consumers favour in their discourses, one can recognise different groups of consumers, assumed by the different values expected in the consumption of perfumes.

The "semiotic square" that illustrates the exposed valuations and, therefore, the axiology (seen as paradigmatic, according to the relations "either… or…" among the valuations) of perfume consumption is patent on picture 2. The terms of designation of groups are identical to those used by Floch (2001), once they illustrate the wanted values.

Knowing beforehand the difficulty of reaching the true values given their frequently aspirational character, the analysis was complemented with parallel interviews on a group of eight perfume advisors. They were asked to classify the consumers they normally served in homogeneous groups on consumption motivations, in order to verify if there was any group quoted that could not be identified with the ones found in the consumer's interviews, or vice-versa. This analysis confirmed the typology found[10].

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[9] The consumers grouping, following these themes and the "semiotic square" of consumption values, can be found in Attachment 2.

[10] These interviews results summary can be seen in Attachment 3.

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THE PRACTICAL CONSUMERS	**THE UTOPIAN CONSUMERS**
Concrete and utilitarian aim	Identification with the brand and
Product wanted for being adequate	its values
to the function, for granting status	Personal fulfilment
Efficacy	Life values

TYPE I	TYPE II
Guarantee given by the media, what they see on TV	Guarantee given by the brand, the brand they recognise

Utilitarian values   **Existential values**

Non-existential values   **Non-utilitarian values**

THE CRITICAL CONSUMER	**THE LUDIC CONSUMER**
Price comparison	Emotion and feeling
Quality/price relationship	Source of pleasure, distraction and
Economy	amusement
	Consumers search for attributes and
	with these, the brands they associate
	to them

Picture 2: Consumers' semiotic typology (adapted from Floch, 2001, p. 120)

Analysing further:

- The perfumes sought "only" to fulfil their function (which includes the act of conferring status) reveal a **practical** consumer, who looks for a "fragrance that he/she likes", without taking risks with the brands or the smell he chooses (he doesn't intend to distinguish himself by the smell or the brand). There is a clear search for guarantee. Although no consumer in this group reveals knowledge as to which values the brands they consume intend to convey, one can distinguish between two groups: **type I**, the **unstable consumer**, who frequently changes brand, accordingly to the brand that momentarily detains a more massive presence on the media, namely television, which serves as a guarantee for the choice and stimulates change; **type II**, the **stable consumer**, who doesn't want to change brand and, therefore, contents himself with one which assures the fulfilment of the function by its great remarkableness;

- The **utopian** consumer searches for well-being, status, identification with the brand. He considers perfume as a picture of a person's identity. They don't change   brand very often within a restricted group and they express a profound knowledge of the several categories of product of the brand and the values it intends to convey, identifying themselves with them (especially with quality). He parts from brands that are excessively divulged on the media, but appreciates the recognition of the brands he uses by people that he appreciates;

- The **critical** consumer searches for perfumes that, having a pleasant smell to him, have a low price level. It is about finding the perfect solution, the good quality/price relationship without overrating the brand (ignoring what it intends to convey). They are influenced neither by media nor by the acknowledgement of the brand he wears by others, never searching for a distinctive smell.

- Perfumes assumed as refinement are no more than the denial of a valuation managed by the utility. It doesn't mean that they are not useful, just that it isn't the utility that gives them the value. The consumer is **ludic** and gives the brand the values he intends to obtain for himself with the use (he mentions these values through personal characteristics such as sensuality or narcissism), being the acknowledgement by others of a "strictly his" smell and the search for pleasure the main choice factors.

Definition of the typical consumers' discourses

The description of the different groups of consumers can be done, according to Dano (1994), by means of three elements which correspond to the visible and/or manifested side of the wanted consumption values, because the values of consumption, being guidelines of difficult expression and that imply judgements, choice criteria, personal opinions, etc., cannot be directly used in that description. The three elements used by Dano are evaluation or judgement by the consumer in relation to the product he uses, the choice criteria that serves as a reference in his buying decision (or not) and the reference framework on which the product applies itself on the consumer's spirit. Note that these elements allow the revealing of the differences between the consumers' discourses, the varying elements, leaving out what is constant of the analysis. In picture 3 one can find a shortened description acquired of the five groups.

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	FEATURES OF VALUE MANIFESTATION		
	Reference framework	**Choice criteria**	**Judgement**
Practical unstable consumers	Guarantee of being considered "in fashion"	The most famous brand at the moment, which gives them the wanted guarantee	Good fragrance, the most famous at the moment
Practical stable consumers	Guarantee of being accepted in their social environment	Recognised brand in the sector, to which they remain faithful and which gives them the wanted guarantee	Good fragrance, of a famous brand
Utopian consumers	Symbol of status and social identification, reflects the life values	Greatest quality in brands that assure the same values they assume for their life	The best one, that makes them feel better about themselves
Critical consumers	Hygiene product that makes one smell better	Quality/price relationship	Best quality/price relationship that conveniently fulfils its function
Ludic consumers	Source of emotion, of feelings of pleasure and amusement	Fragrance that identifies and distinguishes them, with smells associated to characteristics they intend for them	Perfume that best characterises them, a "strictly his" smell

(The leftmost rotated label reads: CONSUMERS GROUPS)

Picture 3: Qualitative description of the consumers' groups from semiotic classification

For the **practical unstable consumers** perfume is a useful and necessary product, which gives the guarantee of smelling good and of being considered "in fashion" (reference framework), they search for that guarantee through the brand which is momentarily the most present in the media, changing at the pace that presence also changes (choice criteria) and judge their perfume as having a good fragrance, of recognised efficacy (judgement).

For the **practical stable consumers** perfume is a useful and necessary product, which gives them the guarantee of smelling good and of being accepted in their social environment (reference framework), they search for that guarantee in a recognised brand in the sector, to which they remain faithful so that they won't take unnecessary risks (choice criteria) and judge their perfume as having a good fragrance, of recognised efficacy (judgement).

The **utopian consumers** see the perfume as a symbol of status and personal identification, reflection of the life values (reference framework), they choose products of brands which

present values that they appreciate and favour quality (choice criteria), thus considering the perfumes they wear as being the ones of the highest quality and, therefore, make themselves feel well in themselves (judgement).

To the **critical consumers** perfume is seen as a product of hygiene that makes one smell better (reference framework), that they seek by the best quality/price relationship (choice criteria) and consider their perfume as the one that presents the best quality/price relationship, conveniently carrying out their function (judgement).

The **ludic consumers** see perfume as a source of emotion, feelings of pleasure and amusement (reference framework), choosing those that distinguish them and present smells they associate with characteristics they want for themselves (choice criteria) and judge their perfume as the one that best characterises and distinguishes them from others (judgement).

Conclusion

The differences among the discourses allowed the grouping of consumers into five groups with different valuations, thus enabling us to propose a virtual typology of consumers and define a typical discourse corresponding to each group. In this study we found several practical stable and unstable, utopian and ludic consumers. Nevertheless, the number of critical consumers found was low, which can reveal that the values conducting their perfume consumption, mainly focused in price, may be contrary to the luxury essence itself.

At a methodological level, this study is a proof of the interest in using the tools of structural semiotics in the exploratory analysis, by deepening the meaning that perfume as a luxury product cause on consumers. The definition of a typology can be a strong contribution to the analysis and definition of the luxury brands' positioning. In the sequence of other semiotic studies, this work also contributes to the recognition of the category utilitarian values *vs.* existential values as structuring of the expectations and representations of consumers in relation to luxury, allowing one to propose the wanted consumption values as criteria of consumers' segmentation.

At the level of practical application, this typology may be an important element, adding up to or replacing the conventional segmentation variables, in the luxury brand management. This work may guide the different marketing mix elements conception, as it identifies and characterize the way each group's consumption values reveal themselves, in order to make them more appealing to the consumers group the brand wishes to target.

The dimension of this analysis, whether for its interviews number and type, or for the reduction of its focus to perfumes (only one product category), is a clear limitation to the results' interpretation and generalisation of both results and conclusions.

In a further development of this study it would be interesting to validate quantitatively the virtual qualitative typology of consumers proposed here.

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Appendix 1: Study's methodology

Guide for the interview about buying and consuming perfumes for self use:

- Buying process
- Expected functions from the perfume
- Periods of consumption
- Brands used
- Values given to the used brands
- Spontaneous associations to the category of products and/or used brands
- Chronological consumption evolution

Data collection

- 23 semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 20 minutes were carried out on consumers of perfume, between the 1st and 16th September 2004 in Lisbon and Oporto. Gift buying was left aside, as well as individuals that hadn't bought a perfume for over 18 months.
- Projection techniques were used as a way to avoid deviations by reasons of personal or cultural nature

Sample

Respondent	Gender	Age	Education	Profession
A	F	26	graduation	managing assistant
B	F	25	graduation	teacher
C	F	25	graduation	unemployed
D	F	27	graduation	lawyer
E	F	32	MBA	marketing director
F	F	29	graduation	customer support coordinator
G	F	27	12th grade	student
H	M	61	graduation	company administrator
I	F	31	graduation	saleswoman
J	F	36	graduation	manager
K	F	48	9th grade	housewife
L	M	26	graduation	asset manager
M	F	49	middle course	commercial assistant
N	F	39	11th grade	marketing assistant
O	F	25	12th grade	student

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P	F	42	graduation	teacher
Q	F	30	12th grade	administration assistant
R	F	48	11th grade	secretary
S	F	37	doctorate	physician
T	F	60	9th grade	housewife
U	F	31	graduation	commercial director
V	F	53	11th grade	housewife
X	M	34	post-graduate	dentist

Attachment 2: Consumer interviews structural analysis summary schema representation, based in the "semiotic square" of consumption values

2 groups

	J	P	D	F	S	K	N
Brand	changes a lot	changes a lot	changes a lot	changes a lot	faithful	faithful	faithful
Influence	high	very high	very high	high	average	average/high	average
Recognition	___	___	___	___	___	___	___
Values	fragrance (do not mention brand values)	fragrance (do not mention brand values)	fragrance (do not mention brand values)	fragrance (do not mention brand values)	fragrance (do not mention brand values)	fragrance (do not mention brand values)	fragrance (do not mention brand values)

	U	V	X	E	O
Brand	few changes	few changes	few changes	few changes	few changes
Influence	low	low	low	low	___
Recognition	low profile	low profile	average	average	___
Values	quality, soberness, elegance (brand values mentioned)	quality, simplicity (brand values mentioned)	quality, low profile, originality, security (brand values mentioned)	quality, guarantee, elegance, soberness (brand values mentioned)	modernity, soberness, humor (brand values mentioned)

PRACTICAL   UTOPIAN

CRITICAL   LUDIC

	A	B
Brand	faithful	faithful
Influence	low	low
Recognition	___	___
Values	fragrance and price (do not mention brand values)	fragrance and quality/price ratio (do not mention brand values)

	C	M	T	I
Brand	changes a lot	changes a lot	changes a lot	few changes
Influence	average/high	average	average	___
Recognition	very important	little impotance	very important	very important
Values	irresistible (self values mentioned)	narcissist (self values mentioned)	charm (self values mentioned)	modernity (self values mentioned)

Attachment 3: Perfume advisors interview results summary

Beauty advisor	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8	Frequency		Most frequent questions
Practical				
unstable	x x x x x x x x	8	100%	"Show me the novelties", "I want to try the one I saw on TV", "Which is the top seller?"
stable	x x x	3	38%	"I want the usual, I already know what I like"
Critical	x x x x	4	50%	"I like A and B. I'm looking for a similar product but cheaper", "I want to try a not expensive perfume"
Ludic	x x x x x x x x	8	100%	"I would like a perfume that makes me feel…"
Utopian	x x x x x	5	63%	"I want a perfume of the brand X" (they won´t even accept to try a fragrance of a very media exposed brand"