

THE IMPORTANCE OF ICONICITY IN THE LUXURY WATCHES INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

Carefully observing the universe of emblematical fashionable products (gadgets, jewelry, watches, cars etc.) that we are surrounded by in our daily life and within society, it is obvious that top brands use and maintain design patterns that guarantee the continuity of product recognition amongst consumers. The iPhone, the Coca-Cola bottle, the Fiat 500 model, the Rolex watches are proof that the iconicity, the successful design of some products over time are the result of the merger between marketing and the semiotics domain with the aim of creating unmistakably recognizable objects at the global level, perceived and valued in a similar manner by consumers, regardless of people's culture and national origin or geographical area. By conducting a detailed study amongst the most prestigious brands of luxury watches, we have noticed that graphic shapes, materials, symbols, suggestions/ideas, true connotations chains at a semiotic level are often used to define product design and to build the brand identity, elements that manage to precisely individualize the positioning of these products on the market.

Keywords: iconicity, object semiotics, brand identity.

Many of my interlocutors ask me oftentimes what the tangible and practical side of semiotics is in the context of modern communication and the contemporary society, generally speaking. Nowadays people wish to only learn and absorb practical things that can be immediately applied in their professional or personal life. To a certain extent, the mercantilism which is imposed by the consumption society will eliminate, although never fully, the less palpable universe of the theoretical or philosophical ideas. And I have pondered over this question, I have scanned the universe of advertising and the universe of fashion while attempting to identify the way in which theoretical semiotics can generate and influence the way in which cultural assets – and not only – can be used.

As I was looking for answers to these questions, I realized that most commercial hits – for instance the Fiat 500 that had been originally launched in the

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50s and 60s became an iconic vehicle, which was quite exponential to the entire history of the automobile – rely on iconicity as Charles S. Pierce defined it. The reinterpretation of the Fiat 500 that was launched in 2007 confirms in a conspicuous manner that the car manufacturer could not have launched the modern remake of the old Fiat 500 without preserving elements of design and volumetrics that were able to generate a relationship of resemblance/iconicity between the current model and the original one. From a semiotic point of view, there is strong motivation of iconicity between the two car versions, the vintage one and the modern one, since the resemblance is obvious and not reliant on suggestion or allusive aesthetic expression alone.



Photo 1

www.eu.usatoday.com

Looking into and scrutinizing various areas of contemporary industries, I have realized that this sort of iconic construction in which recent products preserve a host of structural and design elements of some successful products of the past is mostly to be seen in the industry of luxury watches. We could say that a sort of creative self-plagiarism does exist in terms of design.

Moreover, I consider that in this permanent return to the past and tradition, the luxury watches industry positions itself in a manner which is different from any other manufacturing industries, even imposing on itself to use in the construction of the relevant brands the iconic features of the past commercial hits that have been preserved and reused. Consequently, in a totally peculiar manner, we may say that the industry of the luxury watches may not exist and may not develop in the absence of the construction and use of the theoretical and analysis features that semiotics places at our disposal.

And since we are talking about icons and iconicity, I need to bring up the theory of iconicity in order to avoid any bias. As Pierce would put it, “an icon

involves a resemblance with its object (photos or onomatopœia as icons of the speech)”. (Drăgan, 2007: 207, the author’s translation)

According to Daniela Roventă-Frumușani, an author who looked into Pierce’s theory and classifications, “an icon refers to its object based on some analogy and on the fact that its features match those of the object to a certain extent”. (Roventă-Frumușani, 1999: 87, the author’s translation)

It is obvious that any usage of an old model to which reference is made through an old model in industry or fashion relies on the semiotic principle of iconicity that I explained above.

I would also like to bring up the definition that semiotician Thomas Sebeok established for iconicity: “A sign is said to be iconic when there is a topological similarity between a signifier and its denotata.” (Sebeok, 2002: 73, the author’s translation)

Analyzing the universe of the luxury watch industry, we will note that the most famous brands, such as Rolex, Patek Philippe, Audemars Piguet, or Breitling, to name a few, launched decades back successful watch models that were quite representative and whose shape and compositional structure have survived the time and turned into iconic models that can still be found on the relevant markets.

One of the models that became commercial hits was the Rolex Submariner, which was launched in 1953, according to Rolex’ official website; it was the very first waterproof watch, especially designed for divers who were able to use it as far deep as 100 m. In the meantime, as you could notice in the photos below, the structural and design changes that one could notice on the two models, the original one of 1953 and the current one, as relatively insignificant.



Photo 2

www.rolex.com (model from 1953)



Photo 3

www.rolex.com (current model)

Also in the case of the other above-mentioned watch brands, we will find an approach that is similar to the one of the house of Rolex: the Nautilus model (the Patek Philippe), Royal Oak (from Audemars Piguet) or Breitling’s Navitimer that were launched between the 50s and the 70s have preserved their design and engineering over the decades, with some variations though that are quite difficult to

spot. We need to clarify that these examples are just some of the host of examples that one could see by looking into the current spectrum of this particular industry.

We will also note that the universe of this sort of watch is built identity-wise based on images and values of the hegemonic sort that focus exclusively on the male public, suggesting connotations and symbols that are strictly associated to the areas of interest, activities and professions in which only men used to take interest in the past. Even though these brands do sell women's watches too, they are actually resized versions of the men's watches whose iconic design they fully preserve.

Unavoidably, the symbolic construction of the most representative brands of the watchmaking industry relies intrinsically on semiotic values and elements that I will try to present and deconstruct in the upcoming paragraphs.

I was writing above that the high-end watchmaking industry involves a hegemonic construction. The idea starts from the very definition of hegemony, which is a concept that Gramsci developed back in the 30s and that has been used in cultural studies too; he mostly referred to the ability in certain historical periods of the dominant classes to exercise social and cultural leadership, and by these means – rather than by direct coercion of social classes – to maintain their power over the economic, political and cultural direction over the nation. (O'Sullivan et al. 2001: 160, the author's translation)

The high-end watchmaking industry is almost exclusively focusing on men who earn above-average incomes who will use watches as statements of their social standing. We may say watches have become genuinely ideological elements which men use to state their supremacy. This idea of using luxury watches to showcase somebody's ideology could also be supported by the findings of the research team that authored *Concepte fundamentale din Științele Comunicării și Studiile Culturale (Key Concepts in Communication and Cultural Studies)*; according to the quoted researchers, "[...] hegemony naturalizes what is historically a class ideology and renders it into the form of common sense". (O'Sullivan et al., 2001: 161, author's translation)

Therefore, we may infer that we are being persuaded and educated through the advertising campaigns and through the messages which the media send across so that we have developed the belief that watches are no longer timekeeping devices *per se*, but genuine statements of one's social statement and of the holder's relationship with other members of the society.

Following up on the above-mentioned idea that the identity development of brands is unavoidably associated to the traditionally male-related areas of interest, we may notice that the logos of the leading brands that dominate the luxury watches industry are mostly correlated to elements suggesting masculinity. In the case of Rolex, the logo is a crown, a symbol which is unavoidably associated to the universal history of royalty, which is mostly represented by male archetypes. Also in the case of Patek Philippe, the main element of the logo is a stylized symbol that

reminds us of the heraldry of the crusading knights of the Order of Calatrava, therefore the traditionally historical connection that refers to an exclusively male area is quite conspicuous.



Photo 4

www.rolex.com



Photo 5

www.patek.com



Photo 6

www.esquiremag.ph

Also in the case of Breitling company, even if its extremely recent logo has been restyled and simplified, the logo had featured for more than 50 years a stylized anchor with wings on both of its sides, which are graphic elements quite representative for two of the best known areas traditionally served by men, aviation and the navy, with which Breitling has been and still is associated. You will notice in the left-side corner of the image above the old logo that had been used for a long time, while in the right-side corner you will see the new logo, a stylized and slightly effeminate letter “B” that abandoned the traditional aviation and navy line. Actually, most collections that Breitling showcased in 2018 in 2019 bring forth watches whose aesthetic design is slightly changed when compared to the previous traditional models, and only time and history will tell whether such change will have a beneficial impact upon the brand. Or not!

Referring to the Breitling watches, *Gentleman, Ghidul etern al modei masculine (Gentleman: The Ultimate Companion to the Elegant Man)* notes that: “A pilot’s Breitling watch is a well-known item of prestige. The popularity of the label often makes people overlook the fact that Breitling was originally made famous by watches that met the high professional standards of aviation.” (Roetzel, 2009: 228, the author’s translation)

So far I have reviewed a number of illustrative examples that connect intrinsically the graphics (logos) of this industry to traditionally and hegemonically all-male activities; in the upcoming paragraphs I will also be reviewing the symbolic connections between watch names and the historical significance of these terms. For instance, Patek Philippe’s famous Nautilus model is a straightforward reference to the famous submarine in Jules Verne’s books, which was sailing under the command of Captain Nemo. The name of Rolex’ Submariner is also associated to the navy and military action, and the picture becomes complete as soon as we have taken a peek into the name that Breitling gave to Navitimer, a watch designed for pilots, therefore yet another denomination taking us to the realm of aviation and the navy. Although apparently “Royal Oak”, the name of a model made by the prestigious Audemars Piguet, slides away from the navy and the military, the

linguistic connotations of the model still take us into the areas of royalty and tradition, since oak is one strong long-living tree, which may infer – by association to royalty – the way in which these watches will survive the time and will be left to one's heirs, which also suggests an analogy between inheriting this exceptional watch and being assigned the royal duties.

For this essay, I have chosen only for exemplification purposes four prestigious brands of the luxury watches industry, but there are dozens of alternatives that could complement or replace my selection of brands, such as Ulysse Nardin that included an anchor in their logo and is traditionally associated to manufacturing timekeeping instruments used in the sailing area, or Longines, that chose a pair of stylized wings and has been traditionally associated to aviation. On the other hand, Hublot, a relatively new brand that hit the market in the early 80s makes yet another example that highlights how relatively unique the solution for building high-end brands in the watchmaking industry is; Hublot also starts the etymological construction of its name from elements and components of aviation or navy origin, more specifically the porthole (hublot, in French). Also Hublot's association to sports involves an all-male connotation too, since it is associated to Ferrari and the world of football.

A particular self-positioning manner in the luxury watchmaking industry comes from Richard Mille, a brand that attaches a great importance to using the latest materials and technologies (the so-called high-techs); the traditional models of other brands may weigh hundreds of grams, while Richard Mille will weigh 5 g, 10 g or maybe not more than 20 g. Another sort of particular conditioning in the case of this brand is the extremely limited series in which their models are manufactured.



Photo 7

www.richardmille.com

Now, if we were to follow the description of the associations of the prestigious watch brands in *Gentleman. Ghidul etern al modei masculine (Gentleman: The Ultimate Companion to the Elegant Man)*, I will define this area if more specifically, considering that TAG Hauer is a brand associated to fast cars and motorsports in general, Omega to NASA's space programs and the first moon landing, and Hamilton to the US navy and aviation. (Roetzel, 2009: 228)

An addition to the male definition of these accessories and – to a certain extent – the highlight of an element which is being used in the semiotic analysis, more specifically the intertextuality, are to be seen in the shape of the luxury watches that we are talking about, *i.e.* Nautilus, Royal Oak, Submariner or Navitimer, which suggest the shape of an airplane's or ship's or submarine's porthole. As Angela Goddard, who teaches communication at the University of Manchester, puts it, "intertextuality refers to the way one text can point to or base itself on another." (Goddard, 2002: 105, the author's translation)

With semiotics, text does not refer to written texts only, but also to the elements that form a picture, a painting, a photo, elements that are being taken over from somewhere else and used to construct another text. In our case, the design of the porthole may be taken over from photos or other archive images and transposed in the final form of the watch.



Photo 8

www.patek.com



Photo 9

www.piecesofship.com

Also in the realm of intertextuality, Marian Petcu takes the definition of this notion even further and adds that intertextuality is "any text that is placed on the intersection with other texts that it quotes, processes or anticipates." (Petcu, 2014: 265, the author's translation)

Obviously this procedure may be used in any creative milieu, be it literature or cinematography, advertising, fine arts, fashion or object design.

As we may have noticed this far, the existence of such luxury accessories would no longer be possible if it hadn't been for their iconicity and their symbolic connections, connotations, which are as many elements that the identity

construction of the brand images existing in this universe uses in a steady manner. Even the range of colors that is used to build the brands and the campaigns that advertise these brands rely on semiotic symbolism, since producers use colors and hues that are mostly associated to men or that are iconic for traditionally male activities and crafts, such as blue, grey, kaki, black.

Understanding that watches of this sort are not fashion items (with a quick turnover rate and highly perishable), but items that define luxury (whose time passes much more slowly and whose items are not perishable), I consider that one argument in favor of using unpretentious colors in designing and advertising watches may be better construed based on Ioan Drăgan's explanations:

We have generally noticed that clear and light colors are the best sellers (maybe due *inter alia* to the fact that light-coloured items seem bigger). In spite of that, the simpler the color, the closer it is associated by buyers to luxury. (Drăgan, 2007: 370, the author's translation)

We may even state that – to a certain extent – a number of items and concerns that define contemporary masculinity and that men use in order to make social statements are center stage to the male universe of the Western world. The life and preoccupations of a modern man will be essentially associated to sports, politics, the army, the weapons, cars and motorcycles, and their personal belongings; and in my opinion watches always come first. Of course, the different position and understanding of the role and value of one's items will be influenced by the culture, education, financial background, and age of every individual.

A book standing proof for that is *A Man and His Watch: Iconic Watches and Stories from the Men Who Wore Them* (translated in Italian as *Un uomo & il suo orologio*) published by Matt Hranek, a photographer and journalist. The book demonstrates the peculiar and quite unique connection that some men, who are iconic to today's society (scientists, researchers, inventors, artists/photographers, fashion designers, musicians, entrepreneurs/businessmen, collectors, or actors) have with their own watches. Many of them confessed to the writer that they had inherited some of their watches from family members or that they had them from their fathers. One of the protagonists of the book, editorialist and writer, Aaron Sigmond, remembers how his grandfather used to wear an Elgin watch for special occasions, which he used to safe keep in a box. When his grandfather died, Aaron inherited the watch, which – in his opinion – embodies all of this grandfather's life. Nowadays, the new owner of Elgin has admitted to wearing this watch – in his turn – only on special occasions too. (Hranek, 2019: 64)

Such perspective demonstrates that the world of luxury watches goes beyond the material universe, since it is loaded by emotional features, therefore it is placed in the universe of the goods that have a cultural value. For the time being, the symbolic value of these objects and their unique position on the luxury items market may only be supported by subtle and sophisticated advertising campaigns,

with iconicity being oftentimes placed in the foreground, because if it had not been for iconicity, commercial hits could not be recognisable immediately at the world level.

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