‘Luxury’ is very commonly used in everyday speech. In a positive sense, it often refers to some super-added value. Cars become luxury vehicles when they are equipped with the newest high-tech electronics or upholstered with the finest leather. Clothing becomes ‘luxury’ when designed by a well-known couturier. Nearly every consumer good can be turned into its own luxury version by investing it with an ‘extra’, with an additional material or immaterial characteristic. On the other hand, luxury often has a negative undertone. In this sense, it is being used to refer to the useless, the redundant. As such, luxury can be looked upon as the antonym of comfort (Muhlman 1975: 302). Both are involved in a search for material well-being on top of what is considered to be the social minimum or the social necessity. ‘Luxury’, in this sense, is the search for positive pleasure, the possession of goods without which one can live perfectly well. ‘Comfort’, on the other hand, relates more to the avoidance of annoyances occurring in daily life.

I am, however, not interested in tracing the exact linguistic meaning of the word ‘luxury’. My research tries to go beyond this meaning in order to define it in a sociological way. Sociology has shown hardly any interest in a society’s upper layer of consumer goods. When it has, it has been mostly in an economic way. I want to divert the attention from the economic sphere towards the cultural and the sociological. This article will be a first attempt to define the luxurious. I will examine print advertisements as visual data from deeply layered cultural conceptions. Luxury will be looked upon as a cultural connotation added to material artifacts. As a connotative material, luxury is hard to define precisely. I will use advertisements as keys to the most recurring connotative constructions.

This article contains three main parts. First, a general definition will be proposed, starting from a somewhat different interpretation of the denotation-connotation distinction. This conceptual pair has always been at the center of classic semiotic studies. It tries to deal with the polysemic
character of signs. Given the equivocal status of luxury, it is very important to situate the concept in this frame. After the conceptual outline of luxury, I will clarify Gottdiener’s socio-semiotic theory. Socio-semiotics tries to overcome poststructuralist and postmodernist critiques of the classic semiotic framework. It offers an alternative analysis tool useful for treating cultural information encoded in print advertisements. Finally, I will develop a case study from a sample of print advertisements for luxury products.

The luxury connotation

It will, therefore, be clear at once that just as the line between ‘luxuries’ and ‘decencies’ varies almost indefinitely with the habits of individuals, the distinction between ‘luxuries’ and ‘decencies’ varies similarly with the customs and opinions of classes. (Sidgwick 1894: 4)

This citation comes from a lecture given at the London University Hall Guild on January 1894. The author, H. Sidgwick, tries to define the luxury concept, experiencing difficulty because of the continuously changing meaning of the concept. Sidgwick mentions the shift in habits as the main difficulty. More than a century ago, Sidgwick clarified the socially constituted character of luxury. I will start from the same social constructedness. A luxury product, as such, does not exist. There is not a well-defined category of material cultural artifacts which can be called luxury. I therefore define ‘luxury’ as a connotative cultural meaning. This does not mean luxury cannot have a denotative meaning. One can easily imagine symbolic meanings so attached to a brand or a product that the functional aspects of the sign disappear for the connotative one.

As I use the concepts denotation and connotation in a slightly different way, it is essential to clarify this terminology first. The concepts first appeared in the works of Hjelmslev. It was, however, Roland Barthes who gave their most widespread interpretation in his Elements of Semiology (1968). Connotation picks up a sign on a first level of signification and uses this sign as the signifier on a second, higher level. Judith Williamson presented a lucid example of Barthes’s definition in an analysis of a Chanel No. 5 advertisement. The advertisement showed a close-up of the French star Catherine Deneuve. Williamson presented a scheme, derived from Barthes’s theory (see Fig. 1).
Print advertisements for luxury products

The photograph of Deneuve denotes the actress and constitutes the first level of signification. The use of her photograph in the Chanel No. 5 ad brings this sign to a second level: 'Deneuve' turns into a signifier connoting chicness. Connotation as a higher level of signification installs a sort of hierarchy of meanings. The baseline of this hierarchy must be a fixed relation between a certain signifier and its denotative signified. Upon that, other second- and higher-order significations are created. Although widespread, Barthes's use of the denotation-connotation pair is much debated (see Eco 1970; Hall 1980; Scott 1994).

Like Stuart Hall, I consider Barthes's distinction a mere analytical one. Denotation is only a special case of connotation: a sedimentation of a connotation making the meaning of the sign more fixed. A car can signify status, wealth, youth. When I look, however, for the general signification of the car, I will end up with an instrument for transport. Out of a whole range of possible connotations, the transportation aspect is, for this moment and for our cultural setting, culturally adopted as the 'literal' meaning. In the socialization process, we are taught as a child not only a culture's norm and values but also its dominant codes. These codes help us to interpret the surrounding world. Culture hands us the most suitable signifieds for an incoming signifier. We learn to associate certain signifiers with a signified in an automatic and natural way. Despite this natural character, there is no real naturalness in connecting the visual impression of Cathérine Deneuve with the concept of 'Deneuve'. As Saussure puts it: 'The link between signal and signification is arbitrary ... here is no internal connexion, for example, between the idea "sister" and the French sequence of sounds s-ô-r which acts as its signal' (Saussure...
This goes for the linguistic sign as well as for the material artifacts a culture creates, including its images. A picture is never a mere analogon, a pure reflection of the outside reality (Barthes 1977: 17). Viewing images is as code-mediated as reading linguistic signs.

This does not imply that the denotated meaning is the most important meaning for 'car', as Eco (1986: 64) adds. Standing in front of a Rolls-Royce, the status-interpretation of the car will be much more predominant than the transportational one. Nor does this mean that a denotated meaning is a fixed and nearly untransitional meaning. The signification of the ancient Egypt pyramids has clearly had another denotated meaning than it has today. As society develops, its connotations and denotations follow.

For analytical purposes, I shall maintain the denotation-connotation distinction, though it is more of a continuum. Figure 2 shows a graphical representation of the above-presented denotation-connotation dichotomy. Within a certain culture (represented by the triangle) there are, concerning a certain signifier, several possible meanings. Some of them will be privileged by culture itself, as the most logical meanings, the most natural. This natural connection between a signifier and a particular signified is mediated through the 'dominant' cultural code. Since all codes are systems of rules enabling the connection of signifiers and signifieds, the dominant cultural code will establish the dominant connection, or the 'literal' meaning of the sign. These meanings are the denotations of a certain sign. There are, parallel to these, a range of other possible signifiers, which can be activated depending on the codes that are used in another social context. At the left side of the continuum there are meanings that are not part of that specific culture because the used codes are not culturally acknowledged. These meanings can, however, be known or unknown by someone inside this culture. For example, an artist can create a totally new code for interpreting his works. Nobody understands his work because his signs cannot be understood with the common cultural connotations at hand. Sometimes we know there are other meanings attached to a certain signifier but is it impossible to understand

![Figure 2. Cultural meaning continuum](image)
them. This is the case when the military catches a coded message from an enemy or when an anthropologist discovers a new hieroglyph he cannot understand. Within the continuum, meanings can shift horizontally. Outer-cultural meanings can become adopted within the dominant or subcultural settings. Connotations can become so thoroughly used that they begin to replace some old denotation. At the same time, there is a vertical movement: meanings are created within society and its subgroups; other meanings are forgotten or simply disappear. I apply this scheme to Williamson’s interpretation of Barthes (see Fig. 3).

The picture of Cathérine Deneuve appears in this scheme as a polysemic sign. The denotative meaning of the photo is Cathérine Deneuve herself. Besides that, we can discern many other meanings attached to the picture, and there are many more connotations accompanying the picture of Deneuve as mentioned in Figure 3. Of course, the connotation of the ‘chic’ was important for Chanel in their advertisement. With the existence of different connotations rises the risk of possible misinterpretations. Research seems to confirm the diversity of consumer’s interpretations of images in advertisements (Mick and Politi 1989).

Luxury as a cultural phenomenon is essentially a connotative signified. Material artifacts are seldom classified as luxury products. Nevertheless, we all know luxury products from our daily world. There will be widespread agreement over the fact that a Rolex is a luxury product. Just as in the Rolls-Royce example earlier, it is easy to see that a Rolex is in the

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**Figure 3.** *The Chanel No. 5 example on a connotation-denotation continuum*

**Figure 4.** *The meaning of a Rolex watch*
first place a watch. Its luxury connotation can be the most important propagated meaning but it still remains a watch.\(^7\) (See Fig. 4).

Defining luxury as a connotative signified super-added to material artifacts does not clarify anything about the conversion or the consequences for a product that is being viewed as a luxury. The next section will try to look at the ways in which cultural material artifacts become invested with different kinds of meaning, including the character of luxury.

**Cultural transitional meanings**

_**Decomposition of the socio-semiotic sign**_

Socio-semiotic analysis of material culture starts from a critique of deconstructionism. Deconstructionism and the derived postmodernism are the theoretical constructions built on what was left of Saussure’s semiotic project after Derrida’s critique. A full discussion of these theoretical developments goes far beyond the scope of this article. The main dissatisfaction Gottdiener had with deconstructionism and some forms of postmodernism is their discount of everyday life experiences. These experiences give rise to cultural codes necessary to structure contextual situations in which communication and interaction are made possible. Semiotics has been focusing too long on the linguistic model, trying to apply this to several non-linguistic phenomena.

Furthermore, he criticizes deconstructionism for its infinite regression of meaning. Deconstructionism is a form of idealism because of its denial of some exo-semiotic reality. All significations come from the continuous interpretation of differences between signs. Socio-semiotic analysis stresses the relation between the signification process (as a play of differences between signifiers) and the material world outside the sign system.

The socio-semiotic model of analysis originated in the subfield of urban semiotics. Gottdiener and Lagopoulos presented their first text on the renewed theoretical direction in *The City and the Sign* (1986). They developed a semiotic approach based on the sign model of Hjelmslev and Eco. Hjelmslev sees signs as constituted of a signifier and a signified or in his words an expression and a content. Both the signifier and the signified can be subdivided further in a form and a content. As such every sign can be decomposed into four different aspects:

1. The _substance of the content_ is over-articulated, over-determined culture, i.e., the culture of the society as a whole which constitutes both the well-spring and
the backdrop for specific codified ideologies belonging to particular cultural practices. The form of the content, in contrast, is the specific ideology that has been codified in practice and can be materialized in the object world through social interaction and symbolic behavior.

2. The form of the expression refers to the specific morphological elements that correspond to the codified ideology, while the substance of the expression refers to objects themselves, which correspond to codified ideology and which exist materially, even if that materiality is simply a text in the case of fictitious objects. These levels of the sign are indicated in figure 1.2.

![Figure 1.2](image_url)

**Figure 1.2** The decomposition of the sign according to socio-semiotics

3. Finally, every sign is part of a system of signification, which is structured by the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes. (Gottdiener 1995: 29)

Gottdiener’s socio-semiotics is intended to be applied to phenomena of material culture, but it can equally be applied to the analysis of images, fixed and non-fixed. This article is a first attempt to apply the socio-semiotic theory to the study of the imagery of print advertisements. Since images can be considered as signs as well, we can decompose them in the above presented way in order to expose its ideological constructedness.

**Transfunctionalization through advertisements**

Culture is the aggregate of social processes by which meanings are created, stored, and transferred. It is constituted of norms, values, codes, and signs (material and non-material). In the search for the meaning of luxury we are especially interested in the way culture handles those signs.

The material world in its natural and cultural conception is captured within a cultural frame. Culture hands out meaningful concepts to name and comprehend the surrounding world. So far, we are not dealing with signs at all. Naming an object X or Y does not communicate any meaning. From the moment that the culturally constituted term is inserted into a code (a semantic field) in which it gets meanings through difference with other terms, we can say the object has become a sign in a sign system. The most immediate meaning a sign gets within a sign system is the denotative one, as I argued earlier.

But the cultural denotation and connotations an object is assigned are not the only values a commodity can possess. Eco mentions the semantic
level or value as one possible way to look at the object besides the physical, the mechanical, the economic, and the social value of an object (Eco 1976: 27). Socio-semiotic analysis starts out with this multileveled aspect of objects. Objects as such do not possess sign value. Neither does culture as such produce any sign value. Sign value is constructed within social interaction processes through what Krampen called the process of transfunctionalization. This phenomenon differentiates between the first order and a second order creation of meaning. ‘The first-order imputation of meaning, at the level of denotation, produces the sign function of the object — i.e., its meaning according to its immediate function. The second-order imputation of meaning, or the connotative meaning, signifies its social context. It is this level that transfunctionalizes the object to socially prescribed meanings’ (Gottdiener 1995: 174).

Transfunctionalization is extremely important for the concept of ‘luxury’. Since luxury can be considered as a non-denotative non-functional property, every luxury product needs to transfunctionalize in order to become socially recognized as luxurious. Luxury sign-values can be created at different places in the social circulation of commodities. Following Gottdiener’s scheme of semiosis there are three different moments at which transfunctionalization can take place. First of all, producers create consumer goods for their exchange value. They need to sell the products in order to make a profit. The consumer of these products buys the object because he desires the use value of it. The use value exists within the main cultural settings the consumer is living in. If the consumer wants a perfume it is because he knows the use value of it. In order to get his bottles of perfume sold, a producer will use all kinds of advertising and marketing techniques in order to turn his exchange value into a desired sign value. A brand like Chanel will juxtapose Cathérine Deneuve and a bottle of No. 5 in order to transfunctionalize the bottle of perfume into a status sign. The consumer, who certainly knows the use value of the bottle, will buy the perfume for its second-order connotative value. Of course, not all commodities produced are sold in this fashion. A farmer who goes to the market in order to sell his tomatoes will focus directly on the use value of the vegetable rather than create a second-order sign-value around it.

The second step in the semiosis of material objects concerns the relationship between the object and its user. Living in a world full of material objects forces the individual to deal with these objects. People transfunctionalize their objects themselves. We can imagine several ways in which a consumer can invest his material world with second-order meanings. The most obvious example of this process can be found in subcultures who take some objects as their symbols, their markers. Objects are
adopted not only inside subcultures, but organizations or social groups can also bring about a transfunctionalization of first-order meanings. The adoption of a special sort of hat within a student organization can invest that sort of hat with a connotative meaning of belonging to that social group. The hat becomes a symbolic, inner-group sign instead of a functional garment against the elements.

In the third stage of semiosis, producers use the transfunctionalized objects from the second stage and the newly born needs from society as basic material to produce new meanings. Gottdiener gives the following example: ‘the signifier “punk rock” was sanitized by the Top 40 radio industry and changed to “New Wave”. Whereas the former connotes a revolutionary counterculture, the latter is a marketing statement utilizing the powerful stimulus “new” to indicate a change in product’ (Gottdiener 1995: 183).

Images play an important role in this circulation of meanings. On the one hand, the industrial producers create them in order to invest their products with sign value. Several visual techniques contribute in this process. Advertising research has gone a great way in analyzing the ways television commercials or print advertisements create sign values. Advertisers code their persuasive messages in all kinds of disguises to prevent the consumer from actually focusing on the exchange value of the commodities. Visual information has proved to be more powerful than text in converting exchange values into sign values (Dyer 1986: 82). Because of the complex and polysemic character of images, they are the most prominent means in the transfunctionalization process. Therefore they could turn out to be a rich source of data to get an insight in the transfunctionalization of commodities into luxury products. At the other side of the continuum, individuals create images in order to invest certain products with a second-order connotation. I think, for example, of personal photographs or video shots of the objects within certain contexts or symbolic environments.

The following case study will concentrate on print advertisements for watches. I will explore the sign structure of these advertisements and in what way they fit in the first stage of semiosis. The main focus of the case study will be the process by which these advertisements succeed in transfunctionalizing a time-showing device into a non-functional luxury product.

Case study

The case study I present here is only a partial analysis of more extensive data. In order to get a comprehensive picture of sign values for luxury
products, I have chosen to investigate twelve product categories, nine of which could be expected to carry some luxury connotations. This results in a total sample of 1,372 different magazine advertisements. For this article, I use a sub-sample of 145 entities, exclusively dedicated to watches. All advertisements are drawn from Flemish magazines (in Dutch). I made a random selection of six magazines out of twenty available titles. The selected magazine advertisements span a period from 1978 to 1994.

I am fully aware that the analysis of fixed images cannot be a complete analysis of the phenomenon of luxury. The focus is biased towards the producer-product side. This approach ignores a great deal of personal use and interpretation on the part of the consumer. Nevertheless, the process of semiosis as presented above is an integrative part of the ways in which products become transfunctionalized into luxury.

**The sample**

Socio-semiotics adopts the basic premise that an analysis of material culture, including images, should be done by taking into account exo-semiotic processes of an economic and political nature. If we want to do any analysis of luxury, we should first take a look at the social environment within which the advertising of watches takes place.

As consumer goods, luxury products necessarily function in the economic market. We could make a distinction between two kinds of producers of consumer products. First, there are producers who differentiate their product line. A publisher could produce, for example, a paperback and a hardcover edition of a book. On top of that, he can decide to publish a so-called luxury edition of this book. A luxury edition could be a leather-bound version of the book on special paper in a limited edition with the autograph of the writer. This producer will advertise his book with a note that a limited luxury print is also available. Suppose this publisher specializes in quality books on law. In that case, the publisher will be primarily interested in convincing people that his catalogue consists of quality literature concerning law. In order to propagate his publisher's name (the brand), he is eager to transfunctionalize his product into a sign value of quality. Independent of the content of the books in his catalogue, the publisher will try to convince his potential consumers that what he is selling is quality. Because he knows, from a purely financial point of view, that there are consumers who are compliant to the Veblen effect, he will extend his catalogue with a luxury product in order to increase the sale of his quality law books. This publisher's most important motive for placing advertisements, besides the selling of
books, could be the establishment of the denotative connection of his catalogue (brand) as ‘the collection of quality law books’.

On the other hand, an economic niche exists immediately concerned with the production of luxury goods. Instead of differentiating their product line with an upper and a lower range of products, these companies are only interested in selling luxury products. The main purpose of these producers is different from the first category. They are eager to get their brands invested with a luxury denotation. These producers direct their advertisement efforts towards the construction of a luxury sign value. They present themselves as the producers of luxury, forming a well-defined territory in the marketplace. As such, they are converting the exchange value of their products into a sign value of luxury. This economic niche is, of course, not limited to watches only. The economic luxury sector comprises several products such as jewelry, perfume, crockery, and so on. The group of producers is highly aware of their distinct niche. Although they cross every product boundary, they group together, stressing their main common reference, ‘luxury’. The most famous example of this clustering is the French Comité Colbert,\(^{11}\) which represents about seventy French luxury houses.

Several companies have evolved from being a small artisan family business into real worldwide giants. This was possible due to a democratization and wider distribution of luxury products. Danielle Allère\(\acute{e}\)s (1990) described this phenomenon with a hierarchy of three distinct universes of luxury products attached to three different social classes. Her three-way distinction of luxury goods is based on the personal use and consumption patterns of these three groups of people.

Allère\(\acute{e}\)s places the inaccessible luxury on top. These luxuries are bought by the wealthiest and most distinctive class. Derived from the ancient bourgeoisie, they continuously go after the most rare or the newest objects. Their motive for buying the inaccessible luxury is inspired by the catch-up movements of the new riches: the ‘fuite en avant’ (leaping forward). Inaccessible luxury products are the models, objects of which only a few pieces exist and which are distributed highly selectively at astronomical prices.

The intermediate classes are also economically wealthy, not due to noble birth but by virtue of their personal success. They try to translate their economic wealth into social recognition by imitating the ancient bourgeoisie. They pay high prices for fashion goods that are reproductions of the inaccessible models. On the other hand, they also buy some less exclusive ‘serial products’ in order to acquire quick status recognition.

The last type of class Allère\(\acute{e}\)s distinguishes is the middle class. They formed a new class after World War II. They earn high wages and express
this in a consumption pattern of mimicry. The middle class and the highest classes are trapped in a continuous game of catching up. The middle class shows a high demand for so-called serial objects. This is what Allérès (1990: 73) calls the accessible luxury.

What interests us in this typology is the bottom line of the luxury universe: the serial objects. Since the inaccessible and the intermediate luxury is distributed highly selectively, there is no publicity available for these products. A watch created personally for a Saudi sheik will not be advertised in any magazine, nor will the copy of it for an industrial director. What we might expect to find in the sample is the assortment of luxury serial objects. These objects are manufactured on a larger scale and therefore need a wider group of customers. Luxury houses know they need the mass media in order to reach this kind of consumer. I have adopted the hypothesis that the magazine advertisements in the sample mainly represent serial objects manufactured for what Allérès described as the middle class. The present research cannot confirm or invalidate this hypothesis; I accept it merely as a starting point. The question I address is: what kind of transfunctionalization do industrial producers set up in order to get their serial objects sold as selective, unique pieces of luxury? I now present the methodology I followed to answer that question.

Methodology

As I discussed earlier, socio-semiotics follows quite closely Hjelmslev's decomposition of the sign. Consequently, our methodology adapts itself to this theoretical viewpoint. My case study of a sample of 145 magazine ads for watches involves four steps: an analysis of the substance and form of the expression, and an analysis of the substance and form of the content. I will focus extensively on the form of the expression and the content.

Substance of the expression. Advertisements are a material representation of the intention of a company to obtain exchange value in return for goods sold. This is its only way to survive: to realize a return on its investments, its capital. Advertisements are one tool in what marketers call the marketing mix. Advertisements, however, use material artifacts to establish their selling effect. It is in this respect that we should examine the print advertisements of our sample. Methodologically, I will take a quantitative look at the units of our sample. The principal goal of this analysis will be the description of the sample as a physical fact: what
magazine did they appear in? What about the size of the advertisements? How is color used, and so on? The form of the expression will take the ads of the sample as signs on their own, without any decomposition.

**Form of the expression.** Advertisements are composed of different sets of other signs. It is, however, a composed sign without any structuring rules (syntagmatic axes) and therefore a pseudo-text. We can deal with this polysemic aspect in many different ways. One possible way is to study the rhetorical figures comprised in the images. Since advertisements aim at convincing the consumer that the presented sign value in the ad (or sometimes the presented use value, in case of a new need that is being propagated) runs parallel with his desires, we can think of them in terms of rhetorical devices. Ancient rhetorical figures of speech were recapitulated in the sixties by Roland Barthes. He pleaded for a general rhetorical theory (Barthes 1964). It was Jacques Durand who followed up on this plea by working out a complete analysis of rhetorical figures in advertisements. I will not go any further into this possible way of analyzing the advertisements' substance of the expression. A second possibility is making an inventory of the categories of signs that are presented in the images. Picturing products is not the only way of convincing people. Advertisements also present several external signs besides the product that is advertised. The consumer is urged at that moment to fill in the gap that is created between the product and the newly added signifiers. In order to get a clear view of the form of these signifiers, I will split them up into four categories: the products, the setting, the text, and the persons (cf. Leiss et al. 1986). These four categories make up the most important classes that can appear in a specific advertisement. They are the basic material with which an advertiser works in order to change a product’s exchange value into a sign value. Settings, text and persons, and the visualization of the product itself all cooperate to invest the advertisement with a certain connotation, a desired sign value. Although the construction of this additional meaning is a matter of the form of the content, the analysis of the form of the expression aims to contribute to the better understanding of that level of signification.

**Substance of the content.** This level of analysis goes back to the general ideological systems concerning consumerism and advertisements. It represents the background we have concerning the status and the position of advertisements in society. There will be hardly any possibility to analyze this sign property from our data.

**Form of the content.** The analysis of the form of the content of our sample will pick up the visualized signifiers we found in earlier analyses
of the form of the expression and reinterpret them towards the underlying daily ideologies. This analysis differentiates between denotative signs from the form of the expression and connotative ones. According to Baudrillard, those should have taken over the denotative ones to leave advertisements with nothing more than pure ideological representation and simulation (Gottdiener 1995: 149).

The materiality of the advertisement-sign

In order to analyze our sample of advertisements, I coded them quantitatively using an elaborated checklist. Although my attention was much more concentrated on the form of the expression, I did obtain some information about the intrinsic materiality of the advertisements. As a sign, every print advertisement needs to be printed on a type of paper, in a certain magazine or newspaper, and so on. In order to get a full view of the substance of the expression, two different questions need to be answered: where are the signs of the sample situated and when were they created?

Looking at the type of magazine the advertisements are published in, one of them is highly overrepresented. The *Exclusief* magazine represents more than 50 percent of the sample. This is, of course, quantitatively a distortion of the sub-sample. Since the main focus of our case study will be the composition of the sign within each of the advertisements, I think this unequal distribution will not vitally distort the analysis. We need to keep in mind, however, that the physical location of the advertisements is highly concentrated in that particular magazine. In order to compare the social and cultural role the six magazines play, I classified them according to some external objective information. Since money is often used as indicator for luxury, it was a fairly good indicator with which to classify magazines. On the one hand, I included the magazine selling price a consumer has to pay in order to obtain the sign. Of course, people usually do not buy the magazine for its advertisements, but nevertheless, there is a price to be paid to actually see the promoted products. On the other hand, I focused on the prices producers pay for placing the sign in a certain magazine. In order to compare the different prices for each of the magazines, I related these prices to the paid circulation. Advertisement prices rise when a magazine is selling better. The three widely sold magazines in our sample (*Libelle, Flair, and Knack*) asked nominally the highest prices for a full-page advertisement but turned out to be three times cheaper when we take circulation into account. Full-color pages were even five times more expensive for the smaller magazines. Finally,
I combined both the producer and the consumer prices. Since I could not mix all these figures into one summary figure, I statistically standardized the prices and calculated the mean (Table 1). There are two clear clusters. *Exclusief* belongs to the cluster with positive standardized means, indicating a higher access cost.

Concluding that the positive values relate to a special luxury cluster of magazines goes too far. That would require further research on their profile and the content of their articles. Nevertheless, two separate clusters exist within my sample, one of which dominates the subsample of advertisements for watches. Since most of the magazine advertisements take up one page, it is no surprise that nearly all watch advertisements have a one-page layout.

Meanings change over time. So do the signs that carry those meanings. Producers need to reinterpret consumers’ uses of products, since these provide them with new basic material to promote their products. Advertisements that were published twenty years ago would no longer work today. If we want to get an idea of the luxury connotation that producers are creating, we will need to include a diachronic aspect in the analysis. Table 2 shows the distribution of the sample on a time scale. It looks as if the volume of advertisements for watches grew enormously in the nineties. This is a wrong conclusion, since the real reason for the weight of the last period comes from the analyzed magazines. *Talkies* has been published only since 1986 and *Exclusief* started in 1976.

### Table 1. Means of standardized values for six magazines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Magazine</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avenue</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclusief</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talkies</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flair</td>
<td>-0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knack</td>
<td>-0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libelle</td>
<td>-0.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2. Diachronic appearances of advertisements in the sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1972–1979</td>
<td>13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980–1989</td>
<td>35.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990–1994</td>
<td>51.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Year of publication offers the most important but not the only diachronic information. A year is a cyclical indication of time. Within every year, it is important to situate the appearances according to seasons, yearly events, and so on. Watches turn out to be promoted more strongly in December. This indicates the presumed social use of the watches. Promoting them in December equates them with gifts. Even when they do not appeal directly to the festive period, they do profit from the special atmosphere the magazines are creating in their winter numbers.

The substance of the expression only situates the material existence of the advertisements: their being predominantly in one magazine aimed at a more wealthy producer and consumer public, their predominance in the nineties, and their connection to the festive season. But these numbers tell us nothing about the composition of the signs themselves. Our major interest is in the transfunctionalization process that takes place. We turn our attention, therefore, to the form of the expression and the content.

The making of a luxury watch

When producers hire an advertising agency to create sign value around their products, they ask them to invest these advertisements with a bundle of desirable information. Advertisements are composed signs, open to many possible meanings. But they do not follow clear rules, as a language does, for example. The artist who creates an advertisement has no book of wisdom from which he can deduce the perfect working image. In constructing the form of the expression of his sign, he immediately includes several ideological codes. He picks up signifiers from anywhere and combines them into the new sign. Instructed by the producer, he knows what kind of sign value the image needs to be loaded with. He knows he has to create an image of a certain watch fitting that particular producer or that specific brand.

On a very abstract level, the prevailing cultural codes of society will be included in the sign. The sign will be constructed as an advertising sign, following society’s vision on that particular class of artifacts. If the creator does not possess these codes, he will not be able to create an advertisement at all. These grounding codes, those basic ideologies, are what I have called earlier the substance of the content, the ‘well-spring and the backdrop for specific codified ideologies’ (Gottdiener 1995: 28). They form a culture’s ‘stock of knowledge’. In his creative process, the artist will use more specific codes to create the desired advertisement. In order to reconstruct the connotative properties of luxury, we are especially interested in this process. The following analysis will look at the form of
the expression the different signifiers advertisers have put into their images, in order to retrace the background codes they were using. These ideological constructions are responsible for the creation of the sign value and the transfunctionalization of the exchange value.

In order to analyse the different utterances, I look at an advertisement as possibly being composed of four aspects. Each of these four components can be either present or omitted. The four ‘building stones’ are the product, setting, persons, and text (Leiss et al. 1986: 180). Each of these categories can be further subdivided and classified. If I need any of these further elaborations I will mention them during the analysis. Instead of presenting a full quantitative analysis of the form of the expression followed by the form of the content, I will work the other way around. The analysis of the composing elements of the advertisements has led to the identification of several coding constructions that were being used inside the images. Amongst others, I found five codes I could directly connect to the luxury connotation. I term them as follows: the jewelry code, the quality code, the distinction code, the golden code, and the scarcity code.

The jewelry code

If a watch is to be transfunctionalized, then it should be something else than merely a watch. The jewelry code transfunctionalizes watches into pieces of adornment. The watch is no longer a time-centered instrument. The jewelry code withdraws all instrumentality and functionality from the watch and turns it into a piece of adornment. One wears a watch in order to be seen and not in order to know what time it is. Visually, the jewelry code concentrates in essence on the design aspects of the watch. It would be highly subjective to pick out some design elements that can be considered as jewelry aspects. The photographic image of the product seldom elicits the jewelry code as such. Advertisers are using accompanying objects and texts to highlight the adornment aspect of the watch. If the watch is presented as a piece of jewelry, very often (56 percent of the time) it is presented amidst other jewelry: rings, bracelets, and so on. The surrounding of these elements gives the visual impression that the watch is in its natural environment. Watches are surrounded by jewelry because they belong to this class of objects.

Besides the visual presentation of a jewelry collection, texts are very important transmitters of the jewelry code. Very often the creator of the watch (the brand) is a jeweler. The watch is then presented as an enlargement of his collection or simply as one of the pieces within his normal
collection. This strategy is used by the Cartier company, which accentuates heavily the jewelry aspect of their watches simply because Cartier originates from the jewel industry. On the other hand, a brand can try to transfunctionalize the watch into a jewel simply because of its luxury connotation. For example, Omega sells a so-called ‘jewel-watch’ and labels its creators ‘master-watchmaker-jewelers’. Omega uses the jewelry code very often in its advertisements. Several times it underlines the jewelry aspect of its product by accentuating its connection with the goldsmith’s trade or their knowledge to turn precise watches into precious ornaments. The most important goal of the jewelry code remains the de-functionalization of the watch, or as one of the texts in the sample states: ‘One does not wear a Jaeger-LeCoultre just to know the time. After all, one does not drink a Château-Rothschild millésimé to quench one’s thirst’.

The quality code

The quality code — or should we term it the technology code — is, together with the jewelry code, the strongest source of signs in the advertisement of watches. Mainly, it serves to enlighten the interior of the product. Together with the golden code, these signs are being used to distinguish the materiality of the watch from other watches. The most important aspect of the quality code is the ideological disguise in a denotative form. Producers mention all kinds of qualitative information (see Table 3) as if they were helping the consumer to choose. What they do, actually, is use the quality code as an instrument to turn the product into luxury. The following table presents a selection of seven brands from my sample. I indicate which additional quality they mentioned in their ads.

Table 3. Brand specific use of the quality code

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand</th>
<th>Precision</th>
<th>Water-proof</th>
<th>Shock-proof</th>
<th>Made of steel</th>
<th>Sapphire-glass</th>
<th>Extra fineness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baume &amp; Mercier (9)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cartier (10)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chopard (10)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ebel (9)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longines (4)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omega (19)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rolex (9)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The use of quality aspects in the advertisements clearly depends on the brand. Not all producers are emphasizing the quality of their product. In particular, Cartier and Chopard (and Ebel?) give no additional details about the inner material of the watch. They accentuate more the pure sign value of the watch, leaving little space for the intrinsic properties of the product itself. As I said earlier, Cartier relies more on the jewelry code because of its background. Their aim is to sell jewelry instead of quality watches. Omega, on the other hand, seems to follow a double strategy. They have a collection they present as ornaments. This is what they call the 'jewel-watch'. Besides this collection, they also mention the technical aspects of their watches as indicated in Table 3. This is their second path of transfunctionalizing the Omega-watch.

The visual presentation of the quality code is difficult. References to the interior quality of the product are being done by textual description. Visual support consists mostly in the presentation of the interior of the watch. The consumer is allowed a look into the 'holy' interior of the watch. The technical wisdom of the producer is revealed by presenting an opened watch with shining cogwheels. This 'come and look inside' strategy visually presents the quality message. As if the companies were willing to tell the consumer 'If it were not so good we would not let you take a look'.

The distinction code

The distinction code can be defined as the code which refers to the construction of an in-group and an out-group. Very clearly, advertisements use the distinction code to form a visual and linguistic image of the in-group their customers belong to. People are very commonly used in this respect to show some in-group consumers. If a brand wants to be identified with family values, it will draw on the distinction code when it shows the presence of the product within such a group. Very often the setting and the clothing of the persons will supply the required sign value in order to get the message through.

The sample, however, did not show many uses of this code. In contrast to what one might expect, visual representation of the models did not show any consistent pattern. Models were wearing all kinds of styles: casual, evening dress, sport dress. The settings were not unequivocally distinguished. The great exception is Rolex. They draw heavily on the distinction code with a typical person-text form. The Rolex campaign does not present any popular media star. Instead, they pick up people coming from a selective environment: horseback riding, yachting, opera,
classical music, deep-sea diving, golf, tennis. The sign values these characters bear do not refer to their careers or their selective clothing. They are important because the groups they come from are relatively small, distinctive social environments. Rolex uses these characters in order to transfunctionalize its watch into a sort of key to these groups. When you wear these watches, you belong to the most distinctive groups in society.

Apart from the Rolex campaign, the distinction code was rarely used. The other codes prevailed in the sample. If the setting showed the influences of the distinction code, it was usually through the use of golf attributes next to the product. Golf is clearly considered to have the most powerful sign value to transmit. Golf has replaced tennis as a widely recognized, distinctive sport. Therefore players or their attributes easily convey the message that these watches are only reserved for smaller, distinguished circles.

The golden code

If we are looking at constructions of luxury, gold and diamonds are very important codes. Although they are closely related to the jewelry code, or better, the jewelry code itself is closely connected to the golden code, they do not share the same content. Whereas, in advertisements for watches, the jewelry code serves as a transfunctionalization of a functional object into an adornment, the golden code shows an additional function. The golden code arranges the material of the product. Comparable to the quality code, it uses signs to show a particular transformation of the product into a different design. In contrast to the quality code, this code is more suitable to visual representation. The water resistance and the durability of a watch depend on the characteristics of the inside material. Those are much harder to visualize than external product properties.

Gold and diamonds are crucial signifiers in the construction of a luxury connotation. Both materials carry complex sign values, from classical abundance to a parameter of economic value. If we look at the dominant colors in the advertisements, gold turns out to be the color most used, except for black and white. More than half of the advertisements (53.3 percent) had gold as one of the two most dominant colors, half of those (24 percent of the sample) in combination with black or white. If gold was used, it appeared as the color of the product.

There was no setting or accompanying object that was gold-colored. Visually, the golden code is not used in the product surroundings. It always appears as a product-inherent quality. Of course, the visualization of the watch as a golden object is rooted deeper than the construction
of the advertisement itself. Producers know the value of gold and know the tradition of using gold and diamonds in their products. Therefore, they launch new lines with gold-plated watches. The use of gold and diamonds appears in this fashion as a denotative information: we visualize our watch as a golden watch simply because we are selling golden watches. This kind of informational use of the signifier gold or diamond recurs very often in textual formats. Texts often mention the golden character amidst the quality characteristics of the watches: water-resistant up to 200 meters deep and 18-karat gold. As such, the golden code is used in an informational disguise of quality parameters. Behind this mask of denotative information lies the associative world of glamor and tradition. If a watch is not a plastic watch, even not a stainless steel watch, but a golden watch with diamonds, it gets another signification. Their golden surface or the presence of diamonds gives them a superior sign value that they are connotatively more apt to wear as a distinctive marker, and producers play on that phenomenon.

The scarcity code

Exclusivity and rarity are highly promoted by the different brands. The producers are extremely anxious about their product being labeled as common or undesirable. In order to counter these threats, luxury products need to be subjectively scarce. If we look at the types of luxury Allérès describes, inaccessible and intermediate luxury are both physically and subjectively scarce. But the serial or accessible luxury is usually widely available. Therefore, the creator needs to create a sign value of subjective scarcity within the advertisement in order to make the consumer believe he is buying inaccessible (highly limited) products. Using the scarcity code, he will do this in two different ways. First, the watch can be presented as part of a limited edition. The consumer is guaranteed uniqueness because only a limited number of watches exist. Advertisements using this imagery never publish the actual limit of the collection. The uniqueness of the watch is installed because the sign value attributed to the newly launched collection constructs its scarcity. Objectively, the watch could be sold in shops all over the world. Visually this is done by presenting the watch all by itself (sometimes a pair is presented), indicating the product on a monotonous colored background.

The second way in which the scarcity code is made to work is the limitation, not of production, but of distribution. Most producers within the so-called luxury universe invest a lot of effort to set up an exclusive distribution network. Their watches are sold only in a small network of
boutiques. This last aspect is very common in the advertising of watches. Sixty-three percent of the selected watches indicated one way or another the places where they could be bought. Most advertisements display only one or two selling points. Some brands, however, go very far in listing addresses. Baume & Mercier and Ebel present, respectively, up to 21 or 26 addresses under their products. One could ask if this is not overdoing the distribution code. A producer can hardly present his watch as being exclusively sold and indicate in the same ad the contrary. On the other hand, omitting the distribution code is not always an indication that the product is exclusive. Omega, for example, hardly mentioned any distribution points because their watches are available in most shops. The distribution code is a two-edged sword: it can contribute to the subjective scarcity of a product if the number of selling points is limited and if these selling points have a certain sign value as being exclusive boutiques. If, however, the number of selling points increases, one can hardly maintain the subjective scarcity hypothesis. At that point, one gives the impression of a geographical spread of the watch over the entire country.16

Conclusion

This article should not give the impression that all advertisements selected in our sample are ads for luxury watches. As the analysis of the visualized signs showed, there are several ideological codes intertwined within the advertisements. I analyzed five of them as particularly contributing to the overall connotation of luxury. Of course, these were not the only codes to be found within the sample. Other codes were active, too, in this perspective. Some advertisements showed codes that obviously blocked the forming of a luxury connotation. The most obvious example was the Swiss Swatch brand, which used none of the five codes in its advertisements. Swatch does not target its watches to a luxury-buying public. Instead, they create a young and trendy connotation around their product. A second, more surprising example is the Breitling watch. They direct their watches towards a more exclusive target public, but in a highly unusual way. The Breitling advertisements are, first of all, mostly two-paged, but more important, they use humor codes to sell their watches: visualized cartoon-like slapstick situations. These visualized jokes heavily contrast with the exclusiveness and quality Breitling praises in their accompanying texts.

The analysis of the watch advertisements showed a nearly total absence of a syntagmatic axis. That is, no fixed combination of rules could be discerned in the composition of an advertisement for watches. This is
not surprising, since the process of making an advertisement is more a creative process than a slavish application of rules. This contrasts the sign system of advertisements with other textual sign systems such as a language or the traffic sign system. The selection or paradigmatic axis on the other hand showed a variety of codes. Five of them were important in the formation of a luxury connotation around the products. These codes are mainly images or texts with a certain sign value. That is, they use other signs carrying a connotative value as their most important meaning instead of their own denotative meaning. If a watch is presented next to a golf ball, then this ball does not mean 'ball' but connotes the whole golfing community that is using this ball. The working of ideological codes interiorized by the sender as well as by the receiver of these signs makes this connotation possible.

The connotative aspect of luxury makes analysis difficult. Its exact meaning can never be traced because of its highly transitional character. This article, however, showed some cultural codes reigning in the luxury universe. Producers are using society’s background codes and users’ own lived experience to create advertisement signs. In order to create a luxury connotation within their watch advertisements, they used five different codes. These codes are indicators of our culture’s concept of luxury. This does not mean, however, that every watch presented with the aid of these codes will be a true luxury product. Fashion and internal group processes will ultimately decide whether or not a particular watch will be considered a luxury watch or not. This experience will inspire future advertisers to prolong their campaign or to reorganize it with the aid of new workable signs.

The decompositioned analysis of the sign properties of these advertisements made a detailed analysis possible. The socio-semiotic methodology takes the materiality of the signs and combines it with its cultural coloring. On the one hand, this avoids an idealistic view on advertisements as pure sign values floating around in a postmodern world. On the other hand, it alerts us to the limits of quantification. Mere calculations of frequencies does not take into account the full content layer of the advertisement signs. Both are required to get an idea of the construction process of the signs. My analysis showed a sample in which the luxury connotation was created on safe grounds. Although several codes created ideological sign values, most of the advertisements contained a lot of denotative information. The jewelry code and the golden code as well as the distinction code put signs into advertisements that already possess sign value. Jewelry, for example, carries a whole world of connotative meanings. Luxury advertisements do not rely completely on these codes. Usually they include signs with a more denotative side. The quality code and the
scarcity code use more signs with denotative meaning in order to trans-
functionalize the watch. The water resistance of a watch contributes to
turning the product into a luxury but it is in itself a denotative meaning.
The same goes for the mentioning of prices or selling points. This indicates
that luxury selling is more than selling dreams. When high prices are
involved, connotative sign values as such are not sufficient.

Notes

1. As an exception, I can name here the work of the philosopher Christopher Berry who
presented a rather sociological analysis of the luxury concept in the first chapter of
The Idea of Luxury: A Conceptual and Historical Investigation (Berry 1994).
2. I narrow the scope of my research to material culture and luxury. Emotional states
that are termed 'luxury' will not be considered (e.g., statements such as 'Quietness is
a luxury these days').
3. SR is being used as the abbreviation of signifier, SD is the signified.
4. Concept derived from the sociology of knowledge of Berger and Luckmann (Berger
and Luckmann 1966).
5. Saussure did not use in his first text the words 'signifier' and 'signified'. In this fragment
he uses 'signal' for the first and 'signification' for the latter.
6. This does not mean that all members of a certain culture do share the same knowledge
of all existing codes. One must have learnt a code in order to be able to make the
signifier-signified connections implied by the code.
7. There is a sharp distinction to be made between the product and its brand. Of course,
the Rolex brand can have a denotative luxury meaning.
8. According to Gottdiener (1995: 172), material culture can only possess meaning in
two ways: or it is constructed in isolation by the personal use of an individual. The
meaning of the object then is exclusively personal and research should be done there
on a more psychological level. Or meaning can be constructed within social processes
of groups, social categories, or subcultures. Our research of material culture deals with
the analysis of that kind of meaning.
9. Availability was a main selection criterion in arriving at the original twenty magazines.
All magazines were archived at the Antwerp city library. Only one magazine was
consulted at the archive of a publisher (also located in Antwerp).
10. This concept is derived from H. Leibenstein. The Veblen effect is an economic phenom-
enon in which a demand for a certain product increases not because of a lower price
but on the contrary because of a higher one (Leibenstein 1950: 189).
11. The Comité Colbert was created in 1954 by Jean-Jacques Guerlain. It is a grouping
of French luxury companies promoting their prestigious brands throughout the world.
12. Another classifying possibility was the comparison of the magazine's own role defini-
tion. They all present some texts from which one can deduct some ideal types. I believe,
however, that this method would incorporate the ideological image these magazines
have of themselves and which they want to project.
13. See, for example, the McKinsey report on the French luxury industry (1990).
14. My sample consists only of units appearing in December or June.
15. An important code that was present was the gender code in which watches are being
sexualized. Since this code does not lead to the transfunctionalization of the watch
into luxury, I did not give any further details about its appearance in the form of the expression.
16. An important comment might be that Belgium is such a small country that presenting twenty addresses in an advertisement carries more weight than twenty addresses in the United States.

References


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