

Crafting Brand Identity in the Fashion Industry: A Linguistic Analysis of Web-based Company Communication

Belinda Crawford Camiciottoli

Abstract

This paper explores the construction of brand identity in the fashion industry through a linguistic analysis of the English language communications of three internationally-renowned Italian fashion brands: Valentino, Dolce & Gabbana and Giorgio Armani. Three datasets were compiled from web-based communications of each fashion brand and subsequently analysed with text mining software to extract keywords and descriptive adjectives that reflected facets of brand identity. The results indicate that the three brands present broadly similar lexical profiles that are closely aligned with fashion products, designers and events. At the same time, there were interesting differences in terms of the attributes of identity that each individual brand chose to highlight. The findings are useful for understanding more about how companies seek to utilise web-based communications to shape brand identity in an increasingly globalised marketplace.

Keywords: corporate communication, company websites, brand identity, text mining.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the notion of identity and how it is constructed has become a topic of considerable interest (cf. De Fina 2003; Van De Mieroop 2007). Some research on identity in professional settings has been undertaken from a social constructivist perspective, paying particular attention to the interactional context in which communication takes place. For example, Ho (2010) and Holmes (2005) have shown how professionals use linguistic and discursive resources to construct multi-faceted identities, drawing on personal, social and workplace identities in order to effectively respond to the demands of their professions.

In the corporate world, identity may be reflected in the defining attributes and values that a company strives to communicate, often described as its *corporate identity* (Belasen 2008). Companies also aim to establish *brand identity*, i.e. a set of unique meanings and associations in the consumer's mind that a company aspires to create and to maintain over time (Aaker 2003). Keller (1993) classifies brand associations as attributes of the product itself (product related), or attributes linked to the purchase and consumption of the product, such as information about price or sales outlets (non-product related). However, brand associations may also be less tangible in nature. For example consumers may perceive brands in terms of their experiences with a product, or the imagery, feelings, and attitudes that they have in relation to a product (Broniarczyk and Alba 1994). Brand associations are expressed through linguistic choices that encode opinions and evaluations, often in the form of adjectives such as elegant, strong, or modern (Keller 2003). According to Da Silva and Syed Alwi (2008: 119), "a positive corporate brand will help a company achieve higher levels of performance". For this reason, companies dedicate considerable efforts towards promoting a set of strong and positive associations among consumers in order to steer perceptions of brand identity in the desired direction.

To establish and maintain a successful brand, companies must also be able to effectively communicate its identity. Corporate websites have become important communicative channels through which a company seeks to position itself as standing out from its competitors and thus exert influence on consumers (Salvi, Turnbull, Pontesilli 2007). According to Madhavaram and Appan (2010), web-based marketing communications found on company websites where consumers proactively seek out information now play an important role in shaping attitudes towards brands. Thus, it is increasingly important for companies to design websites in which the desired brand identity clearly emerges. Corporate websites also play a key role in conveying brand identity within the context of globalisation. Salvi, Turnbull and Pontesilli (2007) found that British company websites and English versions of Italian company websites showed a number of differences in language choices used to present and promote brands, which seemed to reflect underlying differences in cultural values and lifestyles.

This paper aims to shed light on how brand identity is constructed in the fashion industry through a linguistic analysis of the English language web-based communications of three leading, globally competitive Italian high-fashion brands: Valentino, Dolce & Gabbana and Giorgio Armani. The fashion industry provides a particularly interesting backdrop for investigating brand identity. Indeed, fashion brands are often identified with iconic personalities and the world of luxury, thus offering potentially rich and well-articulated forms of brand-related communication (Xun and Reynolds 2010).

2. Methodology

Textual datasets were compiled from various types of web-based communications of each of the three fashion brands: Valentino (6,322 words), Dolce & Gabbana (6,765 words) and Giorgio Armani (9,749 words). The texts included presentational information, brand-related press releases and non-financial narrative found on the companies' websites and in annual reports, as well as interviews with house designers published on mainstream media Internet sources.

The three datasets were then analysed with *Wmatrix* (Rayson 2008), a corpus analysis and comparison tool. *Wmatrix* is capable of extracting keywords from a corpus by comparing frequencies of lexical items with those found in a larger normative corpus, i.e. the British National Corpus (BNC) sampler of spoken English, which is incorporated into the software. In addition, *Wmatrix* can perform part-of-speech tagging which enables the generation of exhaustive lists of open word classes (e.g. adjectives), from which items of interest may come to the surface. These types of analysis can be interpreted as corpus-driven as they do not initiate with pre-determined lists of search items, but instead discover items as they emerge during the process of corpus elaboration (Tognini Bonelli 2001). The extraction of keywords and descriptive adjectives from each corpus can provide insights into the brand identity that each company seeks to promote, in terms of product related, non-product related and intangible brand associations (Keller 1993; Broniarczyk and Alba 1994).

3. Results and discussion

A keyword analysis of the three datasets was performed to suggest a broad picture of the brand identity that the companies seek to define. The results are illustrated by keyword clouds generated by *Wmatrix* (Rayson 2008) and reproduced in Figure 1 (Valentino), Figure 2 (Dolce & Gabbana) and Figure 3 (Giorgio Armani). The clouds contain words that all have statistically higher frequencies when compared to the BNC normative corpus as described above. Statistical significance at the .01 level is determined by the log-likelihood measure incorporated in *Wmatrix*. Although all the words in the clouds are significantly more frequent in comparison with the BNC normative corpus, those in larger fonts have particularly high frequencies across the three corpora.

FIGURE 1

Keyword cloud of Valentino web-based communications



FIGURE 2

Keyword cloud of Dolce & Gabbana web-based communications



FIGURE 3



The remaining items in the three keyword clouds show substantial alignment across all three fashion brands, reflecting attributes related mainly to the product (Keller 1993). This is seen in highly significant keywords such as *collection*, *couture*, *dresses*, *jackets*, *fabrics*, *leather*,

¹ Alessandra Facchinetti, Maria Grazia Chiuri and Paolo Piccioli are leading designers that have been associated with the Valentino Fashion Group.

and *velvet*. It seems that all three Italian luxury fashion brands share a common strategy to broadly define their identities through the types and distinctive qualities of their products.

To gain additional insights into the brand identities of the three companies, an analysis was performed on the descriptive adjectives found in each dataset. The *Wmatrix* part-of-speech tagging tool enabled the retrieval of all adjectives along with their relative percentages of each corpus. The top twenty descriptive adjectives found in each dataset of company web-based communications are shown in Table 1 (figures in parentheses refer to percentages).

TABLE 1
Top twenty adjectives in company web-based communications

Valentino	Dolce & Gabbana	Giorgio Armani
new (0.22)	black (0.33)	new (0.41)
red (0.19)	printed (0.33)	grey (0.18)
modern (0.17)	white (0.22)	black (0.15)
international (0.14)	new (0.21)	blue (0.11)
contemporary (0.13)	tartan (0.21)	contemporary (0.11)
global (0.11)	blue (0.18)	exclusive (0.10)
young (0.11)	skinny (0.18)	glossy (0.10)
fine (0.09)	different (0.16)	retail (0.10)
big (0.08)	grey (0.12)	short (0.10)
classic (0.08)	voluminous (0.12)	slim (0.10)
distinctive (0.08)	brown (0.10)	unexpected (0.10)
elegant (0.08)	classic (0.10)	formal (0.09)
feminine (0.08)	contrasting (0.10)	important (0.09)
iconic (0.08)	golden (0.10)	precise (0.09)
rich (0.08)	long (0.10)	sophisticated (0.09)
white (0.08)	military (0.10)	aesthetic (0.08)
American (0.06)	red (0.10)	long (0.08)
creative (0.06)	chunky (0.09)	natural (0.08)
important (0.06)	loose (0.09)	single (0.08)
Italian (0.06)	young (0.09)	white (0.08)

An examination of the lists reveals clusters of adjectives that convey certain facets of brand identity. To some extent, the web-based communications of all three brands promote an identity based on the theme of modernity, as seen in the shared presence of adjectives such as new, contemporary, modern and young. At the same time,

the adjective lists reflect some facets of identity that are unique for each brand. For example, *classic, elegant, feminine, white* and *rich* convey a sense of femininity in Valentino's brand identity. The top adjectives of Dolce & Gabbana's web communications suggest an identity characterised by trendy 'edginess' and stark alternatives, e.g., *black, white, skinny, voluminous, loose, chunky, contrasting* and *different*. Giorgio Armani instead favours a brand identity linked to the idea of exclusivity, seen in adjectives such as *exclusive, unexpected, glossy, sophisticated* and *aesthetic*.

Of particular interest was the lack of emphasis on 'Italianness' as a culturally-oriented facet of brand identity. In Valentino web-based communications, the adjective Italian ranked at the bottom of the top twenty list with only four instances, and was even preceded by the adjectives international and American. Moreover, the adjective Italian did not even rank among the top twenty in Dolce & Gabbana and Giorgio Armani web-based communications, with a total of only two and four occurrences, respectively. This is somewhat surprising considering that the Italian identity of these three brands continues to be perceived quite prominently among global fashion consumers (Crawford Camiciottoli, Ranfagni, Guercini, forthcoming). To gain additional insights, all concordances of the adjective Italian generated by *Wmatrix* were examined qualitatively. As can be seen in Figure 4, six instances were used to generically describe nationality or geographic location (lines 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10), while only four reflected a positive connotation of 'Italianness' in the context of fashion (lines 1, 2, 7, 9).

FIGURE 4
Concordances of the adjective Italian for the three corpora

1	he pure freedom of comfort; where Italian know-how is very much th
2	llections, made from high quality Italian fabrics, can be worn on all o
3	which breaks in the July issue of Italian Vogue, has a new photograp
4	ho showed up to support his fellow Italian . The clothes at times look
5	ister and brother in the northern Italian town of Piacenza. In 1957, fo
6	ward presented to Mr Armani by the Italian Presidente della Repubbli
7	tatus as a major representative of Italian Quality worldwide. In 2008,
8	a, red, coral and orange from an Italian garden, seen on walks along t
9	same time inspired by traditional Italian tailoring. This collection ref
10	worked with. Why are so few young Italian graduates/designers settin

It could be that these companies are transitioning towards a more international identity in response to an increasingly competitive globalised market with a multicultural customer base, and thus are beginning to place less emphasis on the 'Italianness'. Segre Reinach (2005: 47) affirms that "Italian designers above all have been capable in both a concrete and symbolic manner of interpreting Western society's aesthetic demands and desire for luxury". However, the 'made in Italy' system may be losing some ground, also reflected in the fact that a number of high-end Italian fashion brands now manufacture products in other countries where the cost of labour is lower, among which are Valentino in Egypt, Giorgio Armani in Eastern Europe (Chadha and Husband 2006) and Dolce & Gabbana in Tunisia². A greater understanding of a potential shift away from a strong Italian brand identity could be achieved through additional research based on interviews with marketing strategists of the three Italian fashion brands in question and focus group discussions with consumers of these brands.

4. Concluding remarks

The findings of this study have provided some insights into how companies can utilise web-based communications to shape and perhaps shift perceptions of brand identity in order to respond to an increasingly globalised and multi-cultural consumer base. The three Italian luxury fashion brands considered here gave less prominence to 'Italianness' than what might be expected considering traditional perceptions of the strength of the 'made in Italy' image.

The corpus-driven methodology that was used in this study to reveal new patterns in the brand identities of the three fashion houses could be applied in larger scale studies, also focusing on other industries or products where web-based communications are a key component of the corporate message. On a practical level, the methodology could be useful to company marketing strategists as a relatively straightforward and cost-effective way to monitor not only the attributes of brand identity they wish to promote through their own web-based communications, but also those of their competitors.

² *The Report: Emerging Tunisia 2007*, published by the Oxford Business Group.

The present study has focused on brand identity from the perspective of the company. However, as suggested above, it would also be worthwhile to carry out consumer-oriented research on this topic, utilising methods such as interviews, focus groups or sales data analysis which are beyond the scope of this study. In this way, companies could understand more about potential mismatch between desired vs. perceived brand identity, and also how perceived brand identity may impact purchasing intention or consumption patterns. This knowledge could then be used to communicate and manage brand identity in the most effective way possible.

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