



Interpreting classical arts in postmodern advertising from the perspective of intertextuality

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Abstract:

Artwork and advertising design differ in how they convey information. Art is created for its own sake, while advertising design aims to deliver persuasive messages to sell a product. Although art and advertising communicate differently, many advertisements use classical artworks to convey product meanings. The transformation of classical art as a reference for advertising reflects the phenomenon of postmodernism. By studying the characteristics of postmodernism, such as information construction and aesthetic meaning, this research explains how advertising phenomena are produced and what messages classical art can communicate through advertising. This study employed a qualitative case study approach combined with visual semiotic analysis, to examine selected advertisements that reinterpret classical artworks. Each case was analyzed to identify the processes of deconstruction and reconstruction using pastiche and parody and to interpret the intertextual meanings generated within advertising messages. The findings show that classical art is visually reconstructed in postmodern advertising to create cultural and symbolic value. Pastiche tends to strengthen luxurious and high-class brand identities by evoking artistic prestige, while parody provides humorous reinterpretations that engage broader audiences. The research concludes that intertextuality functions as a visual bridge between classical art and contemporary advertising communication, providing new ideas for creative design strategies. This study contributes to the field of visual communication design by demonstrating how classical aesthetics can be transformed into persuasive imagery in postmodern advertising.

Introduction

Postmodernism refers to the cultural reflection and criticism of modernism that emerged in the West after World War II, influencing literature, art, and architecture, and reaching its climax in the 1970s and 1980s. Postmodernism is not a theory but an understanding of the situation in the postmodern era. The era of postmodernism is known as the age of spectacles, where reality becomes imagination and imagination becomes reality (Venkatesh et al., 1993). The current advertising industry blurs the line between reality and imagination, allowing the audience to view ordinary products as idealized creations. It turns imaginary advertising persuasion and stereotyped information into a reality that must be pursued.

Today's advertising cannot just promote all the information-delivering functions of the product but must also add some ideal feelings after consumption. Reality has collapsed, and its place has been replaced by illusion or image (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993; Phillips & McQuarrie, 2010). Baudrillard

believes that postmodernity is an "illusion of reality" (Baudrillard et al., 1983). Many postmodern thinkers have attempted to define postmodernity, yet its boundaries remain fluid and context-dependent. As Hebdige (2003) argues, postmodern visuality combines fragments of earlier cultural forms into hybrid, ironic compositions that blur boundaries between art, media, and consumer culture. French postmodernist thinker François Lyotard believes that postmodernism, in its modern position, tries to present something that cannot be presented on its own in presentation; it rejects the charm of formal beauty and allows for nostalgic experiences consensus, making collective nostalgia inappropriate for things, exploring new forms of presentation that are not popular but initiate a sense of what is impossible to have in reality (Lyotard, 1984:81).

Advertising plays a dominant role in our modern lives. It has become a spatial parody and a hyper-realistic representation, serving as a model for referencing and personalizing images, lifestyles, and social structures. (Baudrillard et al., 1983). Postmodern forms of advertising no longer serve as providers of information focused on the value and quality of products. Today's advertising is more interested in manipulating desires and consumer tastes through game-like imagery techniques. What is being sold is the image, not the product. Marshal McLuhan mentioned: "The medium is the message" (McLuhan, 2017). As a medium, advertising is the message; form is the content; style is the substance; appearance is the truth.

However, despite the growing attention to postmodern advertising and intertextuality, few studies have specifically addressed how classical art is visually reconstructed to communicate new meanings in modern advertisements. Previous works have explored intertextuality (Torres, 2015), persuasion strategies (Hashem & Qtaish, 2024), and the transformation of advertising in post-digital consumer culture (Hackley & Hackley, 2021), yet they lack discussion on the transformation of classical artworks as part of branding and consumer perception. Therefore, this study aims to fill that gap by analyzing how classical art is deconstructed and reconstructed in postmodern advertising, exploring its communicative function, and the resulting cultural meanings. The research is expected to contribute to advertising design studies by providing insights into how intertextuality can enhance aesthetic and symbolic value in visual communication. The results of this research are expected to benefit the field of visual communication design by offering a deeper understanding of how intertextual references can strengthen creative strategies in advertising. In particular, it provides insights for designers and advertisers on how classical art can be transformed into persuasive visual narratives that connect cultural heritage with modern consumer appeal.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to examine how classical artworks are used in postmodern advertisements. The research selected a purposive sample of contemporary ads referencing well-known classical paintings or sculptures. The analysis followed three main steps: identifying visual elements adapted from classical art; analyzing how these elements were transformed through pastiche and parody based on intertextuality theory; and interpreting how these transformations communicate cultural and commercial meanings in advertising. The study adopted visual semiotics and intertextual analyses (Barthes, 2016; Kristeva, 2024) to explore the process of deconstruction and reconstruction within each advertisement. Visual semiotic analysis was used to interpret the meaning of visual signs, colors, gestures, and compositions in each advertisement. The study examined how these elements function as signifiers that generate cultural and symbolic meaning. This method supports the interpretation of deconstruction and reconstruction processes within the intertextual framework.

Results and Discussion



Postmodern advertising uses various images and symbols to build a world of reference. Roland Barthes believes that advertising is a rhetorical world of images, with symbols linked to the construction of themes such as success, charm, honor, beauty, and youth. (Barthes, 2016). As Baudrillard said, the original object becomes more important than the image formed by it (Baudrillard & Singer, 1990: 78). The image that acquires charisma through this process becomes more formal and real than the original object. Advertising has entered the surreal world, and its original intention is no longer to convey the sender's meaning or information to the receiver. Instead, it aims to persuade and entice recipients to consume goods based on the image. Images and imaging are vital strategies for marketing products in postmodern consumer societies.

In today's analog society, an individual's identity is no longer defined by itself but is constructed from a combination of visual signs, images, and codes surrounding the original identity. According to Heidegger, the world image is not an image of the world but an image of the world as it is perceived and seen (Levin, 2008). The product is unimportant, but the images constructed by the advertising industry through the media become the images consumers seek. Images disseminated through mass media, such as the Internet or television, are considered accurate representations. The world becomes hyper-real, media can substitute for reality, simulacra seem more powerful than reality, and what is seen on television is more potent than what is experienced personally.

Although many postmodern thinkers have attempted to establish a precise definition, postmodernity itself is still developing in response to the emergence of complex postmodern phenomena. To understand postmodernity, it is easier to view it through its salient characteristics. As (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2023) note, postmodern culture is characterized by the fluid blending of art, consumption, and digital spectacle, dissolving the line between everyday life and artistic representation.

Classic Art Advertising

In advertising development, advertisements often use classical art to convey messages. Artwork and advertisements differ in both design and communicative purpose. Art is art for its own sake, while advertising serves to promote product information. Transforming the advertising characteristics of classical art is a phenomenon of postmodernism. According to research citations, advertisements that copy or reference works of art are more profound than advertisements based on works of art (Hetsroni & Tukachinsky, 2005). Art allows consumers to escape social class and appreciate "high cultural goods" (Bourdieu, 1993). Visual art in advertising continues to enhance brand prestige and symbolic capital by transforming artistic imagery into consumer value (Schroeder, 2017). This article explores the potential of artistic advertising aesthetics by examining postmodern characteristics, such as messaging technology and aesthetic meaning. It attempts to explain the production and messaging of these advertising phenomena and analyze how they are intercepted. The classical art part is combined with the adjustments and changes made to the message delivery of today's advertising.

Intertextuality as a Characteristic of Postmodern Advertising

Intertextuality is the use of other texts to integrate the meaning of a text. It can borrow and transform an author's pre-designed text, or the reader can use another text as a reference when interpreting the text (Kristeva, 2024). Postmodern media assumes that the audience is media literate, familiar with a wide range of media references, and embraces style as a form of eclecticism. It is the combination and mixing of various forms of artists in intertextual discourse and culture into a new style (Piliang & Adlin, 2003:184). Postmodern media is transmitted not to maintain the meaning of information but to freely develop phenomena and codes. Through intertextuality, postmodern media refers to other media texts, allowing the audience to feel the entertainment and recreation of postmodern media through their familiarity.

Borrowing classic art in modern advertising can be divided into several methods. In addition to adding products and brands, there are several ways to do it, such as directly connecting the original

image, recreating a similar drawing or photo, editing and adding other drawings, or taking some unique elements from classic art (text, body gestures, color). Intertextuality defines the meaning of a work through the understanding of other texts. Pastiche and parody are two examples of intertextuality.

Depending on the message content, ads using classic works can be differentiated through pastiche and parody:

Pastiche

Pastiche is a work of art, literature, music, film, etc., that imitates previous media texts but positively uses them. Pastiche is defined in the Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms as a work that borrows elements from various other writers or certain writers in the past (Baldick, 1996). Pastiche has negative connotations, as it refers to works containing borrowed elements with weaker creativity, originality, authenticity, and freedom (Piliang & Adlin, 2003: 184). Pastiche takes the aesthetic form of text or language from various fragments of history, simultaneously bringing out the spirit of its time and turning it into the context of the past and present zeitgeist that arose and was appreciated.

In accordance with the methodology, each visual example is analyzed through the lens of deconstruction and reconstruction. The process of deconstruction involves identifying which classical elements are fragmented or modified, while reconstruction refers to the creation of new meaning through their recontextualization in modern advertising. The pictures below are from Christian Louboutin's "Lookbook" shoe advertisement in the fall of 2011. Peter Lippmann is a photographer and expert in re-photographing classic paintings, including photos of shoes or handbags. He emphasized photography and lighting techniques, creating images that closely resembled classic art. In advertising, this pair of noble shoes primarily showcases their design, which is a work of art, conveying a high cultural image and luxury. Pastiche is often criticized as "shape-rendering" because its forms tend to be superficial and lack depth of meaning (Hutcheon, 2023). Therefore, this advertisement's production focuses on making it as close to the original image as possible. Consumers can immediately understand the type of classic painting image used, the content information of classic art, and the artist's background through association. The story becomes a subsidiary position.

The classic picture below (Figure1) depicts a very young girl, beautiful, elegant, and innocent. The young girl sits under a tree with a beach landscape in the background. Her face is frontal, her eyes are looking forward, and she is playing with a small black dog in her left hand and holding a green bird in her right hand. The composition of the painting is firm, like a diagonal line, with the right hand raised and the left hand below, forming a graceful gesture. The painter explores his painting techniques, colors, fabrics, and bouquets on clothes. The entire painting technique and the simple expressions drawn within it allow the viewer to appreciate its aesthetic value. The original painting was created by Jean-Marc Nattier, a prominent 17th-century French painter known for his elegant Rococo portrait style.

The advertising image (Figure2) is a photo. The photographer imitates the painting. In addition to replacing a small black dog with a leopard-print bag as advertised, there are many other differences. The model in this advertisement is a more mature woman who wears more luxurious clothes and looks very sexy. The model sits in a more open area rather than leaning against a tree, giving an impression of independence. The overall picture gives a classic, expensive, independent, attractive, and seductive feeling. Let women enter the world of painting after seeing it. If they want this feeling, one way to achieve it is to carry this leopard print bag. The purpose of the advertising agency is to create this picture.

The image in the media becomes more important than reality. When the model is wearing a bag in the picture, the bag seems essential for creating an elegant impression. In real life, this bag is just a high-priced bag designed by a famous designer. At the same time, the image in the picture is enhanced by logos and codes, such as classic art paintings, aristocratic clothing, and the sexy and seductive appearance of women, which indirectly contribute to the image of the bag in the advertisement. Postmodern advertising combines commercial products and other imaging codes into a hyper-real



world. It becomes a reference standard for truth, allowing the audience to bring it to the real world according to this hyper-real standard.



Figure 1. "Portrait of the Marquise D'Antin" from the 17th century
Source: *Christian Louboutin Fall 2011 Lookbook*, 2011



Figure 2. Louboutin women's bag advertisement
Source: *Christian Louboutin Fall 2011 Lookbook*, 2011

This painting Figure 3 depicts the bust of a young woman. She wore black clothes that were not tight, and her hairstyle was simple. The eyes look forward, but they appear empty. The artist depicts a young girl at that time. The woman in the advertising photo (Figure 4) looks more mature. She held the shoes as a product to promote. This model wears tight, dark gray clothes and has a simple, curly hairstyle. She bent her neck slightly and looked forward. The eyes feel very interactive with the audience. His lips twitched slightly, looking confident and proud of what he had. The overall photo is taken from a closer distance than the drawing, bringing the viewer closer to the shoes. The hyper-realistic images created by the models, through the construction of postures, gestures, clothing, and classic artistic codes, make the shoes in the advertisement appear valuable. Owning this pair of shoes will bring pride to the audience. Feel. Combining coding and imaging makes the product's image more valuable than the original.



Figure 3. 19th-century "Portrait of a Girl" painting
Source: *Christian Louboutin Fall 2011 Lookbook*, 2011



Figure 4. Louboutin women's shoe advertisement
Source: *Christian Louboutin Fall 2011 Lookbook*, 2011

From the perspective of visual semiotics, there are visual signs in this kind of advertising, such as period, classic clothing, body language, and classical oil painting media. These marks give the audience an image of classic, expensive, high-end, handmade, and high-grade. Using such images in the advertising industry is to position the product. The products these advertisements promote are not just everyday necessities but are classic, elegant, unique, culturally rich, and limited in production. Therefore, these advertisements are positioned as high-end products for high-end consumers.

Parody

A parody is a media text or work that ridiculously imitates another text or work for ridicule, ironic commentary, or affectionate amusement. Parody is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as literature, art, or architecture that reflects the author's typical trends of thought and expression, is imitated humorously or even absurdly, and highlights the comical and embarrassing features of the subject. Produce interesting effects (Hutcheon, 2023). Parody makes use of text characteristics such as weaknesses, shortcomings, seriousness, and even reputation, manipulating the text to construct ideals and aesthetic values (Piliang & Adlin, 2003: 192). Linda Hutcheon, an expert on postmodernism theory, said: "Parody pays attention to exploring, finding, and displaying the 'differences' of the reference text (Hutcheon, 2023).

The following examples illustrate how visual intertextuality operates within postmodern advertising, connecting theory with practical image analysis. "Mona Lisa" is an oil painting by Leonardo da Vinci from 1500 (Figure 5). It is a very famous classic picture worldwide. The enigmatic smiles he painted were so attractive that his painting skills attracted many experts to investigate. This painting depicts a half-length image of a woman and is the earliest drawing of a reclining posture. This painting

differs from previous ones, which mostly depicted straight and rigid postures, with only the head and upper body drawn. The figure in this painting is sitting and resting his folded hands on the seat's armrests, showing a complete half-body form from head to waist, establishing a new basic structure of portraiture. At the same time, he developed a very mysterious, light smile. Leonardo da Vinci's painting techniques and the mysterious expressions he captured allow viewers to appreciate the painting's aesthetic value. The artwork was painted by Leonardo da Vinci (1503–1506), a Renaissance master whose realistic depiction and sfumato technique revolutionized portraiture.

The advertising picture below (Figure 6) is an edited picture of the Mona Lisa. Next to the woman in the advertising picture is a man smiling and hugging the Mona Lisa with his right hand. Underneath the picture is "No More Single," an advertisement for an online dating service. Editors in the advertising industry led viewers to think that the Mona Lisa had a partner. The design of the advertising image transforms the meaning of the picture. The mystery, elegance, classiness, and classical value of the "Mona Lisa" picture are transformed into a humorous form. The advertising industry has used a mysterious 500-year-old image of a single person to create an online dating service that can help women who have been single for centuries successfully find a partner. Parody advertising finds flaws in the art's perfect story, turning the picture into a product still lacking in the advertisement. This advertising product is the perfect solution for transforming into a classic work of art. References to elegant works of art that the audience has experienced before give them a deeper feel for the advertisement.



Figure 5. Classic oil painting of "Mona Lisa" from the 15th century
Source: *Mona Lisa*, n.d.



Figure 6. An advertisement for online dating services borrows the image of Mona Lisa
Source: Humbert, 2011

The "Thinker" statue (Figure 7) is a powerful, muscular male. He bent over, bent his knees, and held his chin with his right hand as he thought. This statue narrates the existence of man and the things he thinks about. The story behind the statue and the careful muscle and expression of each statue

allow the viewer to appreciate his beauty. The sculpture was created by Auguste Rodin in 1880 as part of his larger work, *The Gates of Hell*, symbolizing intellectual reflection and human existence. In the advertising picture (Figure 8), there is a statue imitating the posture of the "Thinker" statue sitting on the toilet. The whole activity has shifted from a person feeling intelligent and thoughtful to sitting on the toilet, being very idle, and engaging in activities that do not require intelligence. The meaning of these changes makes people feel humorous. Substantial statues and sculptures with profound concepts were less than perfect. Advertisements promote products that become answers to classic works of art. Surreal ads become real answers.



Figure 7. The 18th-century "The Thinker" statue
Source: *The Thinker*, n.d.

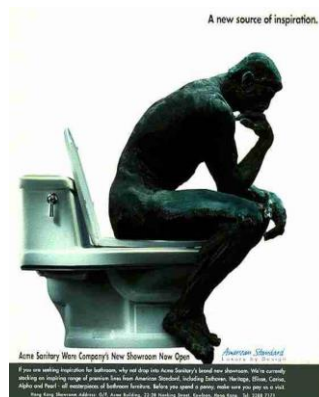


Figure 8. The American Standard toilet advertisement borrows the sculpture "The Thinker"
Source: Humbert, 2011

This kind of advertisement not only contains elements of classical art but also incorporates humor. They are created by taking an original image and replacing some parts, creating a strange and exciting impression. The purpose of advertising that imitates classical art is to make the message more salient, helping consumers remember the differences between the two better. This aims to provide a friendly feeling while reducing interpersonal distance and fostering a social atmosphere. Parody elements are generally associated with young people, urban fashion, and democratic societies. This finding aligns with contemporary research showing that visual social media content strongly influences younger audiences' purchasing behavior, particularly within fashion and lifestyle advertising (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). These advertisements take the aesthetic value of classical art and turn it into humorous and high-artistic value. The advertising positioning of these products is mid-range, which is more suitable for young people.

Postmodern advertising erases the boundaries between art and life, blending space and time within a particular medium. Classic art, such as paintings and sculptures, is reworked into today's

advertising formats. Hyper-realistic impressions seem possible, attracting viewers and making them feel as if they are inside the picture. Classic art allows the audience to appreciate the technology in the work from a third-person perspective. However, in advertising, the audience becomes the first to replace the model in the advertisement. Viewers can unconsciously imagine themselves wearing the advertised products and feel the construction of codes and images that make them want to own the objects, truly experiencing the imagery.

Conclusions

The difference between classic art and post-modern art advertising is that the latter is more commercially oriented and closely tied to the design of the product or brand. In the subtle design of post-modern art advertisements, changes in some models' eyes, expressions, and body postures seem to communicate spiritually with the audience. The difference lies between the creation of artworks and the creation of advertisements. Artworks are for art, while advertisements convey messages to the audience. As Jameson's highly relevant thoughts view the transformation of capitalist culture, creating the so-called "commodity society" or "consumer society," art in its era was high culture, "art for art's sake," in the current postmodern era, it has become "art for art commodities."

From the perspective of information content, pastiche advertisements pick up the artistic spirit of that era, making it difficult for the audience to understand the meaning expressed in the advertisement. Pastiche ads are mainly used for high-end brands, allowing high-end consumers to appreciate the meaning of these ads. Parody advertising adds elements of humor to classical artistic elements. Since average consumers are less likely to appreciate the significance of classical art, they will also understand and appreciate the humor and information brought in advertisements based on their personal experience of textual references.

In classical art, the meaning of the work is given significance by the background and story of the painter. However, in advertising, the story and background of the advertiser are ownerless, and the meaning of the advertisement depends entirely on the individual interpretation of the audience. As Barthes said, "The author is dead", it means that the audience (consumer) is not passive. The text (advertisement) of postmodern art breaks the authoritative center of the author's imagination. However, it allows the audience to think independently, allowing the advertisement's content to provide an open space with high plasticity, and elements can be chosen and integrated at will. The modern presentation of diverse colors enriches the meaning of the times.

This research concludes that postmodern advertising transforms classical art through the processes of deconstruction and reconstruction, producing new meanings that connect luxury, identity, and cultural nostalgia. Pastiche tends to elevate high-end brands by associating them with classic aesthetics, while parody reinterprets art humorously to engage broader audiences. This study contributes to understanding how intertextuality functions as a creative and cultural strategy in visual communication. Future research could expand the dataset to include digital and interactive advertisements across different cultural contexts, exploring how classical art continues to evolve visually and conceptually in globalized media environments.

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