Communicating Luxury Through the Concept of Unconventional Luxury via Imagery Advertising

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Abstract

This study examines imagery advertising's effectiveness in communicating unconventional luxury concepts and their correlation with consumer perceptions of mass-market products. The research investigates how visual narratives incorporating elements of transformation, sustainability, fantasy dreams, escapism, and high cultural capital influence young adults' luxury perceptions in Thailand. Employing a quantitative approach, the study analyzed responses from 400 participants aged 18-30 to AI-generated imagery ads across automotive, electronics, and consumer goods sectors. Results demonstrated that imagery advertising effectively communicated unconventional luxury concepts, with participants showing clear recognition of intended narratives. Analysis using Spearman's rank correlation coefficient revealed positive relationships between these elements and perceived luxury levels. These findings suggest that while imagery advertising can successfully convey unconventional luxury concepts, their impact on elevating mass-market products' luxury perceptions varies in strength. The study contributes to marketing communication practice by providing empirical evidence for effective visual storytelling strategies in luxury brand development, particularly in emerging markets targeting young consumers, while highlighting innovative approaches to bridge the gap between mass-market offerings and luxury perceptions.

Keywords: Unconventional Luxury, Imagery Advertising, Consumer Perception, Marketing Communication

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การสื่อสารความหรูหราตามแนวคิดความหรูหราแนวใหม่ (Unconventional Luxury) ผ่านการโฆษณาด้วยภาพ

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บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้ศึกษาประสิทธิผลของการโฆษณาด้วยภาพในการสื่อสารแนวคิดความหรูหราแนวใหม่ (Unconventional Luxury) และความสัมพันธ์กับการรับรู้ของผู้บริโภคที่มีต่อสินค้าตลาดมวลชน การวิจัยสำรวจว่าการเล่าเรื่องด้วยภาพที่สื่อสารองค์ประกอบด้านการเปลี่ยนแปลง ความยั่งยืน จินตนาการเชิงแฟนตาซี การหลีกหนี และระดับทุนทางวัฒนธรรมที่สูง ส่งผลต่อการรับรู้ความหรูหราของกลุ่มคนรุ่นใหม่ในประเทศไทยอย่างไร งานวิจัยนี้ใช้ระเบียบวิธีวิจัยเชิงปริมาณ วิเคราะห์คำตอบจากผู้ให้ข้อมูล 400 คน อายุ 18–30 ปี ที่มีต่อภาพโฆษณาที่สร้างด้วยปัญญาประดิษฐ์ในกลุ่มสินค้ายานยนต์ อิเล็กทรอนิกส์ และอุปโภคบริโภค ผลการวิจัยแสดงให้เห็นว่าการโฆษณาด้วยภาพสามารถสื่อสารแนวคิดความหรูหราแนวใหม่ได้อย่างมีประสิทธิผล โดยผู้ร่วมวิจัยสามารถรับรู้เรื่องราวที่ต้องการสื่อสารได้อย่างชัดเจน การวิเคราะห์ด้วยสัมประสิทธิ์สหสัมพันธ์แบบสเปียร์แมนพบความสัมพันธ์เชิงบวกระหว่างองค์ประกอบเหล่านี้กับระดับการรับรู้ความหรูหรา ผลการศึกษาชี้ให้เห็นว่าแม้การโฆษณาด้วยภาพจะสามารถสื่อสารแนวคิดความหรูหราแนวใหม่ได้อย่างมีประสิทธิผล แต่ผลกระทบต่อการยกระดับการรับรู้ความหรูหราของสินค้าตลาดมวลชนมีความแตกต่างกันในด้านความเข้มแข็งของความสัมพันธ์ งานวิจัยนี้มีส่วนสำคัญต่อการพัฒนาแนวทางการสื่อสารการตลาด โดยนำเสนอหลักฐานเชิงประจักษ์สำหรับกลยุทธ์การเล่าเรื่องด้วยภาพในการพัฒนาแบรนด์หรูหรา โดยเฉพาะในตลาดเกิดใหม่ที่มุ่งเป้าหมายไปยังผู้บริโภคกลุ่มคนรุ่นใหม่ พร้อมทั้งชี้ให้เห็นถึงศักยภาพของแนวทางการสื่อสารเชิงนวัตกรรมในการลดช่องว่างระหว่างการสื่อสารทางการตลาดของสินค้าตลาดมวลชนกับการรับรู้ความหรูหรา

คำสำคัญ: ความหรูหราแนวใหม่ การโฆษณาด้วยภาพ การรับรู้ของผู้บริโภค การสื่อสารการตลาด

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Introduction

The luxury market continues to grow, with Bain & Company (2023) projecting an 8–10% increase for personal luxury goods in 2023, reaching $395–401 billion. Emerging markets like Thailand are expected to see a 30% rise to $13 billion in 2024 (Inside Luxury, 2024). This growth reflects evolving consumer values that prioritize excellent products, self–reward, and social causes, challenging brands to develop consumer–focused marketing strategies.

'Unconventional luxury' represents a shift from traditional luxury marketing's focus on affluence and elitism to emphasizing consumer experiences and processes. This concept encompasses subjective, personalized values and includes intangible services, everyday pleasures, and common goods that carry special meaning (Banister et al., 2020). However, research has not adequately addressed how these concepts can be effectively communicated through marketing strategies, particularly for mass–market products.

A significant knowledge gap exists in understanding imagery advertising's effectiveness in conveying unconventional luxury concepts. While previous studies highlighted imagery's role in luxury advertising (Amatulli et al., 2018; Ok, 2018), they primarily focused on traditional luxury brands. Thus, limited empirical evidence exists on how imagery advertising can communicate unconventional luxury elements to elevate mass–market products, especially in emerging markets where luxury and mass–market boundaries blur. Despite visual communication's growing importance in digital media (Kim & Ko, 2010; Kumar, 2022), research has not thoroughly examined how unconventional luxury narratives influence consumer perceptions through imagery advertising.

This study addresses these gaps by examining imagery advertising's effectiveness in communicating unconventional luxury concepts for mass–market products and analyzing how specific elements – transformation, sustainability, fantasy dreams, escapism, and high cultural capital – influence young Thai adults' luxury perceptions. Using AI–generated imagery ads, this research provides empirical evidence for effective visual storytelling strategies in luxury marketing communication, offering practical insights for marketers navigating the evolving landscape where traditional boundaries between luxury and mass–market communication continue to dissolve.

Literature Review

Narrative Transportation Theory and Imagery Advertising in Luxury Marketing

Narrative Transportation

The theory of narrative transportation (Green & Brock, 2000) provides the theoretical foundation for understanding how consumers engage with luxury brand narratives. This theory explains how consumers become immersed in stories through advertisements, creating powerful connections with brands and products. The transportation process involves three key components: attention, imagery, and feelings, working together to reduce critical thinking and increase persuasion through affective responses rather than logical evaluations. When consumers are transported into narratives, they develop stronger emotional bonds and more favorable brand attitudes than when processing information analytically.

The effectiveness of narrative transportation in luxury marketing stems from its ability to create meaningful consumer experiences. Escalas (2007) demonstrated that advertisements guiding customers in constructing narratives can transform ordinary products into extraordinary experiences. This transformation occurs as consumers mentally simulate using the product, leading to self-brand connections and enhanced product evaluations. Ok (2018) showed how this process becomes particularly powerful in luxury contexts, where visual storytelling can trigger both emotional and cognitive responses simultaneously.

Visual Storytelling in Luxury Brands

Building on narrative transportation theory, luxury brand advertising plays a crucial role in conveying brand identity through visual narratives (Kim et al., 2016; Phillips & McQuarrie, 2010). Recent research reveals that picture-based ads excel at creating compelling stories and influencing product judgments (Grigsbya et al., 2022). Amatulli et al. (2018) specifically demonstrated the effectiveness of imagery in luxury advertising, showing how visual narratives allow consumers to interpret messages and shape their luxury value perceptions in personally meaningful ways. Some studies have explored innovative approaches, such as Phillips & McQuarrie's (2010). examination of grotesque or surreal images in luxury advertising, finding that unconventional visuals can create distinctive brand impressions and emotional responses.

Importantly, the rise of social media has significantly expanded imagery advertising's reach and impact on brand perception (Grigsbya et al., 2022); Kim & Ko, 2010), offering new opportunities

for visual storytelling across platforms. Atwal & Williams (2009) emphasized how successful luxury brands create immersive brand experiences through strategic visual communication, noting that brand identity must align with both functional and emotional consumer expectations. While traditional luxury brands effectively maintain their identity through stories of heritage and craftsmanship (Cervellon & Coudriet, 2013; Ok, 2018), research on communicating unconventional luxury characteristics through imagery remains limited. This gap becomes particularly significant as luxury marketing evolves beyond traditional status symbols toward more intangible attributes and emotional connections. To address this gap, we must first understand how the concept of luxury itself has evolved.

The Evolution of Unconventional Luxury

Unconventional luxury represents a paradigm shift in luxury marketing communication. While traditional luxury emphasizes affluence and conspicuous consumption, unconventional luxury focuses on inconspicuous consumption and experiential value (Thomsen et al., 2020). This shift aligns with Silverstein and Silverstein et al.'s (2005) concept of 'new luxury' – where premium products become accessible to the middle class while emphasizing emotional benefits. The concept introduces new ways of thinking about luxury that go beyond traditional wealth-focused approaches, creating fundamental changes in how luxury is defined and perceived in the marketplace.

A recent study by Kumar (2022) attempted to draw clear lines between traditional and unconventional luxury, highlighting how modern luxury experiences extend beyond product attributes to encompass personal transformation and social connection. This evolution aligns with changing consumer preferences, particularly among younger generations who often value experiences and authenticity over traditional status symbols. Llamas and Thomsen (2016) demonstrated how luxury experiences facilitate self-transformation and social connection, while Banister et al. (2020) showed how luxury marketing has shifted focus from possession to intangible experiences in everyday life.

Contemporary luxury consumption patterns present both opportunities and challenges for marketing communication. As luxury brands increasingly focus on subjective experiences and perceived benefits rather than physical product characteristics, understanding how to effectively communicate luxury requires examining key elements that distinguish it from unconventional luxury and mass-market offerings.

Key Differentiating Elements of Unconventional Luxury

Building on the evolution of luxury concepts and the importance of effective communication, research has identified three key aspects that distinguish unconventional luxury from mass-market products. These elements not only characterize unconventional luxury but also form the foundation for our research hypotheses: transformation vs. functionality, dream vs. reality, and high vs. low cultural capital.

Transformation vs. Functionality

Transformation emerges as a crucial differentiator. Unlike mass-market products focused on functionality, unconventional luxury is sought for its transformative potential (Richins, 2017). Holmqvist et al. (2020) identified two distinct types of transformation: personal identity shifts and societal transformation through sustainability. Their research showed how luxury experiences can facilitate profound personal changes, affecting not only self-perception but also interpersonal relationships and life satisfaction. Kapferer and Michaut's (2015) research demonstrated how sustainability has become a central element in luxury perception, showing that sustainability-focused communication strategies are increasingly effective in luxury marketing, particularly among environmentally conscious consumers. This understanding forms the basis for our first two hypotheses (*H1* and *H2*), suggesting that both personal transformation narratives and sustainability narratives positively correlate with luxury perceptions.

Dream vs. Reality

The dream dimension distinguishes unconventional luxury from mass-market offerings through its emphasis on aspiration and escape. While mass products serve practical purposes, unconventional luxury enables dream actualization (Dubois & Paternault, 1995). Flueckiger (2009) demonstrated how fantasy in advertising creates dreamlike atmospheres through artistic expression, showing how abstract visuals and imaginative scenarios can transform conventional product presentations into compelling artistic narratives. Ok (2018) further showed how fantasy elements in luxury advertising evoke consumer empathy and create conceivable aspirations. Simultaneously, Cova et al. (2018) and Bauer et al. (2011) highlighted the importance of everyday escapism, showing how luxury experiences can provide meaningful diversions in daily life. Their research revealed how even mundane moments can be transformed into luxury experiences through proper framing and context. These insights lead to our third and fourth hypotheses (*H3* and *H4*), proposing positive relationships between both fantasy and escapist elements with luxury perceptions.

High vs. Low Cultural Capital

Cultural capital significantly influences how luxury is perceived and consumed. Mass-market products typically require minimal cultural capital for appreciation. Holt (1998) showed that high cultural capital individuals prioritize experiences and creativity over outward displays of wealth, valuing items for their ability to enhance their lives rather than adhering to specific brand images. This preference reflects a sophisticated understanding of consumption that values knowledge, authenticity, and personal growth. In contrast, those in the low quintile of cultural capital (LCC), especially those with low incomes, tend to gravitate towards products that are perceived as traditionally luxurious, focusing more on established luxury brands and visible status symbols. This understanding supports our fifth hypothesis (*H5*), positing that communications demonstrating advanced skills and knowledge positively correlate with luxury perceptions.

This comprehensive literature review reveals how narrative transportation through imagery advertising can effectively communicate unconventional luxury elements to enhance mass-market products' perceived luxury value. The identified elements of transformation, sustainability, fantasy, escapism, and cultural capital provide a robust theoretical framework for examining how imagery advertising can elevate mass-market products' luxury perceptions among young consumers in emerging markets. This framework is particularly relevant given the evolving nature of luxury consumption and the growing importance of visual communication in digital and social media contexts.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the effectiveness of imagery advertising in communicating unconventional luxury concepts for mass-market products influence young adult consumers' perceptions of luxury in Thailand.

2. To investigate the correlations between specific elements of unconventional luxury and consumers' perceptions of luxury levels when applied to mass-market products through imagery advertising.

Hypotheses

Based on the literature review and research objectives, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: The transformation on identity shift or life-altering experiences positively correlates with consumers' perceptions of the level of luxury in mass-market products when communicated through imagery advertising.

H2: The societal transformation induced by active engagement in sustainability positively correlates with consumers' perceptions of the level of luxury in mass-market products when communicated through imagery advertising.

H3: The presence of fantasy dreams is positively associated with consumers' perceptions of luxury levels in mass-market products when communicated through imagery advertising.

H4: The existence of mundane dreams as a form of escapism positively correlates with consumers' perceptions of luxury levels in mass-market products when communicated through imagery advertising.

H5: High cultural capital, demonstrated through advanced skills and knowledge, positively correlates with consumers' perceptions of luxury levels in mass-market products when communicated through imagery advertising.

Research Scope

Population

The population comprises young adult university students aged 18–30 in Bangkok, Thailand. This demographic represents a crucial emerging consumer segment in luxury markets, as Giovannini et al. (2015) identified Generation Y's significant role in shaping luxury consumption through their distinctive values and digital literacy. Their engagement with social media platforms and evolving perceptions of luxury align with changing consumption dynamics where traditional status symbols are being redefined by personal experiences (Kumar, 2022). Their forming brand preferences and evolving luxury perceptions offer valuable insights into the effectiveness of innovative marketing strategies in the luxury market landscape.

Sample

A sample of 400 participants was selected based on guidelines by Yamane (1967). While Holt's (1998) framework emphasizes the distinction between high cultural capital (HCC) and low cultural capital (LCC) consumers, this study avoids pre-screening based on cultural capital to prevent sampling bias and artificial distinctions. Instead, the study allows natural variations in cultural capital to emerge organically, providing a more authentic representation of how luxury concepts are perceived. These variations in cultural capital are captured through demographic factors such as academic fields, educational levels, and income brackets.

The study employed a combined stratified and purposive sampling approach, with stratification based on student type (undergraduate and graduate) and academic fields (Humanities/Social Sciences, Science/Technology, Health Sciences) in order to ensure balanced representation across disciplines. Participants were required to be currently enrolled in Bangkok universities and able to complete the Thai questionnaire.
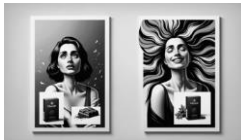
Research Methods

Questionnaire

An online survey was distributed through university channels using Google Forms, comprising demographic questions and evaluations of imagery ads, each linked to a specific hypothesis about unconventional luxury. The study employed a consistent three-question structure across all hypotheses to assess different aspects of unconventional luxury perception. For each hypothesis, participants evaluated: (1) whether the ad communicated a specific narrative (e.g., life-changing experiences, sustainability, fantasy dreams, escapism, or advanced skills); (2) whether the product appeared more luxurious due to these narrative elements; and (3) whether they perceived the ad as luxury. All perceptions were rated on a 5-point Likert scale. This systematic approach allowed for a comprehensive evaluation of how different unconventional luxury concepts influence consumer perceptions, from narrative recognition to overall luxury evaluation, while facilitating comparative analysis across the various dimensions examined in the study.

The study used AI-generated imagery ads to examine unconventional luxury concepts in mass-market products across automotive, electronics, and consumer goods sectors (Thomsen et al., 2020). Five ad sets were created using DALL-E, each representing an element of unconventional luxury: transformation, sustainability, fantasy, escapism, and cultural capital. These elements served

as key words in generating prompts for DALL-E to create the ads. For each element, three ads were generated (one per sector), totaling 15 unique advertisements. This approach eliminated brand biases and allowed for cross-industry comparison of unconventional luxury perceptions while ensuring consistency in the visual representation of each unconventional luxury element across different product categories.

Both research instruments underwent rigorous validation processes by five experts specializing in luxury marketing, visual design, and research methodology. The questionnaire validation used Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC > 0.5), while AI-generated advertisements were evaluated using a structured assessment form rating visual quality, narrative clarity, and alignment with unconventional luxury elements. Manipulation checks confirmed successful communication of intended narratives (>80% success rate). The internal consistency reliability of the questionnaire was verified using Cronbach's alpha coefficient analysis.

Table 1 AI-Generated Ad Sets for Unconventional Luxury Elements

Element	Automotive	Electronics	Consumer Goods
Transformation			
Sustainability			
Fantasy			
Escapism			
Cultural Capital			

Data Analysis

Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was chosen as the primary analytical tool, as it is suitable for ordinal data, such as the Likert scale responses used in the survey, and is robust against outliers (Schober et al., 2018). The internal consistency of survey items was assessed using Cronbach's alpha (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011), and correlation strengths were interpreted following guidelines by Schober et al. (2018). This comprehensive analytical approach allowed for an understanding of the relationships between unconventional luxury elements and consumer perceptions, providing robust insights into the effectiveness of luxury marketing communication strategies.

Results

Demographic Profile of Participants

The study involved 400 participants aged 18–30 years. The majority (71.25%) were between 18–23 years old, with 28.75% aged 24–30. Gender distribution showed 53.75% females, 34.75% males, 10.75% identifying as LGBTQA, and 0.75% preferring not to disclose. Most participants were undergraduate students (82.75%), with 17.25% being graduate students. Academic backgrounds were diverse: 42.75% from Humanities or Social Sciences, 35% from Science and Technology, and 22.25% from Health Sciences. Regarding employment, 40.25% were unemployed, 24.50% in internships, 17.50% in freelance/part-time work, 15.50% in full-time employment, and 2.25% were business owners. The majority (58.50%) reported a monthly income of less than 15,000 baht, 22.25% earned between 15,000 and 30,000 baht, and 19.25% earned more than 30,000 baht.

Internal Consistency

The internal consistency of survey items for each hypothesis was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with results showing acceptable to good reliability: H1 (α = 0.746), H2 (α = 0.692), H3 (α = 0.721), H4 (α = 0.724), and H5 (α = 0.801) (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

Correlation Analysis

The analysis revealed moderate positive correlations between various factors of unconventional luxury and perceptions of luxury levels, with correlation coefficients ranging from 0.17 to 0.64. All correlations were statistically significant at $p < 0.001$, indicating robust relationships

despite varying strengths. Table 2 presents a summary of the correlation coefficients for each hypothesis.

Table 2 Summary of Correlation Coefficients for Unconventional Luxury Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Concept	Q Pairs	Correlation Coefficient (r)	Interpretation
H1	Transformation and Identity Shift	Q1 – Q2	0.51	Moderate positive
		Q2 – Q3	0.50	Moderate positive
		Q1 – Q3	0.39	Weak positive
H2	Sustainability and Societal Transformation	Q4 – Q5	0.40	Moderate positive
		Q5 – Q6	0.61	Moderate positive
		Q4 – Q6	0.17	Weak positive
H3	Fantasy Dreams	Q7 – Q8	0.45	Moderate positive
		Q8 – Q9	0.62	Moderate positive
		Q7 – Q9	0.32	Weak positive
H4	Escapism	Q10 – Q11	0.53	Moderate positive
		Q11 – Q12	0.59	Moderate positive
		Q10 – Q12	0.27	Weak positive
H5	High Cultural Capital	Q13 – Q14	0.59	Moderate positive
		Q14 – Q15	0.64	Moderate positive
		Q13 – Q15	0.50	Moderate positive

The analysis demonstrated varying effectiveness of imagery advertising in communicating unconventional luxury concepts. For narrative recognition and perceived luxury (Q1–Q2, Q4–Q5, Q7–Q8, Q10–Q11, Q13–Q14), the correlations showed moderate positive relationships for high cultural capital (r=0.59), escapism (r = 0.53), and transformation (r=0.51), while fantasy dreams (r=0.45) and sustainability (r=0.40) displayed slightly weaker relationships, suggesting that high cultural capital, escapism, and transformation narratives were more effectively communicated through imagery.

When examining specific luxury elements and overall ad perception (Q2–Q3, Q5–Q6, Q8–Q9, Q11–Q12, Q14–Q15), high cultural capital (r = 0.64), fantasy elements (r = 0.62), sustainability (r=0.61), and escapism (r=0.59) showed moderate positive relationships, indicating that these elements successfully enhanced luxury perceptions when recognized in the advertisements.

The correlations between narrative communication and overall perception (Q1–Q3, Q4–Q6, Q7–Q9, Q10–Q12, Q13–Q15) varied considerably, ranging from very weak for sustainability (r= 0.17), escapism (r = 0.27), and fantasy dreams (r = 0.32), to moderate for transformation (r=0.39) and high cultural capital (r = 0.50), demonstrating that while the imagery could communicate specific elements, its ability to create comprehensive luxury narratives varied significantly across different concepts.

This varying pattern of effectiveness may be attributed to the nature of AI–generated imagery, which can effectively communicate specific visual attributes but may have limitations in crafting comprehensive narratives. Despite these potential limitations, our findings remain valid and valuable, demonstrating that imagery advertising can help imbue mass–market products with luxury associations, particularly when focusing on high cultural capital cues and fantasy elements.

Discussion

This study reveals significant correlations between various elements of unconventional luxury and consumers' perceptions of luxury levels in mass–market products, offering important implications for luxury marketing communication strategies. Our findings both extend and occasionally diverge from prior research in luxury marketing.

Effectiveness of Imagery Advertising in Luxury Communication

The findings extend narrative transportation theory (Green & Brock, 2000) by demonstrating different levels of effectiveness across luxury elements. The moderate positive correlations between narrative recognition and perceived luxury for high cultural capital ($r = 0.59$), escapism ($r = 0.53$), and transformation ($r = 0.51$) support previous research on imagery's role in luxury advertising (Kim et al., 2016; Grigsbya et al., 2022). Notably, sustainability ($r = 0.40$) and fantasy dreams ($r = 0.45$) showed relatively weaker relationships, suggesting these concepts may be more challenging to communicate through visual narratives.

The stronger correlations between specific luxury elements and overall ad perception ($r = 0.50–0.64$) compared to narrative communication and overall perception ($r = 0.17–0.50$) suggest that while imagery can convey individual luxury elements effectively, creating comprehensive luxury narratives presents greater challenges. This aligns with existing research on how consumers interpret visual narratives in luxury contexts (Amatulli et al., 2018; Phillips & McQuarrie, 2010). The particularly strong correlations for high cultural capital ($r = 0.64$) and fantasy elements ($r = 0.62$) indicate these components may be especially suitable for image–based luxury marketing communications.

Correlations Between Unconventional Luxury Elements and Consumer Perceptions *Narrative Transportation and Evolving Luxury Concepts*

Our results contribute to the understanding of luxury marketing's evolution beyond traditional categorizations. The moderate correlations across all elements of unconventional luxury provide empirical support for the multifaceted nature of unconventional luxury as described by Thomsen et al. (2020). The effectiveness of visual storytelling in our findings supports Phillips & McQuarrie's (2010) research on how visual narratives allow consumers to interpret brand messages in personally meaningful ways. This aligns with Escalas' (2007) demonstration that advertisements guiding customers in constructing narratives can transform ordinary products into extraordinary experiences. The importance of this transformation is particularly relevant given the growing importance of visual communication in digital and social media contexts (Kim & Ko, 2010; Kumar, 2022), where Atwal & Williams (2009) emphasized the creation of immersive brand experiences through strategic visual communication.

Transformation and Identity Shift

The moderate positive correlation observed for transformation and identity shift ($r = 0.51$) aligns with Richins' (2017) emphasis on luxury's transformative potential. These findings extend Holmqvist et al.'s (2020) assertion that luxury items can be perceived as catalysts for profound identity shifts, affecting not only self-perception but also interpersonal relationships and life satisfaction. The correlation between transformation narratives and perceived product luxury suggests that marketing communications highlighting personal growth and life-changing experiences can effectively reposition mass-market products as luxury items.

Sustainability and Societal Transformation

The varying correlation patterns for sustainability messaging ($r = 0.40$ for narrative recognition, $r = 0.61$ for specific elements) extend Kapferer and Michaut's (2015) observations into new territory. While they found sustainability messaging effective primarily in the luxury sector, our study demonstrates its potential effectiveness when applied to mass-market products. This finding represents a shift in consumer perceptions where sustainability narratives can effectively transform mass-market products into luxurious ones.

Fantasy Dreams and Escapism

The moderate correlation between fantasy elements and overall ad perception ($r = 0.62$) supports the literature's emphasis on aspirational messaging in luxury marketing (Amatulli et al., 2018; Dubois & Paternault, 1995). Flueckiger's (2009) work demonstrated how fantasy in advertising creates dreamlike atmospheres through artistic expression, while Ok (2018) showed how fantasy elements can evoke consumer empathy and create conceivable aspirations. Similarly, the moderate correlations observed for escapism align with both Cova et al.'s (2018) concept of 'mundane escapes' and Bauer et al.'s (2011) findings on how luxury experiences provide meaningful diversions in daily life, transforming even mundane moments into luxury experiences through proper framing and context.

High Cultural Capital

The consistent moderate correlations for high cultural capital across measures ($r = 0.59$–0.64) support Banister et al.'s (2020) assertion about unconventional luxury representing social distinction through advanced skills and knowledge. This extends Holt's (1998) findings about how high cultural capital individuals prioritize experiences and creativity over outward displays of wealth,

suggesting that young Thai consumers similarly value intellectual and cultural sophistication as markers of luxury. This indicates an important shift in how cultural capital operates in luxury consumption among younger consumers in emerging markets, where sophisticated understanding and refined tastes may be as important as traditional symbols of luxury.

Key Strategies for Luxury Marketing Communications

Based on the discussion above, marketers can develop communication strategies that bridge the gap between mass-market products and luxury perceptions, aligning with modern consumer values and aspirations. These strategies are particularly relevant for younger audiences in emerging markets, where luxury is increasingly defined by personal, ethical, and experiential factors.

- **Transformative and Aspirational Narratives**

  A focus on storytelling can emphasize personal growth, identity shifts, and life-enhancing experiences. By positioning mass-market products as enablers of transformation, brands can elevate consumer perceptions, making ordinary items feel exclusive and aspirational. Incorporating elements of fantasy and escapism can further enhance emotional engagement. Campaigns should highlight how products contribute to achieving personal milestones, offer new experiences, or transform mundane routines into moments of luxury, ultimately resonating with consumers who seek both functional and emotional value.

- **Sustainability and Cultural Sophistication**

  Sustainability should be integrated as a core component of the brand narrative, as it increasingly influences consumers' luxury perceptions. Highlighting eco-friendly production, ethical sourcing, or partnerships with social impact initiatives not only aligns the brand with global trends but also appeals to ethically-driven consumers. In addition to sustainability, marketers should emphasize cultural sophistication – such as craftsmanship, intellectual depth, and cultural heritage – to connect with an audience that values authenticity and refined experiences over traditional material displays of wealth. This dual focus on sustainability and cultural capital helps brands build a deeper connection with both the ethical and aspirational desires of modern consumers.

- **Strategic Use of AI-Generated Visuals**

  AI-generated imagery can be an effective tool for creating visually compelling campaigns that communicate unconventional luxury elements. However, it is crucial to refine these visuals with human expertise to ensure cultural nuance, emotional depth, and authenticity. By blending the efficiency of AI technology with the creativity and emotional intelligence of human designers, marketers can produce visuals that not only capture attention but also resonate deeply with the target audience. This approach helps brands maintain consistency in visual storytelling while adapting to the evolving preferences of younger, digitally savvy consumers who seek both innovation and authenticity in their brand interactions.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates the effectiveness of unconventional luxury narratives in imagery advertising for mass-market products, particularly among young Thai consumers. The findings challenge traditional luxury marketing approaches, providing innovative strategies for both mass-market and luxury brands in emerging markets. The use of AI-generated imagery underscores the importance of high-quality, narrative-driven visuals to create immersive and engaging luxury brand experiences.

The correlations between unconventional luxury elements – sustainability, fantasy, escapism, and high cultural capital – indicate that these elements can effectively communicate luxury and appeal to diverse consumer preferences. Sustainability narratives are essential not only as corporate social responsibility but also as key elements in luxury positioning. Additionally, balancing fantasy and escapism with relatable, everyday luxury experiences can make luxury more accessible, while emphasizing high cultural capital fosters exclusivity beyond traditional notions of luxury.

In conclusion, this research lays the groundwork for reimagining luxury marketing communications, especially for mass-market products in emerging markets. It advocates for a more inclusive, diverse approach that resonates with the values and aspirations of younger consumers. As the luxury market continues to evolve, embracing these unconventional narratives is key to creating meaningful connections with consumers and maintaining relevance in a competitive global marketplace.

Recommendations

Marketers' visual storytelling strategies should incorporate key luxury elements such as transformation, sustainability, fantasy, escapism, and high cultural capital. A content matrix can help map these elements across different products and marketing channels. For AI-generated imagery, a two-stage process is recommended: using AI for initial concepts and refining them with human designers to enhance narrative depth and cultural relevance. A/B testing with the target audience is essential to find the right balance between aspirational and relatable luxury elements.

While this study focuses on young Thai consumers, its findings may not be generalizable to other demographics. Future research could explore unconventional luxury narratives across more diverse socio-economic segments, specifically by examining high cultural capital (HCC) versus low cultural capital (LCC) groups. While this study did not pre-screen participants based on these factors to avoid introducing bias, future studies may intentionally segment participants based on HCC and LCC to explore how these cultural distinctions, along with income differences, influence luxury perceptions. This approach would allow a more focused analysis of how socio-economic and cultural factors shape luxury perceptions, while still preserving the principle of avoiding artificial distinctions in the initial sample selection.

Future research should also consider the potential of AR and VR for creating immersive luxury experiences. Additionally, exploring emotional and psychological drivers, as well as trends like the sharing economy and digital ownership, could deepen understanding of consumer behavior. Finally, examining the long-term impact of AI-generated imagery on brand perception in the luxury sector will help refine future strategies.

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