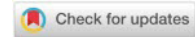


ART-HISTORICAL APPROACHES IN CONTEMPORARY MEDIA AND MARKETING: A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY

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Abstract: The paper examines the relevance of art-historical analytical procedures for interpreting contemporary visual communication in media and marketing. Building on theoretical foundations from visual studies, the research introduces the Art-Historical Analytical Model (AHAM)—a methodological framework developed specifically for this study. AHAM systematises four interpretative levels traditionally used in art-historical analysis: formal, iconographic, iconological, and contextual interpretation. The model is applied and empirically tested through a comparative case study to determine its analytical potential for understanding contemporary visual identities systems. The case sample includes six visual systems: three global branding strategies (Gucci under Alessandro Michele, Louis Vuitton's artist collaborations, and Absolut Vodka's art-based branding) and three regional cultural actors (Museum of Contemporary Art Belgrade, Gallery of Matica Srpska, and the EXIT Festival). The results demonstrate that AHAM enables precise identification of stylistic structures, symbolic codes, and cultural references across both global and local contexts. The iconological and contextual layers, informed by visual studies, reveal how images function as cultural agents embedded in networks of visibility, circulation, and power. The study concludes that AHAM offers a coherent and adaptable analytical framework that enhances interpretative depth and cultural understanding in contemporary media and marketing. As a newly introduced model, AHAM shows promising potential for further theoretical refinement and wider application within visual studies, branding research, and cultural analysis.

Keywords: *art-historical approach; visual communication; branding; visual identity; case study*

Field: Social Sciences

1. INTRODUCTION

Visual communication has become a dominant medium through which contemporary culture constructs meaning, circulates values, and shapes identities. Images no longer serve merely as aesthetic objects; they operate as active cultural participants embedded within economic, symbolic, and technological systems. Recent scholarship further emphasises that contemporary visual culture is inseparable from regimes of power, platforms, and visibility that shape perception and cultural authority (Mirzoeff, 2024).

Mitchell (2005) frames images as entities that act, circulate, and negotiate meaning, while Mirzoeff (2016) conceptualizes visibility as a regime that structures perception, behaviour, and cultural interpretation. Branding and media design therefore play a central role in shaping symbolic frameworks through which contemporary societies articulate cultural, ideological, and economic values.

Visual studies emphasise the need to interpret images within their social, technological, and discursive contexts (Rose, 2016; Schroeder, 2020; Mirzoeff, 2023). Visual identities operate through visual grammars shaped by cultural memory, institutional authority, and global flows of imagery. Standard marketing approaches often focus on psychological or behavioural dimensions, but lack interpretative depth regarding symbolic structures, cultural genealogies, and ideological narratives.

Art history provides a robust interpretative foundation capable of addressing aesthetic, symbolic, and cultural dimensions of imagery. Its methods—formal analysis, iconography, iconology, and contextual interpretation—can be adapted to contemporary media systems, uncovering layers of meaning not accessible through commercial analytical tools.

In order to address these analytical challenges, the paper introduces a new methodological framework—the Art-Historical Analytical Model (AHAM). The model systematises core procedures traditionally used in art-historical interpretation and adapts them for the study of contemporary visual communication. AHAM has not been previously defined in the existing literature; therefore, the present study positions it as an exploratory methodological proposal. Its relevance and analytical potential are examined through a comparative case study encompassing six global and regional visual identity systems.

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2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research presents the Art-Historical Analytical Model (AHAM) as a newly introduced methodological tool designed for interpreting contemporary visual communication. The model is developed for the purposes of this study and is empirically tested through a comparative case study. AHAM consists of four analytical stages—formal, iconographic, iconological, and contextual—which together provide a structured approach for examining visual identity systems.

2.1 The Art-Historical Analytical Model (AHAM)

(1) Formal Analysis

Focuses on composition, chromatic relations, typographic structures, and spatial organisation. It draws on Wölfflin's formal categories and Arnheim's (1974) principles of perceptual balance.

(2) Iconographic Analysis

Identifies motifs, symbols, and representational elements, clarifying how visual markers acquire recognisability and meaning.

(3) Iconological Interpretation

Explores cultural, symbolic, and ideological meanings embedded within visual systems. It builds on Panofsky's interpretative model and draws upon Barthes (1972) and Bourdieu (1993).

(4) Contextual Interpretation

Situates images within socio-cultural, economic, and technological frameworks following visual studies paradigms (Mirzoeff, 2016; Rose, 2022).

2.2 Case Selection

Because AHAM is introduced here for the first time, the selected cases serve not only as analytical material but also as a testing ground for evaluating the model's applicability, flexibility, and interpretative range. The comparative structure (global vs. regional) allows the model to be assessed across different cultural, symbolic, and communicative environments.

To evaluate AHAM across different contexts, the study includes:

Global cases:

- Gucci (Alessandro Michele era)
- Louis Vuitton (artist collaborations)
- Absolut Vodka (art-based branding)

Regional cases:

- Museum of Contemporary Art Belgrade (MoCAB)
- Gallery of Matica Srpska (GMS)
- EXIT Festival

2.3 Data Sources

Data include visual campaigns, logos, posters, institutional documents, online communication, and scholarly literature. All cases were analysed using the four AHAM stages to maintain methodological consistency.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Global Case Studies

a) *Louis Vuitton – Art as a Long-Term Branding Strategy*

For more than two decades, Louis Vuitton has systematically used contemporary art as a core branding strategy, making the brand an instructive example within cultural branding theory. Beginning with Takashi Murakami in 2003, followed by Yayoi Kusama (2012; 2023) and Jeff Koons (2017), the brand has constructed a visual identity situated at the intersection of luxury, artistic narrative, and symbolic capital. In this context, the Louis Vuitton identity functions as a cultural interface that connects contemporary luxury with the artistic canon and global visual mythology.

(1) Formal Analysis

Murakami's palette, characterised by flat chromatic fields, bright colours, and clear contours, corresponds to Arnheim's (1974) principles of perceptual balance. The LV monogram grid retains structural consistency across reinterpretations, reflecting Wölfflin's (1932) concept of the "closed form." These formal mechanisms ensure recognisability while enabling stylistic variation. Kusama's dot patterns and Koons's refined surface treatments further extend the brand's formal vocabulary.

(2) Iconographic Analysis

Murakami introduces Superflat motifs—flowers, cartoon-like figures, and ocular symbols—rooted in Japanese pop-cultural visuality. Kusama contributes her signature polka dots, while Koons incorporates

explicit citations from Western art history (Leonardo, Rubens, Fragonard). These motifs form a layered iconographic system combining contemporary pop imagery with canonical European references.

(3) Iconological Interpretation

Following Holt's (2004) cultural branding theory, Louis Vuitton constructs a symbolic universe in which luxury acquires cultural legitimacy through artistic affiliation. Kusama's repetitive dot patterns evoke modernist concerns with perception and obsession, while Koons's borrowings position the brand within discourses of artistic prestige and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984; 1993). The brand thus transforms artistic languages into ideological markers of sophistication and exclusivity.

(4) Contextual Interpretation

Within global consumer culture, Louis Vuitton's collaborations function as part of what Barthes (1972) describes as myth-making: art becomes a signifier of prestige. Peirce's triadic sign model further explains the brand's communicative strategy: the artwork (icon), the artist's signature (index), and the monogram (symbol) operate collectively within a global luxury market. Gadamer's hermeneutic framework (2004) helps situate these collaborations as dialogues between historical artistic traditions and contemporary luxury capitalism.

b) *Gucci – Postmodern Visual Identity (Alessandro Michele Era)*

Between 2015 and 2022, Gucci represents one of the most accomplished examples of postmodern visual eclecticism within the luxury industry. Alessandro Michele constructs a layered visual system combining Renaissance elements, Gothic references, Baroque ornamentation, pop-cultural citations, and camp aesthetics.

(1) Formal Analysis

Gucci's visual identity under Michele features dense compositions, chromatic saturation, ornate textiles, and stylistic layering. The brand intentionally destabilises traditional formal hierarchy by juxtaposing Renaissance patterns, Gothic motifs, and camp aesthetics. This produces a visually overloaded surface characteristic of postmodern aesthetics.

(2) Iconographic Analysis

Recurring motifs—serpents (knowledge, danger), lions (authority), bees (collective order), and Gothic crosses (spirituality, mysticism)—form a recognisable symbolic vocabulary. Analysed through Panofsky's (1972) iconographic method, these motifs derive meaning from their deep historical associations and cultural lineage.

(3) Iconological Interpretation

Iconologically, Michele's Gucci operates through deliberate stylistic hybridisation and intertextuality. The brand communicates an ideology of eclectic individuality and cultural fluidity. This aligns with Mitchell's (2005) theory of images as active agents within social practice. The visual system also reflects contemporary identity politics, aligning with Hall's (1997) insights into inclusive and queer-friendly representation. Such strategies align with contemporary cultural strategy models in which brands function as ideological and symbolic actors within broader cultural fields (Holt & Cameron, 2023).

(4) Contextual Interpretation

Within the global fashion system, Gucci's aesthetics function as a commentary on postmodern consumer culture. Eco's (1976) concept of the "open work" explains the multiplicity of readings enabled by Gucci's eclectic visuality. The brand's cultural positioning relies on audiences interpreting its imagery through frameworks of luxury, fantasy, and identity experimentation, situating Gucci within broader discussions on fashion, representation, and cultural performance.

c) *Absolut Vodka – Art as a Branding Framework*

Absolut Vodka provides one of the most sustained examples of art-based branding, having collaborated with more than 600 artists since the 1980s—including Keith Haring, Andy Warhol, and Louise Bourgeois.

(1) Formal Analysis

The Absolut bottle's silhouette forms a stable visual constant, functioning as a formal anchor for continuous variation. Artistic reinterpretations—ranging from Warhol's pop-art surfaces to Bourgeois's sculptural treatments—introduce diverse chromatic, textural, and compositional schemes, while maintaining structural recognisability.

(2) Iconographic Analysis

Each commissioned artwork introduces specific motifs: Haring's outlined figures, Warhol's bold colour blocks, or localised cultural symbols in regional editions. These motifs build an iconographic archive centred on the bottle as a recurring representational form.

(3) Iconological Interpretation

Absolut exemplifies Holt's (2004) model of cultural branding: the brand constructs meaning through

association with artistic innovation, positioning itself as a mediator between mass consumerism and high culture. Artistic collaborations transform the product into a symbol of cosmopolitan modernity and creative identity.

(4) Contextual Interpretation

Within global advertising culture, the Absolut bottle becomes what Barthes (1972) describes as a cultural myth—an everyday commodity elevated to symbolic status. Semiotic analysis following Peirce (1998) clarifies the brand's strategy: the silhouette serves as icon, artistic reinterpretation as index of cultural engagement, and the brand name as symbol of creative lifestyle. This positions Absolut within urban, liberal cultural contexts that value experimentation and aesthetic expression.

3.2 Regional Case Studies

a) *Museum of Contemporary Art Belgrade (MoCAB)*

MoCAB's digital identity merges modernist architectural heritage with contemporary design.

Formally, it uses dominant white surfaces, geometric composition, hierarchy, and negative space, consistent with Arnheim (1974) and Bauhaus clarity.

(1) Formal Analysis

MoCAB's digital visual identity is structured around modernist formal logic: dominant white surfaces, geometric compositions, strong visual hierarchy, and extensive negative space. These formal elements correspond to Arnheim's (1974) theory of perceptual organisation and reflect Bauhaus visual principles. The clarity and structural discipline of the visual system align with Wölfflin's categories of linearity and the "closed form," reinforcing the museum's architectural modernism.

(2) Iconographic Analysis

The most recurring iconographic motif is the silhouette of the museum building itself. As a representational form, the silhouette functions as a direct visual reference to the iconic structure designed by Antić and Ristić (1965). The motif also includes geometric fragments, stylised elevations, and simplified outlines that align with the building's sculptural quality.

(3) Iconological Interpretation

At the iconological level, the building's silhouette functions as a symbol of Yugoslav socialist modernism and cultural progressivism. Following Panofsky's (1955; 1972) interpretative framework, the motif operates on two planes: as a literal architectural form and as a signifier of the ideological aspirations of the period in which the museum was established. The digital aesthetics communicate what Barthes (1972) would call a "myth of modernity," reinforcing ideas of rationality, institutional authority, and cultural continuity.

(4) Contextual Interpretation

MoCAB's digital strategy reflects contemporary expectations of transparency and accessibility in public cultural institutions. Eco's (1976) concept of the open system is evident in interactive formats that invite user participation. Gadamer's hermeneutic principle of the "fusion of horizons" (2004) is activated through micro-narratives—short biographies, curated visual stories, and concise interpretative texts—that mediate between the institution's modernist legacy and contemporary audiences. In this wider context, MoCAB uses digital visibility to reassert its institutional identity within the shifting cultural landscape of post-socialist Serbia. This approach aligns with visual culture theory, which understands institutional imagery as a site where cultural memory, authority, and visual regimes intersect (Dikovitskaya, 2021).

b) *Gallery of Matica Srpska (GMS)*

GMS's visual identity is grounded in national cultural heritage. Formally, muted palettes and heraldic motifs follow Baxandall's (1972) "conditions of visibility."

(1) Formal Analysis

GMS employs muted, historically coded colour palettes (blue, burgundy, ochre), symmetric compositions, heraldic structuring, and stylised ornamental forms. These formal choices correspond to Baxandall's (1972) "conditions of visibility," which explain how culturally embedded colour and form conventions shape aesthetic perception.

(2) Iconographic Analysis

The Gallery frequently incorporates Baroque and Classicist motifs, elements of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Serbian painting, and ornamental details inspired by historical frames, coats of arms, and ecclesiastical decorative patterns. These motifs constitute a recognisable iconographic system rooted in national artistic heritage.

(3) Iconological Interpretation

Iconologically, GMS constructs a visual narrative centred on tradition, continuity, and cultural authority. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1993) field theory, the institution uses heritage motifs to assert its position as a custodian of national cultural capital. The visual system symbolically reinforces the Gallery's

historical role in safeguarding and interpreting Serbian artistic identity.

(4) Contextual Interpretation

The Gallery's communication strategy responds to contemporary cultural-policy frameworks that emphasise heritage preservation and national identity. Barthes's (1977) model of connotation explains how heraldic and gold elements communicate legitimacy and prestige. Eco's (1976) theory of cultural codes clarifies how traditional motifs are repurposed as contemporary symbols of Serbian cultural memory. In this context, GMS positions itself as both a historical institution and an active participant in modern cultural discourse.

c) *EXIT Festival*

EXIT's visual identity embodies youth, energy, and urbanity. Formally, it relies on contrasts, saturated colours, dynamic compositions, and bold typography.

(1) Formal Analysis

EXIT's visual identity relies on high-contrast compositions, vibrant colour schemes, dynamic spatial structures, and bold typography. These formal elements draw on pop-art, street culture, and early digital aesthetics, producing a visually energetic system aligned with youth-oriented cultural expressions. The intensity of colour and movement corresponds with Mitchell's (2005) argument that contemporary images function as active agents within social life.

(2) Iconographic Analysis

Iconographic motifs include stars, lightning symbols, stylised architectural elements (Petrovaradin Fortress), and digital-era references such as pixel clusters and glitch effects. These elements form a visual vocabulary associated with millennial and post-millennial urban culture.

(3) Iconological Interpretation

Iconologically, EXIT communicates an ideology of freedom, youthfulness, and collective transformation. Following Holt's (2004) cultural branding framework, the festival's visual language embeds values associated with resistance, creativity, and community. The symbolism of the fortress motif reinforces the festival's historical roots in activism and social engagement.

(4) Contextual Interpretation

EXIT operates within the cultural economy of Southeast Europe, where festivals serve as key generators of cultural identity and creative industry development. Using Peirce's triadic model (1998), EXIT's visuals function as icons (illustrations of performers and fortress architecture), indices (the EXIT logo), and symbols (digital motifs signifying youth and futurity). Hall's (1997) theories of representation help explain how EXIT constructs an "imagined community" of participants united through shared visual and cultural codes.

4. DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis demonstrates that AHAM reveals structural, symbolic, and contextual layers across diverse visual systems. Global brands deploy cultural capital, artistic legitimacy, and visual mythology, while regional institutions articulate heritage, institutional authority, and youth identity.

AHAM proves adaptable and coherent, successfully integrating art-historical interpretation with visual studies. The model uncovers how imagery operates as a cultural interface, shaping social meaning and collective perception. Recent research in visual consumption confirms that images operate as active cultural agents within contemporary branding and media systems, reinforcing ideological and symbolic frameworks beyond functional communication (Schroeder, 2023). The findings indicate that AHAM, although newly introduced, demonstrates strong analytical coherence and adaptability across diverse visual systems. Its application in this study suggests that the model offers both methodological clarity and interpretative depth, supporting its potential for further refinement and future use in visual studies, branding analysis, and cultural interpretation.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study introduces the Art-Historical Analytical Model (AHAM) and evaluates it through six visual identity systems. The findings confirm that AHAM provides interpretative depth and methodological clarity, revealing aesthetic, symbolic, and contextual dimensions of contemporary visual communication.

As AHAM is presented here for the first time, the results of the comparative case study confirm its viability as a methodological framework and indicate that it warrants further theoretical development and empirical validation in subsequent research.

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