

The Perception of Russian Brands of “Luxury Underwear” by Women Aged 18–35



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Abstract This chapter examines the underwear market in the context of fashion and cultural branding. The discourses on idealization and body positivity, as well as luxury and functional underwear corresponding to them, were considered. The Russian underwear market was analyzed. Based on the studied data, a qualitative stage of the study was compiled, consisting of interviews of consumers and experts. It was revealed that consumers’ expectations partially do not coincide with the offer of Russian brands of “luxury underwear.” It was also revealed that women wear “luxury underwear” not only on “special occasions” to demonstrate femininity, but also in everyday life “for themselves.”

Keywords Luxury underwear · Russian underwear brands · Aaker brand vision model · Cultural branding · Mixed discourse

1 Introduction

By 2023, many international companies, including underwear brands, had left the Russian market [1]. At the same time, the demand for underwear is actively growing not only all over the world but also in Russia [2]. As a result, the number of local underwear brands is increasing [3]. In recent years, sporty and comfortable models based on high-tech developments have been gaining popularity. In Europe and around the world, sports underwear accounts for about 60% of sales, while in Russia the largest market share is occupied by lace “luxury underwear” (contains elements of additional decor and/or non-standard fabric (lace, silk, etc.)) [4].

The concept of cultural branding is becoming especially popular. Consumers have become less interested in brands with which they do not share broadcast

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values, and they are willing to invest in brands with which they have similar views [5]. Brands can occupy opposing discourses or mix them up [6].

In the underwear market, brands occupy two opposite discourses: the discourse on idealization, corresponding to luxury lingerie, and the discourse on body positivity, corresponding to functional underwear. The first discourse involves the purchase of luxury lingerie in order to manifest a gender role. The discourse on inclusivity offers customers functional underwear, which should be comfortable and functional [7]. Considering two types of underwear through the Barthes fashion system, one can see a clear connection between the signifier and the signified: luxury underwear can be worn on special occasions, and functional underwear is designed for everyday wear [8]. Despite this, Baudrillard's approach implies the displacement of signified and signifiers. The message in the fashion system is a reflection of his self-representation [9]. Moreover, the development of post-feminism presupposes for the signified "luxury underwear" a relationship with the signifier "the practice of wearing underwear without gender identity." All these make **a contradiction**: is it possible to assign the signified "the practice of wearing underwear for oneself" to the signifier "luxury underwear as a physical object" for the sign "luxury underwear"? In other words, do women wear luxury underwear on "special occasions" to demonstrate femininity and male approval or on a daily basis "for themselves"? Therefore, **the purpose** of this study will be to understand how the offerings of Russian companies of luxury lingerie match consumer expectations.

The results of the study will allow local Russian companies that focus on selling "luxury lingerie" to build a brand vision model so that consumers can match brand communication with their identity. From the point of view of research value, the work allows us to understand whether a mixing of discourses occurs in the field of lingerie or not. Moreover, the study of branding in the field of underwear allows us to more fully explore fashion as a communication system, since underwear is a specific area that requires separate study [7].

2 Literature Review

Fashion is a sociocultural phenomenon and functions as a communication system [10]. Underwear, which is a fashionable object, enters the fashion communication system: the manufacturer creates a fashionable object, the distributor transmits the value assigned to this object—the consumer decodes these messages and correlates them with their values at the "test" stage and, in case of coincidence, switches to "acceptance" by buying underwear of a specific brand (i.e., passes the standard BKK—Suvarabhumi, international). Moreover, all theoretical fashion concepts can be applied to underwear, including the iconic Roland Barthes structure and Baudrillard's approach. According to Barthes, the fashion industry assigns fashionable objects (signified) a code (significator) that determines what function clothing performs [8]. In a networked society, the recipient has the opportunity to receive and decode not only one broadcast message, but several at the same time (he needs to

correlate the decoded message with his personality) [11]. In this case, the fashionable object, as a signified, loses its original code and completely different signifiers can be assigned to it [9]. However, the difference between lingerie and other fashionable objects is that it is a hidden fashionable attribute and the development of communication between underwear brands differs from the generalized rules of functioning of fashionable objects. Thus, underwear needs to be considered in particular.

Cultural branding has recently been closely linked to the concept of fashion, which is based on the brand's creation of its sociocultural identity, with which consumers correlated their values [5]. According to Holt, an opposing discourse is added to the sociocultural positioning that reflects the order of social norms in society, where the basic cultural norms are of the opposite nature. In such a situation, the brand has a variation of three strategies: not to use cultural branding, to take one side of the dichotomy of discourses, and to take a middle value between cultural meanings. Although research confirms the tendency of consumers to switch to a mixed discourse, creating a mixed positioning in one case turns out to be profitable, while in the other it causes dissonance. In addition, Holt, based on cultural branding, expands Aaker's brand vision model [12] by integrating a sociocultural context into it [6].

Lingerie is closely linked to a woman's identity, and the underwear market has a long history that has led to two discourses: idealization and body positivity [13]. Correlating the perception of discourses and the purpose of underwear, the discourse on body idealization involves the purchase of luxury underwear (contains elements of additional decoration and/or non-standard fabric) in order to manifest a gender role [14]. The discourse on inclusivity, on the contrary, offers customers functional underwear (it contains elastic fabric without additional decoration, the primary advantages of which are comfort), which, on the one hand, now creates a sense of self-identification without comparing oneself with others, and on the other hand, it positions lingerie as everyday underwear, which, first of all, should be comfortable and functional [15]. Correlating the perception of discourses and the purpose of underwear, there is a clear connection between the signifier and the signified in both cases. For the sign "luxury lingerie": The signified: "lingerie for a "special occasion," intended for interaction between partners and identifying oneself as an object of manifestation of femininity and sexuality." The signifier: "linen as a physical object containing elements of additional decor (ruffles, rhinestones, etc.) and/or non-standard fabric (silk, lace, etc.)." For the sign "functional underwear": The signified: "intended for everyday wear, not taking into account the manifestation of gender identity and interaction with other people." The signifier: "an element of clothing in the form of underwear of elastic fabric without additional decoration, the primary advantages of which are comfort and functionality" [7]. Thus, it remains unclear how to create a brand of underwear with a mixed discourse that simultaneously corresponds to the category of luxury underwear, but exists outside the framework of sexual overtones and performs the function of "underwear for yourself" on a daily basis.

3 Methods

The study included interviews with experts and consumers. As part of the desk research phase, the Aaker brand vision model was redesigned into the theoretical basis of the study. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted with women aged 18–35 (the sample was recruited using the snowball method). Next, the Russian brands were identified and expert interviews were conducted with representatives of the companies. The experts for the study were taken from the brands that the informants named (the interview was conducted with the heads of the marketing department).

To analyze demand, 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with women aged 18–35, 10 of whom know and buy Russian underwear brands, and 10 of whom know but do not buy. The interviews were conducted before the theoretical saturation. The interview guide contains 40 questions and consists of 4 thematic blocks. All 20 interview recordings were transcribed and analyzed using Atlas.ti. As a result, 82 codes were formed, which were combined into more significant categories, and a semantic link of the codes was created (Fig. 1).

Expert interviews were conducted with representatives of the brands named by the respondents. Thus, 4 brands participated in the study: Defile, Le Journal Intime, Petra, and Vitory. The interview guide contains 39 questions and consists of 4 thematic blocks, while a semantic link of codes was created (Fig. 2).

4 Findings and Discussion

The results of the work showed that mixing the iconic structure is possible; in other words, most girls wear luxury underwear on a regular basis, for themselves, in order to feel the aesthetics of this type of underwear and set the appropriate emotions and mood for the day, that is, there is a mixed discourse in the underwear market. Consumers prefer to adhere to a neutral position regarding underwear: not supporting idealization, where underwear serves to manifest a gender role, and body positivity, where underwear is needed solely for female comfort.

As a result of the study, it was revealed that the brands' offers partially coincide: the emotional benefits are the least consistent; the functional advantages and the essence of the brand are at an average level. As part of the emotional benefits to consumers, it is not enough for brands to affirm the beauty of women, as well as the fact that every day can be special. According to the girls, brands overly focus on their product, not on consumers. They want more attention to themselves; they want to feel like confident and graceful "cats" (the most common association with a girl in underwear). As part of the functional benefits, brands should place more emphasis on the fit and design of underwear, on the brand's price, and on comfort and quality. In essence, the brand needs to raise awareness about the brand (since little information is known about brands, and it is rarely found), improve the product (fit,

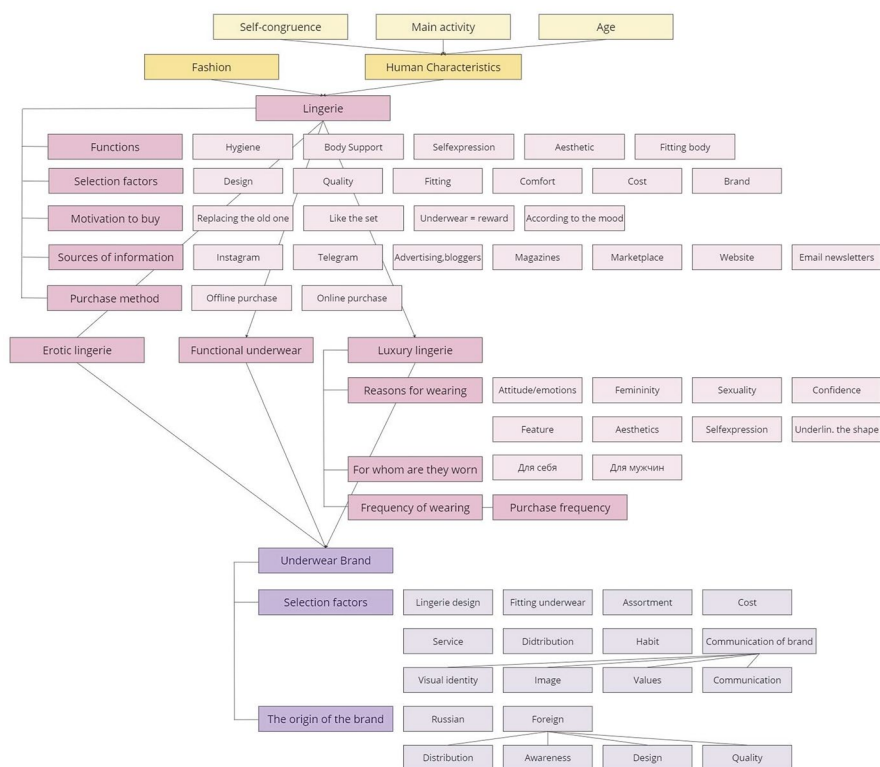


Fig. 1 Semantic connection of codes for semi-structured interviews

design, comfort, quality), and add value to consumer beauty, femininity, pleasure, and success. It is worth noting that the interview results confirm the statistics: Russian girls actively use luxury underwear and often wear it on a regular basis. According to experts of the underwear market, the reason for this may be the cultural characteristics of women's upbringing (striving for the ideal), as well as the unstable situation in the country, which causes a desire to dress up and feel pleasant emotions.

In addition, the data of the cabinet stage is also confirmed. There is an “invisible fashion”: consumers aged 18–35 are impressed by fashion trends in the underwear market: the opportunity to be different, thanks to a diverse range (from tenderness to audacity), brands' concern for their health, and the use of underwear as clothing (e.g., corsets). Despite the fact that underwear is hidden under clothes and it is rarely seen on other people, fashion trends in this area are still spreading to a large number of people. The qualitative stage has shown that the channels where women learn information about underwear coincide with the channels from which they learn fashion trends in this area. Most often, fashion trends in the field of underwear are broadcast through Instagram, advertising (online advertising on the Internet and social networks), bloggers, and marketplaces. The main reason for wearing luxury

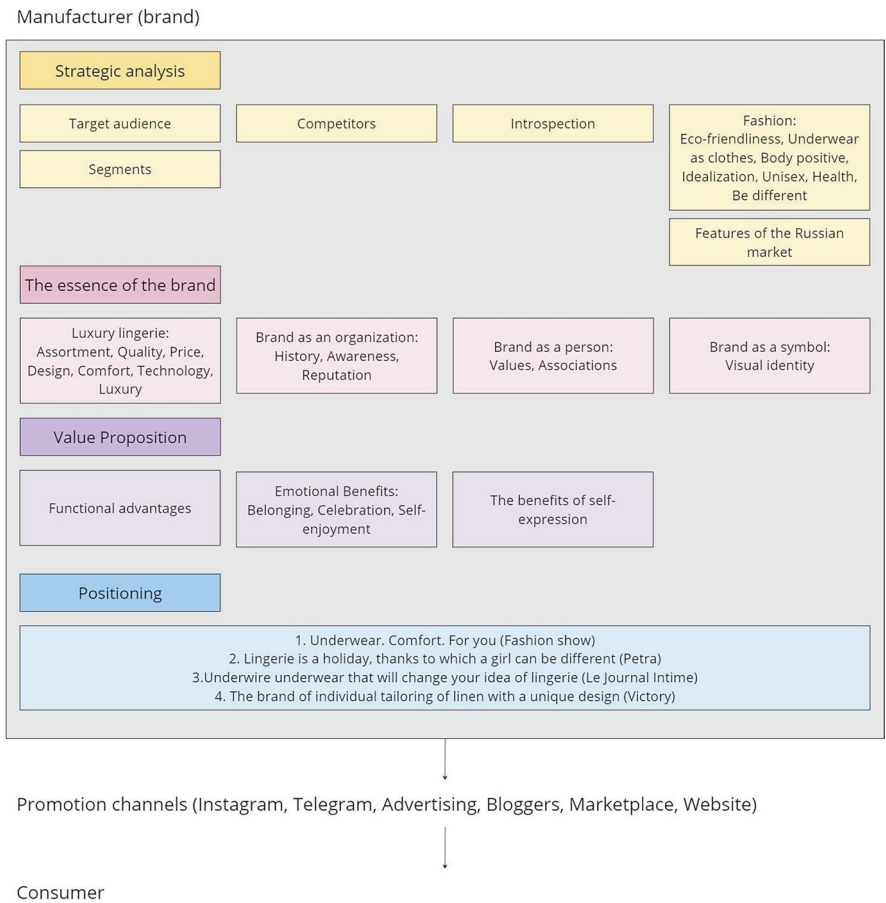


Fig. 2 Semantic connection of the codes for the expert interviews

underwear is the desire to experience the aesthetics of underwear and create appropriate emotions and mood for the day. In addition, it turned out that women who prefer to wear luxury underwear more often are more likely to buy underwear in general. They do this to raise or maintain their mood. Moreover, lovers of luxury lingerie prefer idealized models, as they more reflect the “ideal image” that consumers strive for. Girls most often buy underwear in 1–2 favorite stores, as they have some kind of ritual that improves their mood. Women buy new kits about several times every six months, sometimes online, sometimes offline. In brand communication, visual identity is especially important for consumers, as well as the company’s image. Thus, fashion as a communication system has been studied more fully, as the field of underwear has been considered from the point of view of manufacturers, distributors, and consumers.

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