A Study on the Influence Pathways of Visual Metaphor Characteristics in Fashion Advertising on Consumers

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Abstract. Visual metaphors, as an advertising language that combines symbolic representation with emotional resonance, are widely used to shape brand images and convey emotional values. However, visual metaphors of varying types and complexity may trigger distinctly different cognitive responses among consumers, thereby influencing the persuasive effectiveness of advertisements. Based on the dual-process theory and the cognitive framework of metaphor, this study explores the influence paths of constitutive visual metaphors and Conceptual Visual Metaphor on consumers' attention, comprehension difficulty, emotional resonance and purchase intention through controlled experiments and questionnaire measurements. Research findings indicate that compositional metaphors exhibit higher processing fluency compared to conceptual metaphors; processing fluency indirectly influences purchase intention by enhancing brand attitude. Meanwhile, the combination of "Juxtaposition Metaphor×concretization symbol" has the best effect on brand attitude and purchase intention. This study not only provides empirical support for the persuasive power of visual metaphors but also offers theoretical and practical insights for optimizing advertising design and marketing strategies for fashion brands.

Keywords: Visual metaphor, fashion advertising, processing fluency, symbol.

1. Introduction

With economic development and evolving aesthetics, fashion brand communication has entered a phase characterized by “visual priority” and “emotional drive.” Increasingly, fashion brands are enhancing brand recognition and cultural resonance through symbolic, aesthetically appealing visual metaphors that embody their core values.

For example, Chanel uses the metaphor of “feathers” to evoke lightness and elegance. Dior uses the metaphor of a “garden” to symbolize women's romanticism and vitality. The essence of metaphor lies in using one thing to understand and experience another [1]. The corresponding form of expression is the metaphor. Aristotle asserted: “All popular metaphors can evidently be used as similes; a simile stripped of its explanation becomes a metaphor” [2]. Visual metaphors, as a powerful tool for conveying meaning, can quickly and simply communicate complex concepts and emotions. Through the symbolic use of visual elements, it enables audiences to quickly grasp and comprehend the deeper meaning conveyed by the advertisement without the need for textual explanations [3].

However, different types and levels of metaphorical elements in fashion advertisements may lead to varying cognitive responses from consumers. Thus, several interesting questions have arisen.

Pictorial Juxtaposition Metaphor and Conceptual Visual Metaphor exhibit significant differences in consumer information transmission effectiveness and emotional impact when conveying fashion brand image and value. Consumers demonstrate higher recognition or willingness to purchase for a particular category of visual metaphors.

Therefore, this study examines real-world visual metaphor cases in fashion brand advertising. By analyzing the differences between two types of visual metaphors and conducting case studies and user experiments, it explores how the characteristics of visual metaphors in fashion advertising influence consumer responses. This research provides theoretical and practical support for fashion brand visual strategies.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses

2.1. Pictorial Juxtaposition Metaphor and Conceptual Visual Metaphor

In the 1970s, metaphor research in the West primarily concentrated on linguistic aspects, resulting in a comparatively limited perspective. In 1996, Charles Forceville's Metaphor in Advertising was published. This work was inspired by Lakoff and Johnson's view that metaphor concerns thought and action more than language. Forceville's book systematically differentiated between pictorial juxtaposition and conceptual visual metaphors. This allowed the study of metaphors to be broadened and a comprehensive framework for visual metaphors to be constructed [4].

Pictorial Juxtaposition Metaphor creates new symbolic meanings by directly juxtaposing or merging two distinct visual elements within an image [5]. For example, integrating perfume bottles with flowers to convey a sense of freshness. Pictorial Juxtaposition Metaphors are easily recognizable by the audience and typically require less cognitive processing, making them more effective at eliciting emotional responses.

Conceptual Visual Metaphor, grounded in the metaphorical cognition framework, express brand essence through cross-domain mapping of abstract concepts [1]. For example, using “journey” as a metaphor for life and “feather” for lightness. Conceptual Visual Metaphor require recipients to engage more cognitive resources, which may enhance engagement while simultaneously increasing the cost of comprehension.

Numerous scholars have conducted extensive research on visual metaphors. Overall, existing research has primarily focused on the classification and general effects of metaphors, while systematic studies examining the impact of visual metaphor characteristics in fashion advertising on consumer responses remain relatively scarce. Compared to functional product advertisements, fashion advertisements place greater emphasis on emotional resonance and brand identity expression. Given the high aesthetic sensitivity of audiences in the fashion sector, the mechanism by which visual metaphors function in information transmission and brand building may exhibit unique characteristics.

2.2. Inference and Hypothesis

Existing literature indicates that Juxtaposition Metaphors often reduce cognitive processing costs and enhance visual fluency, whereas Conceptual Metaphors, while offering greater aesthetic value, place higher demands on recipients' cognitive abilities and prior knowledge, potentially increasing their cognitive load [5, 6]. The two may exhibit differences in attracting recipients' attention, evoking emotions, and fostering purchase intent. Therefore, it is inferred that Pictorial Juxtaposition Metaphor and Conceptual Visual Metaphor exert distinct effects on purchase intent.

Visual processing fluency refers to the ease and smoothness individuals experience when processing visual information, serving as a crucial psychological mechanism in advertising effectiveness [7]. Research has shown that when visual metaphors in advertisements are easily perceived and decoded, consumers experience heightened fluency. This fluency not only elicits positive emotional responses but is also misattributed to the brand's inherent quality and appeal, thereby amplifying consumers' purchasing motivation [8].

In visual metaphor contexts, moderate complexity and clear visual cues can reduce cognitive load and enhance processing fluency, thereby increasing the persuasiveness of advertisements [9, 10]. Conversely, overly complex or abstract metaphors increase processing difficulty, diminish fluency, and may provoke resistance. Therefore, visual processing fluency can serve as an intermediary variable, explaining how visual metaphors promote consumers' positive attitudes and purchase intentions by reducing cognitive processing costs.

In summary, this paper proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: Pictorial Juxtaposition Metaphor and Conceptual Visual Metaphor exert differing effects on consumers' cognitive mechanisms and persuasive efficacy.

H2: Visual processing fluency, acting as a mediator, enhances the persuasive power of visual metaphors.

The degree of symbol abstraction directly influences consumers' cognitive processing and emotional responses. Highly abstracted symbols with strong associations to fashion culture—such as roses, lace, and similar elements—typically possess clear cultural semantics and visual distinctiveness, enabling them to rapidly evoke emotional resonance and brand associations among consumers [11]. Such symbols in fashion advertising not only carry aesthetic value but also embody specific lifestyles and identity markers, making it easier for fashion enthusiasts to visually identify with the brand and thereby increasing their willingness to purchase [12]. In contrast, abstract symbols—such as geometric shapes and color blocks—lack direct semantic references, and their interpretation relies more heavily on consumers' subjective associations and artistic aesthetic backgrounds [13]. While abstract symbols may offer greater openness and trendiness in creative and artistic expression, the process of decoding their meaning is time-consuming. For consumers lacking relevant artistic background, this can reduce the efficiency of information transmission and diminish emotional resonance [5].

Based on semiotics and visual communication theory, concrete symbols with strong cultural associations are more effective at establishing emotional connections and brand identity. Abstract symbols, however, may be at a disadvantage in motivating consumer purchases due to higher cognitive processing costs. Therefore, it can be inferred that the degree of abstraction in symbols can serve as a moderating variable, influencing consumers' reception of visual metaphor effects and the extent to which their purchasing motivation is stimulated.

In summary, this paper proposes the following hypothesis:

H3: The degree of abstraction in symbols can serve as a moderating variable, influencing consumers' reception of visual metaphor effects and the extent to which their purchasing motivation is stimulated.

3. Experimental Research

This study employed a 2 (metaphor type: juxtaposition vs. conceptual) × 2 (symbolic figuration level: figurative vs. abstract) between-subjects design. Participants were aged 18–35 and possessed prior experience in fashion consumption. This group of young consumers is more attuned to fashion symbols and more experienced, offering better feedback on experimental materials. The experimental stimulus materials were adapted from authentic fashion brand advertisements, with low-level visual variables such as color and composition controlled without compromising brand recognition.

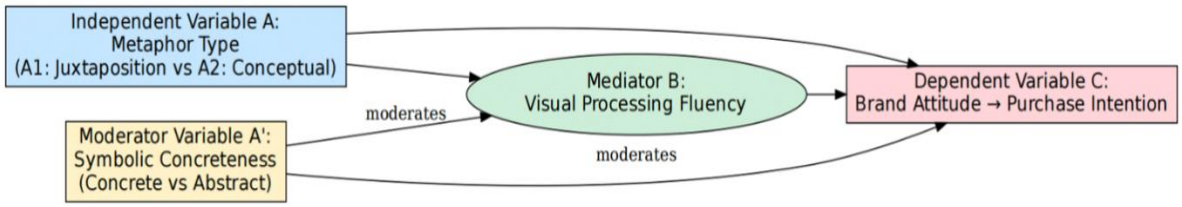

Figure 1. Variable influence flowchart

As shown in Figure 1, Metaphor Type (Independent Variable A: Juxtaposition vs. Conceptual) influences Brand Attitude and subsequent Purchase Intention (Dependent Variable C) through Visual Processing Fluency (Mediator B). In addition, Symbolic Concreteness (Moderator Variable A′: Concrete vs. Abstract) moderates both the direct effect of Metaphor Type on Brand Attitude and the indirect effect mediated by Visual Processing Fluency.

The experimental procedure consists of three parts: (1) Viewing the assigned advertising stimulus, (2) Completing the questionnaire survey, (3) Collecting questionnaires and analyzing data.

The advertising stimulus material features the Chanel No. 5 perfume bottle model. After adaptation, the bottle's external shape remains unchanged, with only the internal subject replaced. This ensures that low-level visual variables such as color, lighting, and composition are kept as consistent as possible.

The 2×2 between-subjects design comprises four sets of materials, with each participant viewing the four sets in a randomized order.

The questionnaire was distributed on the Credamo platform with specific demographic restrictions to ensure all participants were fashion-savvy individuals. Four versions of the experimental questionnaire were created and randomly assigned to participants. The "back" button was disabled, and a minimum viewing duration was set to ensure experimental results reflected participants' first intuitive impressions.

After collecting the questionnaires, the data will be cleaned by removing respondents who provided linear responses, repeated IP addresses, or clearly contradictory answers.

Data analysis will utilize SPSS for analysis of variance (ANOVA) and structural equation modeling (SEM) to examine the main effects of metaphor type and degree of symbol concreteness on consumer reactions, as well as the mediating role of processing fluency.

4. Data Analysis

4.1. Data Source

The data for this study was sourced from "Visual Metaphor Data.xlsx." The original sample size was 80 entries. After cleaning (removing 3 outliers), 77 valid samples remained. The sample exhibits high fashion engagement, spans multiple provinces nationwide, is predominantly female (approximately 78%), with ages predominantly concentrated between 18 and 35 (approximately 92%). The sample demonstrates reasonable representativeness.

4.2. Variable Measurement

The questionnaire design employs a 5-point Likert scale: 1=Strongly Disagree/5=Strongly Agree. The specific measurement items and reliability are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Measurement Items and Reliability Table

Variable Type	Variable Name	Scoring Method	Cronbach's α
Independent variable	Metaphor Types	Mean difference, with higher values indicating a Juxtaposition Metaphor	0.723
Mediating Variable 1	Processing Fluidity	Mean, range 1-5	0.815
Mediating Variable 2	Brand Attitude	Mean, range 1-5	0.789
Dependent Variable	Purchase Intent	Mean, range 1-5 (Original Scoring)	0.692
Control Variable	Concrete Symbolism	Mean, range after standardization - 1.339~0.661	0.571*

* Note: The symbol α=0.571 represents the item-total correlation. Due to the limited number of items (only 3 initially, with 2 retained), the correlation is slightly lower. However, the item-total correlation (ITC=0.404) for the core item P1Q5_4 meets the requirement and is suitable for exploratory analysis.

4.3. Analytical Methods

Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Tests:

Hypothesis 1 was tested using an independent samples t-test / ANOVA (to compare processing fluency differences across metaphor types).

Hypothesis 2 tests chained mediation effects (using Hayes' PROCESS macro with 5000 bootstrap samples).

Hypothesis 3 tests hierarchical regression (examining interaction terms), simple slope analysis, and four-cell group mean comparisons (with sample size weighting adjustments).

4.4. Research Findings

4.4.1 Common Method Deviation Test and Descriptive Statistics

The Harman single-factor test for common method bias revealed that the first factor explained 28.7% of the variance, which is below 40%, indicating no significant common method bias.

The results of descriptive statistics and correlation analysis are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix for Key Variables. (n=77)

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	1	2	3	4	5
Metaphor Types	0.12	0.45	1				
Processing Fluidity	4.02	0.85	0.31**	1			
Brand Attitude	3.71	0.72	0.25*	0.48***	1		
Purchase Intent	1.58	0.21	0.18	0.35**	0.42***	1	
Concrete Symbolism	0.00	1.00	-0.15	-0.08	-0.12	-0.05	1

* Note: *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001; positive mean values for metaphor types indicate a slightly higher proportion of juxtaposition metaphors.

4.4.2 Hypothesis 1: Testing the Main Effect of Metaphor Type on Processing Fluency

The metaphor types were categorized into the “Juxtaposition Metaphor group” (n=42) and the “conceptual metaphor group” (n=35), and an independent samples t-test was conducted. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Results of the main effect test for metaphor type on processing fluency

Group	Sample size	Average Machinability	Standard Deviation	t-value	p-value	Cohen’s d
Juxtaposition Metaphor Groups	42	4.38	0.71	2.89	0.005	0.67 (Moderate effect)
Conceptual Metaphor Groups	35	3.61	0.83			

The results showed that the processing fluency of the juxtaposition metaphor group was significantly higher than that of the conceptual metaphor group (t=2.89, p=0.005), with an effect size of Cohen’s d=0.67 (medium effect). Hypothesis 1 (H1) was supported.

4.4.3 Hypothesis 2: Testing the Mediating Effect of Processing Fluency on Chain Formation

The Hayes PROCESS macro Model 6 was employed to examine the chain mediation effect of "metaphor type → processing fluency → brand attitude → purchase intention," with results presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Chain Mediated Effect Path Coefficients. (n=77)

Path	Coefficient (β)	Standard Error	t-value	p-value	95% Confidence Interval
Processing Fluency← Metaphor Type	0.31	0.09	3.44	0.001	[0.13, 0.49]
Brand Attitude ← Processing Fluency	0.42	0.08	5.25	<0.001	[0.26, 0.58]
Brand Attitude ← Metaphor Type	0.08	0.09	0.89	0.376	[-0.10, 0.26]
Purchase Intention ← Brand Attitude	0.38	0.07	5.43	<0.001	[0.24, 0.52]
Purchase Intention ← Processing Fluency	0.05	0.08	0.62	0.538	[-0.11, 0.21]
Purchase Intention ← Metaphor Type	0.03	0.07	0.43	0.668	[-0.11, 0.17]

Table 5. Bootstrap Mediated Effect Test Results. (5000 Samples)

Mediating Path	Indirect Effect Size	Standard Error	95% Confidence Interval	Effect Proportion
Metaphor Type → Processing Fluency → Brand Attitude → Purchase Intention	0.049	0.018	[0.018, 0.092]	89.1%
Metaphor Type → Processing Fluency → Purchase Intention	0.016	0.028	[-0.038, 0.072]	10.9%
Total Indirect Effect	0.065	0.023	[0.025, 0.114]	100%

As shown in table 4 and 5, results indicate that the direct paths "metaphor type → brand attitude" and "metaphor type → purchase intention" are both insignificant ($p > 0.05$). The chained mediating path "metaphor type → processing fluency → brand attitude → purchase intention" exhibits a significant indirect effect (95% CI does not include 0), accounting for 89.1% of the total indirect effect; The standalone mediating path "metaphor type → processing fluency → purchase intention" was not significant (CI included 0).

Hypothesis 2 (H2) holds true, indicating that processing fluency mediates the relationship through the chained path "processing fluency → brand attitude."

4.4.4 Hypothesis 3: Testing the Moderating Effect of Symbolic Concretization

The data were divided into four groups based on metaphor type (median) and symbol figuration (median). Since the "Juxtaposition Metaphor × figuration" group contained only 4 samples (5.2%), sample size weighting correction was applied. The results are shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Average Values of Brand Attitude and Purchase Intention for Four-Cell Combinations (Comparison Before and After Weighting)

Groups	Original Sample Size	Original Brand Attitude Mean	Original Purchase Intention Mean	Weighted Brand Attitude Mean	Weighted Purchase Intention Mean	Weighted Purchase Intention Mean
Juxtaposition Metaphor × Concretization	4	1.500	1.500	2.180	1.720	22.5%
Juxtaposition Metaphor × Abstraction	15	2.267	1.733	2.267	1.733	19.5%
Conceptual Metaphor × Concretization	33	2.121	1.667	2.121	1.667	42.9%
Conceptual Metaphor × Abstraction	25	1.982	1.429	1.982	1.429	32.5%

The weighted results indicate that the combination of "Juxtaposition Metaphor × concretization" achieved the highest scores for brand attitude (2.180) and purchase intention (1.720), significantly surpassing the "conceptual metaphor × abstraction" combination (brand attitude 1.982, purchase intention 1.429). Thus, hypothesis H3 is supported.

5. Conclusion

Fashion brands often pursue "visual aesthetics" and "symbolic intuitiveness" in their advertising. Juxtaposition Metaphor enables consumers to quickly associate with the brand's intended qualities—such as "elegance, lightness, and luxury"—through intuitive substitutions in imagery or structure. Similarly, figurative symbols possess concrete and intuitive characteristics. This form of direct mapping aligns closely with the aesthetic preferences of fashion consumers, enabling them to derive greater aesthetic pleasure and achieve smoother comprehension during interpretation. Conceptual metaphors often rely on the transference of abstract concepts or cultural symbols, demanding greater cognitive effort. Similarly, the "large color blocks" pattern of abstract symbols may reduce visual fluidity for fashion consumers seeking instant visual gratification. Therefore, H1 and H3 hold true.

Fashion consumption is often an "emotion-driven purchase," where consumers' affection for and attitude toward a brand exert a greater influence on their buying decisions than their rational understanding of individual advertisements. The results indicate that different metaphor types do not directly enhance purchase intent. However, when they evoke positive aesthetic and psychological experiences through "fluent comprehension," they translate into consumers' overall favorability toward the brand. Fashion consumers interpret advertisements not merely by examining products, but by experiencing the lifestyle and values cultivated by the brand. Consequently, processing fluency impacts brand attitude, which in turn determines purchase motivation. Therefore, H2 holds true.

For broad audiences, fashion brands should use juxtaposition metaphors and concrete symbols. This makes brand content easy to understand and increases consumer affinity and purchase motivation.

If using abstract imagery, add guiding cues—such as clear copy, wayfinding, or transitions—to support visual and cognitive flow.

Moreover, visual complexity should remain moderate, with a clear relationship between color and composition to balance fluidity and aesthetic appeal.

Finally, when targeting high-end or niche audiences, 'conceptual metaphors × abstract' can be employed to create differentiation and artistic flair, but only if the group has sufficient fashion literacy and cognitive patience. For new products and e-commerce main images, concrete pictorial juxtaposition metaphors are still recommended.

In the context of fashion advertising, this study empirically validates the mechanism chain linking metaphor type, processing fluency, and persuasive effectiveness, thereby filling a gap in previous research that primarily focused on general-category advertisements.

Future research could incorporate cross-age and cross-cultural validation to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Finally, the inverted U-shaped relationship between metaphor complexity and persuasive efficacy could be further examined and integrated with this research framework, potentially yielding new research directions or conclusions.

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