Gender in Fashion Advertising on Social Media: A Multimodal Discourse Analysis Approach

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Abstract—**This study examines digital fashion advertising discourse on social media from a multimodal perspective. The focus is on Facebook clothing posts published by 'H&M' and the effect of gender on determining the semiotic modes used in such advertisements. The data consists of 8 clothing posts for the two genders published by the company on Facebook during (2020-2022). The data were analyzed using Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) Visual Grammar paradigm to explore the role of gender in the choice of visual modes employed in these posts. The findings show that digital fashion clothing ads widely involve visual semiotic modes as a tool that creates meaning and enables interaction with the target audiences. The results also indicate that gender is a primary factor in the selection of such visual semiotic resources. In particular, the construction of visual meaning, especially representational and interactive meanings, is different from that in male ads.**

Index Terms—**multimodal discourse analysis, fashion advertising, visual semiotic modes, Facebook advertising, gender**

I. INTRODUCTION

The study of discourse in its various forms within different settings has been a topic of discussion in different humanities, social sciences, and communication fields. One kind of discourse that has attracted the attention of many scholars is advertising (e.g., Leech, 1966; Vestergaard & Schroder, 1985; Jones, 1990; Richards & Curran, 2002; Dominick, 2013; Ly & Jung, 2015; Hu & Luo, 2016; Kamath, 2018; Rosa & Savitri, 2019). In its broad sense, advertising is viewed as a communicative means that consists of verbal and non-verbal semiotic modes to present a certain service, promote a product, or attract consumers. The traditional concept of advertising refers mainly to the use of mass media including television, radio, print media like newspapers and magazines, and outdoor billboards to transmit commercial messages. The explosion of technology the world is currently witnessing has changed the advertising practice to become increasingly digital. In particular, the widespread of internet-enabled companies to use social media platforms, web browsers, mobile apps, and many other digital channels to communicate with their customers. Digital advertising has become the new vehicle through which different industries and companies maintain communication with their customers.

It is well-established that the construction of meaning in advertisements is not limited to the use of language, other non-linguistic modes including music, images, colors, and layouts are utilized to transmit the intended message (e.g., Dastijerdi et al., 2012; Abed & Jasem, 2019; Rizvi et al., 2020; Yussuf, 2021). This diversity in the construction of advertising discourse is known as multimodality which has attracted a lot of attention in various fields. The Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) as an approach to research has marked its presence in studies on various forms of spoken and written discourse including advertising discourse (e.g., Al-Masri, 2016; Hussein, 2019; Ghoushchi, 2020).

Advertising, especially in its digital form, is regarded as the key to the success of fashion companies. It reflects the vision of fashion designers and enables them to keep in contact with consumers through a multimodal representation of their products and services. This raised the interest in analyzing fashion advertising discourse from a multimodal perspective (e.g., Nguyen, 2017; Wang, 2020; Haffifah, 2021). Most of the studies that tackled multimodality in fashion advertising discourse focused mainly on the multimodal semiotic construction of fashion advertisements giving very little attention to the impact of social variables on the choice of semiotic modes. In this respect, the study at hand will be of significance in that it sheds light on the role of gender in the visual structure of these advertisements. It aims to identify the visual semiotic modes incorporated in fashion clothing digital advertisements and examines the influence of gender on these modes.

To achieve these aims, the following research questions are formulated:

1. What visual semiotic modes are incorporated in fashion clothing digital ads?
2. What are the differences and similarities between female and male fashion clothing digital ads in terms of the adopted visual semiotic modes?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Theoretical Framework (Visual Grammar Paradigm)

Different research approaches and perspectives have been employed to explore how meanings are generated and communicated through various modes. Such interest has been enhanced with the emergence of Kress and Van Leeuwen's *Visual Grammar* framework (1996). Their work is based on Halliday's systemic functional grammar theory (1978, 1994) which views language as a social semiotic system. Unlike Halliday, they focused on the analysis of images. In their framework, Kress and Leeuwen (1996) asserted that "the visual, like all semiotic modes, has to serve communicational and representational requirements, to function as a full system of communication" (p. 40). According to them, non-linguistic resources such as images are like language, they represent meaning which is constructed through the interaction of different visual semiotic elements. On these grounds, Halliday's three meta-functions of language are replaced by three meta-functions of images in the visual grammar framework: the *representational, interactive,* and *compositional* meta-functions.

In the representational meta-function, the meaning of images is realized through three main components: *processes, participants*, and *circumstances*. The processes in this meta-function are divided into *narrative processes* and *conceptual processes*. While the former occurs in images that represent an action recognized as *'Vector'*, the latter tends to occur in images that lack dynamicity. As for the participants, they are regarded either as interactive or represented. The interactive participants are generally not represented in the images but participate in producing and viewing these images. On the other hand, the represented participants are those who can be viewed in the images. The last component is circumstances, which are classified into two main categories: *locative circumstances* and *circumstances of means*. The former concerns the analysis of the foreground and the background of the image while the latter is mainly concerned with the tools used in action processes.

The second meta-function is interactive. The visual interactive meaning, according to Kress and Van Leeuwen's framework can be described through different elements including visual contact or gaze, social distance and size of the frame, perspective, and modality. In line with this, the image can be either regarded as a 'demand' or an 'offer' image based on whether it represents the participant's gaze direction or not. As for the size of the frame, the image designer can adopt different types of shots through which the social distance between the represented and interactive participants can be described. The third visual element is perspective which indicates the angle or the point of view from which an image is produced. To this end, using a frontal angle indicates an 'attachment' between viewers and participants while using an oblique angle expresses 'detachment'. Last but not the least, *modality*, accounts for the extent to which an image can be authentic. It is concerned with credibility which can be determined in terms of a set of markers including colors, brightness, illumination, context, and representation.

The compositional meta-function is about how visual elements are composed and integrated to form a meaningful whole. Three main elements are included in this kind of image meta-functions: *information value, salience*, and *framing*. Information value is associated with the placement of elements in a certain image in terms of right, left, center, margin, or top and bottom positions. Salience is concerned with how depicted elements are presented to attract the viewer's attention. This can be inferred from various clues like colors, size, and the position of elements in the background and the foreground. The last element in this meta-function is framing, it refers to whether the represented elements are connected or separated from each other by frame lines, and it can be realized using different techniques such as discontinuation of a particular color and empty spaces between elements (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006).

B. Previous Studies

Many scholars have investigated the multimodal aspect in various kinds of discourse including health discourse (e.g., Hunt, 2015), advertising Discourse (e.g., Huo & Luo, 2016), political discourse (e.g., Benderbal, 2017), online media discourse (e.g., Tan et al., 2018), educational discourse (e.g., Peng, 2019). Advertising is one kind of discourse in which multimodality has been widely examined. The focus was on how advertisements are designed to better construct meaning and convey it to the target audiences through different verbal and non-verbal semiotic modes.

Wulan and Pratiwy (2018), for instance, conducted a multimodal discourse analysis of Dettol TV advertisements. Based on the Systemic Functional Linguistic and Visual Grammar theories, the researchers attempted to explore the multimodal components that comprise Dettol ads and the way these components construct the meaning intended by the advertisers. Their results suggested that multimodality in TV advertisements can be clearly described and explained via functional and visual theoretical frameworks. The linguistic analysis revealed that the material processes as a verbal mode were largely presented in comparison with other processes. On the other hand, the visual analysis confirmed the significance of the visual elements in effectively communicating the whole meaning of the ads. As for the audial, gestural, and spatial components, the researchers claimed that these elements proved to help communicate the intended message.

With the intent of analyzing digital advertising, Abed and Jassem (2019) chose to analyze Arabic advertisements. They analyzed from a multimodal perspective fourteen online ads produced by an Iraqi telecommunication company named *Asiacell*. These ads were gathered from the company's official website and social media platforms. The purpose of their study was to identify the different semiotic resources used by the Asiacell company to form the ads' content and structure. Their results indicated that the multimodal characteristics involved in the selected online ads form an

interrelated complementary relationship. Abed and Jassem (2019) demonstrated that Asiacell's ads are constructed to persuade its users through a set of integrated linguistic and non-linguistic strategies including "the aesthetic dimension of the images, the information value of the salient elements, and the short shot" (p. 30).

Another example of a study exploring multimodality in digital advertising discourse is the one conducted by Rizvi et al. (2020). The researchers examined the semiotic modes used to persuade consumers in six e-advertisement visuals retrieved from different online shopping sites. Their analysis was based on using Kress and Van Leeuwen's (1996) three meta-functions framework. The results revealed that each mode involved in the selected digital ads significantly promoted the products. The study also unveiled that all the integrated visual modes such as the participants, the element of gaze, colors, and the placement of the elements carry a deep meaning which contributes to the attractiveness of the product's image. Further, the linguistic modes like capitalization, font, and boldness of writing were highly persuasive and extremely effective in describing the represented product. At the end of this study, the researchers asserted that Kress and Van Leeuwen's three main meanings; the representational, the interactional, and the compositional were effectively conveyed by both the textual and the visual modes.

When it comes to fashion advertising, several studies were conducted (e.g., Camiciottoli, 2013; Nervino, 2018; Hafifah & Sinar, 2021) to analyze different fashion brands' and companies' advertisements to explore the multimodal structural nature of such advertising discourse. Hafifah (2021) studied the photograph collection of Gucci's pre-fall 2020 campaign from a multimodal perspective. The researcher focused on the analysis of the visual elements of Gucci's photograph collection using Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) Visual Grammar Design to investigate a set of thirteen pictures collected from several fashion websites. The results revealed that the photograph collection under investigation comprises all of the three meanings in the Visual Grammar approach, namely the representational, the interactional, and the compositional meanings. The study confirmed that the presence of the visual text alone in multimodal discourses is sufficient to deliver the intended meaning without the need for verbal text.

Not enough attention was devoted to exploring the issue of gender in the visual construction of fashion advertisements on digital media. The present study sheds light on online ads for females' and males' clothing. In particular, it examines the effect of gender on the choice of visual semiotic modes adopted in the digital fashion advertisements of H&M company.

III. METHOD

A. Sample and Data Collection

The sample of this study consists of eight fashion clothing Facebook posts selected from the official Facebook page of the Swedish multinational fashion company "H&M". This company emerged in 1947 in Stockholm. It operates in more than 74 countries where it owns thousands of warehouses and employees, and it largely relies on digital advertising to run its business all around the world. The posts on which the study is based were concerned with the clothes of the two genders excluding unisex products (four for male clothing and four for female clothes). The selected female and male clothing ads were balanced in terms of products advertised (Shirts, jeans, jackets, sweaters). These posts were analyzed to compare the semiotic choices employed in females' and males' clothing digital ads. Table 1 below shows the products' names and the posts' date of publication.

TABLE1
THE SAMPLED FEMALE AND MALE CLOTHING POSTS

Posts	Product's Name	Date of Publication
Females' Posts	Shirt	July 30, 2020
	Jacket	October 05, 2020
	Jeans	February 11, 2020
	Sweater	October 06, 2022
Males' Posts	Shirt	February 04, 2020
	Jacket	February 24, 2021
	Jeans	October 05, 2022
	Sweater	September 28, 2021

The first post in the female category is an advertisement for a summer white shirt. The second one presents an H&M female puffer jacket. The third post is designed to advertise trending straight-leg female jeans. The last one shows a knit sweater from the new collection of H&M (see appendix A).

In the male category, the first post is an online advertisement for a check shirt. The second one advertises a male windproof jacket. The third post represents an ad for a black pair of jeans. Finally, the fourth post is for a roll-neck knit sweater from H&M for a casual look (see appendix B).

B. Data Analysis

The present study adopts the qualitative approach in the analysis of each selected post using KVL's (2006) Visual Grammar framework. It is important to note that the researcher concentrated on the analysis of the visual part of each post (the image) to identify the different visual semiotic modes adopted by online fashion advertisers to promote their products and maintain communication with consumers from both genders. The focus is on the representational,

interactive, and compositional visual elements. In this regard, the analysis of the selected females' fashion clothing posts will be presented first followed by the analysis of males' fashion clothing posts to highlight the main similarities and differences between the two sets of digital ads.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, a visual qualitative analysis of the selected digital ads is conducted to provide answers to the two questions formulated in this paper.

A. The Visual Semiotic Modes Adopted in Females' Fashion Clothing Digital Advertisements

(a). Representational Meta-Function

The representational meaning comprises three elements: participants, processes, and circumstances. The analysis of the four selected female clothing posts shows that the incorporated images include only one participant in each one, a young female model. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) terminology, a participant is regarded as an actor when he/she is represented alone in a given visual characterization. Thus, it seems plausible to consider the represented participants in these images as actors and the receivers of the posts, that is, the audience or the viewers as the interactive participants. The kind of process embodied in each image is narrative. Particularly, actional and reactional processes. The analysis reveals the presence of these two processes in all the examined female ads due to the representation of the participant's gaze and her smiling expressions. In this case, the element of gaze and the smiling act are regarded as the 'vectors'; the performed actions, the represented participants are known as the 'reactors'; the ones who conduct the looking and the smiling acts, and the audience represents the 'phenomenon'; the ones to whom the actions are directed (ibid).

The last element that constitutes the representational meta-function is circumstances. Following Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) notion, circumstances are of two types: locative circumstances and circumstances of means. As for the locative circumstances, the represented participant in post one appears to be sketched against a simple white background. Similarly, the model in the second post is foregrounded against a wall painted grey and orange. On the other hand, the background of the image in post three and four refer to two different places, a street, and a front seat of a car respectively. As far as the circumstances of means are concerned, the analysis disclosed the presence of the element of gaze and smiling expressions as the two means through which a sense of communication is established between the represented participants and the viewers.

(b). The Interactive Meta-Function

The interactive meaning is realized visually through various components including the gaze, size of the frame, perspective, and modality. Interestingly, the participant's direct gaze toward the audience is represented in all the females' clothing posts put under investigation. This implies that these posts encompass a 'demand' image instead of an 'offer' one. Simply worded, the models' direct gaze demands the viewers' attention to the advertised clothing pieces and indicates an interaction between the represented models and the audience. As for the size of the frame and the social distance, the scrutinized images seem to display different sizes. Online advertisers used a medium close shot to capture a 'shirt', a close shot for a 'jacket', a long shot for 'jeans', and a medium long shot for a 'sweater'. In contrast, the perspective which is the third element in the interactive meta-function is the same in all the analyzed images. A frontal angle was used to capture the female model in each post. The use of such an angle, according to Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) terminology, indicates an 'attachment' between viewers and participants. It calls for the involvement of the viewers in the visual characterization. In other words, the image is at the viewers' eye level to get them involved with the represented participant, and hence be attracted to the advertised piece of clothing.

Modality is the last component, and it consists of different markers including colors, context, representation, illumination, and brightness values. These markers measure the extent to which an image can be authentic. Although the degree of modality varies among the images incorporated in females' clothing posts, they all appear authentic. The first and the second posts exhibit a moderate degree of modality due to the absence of context. However, modality is high in the third and fourth posts. This can be explained by the depiction of the elements in their natural colors, the detailed representation of the participants' figures and facial expressions, the presence of illumination and different brightness values as well as the context, that is, the setting where the models are captured.

(c). The Compositional Meta-Function

The compositional meta-function is about how visual elements are composed and integrated to form a meaningful whole, and it consists of three main elements: information value, salience, and framing. The visual composition of elements in the images under scrutiny is almost the same. In terms of information value, a single piece of pictorial information which refers to the represented participant is depicted in the central position of each image. Following Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar, information positioned in the center is more significant than those placed in the margin. In this respect, it is plausible to claim that the represented models are the only significant visual information provided in all the examined ads. As for salience, it can be argued that the salient elements in these images are the represented models themselves as they represent the means through which the advertised clothing piece is

demonstrated to the audience. Their central position in the images and the large space they occupy reinforce their salience. About the framing, a glance at each image reveals the absence of separating frame lines. All the depicted elements appear to be composed within a single frame.

B. The Visual Semiotic Modes Adopted in Males' Fashion Clothing Digital Advertisements

(a). The Representational Meta-Function

The analysis of the representational meaning in the images involved in male clothing ads appears to be different to a certain extent in comparison with female ads. The difference occurs mainly in the type of processes carried out by the represented participants and circumstances. Similar to female clothing ads, online fashion advertisers use a single male participant in each image to present the advertised products. However, the visual exanimation exhibits a wide presence of conceptual process which was completely absent in female ads. This suggests the lack of dynamicity in male clothing ads except for the fourth post where the element of gaze is represented. In line with this visual representation, it is reasonable to claim that almost all the posts in the male category lack a circumstance of means. No tool seems to be represented in the concerned images to maintain contact with the receivers of these ads. On the other hand, locative circumstances totally mark their presence as each image involves a background and a foreground.

(b). The Interactive Meta-Function

Another difference between females' and males' clothing ads is noticed in the construction of the interactive meaning. Unlike female ads, the images used in male ads are 'offer' images. In this case, creating interaction with the audience through a 'demand' image is not the concern of online fashion advertisers in designing male clothing ads. By using 'offer' images, advertisers aim only to provide information about the advertised piece of clothing without creating visual contact with the viewers. By the same token, the visual analysis points to a difference in the adopted size of frames. Although images of the same kind of clothing pieces are examined in both female and male ads, the used frame to capture them differs. A medium long shot was used to capture the 'shirt', a medium close shot for the 'jacket', and a long shot for the 'jeans' and the 'sweater'. In terms of perspective, the same angle used to capture female models is adopted in male ads. Post designers chose a frontal angle instead of an oblique one to engage the audience in the image's content where the participant is directly facing them.

In contrast to females' ads, the modality of the images in males' clothing ads does not vary. All the incorporated images show a moderate modality. Such a deduction stems from the fact that the location of the represented participants is not clear enough for the viewers of these images, but they still look authentic due to the accurate depiction of the participants' physical appearance, the representation of natural colors, and the considerable amount of illumination the participant receives in each image.

(c). The Compositional Meta-Function

The visual composition of elements in male ads is almost similar to females. The analysis reveals the inclusion of one main pictorial information in each image. The latter refers to the represented participant who seems to occupy the foregrounded central position. Such a placement points to the participants' significance as being the models who advertise the pieces of clothing. In this regard, it is plausible to assume that the represented participants are the most salient elements in the analyzed male fashion clothing ads. As for the framing, these visual compositions do not seem to encompass any frame lines that separate the depicted elements.

V. CONCLUSION

The current study came up with two main results; it points to the variety of the visual semiotic modes used in female and male fashion clothing digital advertisements and the remarkable differences in the visual construction of these two categories of digital advertising. The study confirms that the gender of the target audience has an impact on the choice of visual semiotic modes. Online fashion advertisers seem to use different semiotic resources while communicating the visual meaning of female and male clothing ads, particularly, representational and interactive meanings.

Concerning the representational meaning, the findings show a significant difference between the examined females' and males' clothing ads in terms of the represented processes and circumstances. Despite the presence of a single participant in each of the analyzed posts' images, female participants seem to carry out different processes compared to male participants. The analysis unveils the presence of visual contact with the audience and dynamicity in female ads due to the representation of reactional and actional processes. On the other side, these two elements are almost completely absent in male ads because of the wide presence of conceptual processes. As for the circumstances, the results show the representation of locative circumstances (background and foreground) in all the ads put under scrutiny. However, the circumstances of means mainly mark their presence in females' ads only in which no communicative means appears to be involved in the majority of males' ads.
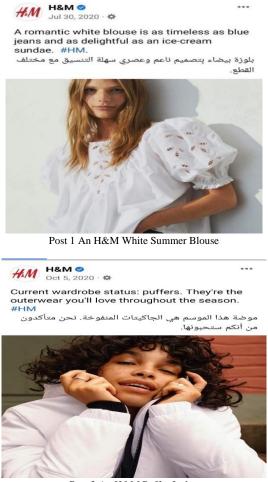
Another difference is noticed in the interactive meaning. Unlike male clothing ads, 'offer' images are totally absent in female ads. This suggests that online fashion advertisers give more importance to the representation of the participant's gaze while designing female clothing ads to create interactive meaning. In contrast, demanding the viewers' interaction through visual contact does not seem to be the main concern of advertisers in male ads. Similarly, the visual analysis of

this meta-function points to diversity in the adopted frames. Although the difference is slight, online fashion advertisers are more inclined to demonstrate a close social distance between the represented participants and the audience in female ads than in males. Alternatively, the same angle was used in all the investigated images. As for the modality of the images, the findings reveal that images in females' ads are more vivid and authentic than the ones in males' ads due to the accurate representation of the context.

Finally, no differences are found between the two sets of advertisements regarding the construction of compositional meaning. The analyzed images appear to have the same visual compositions. They included central information value which referred to the represented participant. Such significance is reinforced by the absence of separating frame lines in all the analyzed images where the represented participant occupied almost all the space in a single frame.

To conclude, this study reveals that in the advertising field, particularly, fashion advertising, the gender of the addressee significantly influences the advertisers' choice of visual techniques to promote their products and persuade consumers. Considering the different personalities of females and males, they intentionally concentrate on the representation of gaze, smiling expressions, close social distance, and vividness of images in the female clothing ads to attract this category of consumers while they chose to keep male ads simple focusing mainly on the advertised clothing pieces.

APPENDIX A H&M FACEBOOK FEMALE CLOTHING POSTS

Post 1 An H&M White Summer Blouse

Post 2 An H&M Puffer Jacket

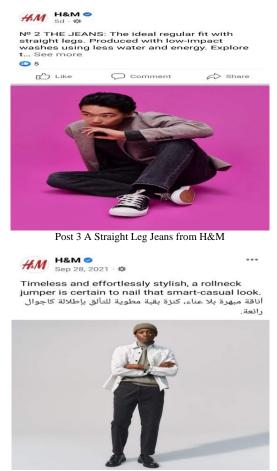Post 3 An H&M Wide Leg Jeans

Post 4 An H&M Knit Sweater

APPENDIX B H&M FACEBOOK MALE CLOTHING POSTS

Post 1 A Check Shirt from H&M

Post 2 A Windproof Jacket from H&M

Post 3 A Straight Leg Jeans from H&M

Post 4 A Rollneck Knit Sweater from H&M

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