

# Narrating Value: Brand Identity Construction in the Luxury Watch Market (Note 1)

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## Abstract

The luxury watch market is a fertile ground for investigating the discursive practices which lead to the construction of corporate brand identity and reputation. Far from being just commodities, luxury watches combine the tangibility of timekeeping devices with the intangibility of concepts like heritage, excellence and authenticity.

This article investigates the discursive construction of corporate identity through the ‘About Us’ sections of the websites of the ten leading European luxury jewellery groups, with a specific focus on luxury watch manufacturers. We built a *corpus* consisting of the main actors in the luxury watch industry, and we processed the data using software-based statistical analysis to unveil linguistic and thematic patterns. This quantitative approach is integrated with Multimodal Discourse Analysis which qualitatively examines how verbal and non-verbal elements work together to convey meaning.

The study highlights how, and to what extent, the ‘About Us’ sections of those companies’ websites contribute to shaping and reinforcing narratives of tradition, quality and exclusivity. The investigation reveals how the verbal texts in the *corpus* craft a sense of value and uniqueness, while their interplay with non-verbal texts corroborates the objective of providing prospective customers with a solid, consistent narrative of luxury. This latter positions luxury not just as a commodity to be owned, but as value that one can embody or identify oneself in.

**Keywords:** Corporate narrative, Text analysis, TALL, Co-word analysis, Thematic map

## 1. Introduction

The corporate landscape is a composite and dynamic environment where a company's success is not solely determined by its products or services, but also by its identity and reputation. In this complex framework, corporate brand identity is a crucial construct, as it represents the expression of a company’s corporate identity: the union of all the internal values, visions and culture-specific aspects - “brand associations” in Aaker’s terms (1996: 68) - and its communication to the outside world by means of its brand elements. In today’s market, where consumers (or prospective ones) have plenty of options for one commodity or service, building a strong and consistent brand identity can be a key competitive advantage, as it contributes to building a deeper connection with the brand, while fostering trust and loyalty (see Mogaji 2021).

To communicate their corporate brand identity, that is the set of material and immaterial elements which shape their unique combination of qualities, companies use brand management (see Aaker 1996; Mogaji 2021). Brand management has to do with planning how to create and maintain a specific identity and “ensur[e] that the brand is perceived as planned by the company” (Mogaji 2021: VI). The study of branding and brand management in marketing goes beyond the scope of this article; yet, since a company’s (brand) identity is discursively constructed, linguistics provides valuable insights into a strategic use of language and other communicative resources.

Within this broader context, the luxury market offers a particularly fertile ground for investigating how corporate brand identity is linguistically constructed and communicated. Indeed, far from being simple commodities, luxury goods are deeply entwined with intangible concepts like heritage, exclusivity, and authenticity. This is especially true for the luxury watch industry, where timepieces bring together functionality and the communication of non-material attributes like tradition, craftsmanship, and sense of value.

Drawing on these premises, this article addresses the multi-layered construction of corporate brand identity through the "About Us" sections of the websites of the ten leading Swiss luxury jewellery groups, with a specific focus on luxury watch manufacturers. The main purpose of the study is exploring which thematic and semantic patterns are mostly used as rhetorical strategies by the companies to craft a sense of value and exclusivity while addressing a broad and heterogeneous audience. The study also aims at establishing if, and to what extent, the interplay between verbal and non-verbal texts, contribute to shape and reinforce corporate brand narratives.

In order to carry the study out, a *corpus* has been compiled from official sources (a 2023 Morgan Stanley survey: <https://monochrome-watches.com/industry-news-top-50-swiss-watch-companies-of-2023-according-to-morgan-stanley-rolex-breaking-the-chf-10-billion-barrier/>). The *corpus* has successively been processed employing a software-based statistical analysis to quantitatively identify recurring linguistic patterns and themes. A parallel multimodal discourse analysis has been conducted, to explore the interplay between verbal and non-verbal texts.

The article is structured as follows: Section 2 provides a background literature review of relevant theories of both statistical text analysis (sub-section 2.1) and Multimodal Discourse Analysis (sub-section 2.2). Section 3 informs on the research methodology, detailing the *corpus* compilation and description (sub-section 3.1) and outlining both the statistical text analysis approach (subsection 3.2) and the Multimodal Discourse Analysis approach (subsection 3.3). Section 4 presents the results of the statistics-informed and multimodal analyses, followed by a discussion of the key findings. Finally, Section 5 offers the final remarks, summarizing the study's contributions and suggesting further developments for future research.

## 2. Background Literature Review

### 2.1 Statistical Text Analysis

The interest in analysing data by automated tools is not new, as it dates back to the Eighties, when Spad-T (Système portable d'analyse de données) (Lebart et al. 1993) was launched; it is nowadays considered as one of the first proposals for the statistical analysis of textual bodies. Aria et al. (2024a) reckon that the development of tools capable of processing and analysing large batches of unstructured data extracted from texts written in natural language has been markedly important, along with the methodological patterns in this sector of study. Remarkable advances and big steps forward have been taken over the years. Aria et al (2022, 2024a, 2024b) enumerate approaches (correspondence analysis, factorial analysis, clustering analysis) that represent the launch pad for more effective, time-saving new methodologies. Nowadays, for example, R and Python (computer programming languages) offer the most trending tools for text analysis and visualisation. Aria et al. (2022, 2024b) have studied the subject of automated textual analysis over the last years, and have finally designed a software to perform effective and comprehensive textual analysis of a large set of data, the TALL software:

“TALL (Text Analysis for All) (<https://tall-app.com>) is a new R Shiny app that combines all the major text analysis advancements developed in recent years. TALL provides a comprehensive workflow for data cleaning, pre-processing, statistical analysis, and visualization of textual data by combining state-of-the-art text analysis techniques into an R Shiny app. TALL serves as a practical solution for researchers without programming skills, offering an intuitive interface that enables interaction with data and the execution of analyses without extensive programming knowledge”. (Aria et al. 2024a)

This software is here used to carry out the automated textual analysis, the quantitative side of our *corpus* of ‘About Us’ sections of luxury watches brands.

## 2.2 Multimodal Studies and Social Semiotics

In Carey Jewitt’s words, multimodality is a field of study “that approaches representation, communication and interaction as something more than language” (2009: 1). At its heart, it challenges the traditional, logocentric view of communication, widening the lens to include other semiotic resources in which language is embedded, and with which it intertwines, like images, sound, gestures, layout, position, gaze (see Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006). In Multimodal Studies signs are viewed not as fixed entities, but as tools used differently in different social contexts to create meaning. Thus, meaning-making is a social act not just in the Hallidayan sense, but in a more comprehensive sense.

Harmut Stöckl states that the ‘multi-semiotic turn’ (2009: 203) in Communication Studies has caused a shift in meaning-making, which has now to be approached as a multisensory process, because of the complex interrelationship between semiotic resources caused by the rise of mixed media. This assumption is also corroborated by the fact that human beings are naturally inclined to communicate multimodally, since they rely on more than one sense to communicate and since their communicative repertoire is characterised by a mixed use of different semiotic resources (see Stöckl 2009). In this perspective, the natural co-occurrence of different semiotic modes causes the co-construction of meaning, which is, according to the scholar, the very nature of multimodality. He does not just speak about the combination of different modes but of their integration (see Stöckl 2019), implying meaning is not the result of a co-presence of different semiotic modes, but the result of their simultaneous interaction and *strategic combination*, specifically defined as “intermodal cohesion/coherence” (Stöckl 2022: 1).

The theoretical foundation of multimodality is deeply rooted in Social Semiotics (Halliday 1978) and in Halliday’s works. Halliday viewed language as highly functional, that is as a resource shaped by (and able to shape) social functions. He argued that it is not possible to look at language as something independent and isolated from the context in which it is used, thus the main concepts of his theoretical framework (Systemic Functional Linguistics) were three metafunctions (ideational, interpersonal and textual) describing what language is expected to do: represent, enact and organize, respectively.

In 1996, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen extended Halliday’s framework to all the other semiotic modes, developing a social semiotic approach to multimodality and positing that, in order to communicate, people draw from a repertoire of semiotic resources they choose (or are enabled to choose) as convenient to shape communication. Thus, the scholars shifted the focus from language to communication. While Halliday saw language as a system whose structure is shaped by its social functions (metafunctions), Kress and van Leeuwen saw communication as design.

In a world dominated by mixed media, the two scholars argued that the relationship between signifier and signified is not just driven by the specific purpose and context of the sign-maker but that meaning-making is the outcome of a relationship between different semiotic resources.

In their Grammar of Visual Design framework, the multimodal alternative to Halliday's metafunctions became: the representational, interactive and compositional metafunctions.

The renewed analytical triptych works as follows:

- Representational metafunction: it focuses on the content and addresses the participants, processes, and settings being referred to or depicted.
- Interactive metafunction: it represents the relationship established between the communicator (the addresser of the communication act) and the recipient (the addressee). This function addresses engagement, detachment, roles and power dynamics, etc.
- Compositional metafunction: this function deals with how the representational and interactive elements are arranged and connected to create a coherent and consistent message. It addresses cohesion, information value, framing, etc.

While Kress & Van Leeuwen focused on creating a grammar of visual design, and Jewitt focused on the theoretical scope(s) of multimodality, other scholars like Bezemer and Kress (2008) and Bateman (2008) moved from the Social Semiotic Multimodal Discourse Analysis framework to focus on different analytical problems: the transformation of semiotic resources and the structural organization of complex multi-semiotic texts, respectively. More specifically, Bezemer and Kress (2008) focused on the concept of recontextualization, exploring how multimodal resources change when the communication context changes. This may either involve a selection process - meaning not all the aspects of a semiotic resource are maintained when the context changes - or a change in the function of the semiotic resource - meaning the resource is repurposed to comply with a new communicative function. Bateman (2008), on the other side, developed an analytical model for the study of complex multimodal texts, integrating Halliday and Kress and Van Leeuwen's frameworks. He argued that complex multimodal documents should be analysed through a framework made up of four interlinked levels, from the most abstract to the most concrete one:

- the Metafunctional Level which incorporates both Halliday and Kress & Van Leeuwen's three metafunctions and is aimed at providing a theoretical and functional justification for every design choice made in a document;
- the Generic Level which focuses on how modes are organized to create a (recognizable) genre;
- the Abstract Layout Level which refers to the structure of the page (i.e.: headers, sidebars, and main content blocks, etc.);
- the Concrete Manifestation Level which is the actual realization of the design.

In the realm of Multimodal Studies, Martinec and Salway (2005) focused on an aspect that had been under-developed by foundational scholars, that is the cohesive relationships between text and image. Drawing on traditional systemic functional concepts like elaboration and extension they aimed at creating a more comprehensive, fine-grained set of analytical tools to address the

relationship(s) between verbal text and image in multi-semiotic texts, so to move beyond observation towards consistent, replicable descriptions of multimodal issues. The scholars' image-text framework takes from Halliday's metafunction to classify how modes interact. They speak about Status to identify the hierarchical relationships between the modes (if there is a dominant and a subordinate mode or if they are equally essential for meaning-making). Furthermore, they speak about logico-semantic relations to define the type of semantic connection within modes. In this sense, they find elaboration and extension. In the first case one mode clarifies or strengthens content(s) presented in another mode (i.e: providing details, restating or specifying the content). In the second case one mode adds new or different information to the other mode.

While Martinec and Salway's framework offers a rigorous methodology for identifying the structural mechanics of image-text interaction, enabling the classification of cohesive ties, Hartmut Stöckl integrates this model into a broader discourse of persuasion, offering an application for these descriptive tools. In other words Martinec and Salway's framework is functional for Stöckl (2022, 2024a, 2024b) to talk about intersemiotic cohesion. The concept of intersemiotic cohesion is central to Stöckl's work in advertising and promotional discourse; in fact, it clarifies how modes are systematically linked to create a unified, persuasive message. Adapting Stephen Toulmin's model (1958), he argues that cohesion is essential to reach multimodal argumentation because it binds together data (the evidence, often provided by visual modes) and warrant (the justification, often provided by verbal modes). This aspect, as the analysis section shows, is particularly relevant for the study of corporate websites discourses as the relationship and consistency of verbal and non-verbal aspects in communicative strategies contribute to frame corporate identity.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Corpus Compilation and Description

The primary data to build a corpus of digital corporate discourse were retrieved from the official websites of ten top-tier luxury watch brands, specifically targeting the 'About Us' (or equivalent History/La Maison) sections. This process resulted in a multimodal *corpus* consisting of both verbal text and visual units (images and layout screenshots). As for language, to ensure linguistic consistency across the comparative analysis, the data collection was restricted to the English language versions of the brands' global sites.

We selected the top ten Swiss watchmaker brands, on the basis of their objective market performance (turnover) and industry standing. (<https://monochrome-watches.com/industry-news-top-50-swiss-watch-companies-of-2023-according-to-morgan-stanley-rolex-breaking-the-chf-10-billion-barrier/>).

The selection includes the so-called Holy Trinity (Patek Philippe, Audemars Piguet and Vacheron Constantin) alongside global leaders like Rolex, Cartier, and Omega.

The verbal components of the *corpus* were processed using TALL (Text Analysis for All), a specialized R Shiny application developed by a team of researchers at the University of Naples Federico II, University of Campania "Vanvitelli and University of Calabria (see Aria et al.,

2023, 2024a, 2024b). TALL was selected for its ability to provide a statistics-based text analysis, allowing for the extraction of valuable data without the burden of extensive manual programming. Through TALL, a quantitative analysis was performed to identify high-frequency keywords and lexical clusters. This objective assessment revealed a preliminary heavy concentration of terms such as ‘*Quality*’, ‘*Design*’, ‘*Precision*’, which the qualitative analysis integrates and confirms as some of the most common verbal anchors for the communication of the brands’ ethos of uniqueness and transparency.

The non-verbal components of the corpus were analyzed following the principles of Multimodal Discourse Analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006; Kress 2009; Stöckl 2009, 2019, 2020, 2022, 2024a, 2024b; Martinec and Andrew Salway 2005). The images presented in section 3.3 for in-depth qualitative analysis have been selected based on their compositional salience and their representative status within the semantic clusters identified during the TALL processing phase.

### 3.2 Statistical Text Analysis

The quantitative analysis was conducted by processing data with TALL software as follows. First, we uploaded the 10 documents, containing the text extracted from the companies’ websites, in .txt format. To follow, we processed the documents with the Georgetown University Multilayer corpus (GUM) treebank. The next step was tokenization, refining the data by extracting proper nouns in the form of multi-words. To conclude the process, we tagged adjectives, nouns, verbs and multi-words. The overall computational step was then accomplished and the output is shown in Tab. 1. The figures reported here are divided into tokens (the smallest unit a text or a corpus consists of (word and non-word), types (unique word forms a text consists of) and lemmas, (dictionary forms of a word). The number of sentences completes the list.

Table 1. Lexical metrics of the global corpus (Output generated via TALL)

Description	Values
All	All
Documents	10.00
Tokens	43,293.00
Types	6,306.00
Lemma	5,290.00
Sentences	2,083.00

In Table 2, results sorted by brands are reported. In this list, it is possible to see that Planet Omega provides the most synthetic information, with a number of lemmas and sentences far

lower than the other brands. Breitling and Richard Mille instead, need more sentences and lemmas to convey information, and they lead the way in this list.

Table 2. Comparative lexical metrics across the selected watch brands (Output generated via TALL)

<u>-</u>	<u>SENTENCES</u>	<u>TYPE</u>	<u>TOKEN</u>	<u>LEMMA</u>
<u>AUDEMARS PIGUET</u>	<u>192</u>	<u>1343</u>	<u>4232</u>	<u>1151</u>
<u>BREITLING</u>	<u>361</u>	<u>2420</u>	<u>8082</u>	<u>2008</u>
<u>CARTIER</u>	<u>198</u>	<u>1384</u>	<u>4270</u>	<u>1149</u>
<u>LONGINES</u>	<u>113</u>	<u>906</u>	<u>2426</u>	<u>803</u>
<u>PATEK PHILIPPE</u>	<u>190</u>	<u>1429</u>	<u>4124</u>	<u>1228</u>
<u>PLANET OMEGA</u>	<u>34</u>	<u>363</u>	<u>750</u>	<u>328</u>
<u>RICHARD MILLE</u>	<u>322</u>	<u>2193</u>	<u>7633</u>	<u>1832</u>
<u>ROLEX</u>	<u>153</u>	<u>1185</u>	<u>3519</u>	<u>1044</u>
<u>TISSOT</u>	<u>145</u>	<u>1168</u>	<u>2932</u>	<u>1022</u>
<u>VACHERON CONSTANTIN</u>	<u>218</u>	<u>1820</u>	<u>5323</u>	<u>1506</u>

These data were then used to obtain two main software products: a Co-word analysis and a Thematic map.

The Co-Word Analysis allows to draw a visual map of semantic relationships among tokens; furthermore, it permits to identify both the words and the semantic patterns that mainly occur in the text. The Thematic Map, on is useful to map the most relevant topics and to provide a schematization of text patterns. It allows, in nutshell, ‘to read a text without reading it’, that is providing a snapshot, a glimpse, a general overview on which topic is the most/least central and relevant, which one is referred to more or less intensely and frequently.



- *Co-Word analysis*

This analysis allows us to determine how often words appear together in the texts of the “About Us” sections scrutinized. Two main features need description: the node size, which represents frequency, and the edge thickness which describes the strength of association (based on the association index). By the Walktrap algorithm, we were able to single out pretty differentiated clusters or communities, which eventually represent thematic groupings or shared discourse patterns.

1. Community Structure. Each community can be displayed under a different color, and each of them can be linked to a specific theme:

- Red/Pink Community (Time, Watchmaking, Movement, First, Chronograph). This cluster is likely to express the core concepts of watchmaking. The high frequency of the word "time" may be related not only to elapsing time, but also - especially when it is found in the co-occurrence with "watchmaking", "movement," "chronograph," and "first" - elicitation of tradition, innovation and mechanical functions of the watch. The connections among these words suggest that the narrative of all the brands scrutinized, as well as the technical building of chronographs, is intimately linked to history and tradition.
- Brown/Orange Community (Watches, Brand, Richard Mille, Design, Parts, Years, Industry). This cluster recalls the prominence in the narrative of marketing, trade and commercial aspects as well as the design ones. Not surprisingly, the words "Watches" and "Brand" are central. The pretty high frequency of the name "Richard Mille" may suggest that this brand, along with its design, is often cited in the sections, possibly, either as benchmark or as a competitor. The co-occurrence of words like "Design," "Parts," "Years," and "Industry" generates a narrative around the watchmaking industry, design process, and the legacy of the brands and their long-lasting presence on the market.
- Blue Community (Watchmaking, New, Audemars). Here, the focus is shifted on the watchmaking ability of craftsmen to build watches. It is interesting to note that Audemars Piguet might be connected to this topic, possibly more than others.
- Green Community (Brand, Precision, Family). The co-occurrence of these words can be interpreted in several ways. There is a wide umbrella of references: it includes the professional aspect of the brand (business), the precision of the watch (technicality), and the familiar values (tradition and history).

2. Centrality and Influence. The largest nodes (e.g., "watches," "time," "movement," "watchmaking") are likely to represent the most frequent and central words. Thus, these terms are closely interconnected and they not only contribute in building the narrative meaning and structure, but also define the core themes which these companies found their brand identity upon.

### 3. Word Associations and Collocations

- "First" with "Chronograph" and "Movement": This triad may suggest that advances and achievements in chronograph technology and movement design are pivotal in conveying brand narratives.
- "Innovation" with "Tradition" and "Heritage": This group of connections may reveal a pretty common rhetorical strategy that communicates luxury brands as both innovative, long-lasting and deeply rooted in tradition. This allows, in brand management strategies, to maintain prestige and justify high prices.
- "Design" with "Perfect" and "Timepiece": These linked words may suggest, instead, a discontinued search for perfection both in design and manufacturing.

### 4. Network Density

The overall density of the network sketches out how closely these concepts are intertwined in the brands' communication. The higher the density of the network, the more cohesive and integrated the narrative is. Conversely, a less dense network might indicate more differentiated or fragmented communication acts.

- *Thematic Map*

The thematic map, generated using a bibliometric-inspired approach, comes into two forms: the first form, (Fig. 2 below), provides a snapshot of the conceptual structure of the corpus, showing the relevance of the identified topics, based on word co-occurrence patterns. The second form, organized as a network (Figure 3 below), provides a glimpse on density (topics' internal cohesion) and centrality (interaction with other topics). The map provides also the list of the identified topics (Table 4). The map, in its first form, is divided into four quadrants, each representing a different strategic position for a topic:

- Hot Topics (Upper Right). High centrality (relevance) and high density (development). These are the well-developed and important themes in the *corpus*.
- Basic Topics (Lower Right). High centrality but low density. These are important, foundational themes, but less developed than "Hot Topics."
- Niche Topics (Upper Left). Low centrality but high density. These are specialized, well-developed themes, but less central to the overall discourse. They reflect particular areas of focus for certain brands or specific aspects of the industry.
- Peripheral Topics (Lower Left). Low centrality and low density. These are less important and less developed themes, potentially representing emerging trends or less emphasized aspects.

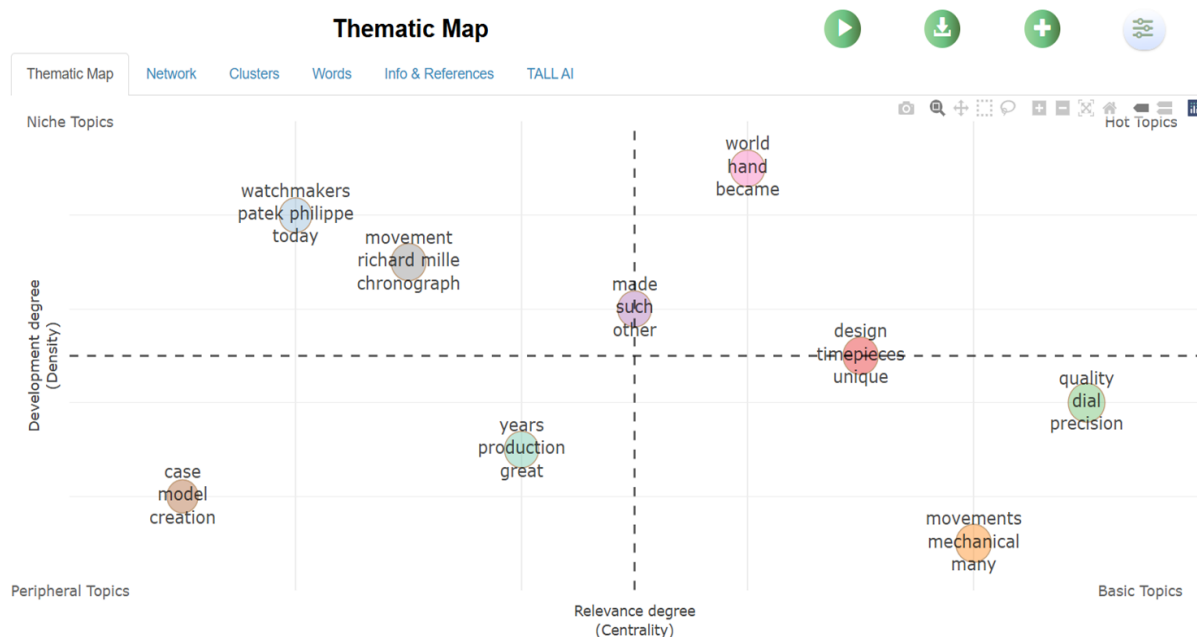


Figure 2. Thematic map on two axis: centrality and density (Output generated via TALL)

On the basis of such a partition, we can step forward and interpret each quadrant of the thematic map we obtained from our corpus.

1. Hot Topics. The prominent themes in this quadrant include words like "quality", "dial", "precision", "technical", "high", "gold", "work", "art", "timepiece", and "own". The first implication is that a major chunk of the luxury watch brands communication strategy orbitates around emphasizing "high-quality materials", "technical precision", and the "artistic value" of their timepieces. The occurrence of "own", can be interpreted not only in its extended meanings of ownership, property and belonging, but also in suggesting and effectively communicating the sense of exclusivity, intimate personal connection with the watch (and consequently with the brand) and affection.
2. Basic topics. This quadrant contains terms such as "movements", "mechanical", "many", "designed", "breitling", "know", "manufacture", and "launched." This suggests that brand narratives are designed around the mechanics and design process, which become foundational elements and inspire imagery of technical perfection, reliability and precision. The inclusion of "Breitling" likely indicates that it is a major brand. This quadrant underscores the practical elements of production and the launching of new design, models and initiatives. The use of "know" might indicate brands trying to showcase their expertise, or make sure that the consumer understands the value proposition. This latter word, implies the smooth connection with "knowledge", declined in a multifaceted array of applications: from handcraftmanship (human knowledge), to tradition (knowledge of brand history and roots), to ability (knowledge of the technical side), to customer care (the company knows the customer and the customer knows, is aware of the brand)

3. Niche Topics. This area includes terms like "watchmakers," "patek philippe", "today", "century", "movement", "set", "richard mille", "audemars piguet," "chronograph", "collection", "spirit," "small", "year", "vallée de joux," "developed", "place", "history", "second", "major", and "automatic". This suggests that these clusters are strongly related to specific brands such as Patek Philippe, Audemars Piguet, and Richard Mille. It highlights not only specific aspects such as chronographs, movements, and locations or historic elements like the "Vallée de Joux", but also celebrates watchmakers, craftsmen whose ability is central in luxury watch brands life, who are able to work and refine intricate movements, getting close to perfection in their unique work. Their legacy relates then to "history" and "century". Watchmakers become frequently, in these brands' communication, the main actors, also from a pictorial point of view: very often their hands are shown, holding tools and very close to watch workings, cases and movements (see section 3.3 for further details on this aspect).
4. Peripheral Topics. This quadrant includes terms such as "case", "model", "creation", "used", "perfect", "chronographs", "wrist", "use", "based", and "line". These words are less central and less developed in the overall discourse. This potentially indicates an opportunity for brands to differentiate themselves by focusing more on "the case" or "creation" of their models in their brand communication. This batch of words may also point out a reference to marketing aspects, line and typologies of products, gamuts and promotional processes.
5. Bridge/Central Topics. The central area contains the topics connecting different themes and could give insight on the narrative. "day", "created", "excellence", "hands", "known", "power", "design", "timepieces", "unique", "vacheron constantin", "expertise", "innovation", "tradition", "heritage", "create", and "exceptional" seems to highlight the connections among the creative process, manufacturing, the expertise and the exclusiveness of the luxury watches brands.



historical buildings, etc.), and a deliberate page layout. By conducting a multimodal analysis, one can uncover how these different elements work together to:

- Construct a specific ethos (i.e., presenting the company as traditional, innovative and/or exclusive).
- Establish a sense of authenticity and credibility, and eventually foster trust.
- Differentiate the brand from its competitors.
- Engage stakeholders and influence their decisions.

Ethos refers to the persuasive appeal based on the credibility of the communicator. In corporate communication it refers to the construction of the brand's public persona and to its eventual perception. From a multimodal point of view ethos is a holistic concept constructed through the synergy of multiple metafunctions (see Kress and van Leeuwen 2006): the interactive metafunction, which defines the relationship and authority status between the brand and the audience (e.g., if the brand is positioned as a traditional, innovative, qualitative, exclusive authority, and so forth) and the compositional metafunction, which analyses how verbal and non verbal elements are set together to convey the status and the ethos properly.

As for establishing a sense of authenticity and credibility, this is constructed, multimodally speaking, through a strategic co-construction of data and warrant via intersemiotic cohesion. Drawing on Stöckl's (2024a; 2024b) adaptation of the Toulmin model for multimodal argumentation in print ads, the structure visual data/linguistic warrant is normally found as the prototypical pattern. However, in the case of luxury watches, this pattern is sometimes altered or reversed, thus resulting in linguistic data/visual warrant. As the analysis shows in detail, Stöckl's paradigm sometimes shifts because the luxury watch genre tends to prioritize abstract, internal, and non-visual qualities over immediate sensory appeal.

Differentiation is the strategic process of creating a unique position in the marketplace by highlighting distinctive features, benefits, or character, instilling in prospective consumers the will of choosing a specific brand over its competitors. Under the multimodal lens, differentiation is conveyed mainly through the compositional metafunction (see Kress and van Leeuwen 2006), as it uncovers how unique semiotic choices are used to prioritize information which convey the brand's uniqueness and distinctiveness.

Finally, engaging stakeholders and influencing their decisions has to do with how the communication attempts to initiate, maintain, or intensify the relationship with the audience, ultimately guiding them toward a desired action (purchase a watch, in this case, and enter the brand's community of users). From a multimodal point of view engagement is mainly analyzed through the interactive metafunction (see Kress and van Leeuwen 2006) as it enables an examination of the semiotic resources used by the communicator (the brand) to strategically manipulate and verbally and visually address the communication recipient.

Building upon the quantitative findings presented in the previous section, we systematically examined the 'About Us' sections of the ten Swiss top-tier luxury watch brands to select representative multimodal units. These examples illustrate the complex intersemiotic relations

introduced in the theoretical framework. To make the connection between the statistical and multimodal stages more explicit, each screenshot discussed below is read as a qualitative instantiation of one or more semantic clusters identified through the co-word analysis and thematic map. In particular, the multimodal examples were selected because they visually and verbally activate the clusters related to watchmaking, movement, precision, craftsmanship, heritage, excellence, power, design and uniqueness.

To begin with, Figure 4 (below) has been retrieved from the Rolex website and it shows Roger Federer playing a match at Wimbledon. Here, in terms of modality and linkage, the visual mode is predominant as it introduces an element which is related to what is conveyed through the verbal mode, that is Federer's quotation. Indeed, the quotation works as a consolidation of the image setting and context. It refers to Wimbledon as a "tournament" but people browsing the website know it is not *just* a tournament. This is confirmed by the fact that even though Federer is the only element in focus, the Rolex logo in the background offers precise indications about the setting of the scene and, at the same time, it contributes to build and strengthen the ethos of the brand. It can be said that while Federer's image attracts the eye of the viewer first (because of its size and sharpness), the logo in the background retains the viewer's look because of color contrast (bright yellow on dark green), position (bottom right, the place of the new and the real, according to Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar).

The fact that the logo doesn't interfere with the athlete's worldwide known prestige suggests that the brand's iconicity does not need to be claimed, its very presence in the exclusive sportive and social event legitimates its authority. Drawing on these assumptions, it could be argued that, in this case, Stöckl's framework linguistic data/visual warrant can be re-interpreted as a visual data/visual warrant one. On the one hand, Federer represents the visual data, as his historical success at Wimbledon immediately anchors the brand to both an idea of excellent performance and to that of an exclusive context. The blurred logo in the background, instead, functions as a visual warrant, as it ideally bridges Federer's excellence to the brand's authority and legitimation. Here the brand aims at conveying a powerful claim: since Rolex is the official sponsor and timekeeper of such a prestigious event as Wimbledon, the brand itself embodies the characteristics of excellence and exclusivity.

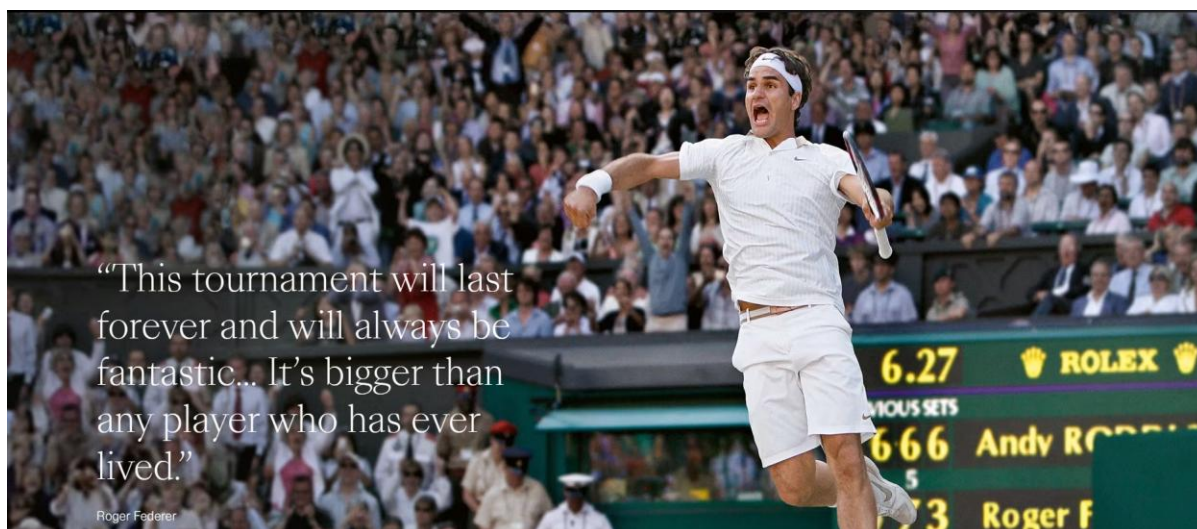


Figure 4. Roger Federer playing at Wimbledon (Rolex website, last accessed August 2025)

As shown in Figure 5 below, Stöckl's argumentation framework is maintained in the case of the Patek Philippe website. In this case, the website screenshot provides an example of the sophisticated visual metaphor leveraged by the brand to construct an ethos of scientific precision and rarity. Centrally composed, the screenshot depicts an artisan's hands painting a dial with a micro-brush. Here, the lighting and the sharp focus are concentrated on the points of contact of the fingers with the brush and of the brush with the dial, implying how human agency is central in the realization of 'rare handcrafts'. Interestingly, the colors used to paint the dial are contained in vessels which resemble Petri dishes, shallow circular flat-bottomed dishes (often with a fitting cover) used in biology laboratories, typically to grow cultures of microorganisms. Thus, their presence seems to invoke the precise, sterile atmosphere of a laboratory.

In terms of composition these elements are slightly out of focus in comparison to the hands and brush, so they are made less salient, yet they contribute to act as a visual warrant. Indeed, together with the hands and brush, they connect the linguistic claim of 'safeguarding' ancient traditions, conveyed by the verbal text, at the bottom centre, with the abstract concepts of artisanal expertise and high-level technical rigor (see Stöckl 2024a; 2024b). The synergy between the verbal and the visual conveys (and validates) the brand's credibility, but also its transparency and authenticity. In fact, if on the one hand longevity and heritage are presented as characteristics maintained and preserved through, and thanks to, manual precision and a long-lasting artisanal expertise (credibility), on the other hand, the intimacy presented through the hands close-up puts viewers 'behind the scene' of the brand's claims, showing them the (artisanal) labor behind the luxurious product. This example therefore corresponds to the statistical clusters centred on quality, precision, art, work and watchmaking expertise, translating them into a visual rhetoric of manual accuracy and technical-artistic control.

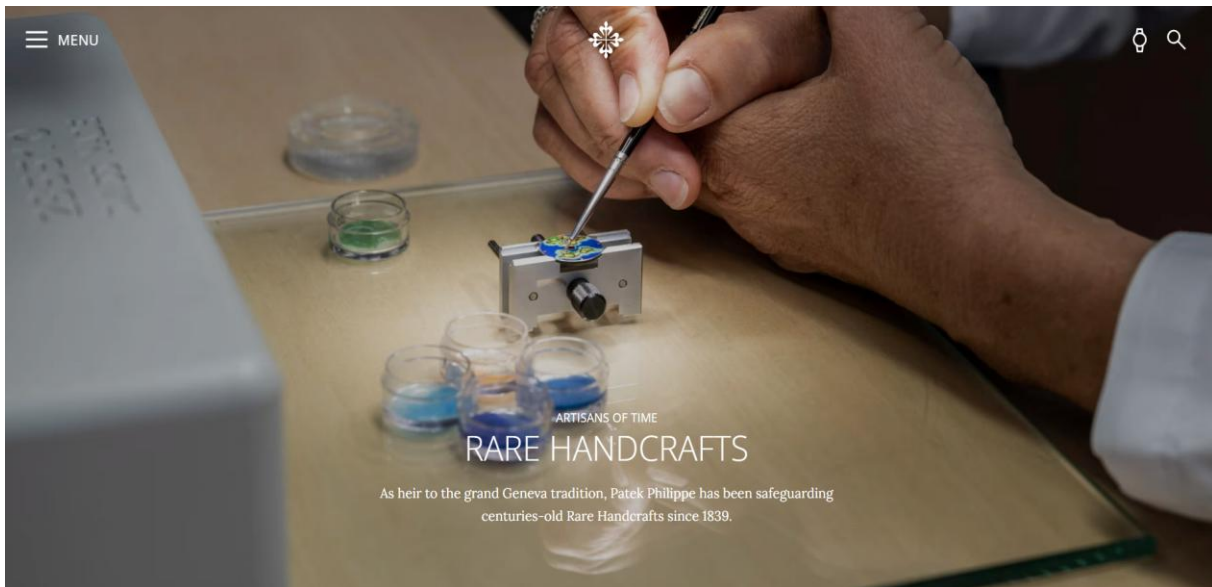


Figure 5. Artisan painting a dial (Patek Philippe website, last accessed August 2025)

While Patek Philippe utilizes the central placement of hands and tools to evoke a sense of intimacy and scientific rigor, Audemars Piguet (Figure 6, below) shares the same visual vocabulary (the representation of hands and tools at the centre of the screenshot) aiming at a different rhetorical goal. Indeed, in this case the focus shifts from the ‘scientific’ painting of a dial to the mechanical transparency of high-level engineering. In this layout, according to the compositional metafunction the skeleton of a chronograph occupies the top center, while hands holding tweezers and framing the gears composition occupy the center and the margins. Also in this case the lighting and the sharp focus are concentrated on the point of touch of the tweezers with the gears, while the rest of the image is made just a little less salient through shadows, even though it seems clear, as for Audemars Piguet, that the artisan’s agency remains central to the visual narration of a high-tech workshop.

As for the verbal text, here the description of the chronographs occupies the left (the side of the Given, according to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006)) and sits directly over the slightly foregrounded image of the hands, creating an overlay effect which contributes to strengthen the intersemiotic cohesion between the verbal and the visual modes. Drawing on Stöckl’s framework (2024a; 2024b), the abstract and technical claims regarding ‘astronomical complications’ and the ‘history of our chronograph’ (Linguistic Data) are validated by the visual transparency of the watch’s internal gears (Visual Warrant). Moreover, choosing to use the term ‘chronograph’ over a more generic ‘watch’ the brand is willing to specialize the discourse and target aficionados and experts. Thus, as in the case of Patek Philippe, also in this case the brand constructs an ethos of technical mastery and transparency, but the focus is shifted on horological engineering rather than just traditional craft. The image thus multimodally realizes the cluster built around watchmaking, movement, chronograph, mechanical expertise and manufacture, visually foregrounding the technical vocabulary that emerged as central in the quantitative analysis.

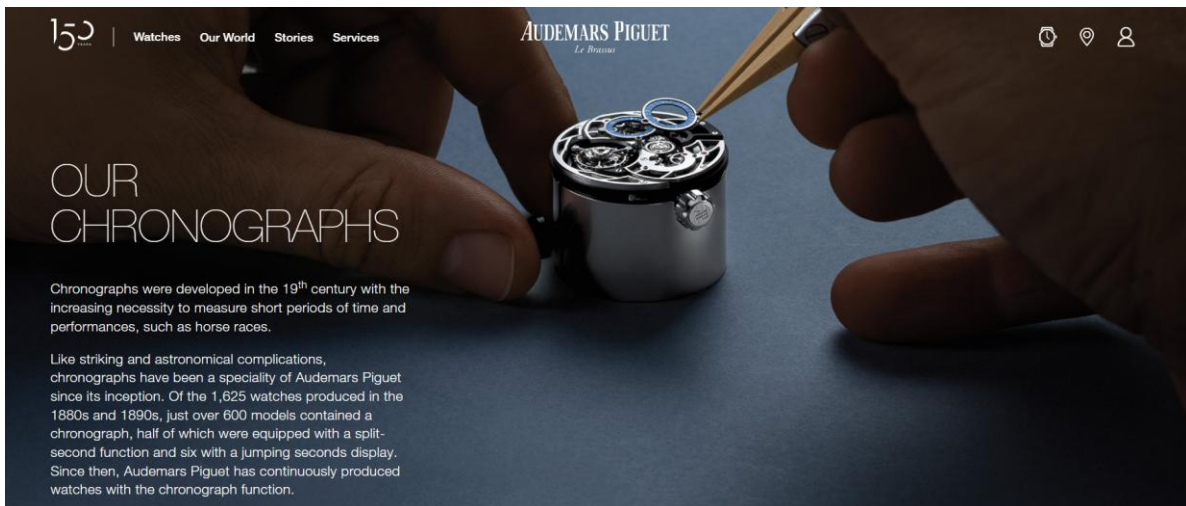


Figure 6. Artisan working with gears (Audemar Piguet website, last accessed August 2025)

The discourse of engineering mastery conveyed through verbal and non-verbal narratives as seen in Figure 6 is connected to the idea of heritage, traditions and historicity of the brand in a different section of the ‘About Us’ section on Audemars Piguet’s website, as shown by Figure 7 below. In this case, the choice of utilizing an original ancient sepia photograph of an artisan at work is not just aesthetic, but aimed at establishing and conveying the brand’s origins and the reasons behind its very birth. Unlike the screenshot in Figure 6, this layout follows a classic given/new structure (see Kress and van Leeuwen 2006). The historical image on the left (the side of the given) provides the visual evidence of the brand’s roots, while the white text on a black background on the right (the side of the new) introduces the story behind the brand, that is the necessity of converting “the long and hostile winter months” in the region of Le Brassus (where the company was born) in something resourceful. In this perspective, while working as a visual warrant, the image of the artisan at work validates the linguistic data that the brand has humble, agrarian origins, and yet it was born out of determination and resilience, as the result of the work of people who were able to ‘master an unyielding environment’.

The synergy between the verbal and the visual mode is further reinforced by the interactive metafunction. Indeed, differently from the images displayed so far, in this case the image positions the viewer as an unseen observer looking into the artisan’s atelier. This detached, voyeuristic perspective creates a boundary between the viewer and the object of the representation, reinforcing the perception that we are looking at an historical record. Moreover, the fact that the artisan does not acknowledge the presence of the camera suggests objectivity: the scene was captured naturally; the artisan is not posing, on the contrary, he is focused on his work, thus reinforcing the brand’s ethos of authenticity. It suggests that Audemars Piguet’s current technical mastery is not merely a modern achievement, but a hard-won victory over the ‘unyielding’ challenges of its historical beginnings. In this sense, Figure 7 visually anchors the statistical clusters related to history, tradition, heritage, place and watchmakers, transforming recurrent lexical references to origins and continuity into a concrete scene of artisanal labour and historical authenticity.



Figure 7. Historical photograph of an artisan in his laboratory (Audemars Piguet website, last accessed August 2025)

The (multimodal) construction of corporate ethos reaches its peak when brand narratives move beyond the technicalities of the atelier and the commercial nature of sponsorship to claim a place within worldly narratives (i.e. political power and cultural heritage or prestige). In this case, the transition from artisanal expertise to symbolic value adds a new layer of institutional legitimacy to the brand, which transcends its functional utility to achieve the status of a myth. The following examples (Figures 8 and 9 below) show how the creation of the myth is pursued multimodally stripping the watch (and by extension the brand) of its merely functional role and adding a layer of cultural significance.

In Figure 8, the representation of the ‘President’s Watch’ alongside a red telephone shifts the brand’s narration from sporting prestige (as seen in Figure 4) to power and authority, maintaining and enriching the original symbolic meaning of exclusivity and quality. Here, the close-up on the red telephone serves as the visual data for a narrative of leadership, while the verbal claim ‘The presidents’ watch’ acts as the linguistic warrant, anchoring the brand to one of the world’s most influential figures. Interestingly, while the linguistic mode limits the possible interpretations of the red phones, offering precise indications on the setting of the image, the red phone evokes an immediate emotional response in the viewer because of its culturally-connoted significance. This, together with the chromatic salience of the phone, make the image ‘promote’ the concept of power, in the mind of the viewer, before the brain even reads the words “The presidents’ watch”. Thus, the verbal mode extends (cfr. Stöckl 2009: 216) something that the viewer immediately receives and perceives on a metaphorical level. In this case, the multimodal construction of meaning expands the lexical field of excellence and exclusivity towards the symbolic domain of institutional power and public authority.



Figure 8. The presidents' watch (Rolex website, last accessed August 2025)

Similarly, Vacheron Constantin (Figures 9 below) leverages institutional legitimacy through its collaboration with the Louvre. The brand utilizes the Louvre's cultural authority to validate its own products as wearable pieces of art, double-playing with the idea of artisanal labor (whose result is a unique piece of art) and that of historical artifacts. In this context, the compositional metafunction serves to merge the brand's identity with that of a world-renowned cultural institution, transforming the watch from a technical instrument into an highly exclusive piece of art, recalling a historical relic.

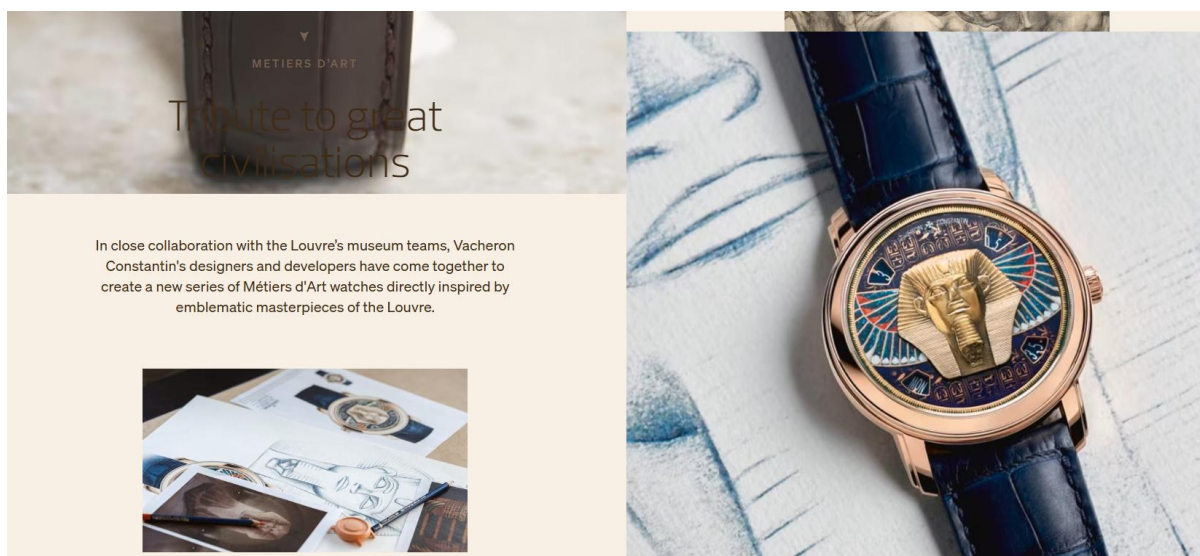


Figure 9. Vacheron Constantin's 'Grand Sphinx de Tanis' (Vacheron Constantin website, last accessed August 2025)

Unlike the metaphorical extensions found in Figure 8, in the case of Vacheron Constantin's 'Grand Sphinx de Tanis' (Figure 9 above) elaboration (cfr. Stöckl 2009: 216) enables the brand to achieve the presentation of the product, not just as a rare, high-quality object, but as a scientifically accurate piece of art, and record of history. This assumption is confirmed by the general layout. Indeed, the image of the watch with the Sphinx is set on the right - the side of the new, according to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) - and works as the outcome of the brand's commitment, the (future) information the brand wants its audience to associate with its identity. On the other hand, the verbal text that explains the collaboration with the Louvre occupies the left - the side of the given according to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) - anchoring the image to a precise narration of exclusivity and luxury. The example confirms how the clusters related to art, heritage, uniqueness, expertise and tradition are visually reframed through the cultural authority of the museum.

## 4. Discussion of the Results

### 4.1 Statistic Observation

The quantitative pillar of our analysis provides interesting common traits, which can be inferred from the co-word analysis and from the thematic map, both based on word frequency and relevance. As we stated in section 3.2, the relationships and the links among words generate hints on the communicative strategies. In the co-word analysis, for instance, one of the possible evidence that can be drawn, is that word connections suggest that the narrative of all the brands scrutinized encompasses some pivotal points: in the first community of words, the focus of communication is on watchmaking, which frequently intertwines with experience, legacy and history, building a solid brand equity. In the second community of words, the communication pivots on marketing and all the trade aspects: here, again, history and brand legacy support the strategic business communication, complementing and integrating the message. The third community of words concentrates on the ability of craftsmen, their unique experience and the quality they are able to deliver in every manufacture. The fourth community, as well as the technical building of chronographs, is intimately linked to a network of connections among words of different origin: business, technique and tradition; it generates several possibilities of interpretation on the basis of such interconnections. The nature of the message delivered, in the scrutinised *corpus* is then framed in the cosmogony business-history-handcraftsmanship-technicality, which provides the opportunity, for the company, to set up a number of communication milieus. From creating the imagery of exquisite watchmaking, with frequent words like "movement", "handcraftsmen", "unique", to the representation of shopping experience, from the marketing point of view, by the frequency of words like "exclusiveness", "design" and "brand", to the collocation in history of the brand, with words like "time", "tradition" and "legacy". The thematic map confirms the suggestions of the co-word analysis, which it derives from. The topics identified and shown in the quadrants. In the hot topics quadrant, a first common pillar in the communication is the reference to quality of materials and technical precision, as well as artistic value. The basic topics quadrant contains reference to design, precision and technicality. The niche topics, instead, express recognition of expertise, ability and experience of watchmakers, unique craftsmen able to get close to perfection with their work. They are the human element in

the communication and are undoubtedly the main characters in luxury watch brand communication. Peripheral topics, instead, provide insight on marketing aspects, which, in their turn, stand on originality of models, design and all those exclusivity aspects included in the customers' shopping proposition. These results harmonize themselves within the qualitative and multimodal analysis, as they show perfect coherence with the statistical figures, confirming the main pillar which the luxury brands communications is constructed upon.

#### *4.2 Multimodal Observation*

Taken together, the multimodal findings can be read as qualitative realizations of the semantic patterns identified through the co-word analysis and the thematic map. Figures 5, 6 and 7 visually elaborate the clusters related to craftsmanship, watchmaking, movement, precision, expertise, tradition and heritage, by foregrounding artisans' hands, tools, gears, historical workshops and manufacturing processes. Conversely, Figures 4, 8 and 9 expand the semantic field of luxury beyond production and craftsmanship, connecting the brands with wider symbolic domains such as sporting excellence, political authority, cultural prestige and artistic legitimacy. In this sense, the multimodal analysis strengthens the statistical results by showing how recurrent lexical patterns identified by TALL are visually and compositionally enacted in corporate storytelling.

This twofold distribution provides the basis for the discussion that follows, which aims to wrap up the multimodal findings by distinguishing between two complementary movements in luxury branding: the demystification of artisanal production and the symbolic de-commodification of the watch.

The multimodal analysis conducted on some selected screenshots from the brands' official websites suggests a sophisticated hierarchy in the multimodal construction of luxury. While the 'About Us' sections of Patek Philippe and Audemars Piguet prioritize an ethos of technical transparency, showing what happens (or what happened) in the artisans' laboratories, Rolex and Vacheron Constantin tend to pursue a more ambitious semiotic de-commodification, so much so that the watch becomes more a symbol of social and political positioning than a fine handcrafted piece of jewellery.

Since this reading is based on selected screenshots, it could not possibly be exhaustive or cover all the rhetorical strategies used by the ten Swiss top-tier luxury watch brands to promote their brand identities and convey their ethos. Yet, the analysis tried to offer a general view on the different ways in which a brand can narrate and promote itself through the strategic use of verbal and visual modes and construction of intersemiotic relationships. The supplemental discussion that follows therefore offers an overview of the multimodal communicative patterns used to communicate the brands' ethos, while also providing a qualitative reading of the aspects resulting from the statistics-based textual analysis.

In the examples centred on horological production and artisanal expertise, especially Figures 5 to 7, the compositional metafunction is deployed to 'demystify' the product, inviting the viewer into the intimate space of the laboratory, workshop or atelier. Here, the visual close-ups of hands and tools, together with the historical representation of the artisan at work, serve as

empirical proof of the brand's 'rights' to claim excellence, uniqueness and exclusivity. In these cases, the watch, mainly reduced to some of its components, remains an object of labor, validated by the visible expertise of the artisan; thus, human agency is fundamental to present the brands' birth and consolidation as businesses producing unique artifacts.

Figures 4, 8 and 9, instead, present the outcomes of brand narratives which come to inhabit worldly discourses. In these cases, the strategy pivots from proving 'how' a watch is made to establishing 'who' or 'what' the watch represents. Figure 4 anchors Rolex to sporting prestige and elite performance, Figure 8 to institutional power and public authority, and Figure 9 to cultural heritage and artistic legitimacy.

This transition marks the shift from narrating luxurious commodities to narrating status. As a consequence, brands move from conveying an identity rooted in artisanal expertise, accuracy and scientific precision, to adding an allure of social distinction, cultural legitimacy and symbolic power to their discourses.

The findings suggest that luxury branding is a multimodal journey from the physical dimension (conveyed through verbal and visual representations of the artisans' laboratories) to the metaphysical dimension - the myth in Barthes' terms (1957) - conveyed through verbal and visual representations of culturally-connoted symbols and/or established cultural institutions, where the ultimate goal is to transform a high-precision instrument not just into an exclusive piece of jewellery, but into an indisputable cultural monument.

## 5. Conclusions

Our idea of exploiting coagent methodologies, statistical quantitative tools and multimodal qualitative analysis, has provided interesting hints on a complete and integrated analysis of a corpus of company narratives. The results that the computational tools for textual analysis provide, give the extraordinary possibility of "reading a text without reading it"; tables, graphs, clouds, clusters, maps, give the possibility of understanding the content of texts, observing the way topics connect, get closer, diverge and generate meanings. The outcome of data processing, through TALL, has been matched with observations on the multimodal strategies used by the brands, that is the synergy between the visual and verbal elements used to convey meaning, building corporate ethos and persuade (prospective) customers.

Results can be schematized here:

1. Luxury watch brands' narrative focus mainly on four pillars: handcraftsmanship, tradition and heritage, technicality and marketing. Whilst trade and marketing strategies are, by their nature, not apparent, they are not easily visible in multimodal analysis. Thus:

a) brands emphasize the craftsmanship and artistic elements of their watches, their design, their complex and exquisite technical content and their exclusiveness;

b) companies, consequently, leverage upon these elements to communicate a whole set of interconnected solid quality standpoints: against this backdrop, highlighting the skills of watchmakers, the very high technical intensity of the product and the heritage of the brand is crucial.

2. The reference to innovation and tradition is crucial: as a matter of fact, brands need to communicate how they are evolving while staying true to their roots
3. While emphasizing technical precision is important, brands seem also to connect with consumers on an emotional level by highlighting the artistry and personal connection associated with owning a luxury timepiece.
4. Brands seem to explore opportunities to differentiate themselves by further developing the creation of unique models, focusing on beauty, design and exclusiveness. Such elements feed successful marketing strategies.
5. Sports and other cultural milieus play a very important role as they represent the natural environment (e.g, Wimbledon tennis tournament or the Museum of Louvre) for luxury watches brand customers to express luxury and exclusiveness.

The study also presents some limitations. First, the corpus is restricted to the English-language “About Us” sections of ten top-tier Swiss luxury watch brands; consequently, the findings cannot be generalized to the whole luxury market or to non-Swiss watchmaking traditions. Second, the multimodal analysis focuses on selected representative screenshots, rather than on the full visual architecture of each website. Third, the study investigates brand-produced discourse and does not include audience reception or consumers’ interpretations of these narratives. Future research could address these limitations by comparing luxury watches with other luxury sectors, such as fashion, jewellery, automotive luxury or hospitality, and by examining cross-cultural differences across different language versions of the same corporate websites. These developments could also benefit from the integration of visual analysis algorithms into text analysis software, in order to provide a more comprehensive insight into luxury business communication.

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## Note

Note 1. The article was a result of a fruitful collaboration between both authors. Walter Giordano authored Sub-sections 2.1; 3.2; 4.1 and Section 5. Luisa Marino authored Section 1, Sub-sections 2.2, 3.1, 3.3, 4.2.

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