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## **Representations of the Olfactory Concept in Advertising: A Case Study**

**Abstract:** The analysis of a perfume advertising image can be done from multiple perspectives, the endeavors to provide possible reading paths and interpretations being among the most diverse in the literature. Whether it is to meet the consumers’ psychological desires, to relate to fashion trends, or to create a rare scent, perfume advertising is a real challenge, which often needs to be answered just by juxtaposing an image and the product name. Our paper highlights the way in which the correlation between the visual and olfactory forms of perfumes is attempted, through product name, vial, characters, context and text (Julien 1997). Because in many advertisements the perfume is replacing the character, we chose as a case study an advertising image that we consider illustrating in this respect, that of the new olfactory creation of Chanel, Gabrielle, which appeared in September 2017. We have to mention that the launch of this product has been marked by the appearance of homage articles in glossy magazines, which contributes, through the information provided, to a better understanding of the message the advertisement transmits.

**Keywords:** image, visual identity, olfactory concept, olfactory memory, brand name, perfume name, perfume bottle, advertising context

### **1. Fragrances – Vectors of Communication**

Considered a privileged way of communication, perfumes are an identity mark (Vettraino-Soulard 1992, 106). We can often hear in advertisements about perfumes for strong women, perfumes that suit active women, perfumes for romantic women, etc. The power of self-representation of fragrances as well as their association with certain

psycho-moral qualities was highlighted by Charles S. Peirce in 1905, which supported the idea that a fine correspondence between a perfume and the impression about a woman's nature can be made:

“A lady's favourite perfume seems to me to be in agreement with her spiritual being. If she does not use any, her nature will lack fragrance [...]” (Peirce 1905/1990, 274).

Fragrances are artefacts through which we communicate socially, transmitting messages whose meanings depend on the context (Gell 2006). They have a large symbolic connotation and are invested with an important capital of signs, which appeal to imagination, both through established stereotypes and through the most unusual figures (Boutaud 2004, 89-91).

The development of the image of a perfume has nothing to do with the fragrance, but it can be done taking into account the following: a) the consumers' psychological desires, b) the fashion and social values of the moment, or c) the preference for the “artistic creation” / “work of art” (Courbet & Fourquet 2003, 46-50).

In the first situation, the positive emotions are triggered for the consumer to have a constructive attitude towards the message conveyed, to adhere to it and to become a brand sympathizer. The evaluation of the message is not made by taking into account the given arguments or the content, only globally, based on a general feeling that corresponds to the receiver's most powerful desires. Among these desires and motivations, advertising focuses on three types:

1. “Narcissism and olfactory identity card”. Consumers who use perfume to value their identity and self-image will be receptive to commercials that show a seductive image of the typical consumer they want to identify with. The perfume will respond to the search for self-love, but also for love from the others and will help to build the image and the identity of the individual in the perception of the others as well as of one's own;

2. “Luxury and social valorisation”. Consuming luxury products makes individuals want to fall into a higher social category, but it also makes others think that people who consume such products belong to such a category. Advertising for this kind of consumers, preoccupied with what the others think about them, will resort to luxury symbols (jewellery, cars and expensive clothes, etc.) that will be found in advertisements or in the name of the brand;

3. “Seduction and sexual desires”. Fragrances are indisputably used out of the desire to seduce. In advertising, the act of seduction can be explicit or suggested. Many commercials are based on the myth of the seductive and irresistible person after using a perfume.

The second situation, given that fashion is ephemeral, will be based on a fragrance that will appeal to as many consumers as possible. Thus, it will require a considerable communication budget for an intense ad delivery. For example, many “unisex” toilet waters have appeared together with the “androgynous” individual trend.

Finally, the third situation is about those consumers who are looking for a rare fragrance based on natural ingredients and a bold fragrance that would have resulted from a long process of artistic creation and not as subsequent tests or marketing studies. Because the emphasis is on the social distinction of the product’s rarity, the ads will be discreet and will target a well-defined audience.

Advertisers for fragrances face a challenge that is not at all easy, because they often have to render a “nonfigurative reality” only through the image, the name of the perfume and rarely a slogan (Dâncu 2001, 155-156). This type of advertising can therefore focus on four main elements: the brand name, the product name, the perfume bottle and the characteristic “image” that the creator wishes to give to each line (Vettraino-Soulard 1985, 82-93).

## **2. The Visual Identity of Perfumes**

Regarding the brand name, there are two co-existing advertising strategies: that of the young creators who emphasize on the launch of the product and less on their “names” and that of the renowned brands relying on their fame, in other fields (for example, Coco Chanel, whose name became famous as a result of her clothing, and which later expanded into perfumery). Regarding the name of a product, its choice is made with great care as it helps to set the perfume in the consumer’s mind.

The product may bear the name of the manufacturer without any other distinguishing marks (*Armani*, *Trussardi*). The name may also be a trademark attribute (*Hermès*, *Amazon*), an indication of the target audience (*Miss Dior* - a fragrance not only for young girls), a number (*N° 5* - Chanel) or an element from the product’s component (*Vétiver*). Finally, the name may refer to a colour (*Habit rouge* - Guerlain), may reveal exoticism (*Shalimar* - Guerlain, *Ivoire* - Balmain), may evoke the place or time (*Paris* - Yves Saint - Laurent, *Vol de nuit* - Guerlain) can

send to real healers or myths (*Antaeus* - Chanel). Just as important as choosing a name is choosing the bottle, more specifically, the shape of the container and the lid, the material, the colour, the label, and possibly the style of the graphs. The bottles are often the result of the collaboration between artists, artisans, graphic artists and silent partner, and are distinguished by a wide variety of shapes and colours.

It has been noticed that the perfume bottles for men are more sober, more elongated and darker, while the perfume bottles for women are more rounded, more sophisticated and made of transparent materials (Vettraino-Soulard 1985, 97; Julien 1997, 39). The “image” of the product is often the simultaneous presence of four elements: the context in which the product appears, the nature of the illustration (photograph, drawing, painting, etc.), the colours and the identification graphs of the product (product name, brand name, bottle, packaging, a sample, an advertising text, Vettraino-Soulard 1985, 92-93).

The name of the perfume, the signature of the manufacturer, the vial, the characters, the context of the image (the colours, the decoration) and the advertising text can contribute to establishing the correspondence between the visual and the fragrant forms of perfumes (Julien 1997, 27-71). Further on, we are going to present Mariette Julien’s considerations and examples of these correspondences as they can provide a useful analysis path for approaching an advertising image.

The olfactory concept of a perfume is determined by its component elements. There are five fundamental olfactory concepts recognized by the French Fragrance Society: *floral* (floral, romantic, sometimes playful, fruity or sweet notes), *cypresses* (notes of oak tree, patchouli and bergamot), fern (notes of oak moss and coumarin), amber (oriental notes, powders, vanilla) and leather (tobacco notes). Even though the perception and effect of odours are subjective in nature, depending on the abundance of the mental images, cultural affiliation and sensitivity of each individual, many people associate the smells of amber, musk, purple, carnation and jasmine with sensuality and passion, of bergamot, lemon, cedar, mandarin and vetiver, with dynamism, of cedar, coriander, incense, oak, daffodil, sandal and vanilla with calm and loneliness, of orange, iris, hyacinth, lilac, with charm and seduction (Julien 1997, 22-24; 51).

In some perfume names, there is a description of the fragrance which the respective perfumes have in their composition: *Narcisse* (Chloé), *Vanilla Fields* (Coty), *Gardenia-Passion* (Annick Goutal). The olfactory sense can also be evoked by the names of the perfumes inspired by first names (for example, *Loulou*-Cacharel can be perceived as a fresh

and delicate scent) or names proposing situations (*Safari* - Ralph Lauren suggesting exotic and discreet notes, while *Paris* - Yves Saint Laurent involving strong notes). There are also names that do not indicate the fragrance, but which bear olfactory meaning. Thus, *C'est la vie!* (Christian Lacroix) sends our minds to the idea of vivacity, *Poisson* (Dior) to boldness, *Ysatis* (Givenchy) to exoticism. Sometimes, the name of the perfume coincides with the name of the manufacturer, especially for men's fragrances (*Armani pour homme*, *Chanel pour homme*, *Patou*, etc.).

For the specialists, Jean Patou's signature, which produces the most expensive perfumes in the world, is a clue of an exclusive olfactory concept (Julien 1997, 32-33).

The personality of a perfume can be also evoked by the design of the bottle, which contributes to the visual identification of the product. For example, the perfume bottle of *L'air du Temps* (Nina Ricci), created by the famous René Lalique, illustrates two pigeons kissing and thus evoking a light, romantic fragrance; the perfume bottle of *No. 5* (Chanel), which has become a piece of collection at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, compliments by its shape and label, the timeless elegance of Coco Chanel's creations and it can be associated with the classical olfactory notes (Julien 1997, 35-37).

Based on a generalization principle, the five categories of the olfactory concepts mentioned correspond to certain personalities and non-verbal types of behaviour, as well as to some special use contexts. By analysing a corpus of 300 advertisements from French, American and Canadian magazines sold in Quebec between 1986 and 1996, Mariette Julien identified four types of personalities, both female and masculine, characterized by a specific non-verbal language, which can refer to a certain olfactory concept: the sensual type, the *grand standing* type, the romantic type and the eccentric type (Julien 1997, 39-50). Guided by the model given by the mentioned author, to which he reported comparatively, Vasile Sebastian-Dâncu conducted a similar analysis on a sample of 294 advertisements from French, Italian and German magazines from 1992 to 1998. This resulted in a typology that, in the author's opinion, is much better suited to the diversity of the advertising situations in which the characters appear, especially for the European sample: *the distinguished-elitist type*, *the romantic guy*, *the sensual type*, *the rebel type* and *the sportsman* (Dâncu 2001, 170-180). We will insist on the peculiarities of the characters in the typology made by Mariette Julien, which we consider to have been based on better established criteria.

As for the women's fragrances, the sensual feminine characters have a lingering look focused directly on the reader of the advertisement, almost always keeping their lips open and, through the close-up plan they are photographed, they create the impression that they are at an intimate distance from the reader of the ad, which would allow the perception of the olfactory feeling. Most of the time, the nudity of the character is exploited, being caught frontally upright. The olfactory concept of the female sensual type is amber. With regard to the men's fragrances, the sensual masculine characters never look directly at the advertiser. They are left to be looked at, they keep their mouth shut and they are at a personal distance from the reader. In this situation, the nudity of the character is also exploited, and this type can correspond to any olfactory concept.

The *grand standing* female characters in the women's perfume ads avoid the reader's gaze, they have a retained smile, are dressed in classic evening dresses, wear hats and jewels, and have their hair tied up. They are caught in a static position, both at an intimate and personal distance from the reader. The specific olfactory concepts are: floral and amber. The grand standing male characters in the advertisements for men's perfumes are either at a social distance or at a distance from the reader, are smiling, wear sportswear, casual or tuxedo, have no beard or moustache and are caught in action. The specific olfactory concepts are: chypre, fern and leather.

The romantic female characters from the advertisements for women's perfumes have a solitary, meditating or sad presence, avoiding the reader's eyes, being at an intimate distance, smiling a little, having melancholic gestures and they are caught either with their backs or faces covered with a veil that create a mysterious atmosphere around them. These characters have as characteristics the floral and chicory olfactory concepts. Instead, the romantic male characters in the men's perfume ads appear in a couple, seem to want to share their secrets through their eyes, have timid gestures, either at an intimate distance or at a social distance from the reader, and they are caught in various positions. The specific olfactory concepts are: chypre, fern and skin.

Finally, the eccentric feminine characters from the advertisements for women's perfumes usually fix the readers with a bold look at a social distance from them, smiling excessively, being surprised in motion and wearing extravagant clothing. The characteristic olfactory concepts are: floral and amber. The eccentric masculine characters in the advertisements for men's perfumes, even if they avoid the reader's eyes, they are not indifferent to them. They are at a personal distance from the reader, having

exaggerated facial expressions, being in motion and wearing sober clothing. The specific olfactory concepts are also floral and amber.

The context of the advertising image can also contribute, both through the colours used and the elements that make up the background, to the perception of the promoted olfactory concept. Research has shown that colour and scents can be associated. For example, the pink colour would correspond to the sweet scent, yellow and orange to the spicy smell, blue to the fresh scent, green to the peppermint scent, purple to the fragrant scent, etc. However, these associations depend on the consumer's cultural trends and their olfactory sensitivity. Quite often, the colour chosen to promote a perfume is inspired by the user's personality. In terms of the advertising design, we encounter a number of recurring elements, which suggest some olfactory features: the marine landscape, the green field, the wind (which often evokes freshness), the luxurious interiors (in which romantic and suggesting characters usually evolve floral) etc. (Julien 1997, 51-55, 60). Regarding the advertising texts, they can provide information about the perfume's component elements or target audiences (feminine / masculine) or may induce a certain olfactory concept through a rhetorical figure (Julien 1997, 64).

We considered the aspects presented according to the possible interpretations of the advertising images of perfumes, interpretations which differ from one person to another and from one culture to another. The act of interpreting the advertising images makes the transition from the real to the possible, opening the scope of multiple possibilities (Sălăvăștru 2006, 67). However, in creating these images, they rely on certain expectations of the audience, enlisted in the mind of the target group, which connect the olfactory memory to the social status confirmed by the association with a certain type of perfume. In this way, the identity of a perfume becomes an intermingling of the perception and the internalization of the olfactory signs.

#### **4. “Mise en image” of the Chanel’s ads: from *Chanel No5* to *Gabrielle Chanel***

Advertising for perfume is gaining ground in the digital environment. However, these products, considered luxury, continue to be intensively promoted in the printed media, especially in the *glossy* magazines, whose high-quality paper manages to make them very

worthwhile (Les Echos<sup>1</sup>, 2016) and transpose the audience, often found in search of models and characters with which to identify themselves, in an online world (Dâncu 2001, 155-156). The launch of a perfume also makes it possible for the articles on the topic of the olfactory concept, the characteristic traits of the product, the evolution of the brand, the celebrity that promotes it, etc. to appear in these magazines. An eloquent example for this is the last olfactory creation of Chanel, *Gabrielle*, which appeared in the autumn of 2017.

Chanel enters alongside Louis Vuitton and Cartier among the French brands that adopted and imposed the “luxury strategy” between 1960 and 1970, which targets the consumer’s dreams, without taking into account his/her needs or desires. The luxury products are not necessarily expensive, but they must be beautiful, rare, well-made, made by renowned people, not machines or computers. The essential condition for this type of product is to respond to the consumer’s personal expectations, but, at the same time, to make the most of it in the eyes of the others. Luxury is, however, *relative* and *subjective*, so its representations may differ from one brand to another (Bastien 2010, 60-63).

In the perfume industry, Coco Chanel’s first creation, her true name being Gabrielle Bonheur Chanel, is the legendary *N°5*, a perfume that appeared in the 1920s from Coco’s collaboration with the famous perfumer, Ernest Beaux. They risked on a hazardous combination of jasmine and musk – associated at the time with easy women – ylang-ylang and roses of May. An exquisite perfume emerged, which has become a symbol of femininity by excellence and has been given a number as a name with a special meaning for the creator’s existence (Teodorescu 2017). Over the years, in promoting this fragrance, the focus has been on the idea of natural beauty, style and elegance that has been passed on by means of celebrities (most actresses and models) that have become Ambassadors for *Chanel N°5*: Marilyn Monroe, Suzy Parker, Ali MacGraw, Catherine Deneuve, Jean Rosemary Shrimpton, Carole Bouquet, Estella Warren, Audrey Tautou, Nicole Kidman, Gisele Bündchen<sup>2</sup>. But the one who first associated her image with the perfume was Coco Chanel herself, photographed in her 1937 commercial in her room at the Ritz Hotel in a luxurious background.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.lesechos.fr/31/05/2016/lesechos.fr/021981945249\\_le-digital--premier-medium-du-marche-publicitaire-du-luxe-en-2017.htm](https://www.lesechos.fr/31/05/2016/lesechos.fr/021981945249_le-digital--premier-medium-du-marche-publicitaire-du-luxe-en-2017.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Some of these ads are found at: <http://inside.chanel.com/fr/no5/campaigns>. Accessed: 23/12/2017.





**Figure 1.** *Chanel N° 5* Advertisement from 1937<sup>1</sup>

The strategy on which the creative creators of the advertisements for *Chanel No 5* rely, which is also commonly used in perfume advertising, is identifying the consumers with the celebrities the product is promoted by. These models seduce the public through their suggestive beauty, considered a “sexual symbol” even when it is not about nudity (Federico 1998, 6). Sometimes the ad consists only of the figure of the female character next to the perfume bottle. The emphasis is on idealizing the woman’s image by highlighting the physical features, behaviour, clothing and accessories, while the background remains evanescent. This combines the aesthetic and social criteria to convey positive information that suggests a connection between social boldness and physical beauty:

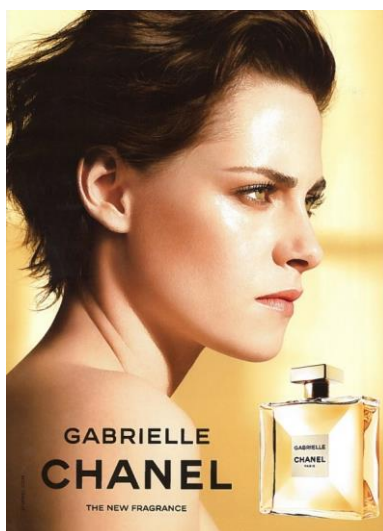
“The face of a woman expresses an intense emotion, either social, addressed to the receiver or a deliberate look, oriented towards the perfume. When the observation is directed towards the recipient of the image, it simulates a mutual contact with it and, therefore, a positive valuation of it as a partner. When the appearance is deictic, it is trying to draw attention to something, in general, to the perfume, which is taken as a recipient. This representation of a woman is both exhaustive and

<sup>1</sup> Taken from [http://inside.chanel.com/fr/no5/campaigns/1937\\_no5](http://inside.chanel.com/fr/no5/campaigns/1937_no5). Accessed: 23/12/2017.

specialized because it is not limited to one or two characteristic features, but tends to accumulate more dimensions ...”<sup>1</sup> (Conein 1994, 60-61).

Sometimes, there is no explanation to make a connection between the character and the perfume. These are present in the picture by a simple juxtaposition, the connection between them being made by what the character means to the public, but also by the meanings that the perfume tries to acquire. In fact, it is about a “transfer of significance”, meaning that the perfume gets to substitute for the character (Williamson 2002, 25).

This is the case, for example, in the advertisement of Chanel’s new fragrance water, *Gabrielle* (Figure 2), which appeared after 15 years when there were only reinterpretations, in stronger or lighter versions, of the floral fragrances already launched (Ionescu 2017, 54).



**Figure 2.** *Gabrielle* Chanel<sup>2</sup> Advertisement

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<sup>1</sup> “Le visage de la femme exprime une émotion intense, dans un regard soit social adressé au destinataire, soit déictique orienté vers le parfum. Lorsque le regard est tourné vers le destinataire de l’image, il simule un regard mutuel et un contact avec celui-ci et donc une prise en considération positive de celui-ci comme partenaire. Lorsque le regard est déictique, il cherche à attirer l’attention vers quelque chose, généralement le parfum, en le localisant pour un destinataire. Cette représentation de la femme se veut à la fois exhaustive et spécialisée car elle ne se limite à un ou deux traits caractéristiques, mais tend à accumuler plusieurs dimensions”.

<sup>2</sup> Taken from the cover of *Elle* Romania magazine, October 2017, no. 239.

This perfume water has floral notes and is the expression of an imaginary white flower, consisting of a bouquet of four flowers: orange blossom, ylang-ylang, jasmine and tuberose. The creamy appearance of jasmine is highlighted by musk and sandalwood, and the freshness of the orange flower is given by the mandarin, grapefruit and blackcurrant peel (Vasile and Brîndușă 2017, 82).

Every Chanel olfactory creation, referring either to *No5*, *Coco Mademoiselle*, *Coco Allure*, *Chance*, *Bleu de Chanel*, or *premium* perfumes, *Les Exclusifs de Chanel*, illustrates a stage in Coco Chanel's life from the beginning of 1921, when *No5* was released. This time, the perfumer Olivier Polge, continuing the tradition of his father, Jacques Polge, with whom she has constantly consulted on creating new perfume water, was inspired by the time when the fashion designer was known as Gabrielle and characterized her rebellious spirit, to follow their dreams, however bold they were, and to open up new horizons. The perfumer Olivier Polge said she had always associated the rebellious women whose personality was strong and determined, with the white flowers (Vasile and Brîndușă 2017, 82).

*Gabrielle* has also become the name of the perfume - an expression of a more intimate face of the creator:

“The choice of the name Gabrielle, for this perfume, to the detriment of the Coco pseudonym, says everything: Gabrielle is the true incarnation, the human behind the brand's greatness, and the creator Coco owes everything to Gabrielle. Its real name is, in fact, a form of absolute authenticity and the best expression of sincerity. Thus, the Gabrielle perfume addresses the woman who chooses to follow her own life, to show who she really is and to express herself freely, evoking her natural aura and selfless self-confidence” (Ionescu 2017, 54).

In the advertisement, the name of the perfume appears twice: on the shoulder of the female character and on the perfume bottle. Thus, the idea is that the character and the perfume are replacing Gabrielle Chanel, from whom he borrows passion, style and the feeling of freedom.

As far as the bottle is concerned, it allows the golden colour of the perfume to be clearly seen and behind a seeming simplicity it conceals a whole story, which the advertising image does not reveal, but which we find out “from the backstage of the perfume icon” (Cosmopolitan 2017, 4-5, Ionescu 2017, 54-55). Thus, the perfume bottle was created by Sylvie Legastelois, who has been working for Chanel for more than 30 years. The creative process lasted for 7 years, and the source of inspiration was

purity, which Gabrielle Chanel appreciated very much. The very fine and extremely thin glass allows the light to penetrate, which makes the floral and solar composition of the fragrance radiant, whose intensity is reflected by the bright gold. The intention was, as Sylvie Legastelois confesses, that the perfume should dominate the container. The base of the bottle, usually made of a thicker and curved material, has been abandoned, but the traditional octagonal shape of the lid, reminiscent of the Place Vendôme in Paris, has been preserved. The lid bears the Chanel logo and is a mixture of gold and silver. The same size as the lid is the label, also coloured in a golden tone. The chrome of all fragrance glass components as well as the background depict the haute couture creations of the brand, suggesting the refinement and “chanelian” luxury.

The perfume in the advertisement image looks like a projection of the female character that embodies Gabrielle Chanel. This is Kristen Stewart, an ambitious, persevering, independent, courageous actress in her artistic choices (Gogu 2017, 134), with a strong personality and unconventional style. The actress resembles Gabrielle Chanel by the force and stubbornness of being herself, without caring about social rules (Vasile and Brîndușă 2017, 82). Through her bold and provocative look, rebellious hair, body nudity and posture, the female character in the ad shows its non-conformism and differs from the *grand standing* type commonly used in promoting Chanel perfumes. According to Mariette Julien’s typology, the woman in the advertising image presents the romantic character’s particularities (solitary, meditating, avoiding the reader’s eyes, at an intimate distance, not smiling, corresponding to the floral olfactory concept).

The text of the ad is an informative one (*The New Fragrance*) and refers to a new olfactory concept. By placing the text on the woman’s body, under the name *Gabrielle Chanel*, the idea that the perfume replaces the character is emphasized once again. The advertising image transmits this idea very clearly and, by chromatics, suggests a solar perfume. However, it is not enough to understand the hidden meanings, which can only be revealed by the creators of perfumes and advertisements.

The visual identity of the Chanel fashion house is complemented by the personality and references to certain aspects of Coco Chanel’s life, and it is only coherent to those who know it. Chanel’s perfume means, therefore, beyond its intrinsic qualities, “to enter into the aura of a legend” (Joannès 2008/2009, 44), which perpetuates the consistency of visual identity.

## 5. Instead of Conclusions

Our theoretical approach, whose limitations we undertake, has highlighted a number of common places which the perfume advertising exploits. Fragrances are information carriers and contribute both to self-identity building and to value it in the eyes of others. The advertising communication in the case of perfumes is a symbolic one, the meaning being often confined to images only, subject to multiple interpretations. Most of the time, in creating these images, they rely on certain cultural stereotypes and the notoriety of the people chosen to promote the olfactory concept, people with whom the public wishes to identify themselves.

The course of reading an advertising image is based on what Mariette Julien calls “a semantics in the form of an encyclopaedia” (Julien 1997, 176), which depends on the experience of the lecturers and can lead to similar or different interpretations than the ones assumed by the creators of advertisements.

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