The Imaginary-Symbolic Model: Jacques Lacan's Theory in the Interpretation of Product Meaning in Advertising

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***Abstract*— The article presents the Imaginary-Symbolic Model – an analytical tool inspired by Jacques Lacan's theory for studying the meanings of products in advertisements. The analysis focuses on the mechanisms that influence consumer desires through the Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real orders, as well as the strategic embodiment of the so-called "object petit a".**

Keywords— Jacques Lacan, Psychoanalysis, Fantasy, Hermeneutics of Advertising, Imaginary Order, Symbolic Order, Real Order, Object Petit A, Interpretation of Advertisements

I. INTRODUCTION

We live in an era where many products on the market are no longer merely commodities. The growing prevalence of branding, the deep penetration of consumers' minds by advertisements, and the attribution of symbolic meanings to goods have transformed marketing into a meaning-making domain, where collective desires and dreams are managed. As psychologist Dariusz Doliński points out: "In a physical sense, people buy products. In a psychological sense, however, they buy a certain image of them, the perception of those products" (Doliński, 2003, 27). As a result, the sphere of consumer goods, often associated with materialism and marked by the stigma of commodity fetishism, has acquired an almost quasi-religious aspect.

According to marketing specialist Robert Jones:

This rise in the power of the market, this rise in materialism, has given people an increasing need for meaning in their lives, both as consumers and as employees. […] People need a sense of identity (who am I?) and belonging (where do I fit?). In the past, these meanings came from family, village, religion, nation – but all have been undermined by urbanization, secularization, and globalization.

Materialism creates a vacuum of meaning – and then branding tries to fill that vacuum. Consumers need not just »value for money« but »values for money« (Jones 2017, 36-37).

As a result of these transformations, the market for products has become a market of fantasies, where consumers primarily purchase ideas and emotions. Shopping is no longer merely about satisfying needs – it becomes an act of identity construction, a manifestation of lifestyle, and a response to hidden desires. Marketers, armed with insights from psychoanalysis and modern psychological theories, craft messages that target consumers' unconscious minds, activating archetypes, longings, and fears. Rather than persuading with rational arguments, advertisements draw viewers into a whirlwind of dreams, promising the fulfillment of hidden desires. After all, as the ancient philosopher Epicurus emphasizes: "Nature's wealth at once has its bounds and is easy to procure; but the wealth of vain fancies recedes to an infinite distance" (Diogenes Laertius, 1925, 669).

All of this makes it clear that critical engagement with marketing messages requires new analytical tools. How can we decode advertisements to reveal their hidden meanings? What can we do to uncover the intricate web of dreams and fantasies embodied by products?

I believe that few theoretical frameworks can help us in this endeavor as effectively as the one developed by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. However, since his concepts are often highly technical and not always directly applicable to the hermeneutics of advertising, I have adapted them to create a model oriented toward practical interpretative goals. This led to the development of the Imaginary-Symbolic Model, which I present in this article.

The aim of this paper is to introduce an original model that enables the analysis of product meaning in relation to consumer desires within three key domains: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. This model helps to understand how products respond to consumers' hidden needs, what roles they play

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within their structure of desire, and what constitutes their "desire core" ("object petit a").

II. THE PSYCHOANALYTIC CONCEPTION OF JACQUES LACAN

According to Jacques Lacan, human experience consists of three orders: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real (Lacan, 1991, 215–217). The Imaginary is associated with images and perceptions – how individuals see themselves and others. The Symbolic relates to language, law, social norms, and cultural structures – all the systems that shape and regulate our lives. The Real, on the other hand, represents the realm of experience that escapes full comprehension and linguistic expression – it is elusive and cannot be fully translated into the Symbolic or the Imaginary. The Real encompasses everything that lies beyond symbolization and representation; it manifests itself, for instance, in sudden traumas or absurd events that the mind struggles to process (Lacan, 1998, 66–70).

To explain the details of the French psychoanalyst's concept, I will examine each of these orders in turn. At the same time, I will illustrate their significance with examples from the fields of advertising, branding, and marketing.

A. THE IMAGINARY ORDER

"The real supports the phantasy, the phantasy protects the real" – Lacan points out (Lacan 1998, 41). From his perspective our experience of reality is subjective and mediated by certain imaginaries that complete it. As a result, the French psychoanalyst – following Freud – reverses the traditional ontological order: while neurotic states resemble wakefulness, exposing us to the Real – unwanted and often painful – reality itself has much in common with a dream. It is shrouded in layers of fantasy, symbols, and hidden desires that filter experience, giving it a dreamlike, subjectively distorted quality.

It is important to emphasize that – despite the conceptual ambiguity – traditionally understood symbols do not belong to the Symbolic Order but rather to the Imaginary one. While the former is structured by language (hence the significance of linguistic analysis), the latter is primarily associated with images. Even when language is used in this context, its function is to create an image, a representation, an imagined reality.

To illustrate this point, I would like to refer to a 1970s print advertisement for *Paco Rabanne*. In the image, we see a naked, relaxed man lying in bed, accompanied by a dialogue that goes:

- Hello?
- You snore.
- And you steal all the covers. What time did you leave?
- Six-thirty. You looked like a toppled Greek statue. Except some tourist had stolen your fig leaf. I was tempted to wake you.
- I miss you already.
- You'll miss something else. Have you been in the bathroom?
- Why?
- I took your bottle of Paco Rabanne cologne.
- What are you going to do with it? Give it to some secret lover you're hiding in San Francisco?
- I'm going to rub it all over me before I go to sleep tonight. And then I'm going to think about every little thing about you. And last night.
- Do you know what your voice does to me?
- You're not the only one with an imagination. I've got to go. They're calling my flight. I'll be back Tuesday. Do you want me to bring you anything?
- My bottle of Paco Rabanne. And a fig leaf (Ogilvy 1985, 30).

In this case, the purpose of the ad is clear: it aims to make the product a focal point within a network of imaginations and associations. Although the ad uses language, it is a strictly visual and imaginative one. The implied romance between the man and a mysterious woman, suggested by the dialogue, is an emotionally engaging image – one that incorporates an additional element: a bottle of *Paco Rabanne* perfume.

Marketing strategies within the Imaginary Order are effectively illustrated in the series *The Century of the Self*. This four-part documentary, directed by Adam Curtis, explores how Sigmund Freud's theories were used by Edward Bernays – the "father of Public Relations" – to transform the paradigm of advertising (Curtis, 2002). The founder of psychoanalysis argued that the subject is not limited to rationality but also includes the unconscious, which follows its own logic (Freud 1913, 82-85). Although we tend to believe that we make free, conscious, and rational decisions, Freud maintained that we are actually governed by hidden, autonomous forces – repressed fears, the pursuit of happiness, and sexual drives.

Being familiar with Freudian psychoanalysis, early practitioners of the emerging field of PR sought to follow this approach. To attract a potential buyer to a product, it was no longer sufficient to advertise its functional benefits. Nor could it be assumed that consumers make an objective cost-benefit analysis before making a purchase. Instead, their preferences are shaped by seemingly insignificant factors, such as the association of a product with self-worth, happiness, and personal fulfillment.

An example of this approach is *L'Oréal's* advertising campaign, which introduced the iconic slogan "Because You're Worth It" in 1971. The phrase was created by Ilon Specht, a young copywriter working for the McCann advertising agency in New York. Referring to the top of Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the campaign conveys a subtle yet powerful message: purchasing *L'Oréal* products is not just about beauty care, but an act of self-affirmation, a declaration of self-worth, and a statement that one deserves luxury. In this way, the brand taps into the need for personal fulfillment, offering more than just cosmetics – it promises the opportunity to become a better version of oneself.

As marketing expert Seth Godin emphasizes: "You may say you're offering a widget, but don't believe it. When you're marketing change, you're offering a new emotional state, a step closer to the dreams and desires of your customers, not a widget" (Godin 2018, 70).

It is worth to note that one of the most frequently used fantasies in shaping the symbolic meanings of products in consumers' minds is the fantasy of the "ideal self". As Dariusz Doliński points out: "The »real self« does not actually refer to what a person truly is, but rather represents their subjective belief about the traits they possess. The »ideal self«, on the other hand, is a person's belief about what they would like to be. However, it would be more reasonable to use the term »desired self« instead […]" (Doliński 2003, 59). As a result, the psychologist continues, „when developing advertising scripts, it is essential to consider the dynamics of people's situationally changing perceptions of their »ideal self« and to align the brand image accordingly". (Doliński 2003, 59).

B. THE SYMBOLIC ORDER

As mentioned earlier, the Symbolic refers to the domain of signs, meanings, and rules that structure human reality through language and culture. It is within this order that individuals become immersed in a world of meanings that precede their own existence. The Symbolic functions as a matrix through which a person acquires the ability to perceive and understand both themselves and their surroundings.

From Lacan's perspective, products do not possess inherent meaning; rather, they serve as signifiers that play specific roles within the symbolic structure. Their consumption is not about fulfilling a real need but rather about satisfying a symbolic function – restoring an illusory sense of completeness by participating in a system of signs. In other words, the object we purchase – for example, a dress chosen by a woman in a store – does not satisfy desire because of its material qualities, but because it functions as a sign of fulfilled desire. A sign that loses its significance the moment another item takes the place of the so-called "object petit a".

At the same time, the meaning of a product emerges from cultural intertextuality. As I explain later, focusing on *Levi's* "Go Forth" campaign, the brand assigns meaning to jeans by drawing on an already established poetic language – that of Walt Whitman – evoking a wild America, pioneers, rewarding effort (freedom, America, explorers, struggle, dirt, satisfaction, etc.).

Here, however, I would like to focus on a different example: an old print advertisement for *Idris* ginger beer, which relies entirely on text. Although – similar to the *Paco Rabanne* ad –it is highly visual in its descriptive nature, its key significance lies in its structural relationships.

- REMEMBER… THAT TIME AFTER SCHOOL, in the summer, when ou could go outside and play till teen o'clock at night?
- THAT LONG DRIVE to the seaside, when you first saw the blue of the sea through a gap in the hills?
- PUTTING UP A TENT in the garden, and drinking Lemonade made cloudy by the real lemons in it, as the sun shone through canvas?
- GETTING OFF THE BUS a stop early, so you could spend the fare money you saved on sweets?
- PLAYING »TAG« in the garden all afternoon, as the shadows lengthened across the lawn?
- GOING FOR A LONG WALK, just with your best friend, and giving yourself a reward in the sweet shop a mile away from home?
- MAKING AN ICE CREAM float, with vanilla ice cream and Cream Soda, and taking it carefully outside with your two favourite comics?
- PICKING WILD BLACKBERRIES, and thinking you could run away and survive for ever on the delicious, free fruit?
- ROLLING DOWN a long bank, and standing up and feeling all dizzy as you ran up the bank to do it again?
- THE TASTE OF Dandelion and Burdock (if you ever drank it, how could you ever forget it)?
- PLAYING CATCH AGAINST a wall, and giving yourself a target of 10 in a row, to help England win the match?
- COMING HOME ONE DAY, to find that your family was the proud owner of a dog, and you had to think of a name for it?
- TRYING GINGER BEER, made with real ginger, because your father said it was a great drink, and finding out he was right? (The Copy Book, 2022, s. 236-237).

The text of the ad is essentially a journey through imagination by means of words. At the same time, it has an almost hypnotic quality – the very first phrase, "REMEMBER… THAT TIME AFTER SCHOOL…", resembles the kind of language used at the beginning of a hypnosis session (for example: "Feel your forehead relax, your shoulders, your back. Every part of your body becomes heavier and more at ease…"). As a result, this opening phrase acts as a hypnotic gateway, leading the reader into the Symbolic Order – in this case, through language.

Each sentence begins with a dynamic verb ("PLAYING", "PUTTING UP", "GOING FOR"), which further draws the reader into an active, engaging narrative. Phrases like "cloudy lemonade", "vanilla ice cream", "wild blackberries" create sensory-rich imagery that stimulates the imagination. Meanwhile, adjective-noun clusters like "real lemons" and "real ginger" reinforce a sense of authenticity and product quality. This is hardly surprising, as from Lacan's perspective, fantasy represents the peak of reality – just as in Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, where dreams are true, while reality turns out to be a fiction – filtered through imagination.

Particular attention should be given to the hypnotic rhythm of the narration. The repetition of verbs ("PLAYING", "ROLLING", "MAKING") establishes a rhythmic pattern that immerses the reader in a nostalgic world of fantasy. The text concludes with a mention of "Ginger Beer", which ties all the memories together into a cohesive image of happiness. Importantly, it does not refer directly to the present – everything is framed in terms of "that time" from the past. This temporal shift underscores the idea that childhood is lost, yet *Idris* offers a way to partially reclaim what has disappeared.

In summary, by employing hypnotic language, the advertisement constructs vivid mental images that are designed to take root in the reader's mind. The product itself becomes an inseparable element of this carefully crafted vision.

C. THE REAL ORDER

The Real is the most enigmatic and elusive of the three orders identified by Lacan. It is, in essence, that which escapes symbolization and representation – what cannot be fully captured in an image or language. The Real constitutes a space of absence or excess, which cannot be integrated into symbolic structures yet remains ever-present as an underlying force, generating tension and unease. In other words, as Lacan points out, "the real is everything that doesn't work out, that doesn't function, that gets in the way of man's life and the affirmation of his personality" (Lacan 2015, 18).

Although this sphere is inherently inaccessible, its constant presence shapes human experience. As the French thinker clarifies in an interview: "What is to be deciphered in psychic analysis is all the time there, present since the beginning. You speak about repression, forgetting something. As Freud formulated it, repression is inseparable from the phenomenon of »the return of the repressed«. Something continues to function, something continues to speak in the place where it was repressed" (Lacan 1957)

In *Nike's* famous print ad, created by Dan Wieden, we see a runner illuminated by a beam of sunlight in New York City. Next to the image, the slogan states: "Most Heroes are Anonymous" (The Copy Book 2022, 531). In this case, the path to becoming a hero – moving closer to the "ideal self" – is framed as purchasing a pair of *Nike* shoes. The ad attempts to imbue the running shoes with quasi-magical qualities, in a sense enchanting them – a process that is at the core of branding.

However, when a consumer unaccustomed to running decides to buy the shoes and goes for a jog once, twice, or three times, the product is inevitably "disenchanted". It quickly becomes evident that *Nike* shoes do not actually possess magical powers – they do not carry the runner like Hermes' winged sandals. While imaginary communication may suggest otherwise, the shoes themselves do not propel anyone forward – running requires real effort, which often leads many beginners to quickly abandon their aspirations. In this way, the soap bubble of certain fantasies is punctured by reality.

At the moment of fulfillment, desire vanishes, leaving behind a sense of emptiness. The Real thus manifests itself as a disappointment: "So, is this all there is?" "Why don't I feel any different?" As British art critic John Berger observes: "The more convincingly publicity conveys the pleasure of bathing in a warm, distant sea, the more the spectator-buyer will become aware that he is hundreds of miles away from that see and the more remote the chance of bathing in it will seem to him" (Berger 1977, 132). This paradox lies at the core of contemporary consumer culture – the more an advertisement idealizes a product, the more it heightens the subject's awareness of unfulfilled desires in reality. The Real thus emerges as a persistent reminder of the gap between fantasy and life.

In summary, the Real is that which is repressed, hidden behind the curtain of fiction. Every ad produced in the golden age of branding makes overstated promises. To construct a cohesive fantasy, it smooths out all irregularities within the Imaginary and conceals its own shadow. Interestingly, as Lacan and Freud suggest, this shadow always returns.

D. "OBJECT PETIT A"

Another key element of the Imaginary-Symbolic Model is the concept of "object petit a". According to Lacan, this is an enigmatic and elusive object of desire – something that can never be fully attained or satisfied. It is an illusory goal that drives human aspirations while always remaining beyond reach (Lacan 1998, 112–113). Consequently, "object petit a" functions as a void around which structured fantasies are woven. Paradoxically, it serves as the "hard core" of desire. However, this so-called core is, in reality, a lack – something unreal.

From another perspective, "object petit a" can be understood as an amorphous, undefined object of desire – something that seems to fill a fundamental void within a person, yet remains shrouded in mystery. It is the final link in the chain of human longing – the element that gives shape to specific desires while itself remaining hidden in the shadows. As the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek explains, discussing the views of the French thinker:

The status of this object-cause of desire is that of an anamorphosis. A port of the picture which, looked at from straight in front, appears as meaningless blotch takes on the contours of a known object when we shift our position and look at the picture from an angle.

Lacan's point is even more radical: the object-cause of desire is something that, viewed from in front, is nothing at all, just a void: it acquires the contours of something only when viewed at a slant. […] This is object a: an entity that has no substantial consistency, which in itself is "nothing but confusion", and which acquires a definite shape only when looked at from a standpoint slanted by the subject's desires and fears […] (Žižek 2006, 68-69).

To better grasp the amorphous nature of "object petit a", one might turn to the logo of the *Play* company – a shapeless mass that at times appears as a sphere, at others as a star, a cylinder, or something else entirely. When incorporated into various advertisements, it can be stretched, compressed, or reshaped, adapting to different contexts. However, one aspect remains unchanged – its branding-defining purple-and-white stripes.

Focusing on another example: what is *Apple's* actual product? It is not the *iPhone, iMac,* or *Apple Vision Pro* – these are merely items within its product lineup. When we consider the brand's deeper meaning, it becomes evident that these gadgets function as signs pointing to a single, ultimate product – the embodiment of modernity itself. Buying *Apple* products is akin to receiving gifts from a beloved woman: a handkerchief marked with lipstick, a glove scented with perfume, a gleaming hairpin pulled from freshly styled hair. The more such gifts we receive, the stronger our desire for her grows – yet, paradoxically, our longing remains unfulfilled.

The same logic applies to *Apple's* offer. Each product serves as a signifier of what *Apple* represents and promises. However, what it presents is nothing more than a fantasy placed before our eyes – a Platonic form, which can only take temporary, ever-changing shapes. As a result, the constant release of new *iPhone* models resembles an attempt to materialize an inverted form of Platonic idealism. The idea of the *iPhone* exists

somewhere in the eternal "realm of forms" – a perfect, abstract concept. Meanwhile, *iPhone 10, iPhone 11, iPhone 12, iPhone 13, iPhone 14, iPhone 15* – each successive model appears to draw closer to this ideal, more fully embodying reflections of technological perfection.

However, as one might expect, the movement of bringing the "perfect *iPhone*" from the heavens to Earth will never end. *Apple* customers will never receive the "ultimate product" that fully satisfies their desires. Instead, they will live in a perpetual state of anticipation, waiting for the next prophetic words of a capitalist visionary – someone in the mold of Steve Jobs. "Publicity speaks in the future tense and yet the achievement of this future is endlessly deferred. How then does publicity remain credible – or credible enough to exert the influence it does? It remains credible because the truthfulness of publicity is judged, not by the real fulfillment of its promises, but by the relevance of its fantasies to those of the spectator-buyer. Its essential application is not to reality but to day-dreams" – Berger, in a truly Lacanian tone, concludes (Berger 1977, 146).

From this perspective, it becomes clear that "object petit a" is something that fuels desire while always remaining beyond the subject's reach. As Žižek explains, drawing a parallel between Lacan's concept and Albert Einstein's theory of relativity: "The starting point of the theory of relativity is the strange fact that, for every observer, no matter in what direction and how fast he moves, light moves at the same speed; in an analogous way, for Lacan, no matter whether the desiring subject approaches or runs from his object of desire, this object seems to remain at the same distance from him. […] No matter how close I get to the object of desire, its cause remains at a distance, elusive" (Žižek 2006, 76-77).

As Lacan's analysis suggests, in late capitalism, the product itself ultimately has no inherent meaning. The core product, the formal product, and the augmented product are secondary. What matters most is the ability to embed it within the innate structure of human desire through effective marketing – to position it as the "object petit a". If this is achieved, the product becomes an unconscious promise of something that will bring fulfillment.

III. THE IMAGINARY-SYMBOLIC MODEL

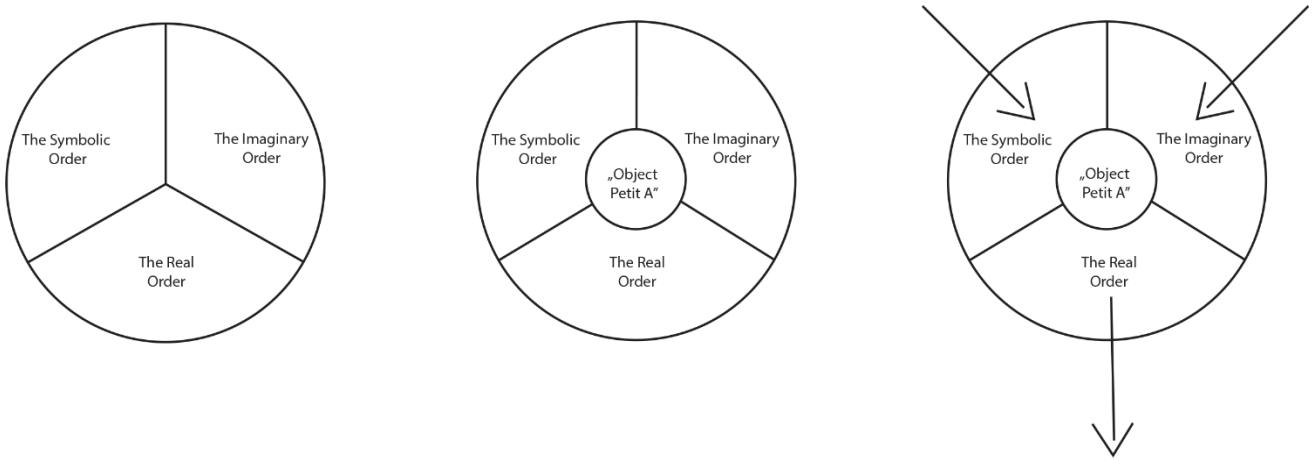
As I mentioned in the introduction, the Imaginary-Symbolic Model is a hermeneutic tool designed to help interpret the imaginary meanings assigned to products. The model is particularly useful in analyzing advertisements that attempt to "enchant" commercial goods. In other words, it facilitates decoding what branding encodes – unveiling the fantasies that flourish within the framework of commodity fetishism.

While the analysis of a product's Imaginary aspect focuses on images, symbols, and archetypes, its Symbolic aspect is primarily concerned with language – its formal and narrative structure, as well as the tone and connotations of words used in advertising. The Real, on the other hand, represents the hidden counterpart of the fantasy created by the Imaginary and the Symbolic – it encompasses everything that disrupts the imaginary order, everything that must be repressed to maintain the illusion constructed by branding.

To identify the Real, we must ask: What is the unspoken guilt of the advertisement? What is the shadow of the fantasy it offers? What will ultimately resurface when the consumer experiences their first disappointments with the product? What underlying disillusionments linger in the air, waiting to manifest?

When the vectors of the Imaginary and the Symbolic are directed inward, working to sustain the fantasy and protect it from collapse, the vector of the Real moves outward – it consists of elements that disrupt the fantasy and are therefore repressed yet remain subtly present beneath the surface.

FIGURE 1



Source: own.

To illustrate the internal dynamics of these forces, it is useful to refer to the model of atomic nucleus structure in physics. While electromagnetic radiation repels protons and electrons from each other, the strong nuclear force counteracts this repulsion, holding the atomic components together. As a result, the atom maintains a relatively stable structure, though – just like the fantasy in the Imaginary-Symbolic Model – it can be disrupted under certain conditions, leading to decay or recombination.

It is crucial to emphasize that, in a strict sense, the atomic nucleus in this model corresponds to "object petit a". As mentioned earlier, this represents the core of desire – a void around which the imaginary constructs of advertising are organized.

How to apply the model in practice? To analyze the meaning of a product in advertising, one must simply attempt to answer a set of key questions, as outlined in the table below. These responses will clarify the product's meaning within the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real orders, while also identifying the core of desire – "object petit a".

TABLE 1

The Imaginary Order	The Symbolic Order	The Real Order	„Object Petit A"
What images, archetypes, and symbols are used in the advertisement? What emotions do the visual representations evoke? How is the product presented aesthetically (e.g., harmony, simplicity, dynamism)? Does the ad reference cultural or historical fantasies? Which visual elements construct the perception of the product as something unique or desirable?	What words, slogans, and narratives are used in the advertisement? What connotations do the words and phrases in the ad carry? What narrative structures shape the story of the product? How does the advertisement position the product within social norms, values, or aspirations? Does the language of the ad emphasize authenticity, modernity, tradition, or other symbolic values?	What aspects of reality are repressed or hidden within the advertisement's narrative? Does the ad avoid addressing aspects related to production, consumption, or the product's environmental impact? What contradictions or tensions could disrupt the idealized vision of the product? What real limitations of the product are concealed or masked in the ad creation? Is there a dissonance between the advertisement's promise and the actual experience of the product?	What desires or longings does the product promise to fulfill? What is presented as the lack that the product is supposed to fill? How does the product fit into the fantasy of an ideal life, identity, or social relationships? What image of the "ideal self" (e.g., better, younger, wealthier) does the advertisement promote? How does the product create the illusion of being the key to fulfilling a desire that ultimately remains unattainable?

Source: own

IV. CASE STUDIES

After presenting the Imaginary-Symbolic Model itself, I would now like to move on to its practical application. In this section, I will introduce three case studies that illustrate how this analytical tool can be used to examine the meanings of products in relation to their Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real aspects. The examples I have selected include: "Acqua di Gioia" perfume commercials by *Giorgio Armani*, the "Go Forth" campaign by *Levi's*, and the "Bike" TV ad by *Hovis*.

The goal of this section is to demonstrate how the model helps reveal the mechanisms behind consumer desire formation and to interpret the hidden meanings encoded in advertising and branding strategies.

1) "ACQUA DI GIOIA" PERFUME BY GIORGIO ARMANI

Beginning the analysis with "Acqua di Gioia" by *Giorgio Armani*, I will focus on two television commercials from the "The Essence of Joy" series: one featuring Barbara Palvin (YouTube, 2016) and the other starring Emily DiDonato (YouTube, 2017).

a. THE IMAGINARY ORDER

The "Acqua di Gioia" commercials rely entirely on hypnotic music and sensual imagery. However, their sequence of shots is not random – it constructs a logical, emotional argument aimed at the unconscious part of the viewer's psyche, forming a syllogism of desire. As a result, specific elements of the "Acqua di Gioia" campaign are particularly well-suited for analyzing the symbolic meaning of perfume. The goal, as Lacan suggests, is "to differentiate in a discourse the meaning of symbols, the presence of myths" (Lacan 1957).

In the Barbara Palvin commercial, sensual and symbolically rich imagery dominates. The entire advertisement is shot in sepia tones, giving it an ethereal, dreamlike quality. The rolling ocean waves are interwoven with shots of the model, her wet hair glistening and her lips slightly parted in an erotic expression. Her movements are slow and sensual, matching the rhythm of the background music. The camera submerges and emerges from the water, following her as she wades into the sea, closing her eyes in ecstasy. Finally – as if in a religious ritual – Palvin smiles at the camera, spreads her arms, and falls backward into the water, disappearing beneath the waves.

The *Armani* perfume commercial employs powerful symbolic imagery of water, the sea, and immersion to construct a narrative saturated with Imaginary meaning. Water, an archetype of immense symbolic significance, is associated with transformation, purification, and renewal. Many traditions – from Christian baptism to the mythological birth of Aphrodite from sea foam – connect water to femininity, sensuality, and metamorphosis. The model embodies the goddess of beauty, and her submersion in water becomes a symbol of rebirth and a reconnection with nature. As the writer, philosopher, and religious scholar Mircea Eliade explains: "The Waters symbolise the entire universe of the virtual; they are the *fons et orgio*, the reservoir of all the potentialities of existence; […] Contact with water always goes with regeneration, on the one hand because dissolution is followed by a »new birth«, and on the other hand because immersion fertilizes and multiplies the potentialities of life" (Eliade 1952, 151).

In this way, the perfume becomes more than just a scent – it is a promise of transformation. This symbolic world is

magically "enchanted" within the bottle, offering the consumer a dream in the form of fragrance. As the renowned advertising creator David Ogilvy reminds us: "Products, like people, have personalities" (Ogilvy 1985, 14)

The Emily DiDonato commercial closely resembles the previous example, though this time, the setting shifts to a tropical jungle. The visuals depict a dense rainforest in deep blue tones, shrouded in mist. Once again, water plays a central role: raindrops trickle down leaves and the model's skin, as she, hidden among the foliage, appears to embody a wild, mysterious goddess. DiDonato runs through the forest, lies down in the wet grass, and finally rushes into the sea – as she gazes piercingly into the camera, her mysterious expression reveals traces of ecstasy.

The "Acqua di Gioia" commercial uses tropical archetypes – lush plants, rain, waves crashing against cliffs – to create a sensual imagery. The *Armani* perfume once again serves as a vehicle to a world of the senses. It's important to note that in everyday life, sensuality is always somewhat muted. However, in the fantasy crafted by the advertisement, the senses blossom like wet, tropical flowers. As a result, almost everything – from visual details to the music – becomes an invitation to the world of fantasy. The perfume acts as a key that opens the door to a place where sensuality knows no boundaries.

b. THE SYMBOLIC ORDER

Given that *Armani* perfume commercials feature virtually no words (with only the slogan "The Essence of Joy" appearing at the end), interpreting the symbolic meaning of the product seems unnecessary.

What deserves attention is the slogan, which – by directly referencing an essential nature – points to the "object petit a". While the perfume is described as the "essence of pleasure", this essence does not actually exist. The structure of the fantasy resembles a spiral staircase without a central pillar. While we can walk up the stairs and are convinced that their stability is ensured by something at the center, in reality, there is nothing there. The "Acqua di Gioia" commercial consciously directs our attention to this very empty center, doing so through language. This not only does not diminish customer desire but, in fact, intensifies it.

c. THE REAL ORDER

In the *Armani* perfume commercials, the Real reveals itself as what the ad attempts to conceal, hiding it behind a fantasy of sensuality and emotional fulfillment. The "Acqua di Gioia" commercials create a world of imagery, where the scent is presented as a key to beauty, uniqueness, and even transcendence. The viewer is seduced by a vision in which the perfume becomes a symbol of perfection and a means of realizing a desired, erotic dream.

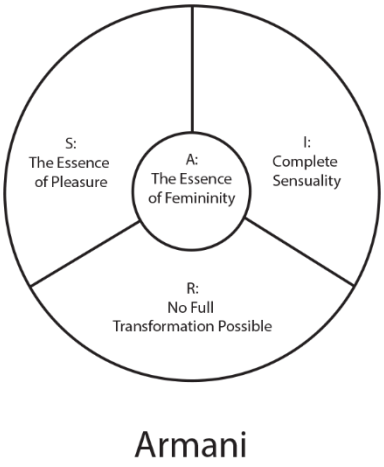
However, the perfume can at most add a bit of charm to a woman – it does not automatically ensure attractiveness or sex appeal. While the emotional syllogism embedded in the advertisement convinces me that, with the perfume-as-vehicle, I am like the model, in reality, I am different. The product deceives me.

d. „OBJECT PETIT A"

The core of desire related to *Armani* perfumes is the unattainable idea of perfect femininity and full attractiveness. The consumer desires something that seems to be contained within the perfume, intoxicating herself with its symbolic scent, much like a hallucinogenic substance – a sensual and elegant essence that will make her someone exceptional. This is the "object petit a" as an imagined fetish element that fuels desire but never satisfies it. It represents the "essence of femininity" as something fundamentally unreal – a void entwined with the ivy of imagination.

As Berger explains, pointing to the presence of "object petit a" in the advertisement's message: "The spectator-buyer is meant to envy herself as she will become if she buys the product. She is meant to imagine herself transformed by the product into an object of envy for others, an envy which will then justify her loving herself. One could put this another way: the publicity image steals her love of herself as she is, and offers it back to her for the price of the product" (Berger 1977, 134).

FIGURE 2



Source: own.

2) "GO FORTH" CAMPAIGN BY LEVI'S

Another case perfectly illustrates the importance of the sphere of the Symbolic; weaving the meaning of a product into narratives available in culture and assimilated through marketing efforts. I am referring to the *Levi's* jeans advertisements from the "Go Forth" campaign. I would like to focus on a series of print ads with a traditional composition (photos along with copy) and on a television commercial that uses a fragment of a poem by the American poet Walt Whitman (YouTube, 2009).

a. THE IMAGINARY ORDER

On the first of the series of print ads, we see a blurred photo depicting a young man running. In the center of the design, there is a slogan written in a handwritten style: „Make Something or be Forgotten" (Pinterest, 2017). The next ad shows a young man in jeans without a shirt running into the sea. The text placed at the top of the design reads: „Strike Up for the New World" (AdForum, 2010). The third design presents a similar scene, but in this case, we only see legs sticking vertically out of the water. The slogan on this ad is: „For Those Who Toil" (AdAge, 2009). All the print ads from the "Go Forth" series are consistent, maintaining the same convention.

Using slightly different images and slogans, they refer to a similar idea.

Referring to the aforementioned fantasy of the "ideal self", *Levi's* jeans attempt to provide consumers with a desired identity. As Žižek reminds us: "A man who lives in a large city and owns a *Land-Rover* (for which he obviously has no use) doesn't simply lead a non-nonsense, down-to-earth life; rather, he owns such a car in order to signal that he leads his life under the sign of a no-nonsesne, down-to-earth attitude. To wear stone-washed jeans is to signal a certain attitude to life" (Žižek 2006, 16).

It is worth noting that we all define ourselves through our preferences. What I like and what I dislike largely answers the question of who I am. In modern marketing, we have long been dealing with something that can be described as the commercialization of the social definers. "When my students meet each other for the first time each September, they bond within hours, at least in part because they have brands in common – whether it's *Evian* or *Beats* or *Louis Vuitton*, it's recognizable and means roughly the same thing everywhere, and people define themselves (and others) by the brands they like" – Robert Jones points out (Jones 2017, 34). *Levi's* jeans, on the other hand, represent the fantasy of youth, sexual energy, and a lack of limitations. By putting them on, you change your identity.

b. THE SYMBOLIC ORDER

The symbolic sphere is not only the sphere of language *per se* – it is also the domain of language that is appropriately structured and dramatized, organizing meanings in the form of a narrative. In an effort to give offered products a symbolic image and position them in the minds of consumers, producers make them part of broader narratives. As Leo Burnett, quoted by Ogilvy, points out: "There is an inherent drama in every product. Our No. 1 job is to dig for it and capitalize on it" (Ogilvy 1985, 201). The case of *Levi's* seems particularly interesting here because, instead of trying to create its own narrative from scratch, it adopts and commercializes one that already exists in American culture. In the 2009 television commercial "O Pioneers!", part of the "Go Forth" campaign, we observe emotionally charged scenes interrupted by rapid montage cuts. The images depict young people, youthful energy, shared laughter, touching closeness, naked bodies, wind in their hair, and an atmosphere of adventure. The voiceover recites a poem by Walt Whitman.

COME my tan-faced children,
Follow well in order, get your weapons ready,
Have you your pistols? Have you your sharp-edged axes?
Pioneers! O pioneers!
For we cannot tarry here,
We must march my darlings, we must bear the brunt of danger,
We the youthful sinewy races, all the rest on us depend,
Pioneers! O pioneers!
O you youths, Western youths,
So impatient, full of action, full of manly pride and friendship,
Plain I see you Western youths, see you tramping with the foremost,
Pioneers! O pioneers! (Whitman, 2001, s. 287-288).

On another print ad from the "Go Forth" series, which shows a handsome, muddy young man with tousled hair, we see a similar text based on Whitman's poem, but slightly modified for Levi's needs:

I am the new American Pioneer, looking forward, never back.
No longer content to wait for better Times.
I will work for better times. Cause no one built this country in suits.
All I need is all I got. Bruises heal. Stink is good. And apathy is dead.
So I strike up for the new world. Newer, mighter world. The one I will make to my liking.
For after the darkness comes the dawn. There is a better tomorrow.
Look across the pains and mountains and see American's eternal Promise.
A Promise of Progress.
Go forth with me. Go Forth (Campaigns of the World, 2017).

As an be seen, the ad refers to the myth of American progress, building a narrative of rebirth and new beginnings ("after the darkness comes the dawn"). Key phrases ("I will work for better times", "go forth") emphasize an active approach to life, encouraging the audience to take action. Expressions like "stink is good" or "bruises heal" suggest that real life is full of imperfections, but it is precisely this that makes it valuable.

As a result, the text creates the image of a contemporary "American pioneer" who is fearless, adventurous, full of energy – and thus, charm. The final sentence of the advertisement ("go forth with me"), which is essentially a marketing call-to-action inviting viewers to buy jeans, subconsciously suggests that all the mentioned meanings have been encapsulated in the pants, while also appealing to a sense of belonging to a group.

To better explain the significance of language in *Levi's* advertisement, I would like to analyze its fragments using a table.

TABLE 2

Language Element	Key Phrases	Connotations	Symbolic Meaning
Subject	„I"	The individual, individualism, subjectivity	The ad presents a young, independent man as a new pioneer, emphasizing personal strength and agency.
Action verbs	„looking forward", „strike up", „work for"	Movement, energy, striving for a goal	It emphasizes the importance of activity, courage, optimism and acting in the spirit of change.
Negation	„never back", „no longer content", „apathy is dead"	Opposition to stagnation and apathy	The image of liberation from the past and passivity encourages active participation in creating a better future.
Emotional phrases	„bruises heal", „stink is good"	Courage, determination, acceptance of imperfection	It suggests that hardships and imperfections are part of the path to success, building an image of perseverance.
Time symbolism	„better times", „darkness",	Progress, future, hope	It indicates optimism and a belief in continuous development and the possibility of change.

Language Element	Key Phrases	Connotations	Symbolic Meaning
	„dawn", „tomorrow"		
Space	„pains and mountains", „eternal Promise"	Landscape, nature, unlimited possibilities	It reinforces the image of America as a promised land, a place of new opportunity and progress.
Keywords	„Go Forth"	Action, forward movement, exploration	An encouragement to act in a pioneering spirit, emphasizing youth, energy and the discovery of new possibilities.

Source: own

c. THE REAL ORDER

The real in *Levi's* advertisements primarily reveals itself as a fundamental contradiction between the promise of individuality and the reality of mass production. The "Go Forth" campaign emphasizes that jeans are an expression of uniqueness, personal style, and rebellion against conformity – they are meant to be what allows one to stand out and discover their true "self". In reality, however, *Levi's* jeans are produced on a mass scale in factories in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Vietnam. Furthermore, the same models of pants are worn by literally millions of people.

In this context, the Real is a reminder that the product, which is supposed to represent uniqueness, is paradoxically identical to what many others wear. The mass nature of *Levi's* jeans production and consumption collides with the fantasy of exceptionalism built by the brand's narrative. The consumer, who identifies with the vision of individuality, inevitably faces the Real – the awareness that their choice is part of a global consumption system, not an expression of a completely autonomous decision. This dissonance, though unarticulated in the ad, is present in the background and resists the symbolic coherence of *Levi's* promise.

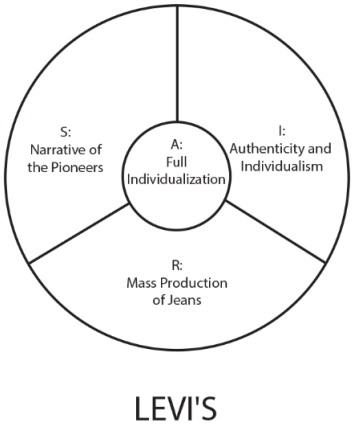
Moreover, jeans are not magical. After purchasing the product, it quickly becomes apparent that it is unable to transform our "self". This is precisely the moment of confrontation with the Real. The realization that jeans are simply one of many clothing items, which – in the absence of other, favorable circumstances – will not lead us into a world of rebellion and sensuality.

d. „OBJECT PETIT A"

The "object little a" in the "Go Forth" advertisements functions as an elusive promise of fulfillment of desires related to youth, freedom, and authenticity. The campaign builds a vision of jeans as something more than an ordinary product – they become a symbol of a life full of adventure, passion, and energy. The fantasy offered by *Levi's* promises the consumer the possibility of escaping from everyday routine and entering a world full of exciting experiences. In this way, jeans become a semblance of an idealized "self" – the person we would like to be but can never fully become.

The central element of this fantasy is the belief that jeans can provide an individual with the desired identity. In a world where consumption defines who we are, *Levi's* appeals to the desire to be unique, independent, and authentic. „Raising people's expectations, engaging in their hopes and dreams, helping them see further – that's the difficult work we signed up for" – Godin points out (Godin, 2018, 61). However, paradoxically, the Real, which bursts the created fantasy, reminds us that instead of uniqueness, the pants provide only a fragile illusion of individuality.

FIGURE 3



Source: own

3) THE „BIKE" HOVIS COMMERCIAL

As the final subject of analysis, I would like to use the British people's favorite commercial, directed by Ridley Scott the "Bike" from 1973 (YouTube, 2007). My choice is motivated, among other things, by the desire to illustrate that imagination plays a significant role even in the case of such ordinary products as bread. Although food products are sometimes overlooked in advertising hermeneutics analyses, they often demonstrate the power of branding even more effectively than other categories. This happens because, in a market where the differences between goods are almost imperceptible, the brand plays a crucial role.

As Ogilvy explains: "Take whiskey. Why do some people chose *Jack Daniel's*, while others choose *Grand Dad* or *Taylor*? Have they tried all three and compared the taste? Don't make me laugh. The reality is that these three brands have different images which appeal to different kinds of people. It isn't the whiskey they choose, it's the image. The brand image is 90 per cent of what the distiller has to sell" (Ogilvy 1985, 14).

Notably, although the "Bike" commercial was intended to promote the *Hovis* bread brand, similar patterns were used by other manufacturers. One particularly noteworthy example is the advertisement for *Pepperidge Farm* bread, created by the aforementioned Ogilvy. Significantly, as the author himself confesses: "My partner Esty Stowell complained that the first commercial I wrote for *Pepperidge Farm* bread was sound enough, but lacking in imagery. That night I dreamed of two white horses pulling a baker's delivery van along a country lane at a smart trot. Today, 27 years later, that horse-drawn van is still driving up that lane in *Pepperidge* commercials" (Ogilvy 1985, 16). These observations help us understand how the dreams dreamt by copywriters can become waking dreams of consumers.

a. THE IMAGINARY ORDER

Returning to the *Hovis* commercial: it depicts an idyllic British countryside, a child on a bicycle, peace, simplicity, and the harmony of life. The visuals are presented in a nostalgic style (sepia tones, soft lighting) and are filled with a dreamlike atmosphere. In the background, we hear "New World Symphony" by the Czech composer Antonín Dvořák, which

transports us into a world of melancholy and undefined longing.

The main character, a boy, delivers bread to homes in his village, pushing his bicycle loaded with loaves up a steep street. In the background, a narrator recalls that the wheat germ in *Hovis* bread provides strength and energy – thanks to it, the boy will be able to run uphill just as quickly as he rides down. The advertisement concludes with the message that *Hovis* is just as healthy and nutritious today as it has always been.

Scott's commercial transports viewers into a dreamlike past. Through the idyllic setting of a British village (a cobbled street, thatched roofs), the ad creates an image of "uchronia" – a utopia rooted in the past (Szacki 2000, 89-90). This demonstrates that marketing fantasies do not always have to be set in the future (as in the case of *Apple*, for example). More importantly, the positive associations evoked by the carefully constructed world in the advertisement can be transferred to the product. As Doliński explains, describing the nature of such transfers: "If the sight of the Tatra Mountains evokes positive emotions in us, then associating an object with this view may cause us to perceive that object […] positively as well. If the sight of palm trees and a warm sea evokes warm feelings in us, then associating these images with a soap in an advertisement may lead to the soap being perceived positively as well" (Doliński 2003, 94).

As a result, in this narrative, bread acquires a deeper symbolic meaning, becoming more than just an ordinary food product – it is almost a time machine. It connects the consumer with childhood, familial warmth, and a sense of security. The melancholic tone of Dvořák's music intensifies the longing for a world that never existed in such an ideal form but is deeply embedded in cultural fantasies.

b. THE SYMBOLIC ORDER

The *Hovis* commercial is based on a model, almost fairy-tale-like narrative, featuring a set of traditional archetypes: the innocent child, Mother Earth, the lost paradise, and the guardian of tradition. By skillfully juggling these elements, the director turns bread into the central node of an imaginative network. The slogan "as good for you today as it's always been" expresses the fantasy of timelessness, with the word "always" playing a key role.

However, when analyzing this advertisement, it is worth mentioning another, previously overlooked aspect of the symbolic: the way it provides an individual with a place within the social structure. The symbolic is not only the domain of language but also a sphere of intersubjectivity, where meanings are created. Through the process of socialization, individuals internalize norms, values, and social roles that define their identity and relationships with others. These are precisely the strings that advertisements often seek to play – by purchasing a product, a person can become part of a (symbolic, imagined) community. As Godin argues: "In »people like us do things like this«, the »us« matters. The more specific, the more connected, the tighter the »us«, the better" (Godin 2018, 91).

From this perspective, *Hovis* bread emerges as an important element of British cultural identity, not only creating the illusion of a return to the past but also offering the opportunity to become part of an idealized, traditional community.

c. THE REAL ORDER

The Real in the *Hovis* commercial reveals itself as an underlying tension between the idyllic image of the past and the awareness that this "good old world" is no longer attainable. In reality, the stronger our desire to return to the blissful days of childhood, the more we long for them, the more subconscious disappointment accumulates within us. It resembles the bittersweet experience of looking at old photographs, which – beyond evoking pleasant memories – also remind us that what has passed will never return.

The *Hovis* ad promises a return to simplicity, harmony, and security, symbolized by the rural landscape, the child on a bicycle, and traditionally baked bread. In truth, however, we all know that these values belong to the realm of fantasy – a past that exists only as an imagined construct in collective consciousness.

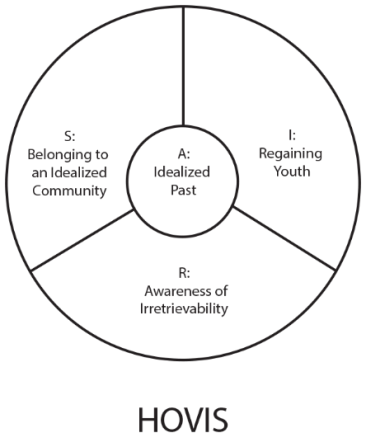
Moreover, although the product is presented as a carrier of tradition and memory, it now operates within a system of mass production and global consumption. *Hovis* bread, produced on an industrial scale, is no longer the result of a small village baker's craft but rather part of a complex production chain. This clash between an idealized past and the realities of modern capitalism creates a hidden dissonance that the advertisement attempts to mask by offering the viewer emotional fulfillment through the fantasy of bygone times.

d. "OBJECT PETIT A"

In the *Hovis* advertisement, "object petit a" is the elusive object of desire that drives the narrative of returning to an idealized past. It is not a tangible object but rather a vague idea – the longing for childhood, home, and a world full of harmony. "Object petit a" is an unattainable ideal, as time cannot be reversed. However, the consumer seeks to grasp even a fragment of that world – by purchasing the bread, they come closer to the fantasy of childhood innocence and carefree joy.

As always, the "hard core" of desire turns out to be a lack – an idealized past that never truly existed in the way it is presented, yet still exerts a powerful influence on the imagination. The viewer of the advertisement never fully achieves the promise of returning to childhood, but the "object petit a" allows them to indulge in the illusion that such a return is within reach. In this way, bread once again becomes more than just a product; it serves as a symbolic gateway to a fantasy of happiness and wholeness – one that, though unattainable, remains irresistible.

FIGURE 4



Source: own.

V. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that the assumptions and examples outlined in this article represent only the first step toward developing a fully-fledged analytical tool. The Imaginary-Symbolic Model, although grounded in theoretical foundations drawn from the thought of Jacques Lacan, requires further research, refinement, and verification through practical applications.

The aim of this article was to establish a foundation that not only encourages deeper reflection on the role of desires in shaping consumer relationships with products but also illustrates how marketing leverages these mechanisms to construct symbolic meanings and emotional bonds with brands. The Imaginary-Symbolic Model helps to understand what truly attracts consumers to products by identifying the "desire core" – "object petit a" – as a key element in stimulating human fantasy.

The challenge remains to adapt the model to various cultural and industry contexts, as well as to analyze its limitations. Its application requires consideration of different consumer groups, product types, and marketing strategies. To achieve this, empirical research is necessary to provide a more precise verification of the model's assumptions and its effectiveness in practice.

I hope that the concepts presented in this article will serve as a starting point for further research and discussion. In this way, the Imaginary-Symbolic Model may contribute to a deeper understanding not only of marketing but also of contemporary consumer culture, in which products increasingly function as carriers of identity markers, symbolic meanings, and diverse fantasies.

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