

Kryknitska, I. O. (2025). Shaping brand identity through metaphoric connotation: The case of Yves Saint Laurent. *Actual Issues of Modern Science. European Scientific e-Journal*, 38, ——. Ostrava.

DOI: 10.47451/phl2025-07-01

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Shaping Brand Identity Through Metaphoric Connotation: The Case of Yves Saint Laurent

Abstract: This article examines the role of creative metaphors coined by Yves Saint Laurent, the brand founder, as mechanisms in constructing the brand identity. Grounded in Conceptual Integration Theory, the study examines how Saint Laurent’s metaphorical discourse fuses conceptual domains such as fashion, art, love, freedom, and happiness to produce rich connotations that shape the brand’s self-presentation and emotional appeal. The study object is the creative metaphors of the founder of the YSL brand. The study aims to analyze metaphors through the lens of conceptual integration theory as a mechanism for constructing brand identity. The analysis reveals that these metaphors function not only as stylistic semasiological devices that generate emotionally resonant meanings, but are also powerful semiotic tools through which the brand encodes values and communicates its distinct identity. By blending conceptual domains related to clothing and fashion, as well as the core values of the brand and its target consumer identity, the metaphors construct emergent meanings that contribute to connotations that embody the brand identity. Expressions like “a pencil stroke”, “a passport for happiness”, or “the arms of the man she loves” construct a layered metaphorical narrative in which the brand is positioned as a source of aesthetic refinement, emotional transformation, and existential fulfillment. The connotative network associated with the brand’s identity and its underlying mythology encompasses the values of happiness, freedom, confidence, self-realization, love, individuality, as well as conceptual oppositions that resonate with the oxymoronic logic of the brand identity – such as complexity in simplicity and strength in femininity. Crucially, the metaphors articulate identity positions for the consumer, implying that engaging with the brand enables one to access internal states such as confidence, individuality, and romantic completeness. In this way, the brand identity is shaped through symbolic projection: the values encoded in the metaphors – creativity, elegance, sensuality, and freedom – are internalized by the audience as part of their identity narrative. By foregrounding the founder’s metaphorical imagination, the study highlights how brand identity emerges not only from visual design or product quality but from the symbolic and emotional universe evoked through language. The metaphors of Yves Saint Laurent construct a coherent and compelling myth for the brand – one that fuses cultural ideals with personal aspirations, thereby ensuring the brand’s enduring emotional relevance and symbolic power.

Keywords: creative metaphors, connotations, brand identity, conceptual integration, Yves Saint Laurent.

Abbreviations:

YSL is Yves Saint Laurent.

Introduction

Drawing on Barthes' ideas (1964; 1967), brands sell not just products and services but ideas and values, using connotative meanings intended to replace for the consumer the product or service. The connotations activated by brand advertising focus on associations that the product name and brand name should evoke. These become secondary signifieds, displacing the initial functional value of the product as clothing, food, means of communication, transportation, etc., associating it with success, utility, health, creativity, prestige, and so on. In this context, the meanings of signs denoting the brand, products, or services become signifiers connoting values and ideas (signifieds) (Kravchenko & Yudenko, 2023).

The discourse of the Yves Saint Laurent (hereafter YSL) brand is significantly represented by metaphorical statements from its founder, quotes that have often been used as brand slogans. The distinctiveness of YSL's metaphors lies not only in their advertising function but also in their role as carriers of cultural myth, creating the perception of the brand as a symbol of freedom, refinement, individuality, and authenticity, shaping the brand's identity.

Despite sustained scholarly interest in metaphor within advertising discourse as an indirect tool of marketing communications (Phillips, 1997; Toncar & Munch, 2001), its role as a mechanism for creating connotations that underpin brand identity remains insufficiently studied, underscoring the relevance of the chosen topic. The issue of constructing brand identity through metaphors has been partially explored alongside other semasiological stylistic devices (Kravchenko et al., 2021; Kravchenko et al., 2024). The connotation based on metaphor as a means of creating advertising mythologems has been examined through visual metaphors (Barthes, 1964; Yan & Ming, 2015; Williamson, 1978), albeit without direct relation to brand identity. Similarly, the examination of metaphors in a semiotic aspect, as a means to activate secondary signifieds of brands (Dyer, 1982; Vestergaard & Schröder, 1985), overlooks the mechanism of creating such meanings through connotations. In this regard, analyzing the connotative meanings constructed in blends of metaphors as a mechanism for the formation of brand identity defines the novelty and relevance of our study.

The study object is the creative metaphors of the founder of the YSL brand (Top 50..., 2025).

The study aims to analyze metaphors through the lens of conceptual integration theory as a mechanism for constructing brand identity.

Study objectives include

- identifying the creative metaphors used by Yves Saint Laurent in brand-related discourse;
- examining the mental spaces activated in these metaphors and how they interact within blended mental spaces;
- analyzing how metaphorical blends give rise to connotative meanings;
- exploring the role of these meanings in shaping the brand's identity.

A comprehensive study of these aspects will contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of metaphor in the semiotic construction of brand identity as a mechanism for cultural encoding and symbolic value transfer in luxury brand communication. It may be of interest to

scholars in cognitive linguistics, branding, advertising discourse, and cultural studies, as well as to practitioners involved in strategic brand communication.

Methods

The study applied a methodology based on Conceptual Integration Theory ([Fauconnier & Turner, 2000](#); [Fauconnier & Turner, 2002, pp. 283–304](#)), suggesting the construction of a conceptual integration network that includes the mental spaces involved in integration: input spaces, a generic space that combines abstract structures common to input spaces, and a blended space in which projections of elements selected from the input spaces lead to new knowledge structures ([Kryknitska, 2025](#)).

The conceptual processes underlying cross-dimensional mappings at the Composition and Completion stages of the blend as well as its elaborative potential, are analyzed in terms of the activated connotations that contribute to the construction of brand identity.

Results

The connotative meanings of “simplicity as complex aesthetics” and “freedom in minimalism” are activated in the blend of the creative metaphor below:

“The woman in a black dress is a pencil stroke” ([Top 50..., 2025](#)).

The metaphor employs iconization—a visual correspondence between the contour drawn by a pencil stroke and the silhouette of a woman in black.

Let us analyze this metaphor through the lens of the Conceptual Integration Theory.

Input Space 1: WOMAN, with prominent elements such as elegance and simplicity.

Input Space 2: PENCIL STROKE, with elements such as minimalism, expressiveness, and the aesthetics of the line.

Generic Space: unites shared elements from the input spaces, including form, visual representation, artistic expressiveness, and the black color.

In terms of conceptual network type, this is a single-scope blend, where the overall structure is drawn from the space of the pencil stroke, while the substantive content comes from the space of the woman. The woman is interpreted in terms of an artistic gesture—rather than the pencil stroke being interpreted in terms of the woman.

Within the blend, various elements from the two input spaces are compressed: The woman in a black dress becomes a graceful monochrome line; The woman is transformed into the embodiment of minimalist beauty; Elegance is abstracted to the point of disembodiment, turning into a line.

In the Completion stage, the structure of the blend is enriched with background knowledge: The woman in black is seen as a work of art, as the embodiment of creative intent (by an artist or designer), and as a symbol of minimalist beauty.

During the Elaboration stage—or mental “running” of the blend—various scenarios and additional meanings (potential implications) may be activated, such as

- (a) the black dress as a means of expressing a multifaceted artistic image or idea, associated with the symbolism of black (mystery, potential, power, self-sufficiency);
- (b) the ephemerality of beauty—just as a pencil stroke can be erased;

- (c) the idea of movement/dynamism: the woman in black as a moment of movement, expression, a fleeting instant of beauty the artist wants to capture (cf. Goethe's Faust: "Stay a while, you are so beautiful!").

Such elements of the blend as "the embodiment of minimalist beauty" and "a work of art" contribute to key codes/secondary signifieds of the YSL brand as elements of its identity: complex simplicity, strength (of expression) in simplicity, and freedom in minimalism.

The metaphor's elaborative potential supports the conceptual architecture of YSL's discourse. The image of the woman as an expressive stroke is associated with such connotations underlying the brand identity, as individuality and freedom, and with restrained extravagance. Simultaneously, the blend resonates with the oxymoronic logic of brand identity, which is built upon oppositions brought into harmony. The metaphor harmonizes key brand oppositions such as

- (a) strong—feminine: the stroke is both light and powerfully expressive, just like the image of the woman;
- (b) minimalism—semantic depth: the stroke is minimal in form yet rich in meaning (as is the black dress);
- (c) restraint—extravagance: the woman in black is not flashy, yet aesthetically striking;
- (d) simplicity—complexity: the simple line, like the black dress, carries semiotic and artistic complexity.

Thus, the metaphor "The woman in a black dress is a pencil stroke" encapsulates YSL's brand identity by blending minimalist aesthetics with expressive depth, harmonizing elegance, individuality, and oxymoronic oppositions.

A causal link between the brand (its product), self-confidence, and the feeling of happiness is implied by the metaphor in the statement:

"When you feel good in a clothing, anything can happen. A good clothing is a passport for happiness" ([Top 50..., 2025](#)).

This metaphor blends two input spaces: High-quality clothing (the brand's product) and Passport.

Input Space 1: CLOTHING—includes elements such as:

- an item of appearance;
- a source of comfort and confidence;
- a social status marker;
- a product of the YSL brand;
- a trigger for positive emotions.

Input Space 2: PASSPORT—includes

- a document;
- access/authorization for travel;
- a means of crossing borders;
- a symbol of new opportunities and freedom;
- an attribute of identity (citizenship).

The Generic Space brings together shared elements from both inputs, such as

- an object that grants access to positive experiences;

- a means of transition (to another state or new opportunities);
- a trigger for change and expanded possibilities;
- a tool of identification/self-identification.

From the passport input space, the following elements are projected onto clothing:

Access function: passport → access to countries; clothing → access to an internal state of happiness;

Identity-marking function: a passport indicates citizenship; clothing (especially YSL clothing) indicates style, taste, self-perception, and identity.

In the Blended Space, a new structure emerges: clothing as a means of accessing a state of happiness, fulfilling the needs for confidence and self-realization. The blend creates the connotative meaning of a causal link: Brand (its product) → confidence → happiness.

At the Completion stage, the blend develops the connotative message that the YSL brand product serves as a means of internal transformation, changing not only one's appearance but also one's inner state.

At the Elaboration stage, the blend generates additional connotations that associate the brand's products with the values that form its identity:

- YSL is not just clothing, but a means to achieve inner well-being;
- the YSL brand can make a person happy, functioning as a culturally marked "passport" into a desired emotional state.

The elaboration may further draw on the symbolic potential of the concepts' passport and clothing: the passport symbolizes freedom as new possibilities; clothing symbolizes confidence and self-realization.

Thus, the metaphor blend and its elaborative potential contribute to activating key connotative constants associated with the brand's identity—happiness, freedom, confidence, and self-realization.

The connotative message about YSL's ability to make its target customer happy is reinforced in the blend of an extended metaphor based on the integration of the concepts of clothing, love, beauty, and happiness:

"The most beautiful clothes that can dress a woman are the arms of the man she loves. But for those who have not had the fortune of finding this happiness, I am there." (Top 50..., 2025).

Through blending, an image is created in which the brand metonymically becomes the source of what a woman may be lacking – love and happiness. The conceptual integration can be schematically represented as follows:

Input Space 1: CLOTHING, includes elements such as

- (a) object of aesthetics;
- (b) highlights beauty;
- (c) protects and presents the body;
- (d) expresses style and individuality;
- (e) creates confidence.

Input Space 2: THE EMBRACE OF A LOVED ONE, is structured around

- (a) gesture of emotional closeness;
- (b) expression of love, warmth, acceptance;

- (c) source of comfort and happiness;
- (d) iconic gesture of protection.

The Generic Space includes shared elements from both inputs, such as

- (a) something that “envelops” a person (literally or metaphorically);
- (b) source of emotion;
- (c) state of comfort and protection;
- (d) means of transitioning to a state of happiness.

In the Blended Space, the following mappings take place: embraces, like beautiful clothing, aesthetically “adorn” the woman; both function as sources of comfort and happiness.

Beauty, love, clothing, and happiness are fused into one emergent space: Love (in the form of an embrace) is the highest form of beauty; Love is happiness; Clothing (when it is by YSL) becomes a substitute for both.

The connotative message “the brand is a substitute for love and happiness” is supported by the subsequent context of the metaphorical expression, which combines two deictic markers – personal and spatial: “I am there.” The personal deixis “I” metonymically refers to the YSL brand as an empathetic participant in a woman’s life. The spatial deixis “I am *there*” creates an effect of presence, support, and accessibility – the brand is always near, always ready to offer happiness through beauty (i.e., beautiful clothing).

This meaning facilitates the completion of the blend and its further elaboration, activating the secondary connotative signified:

If there is no love → YSL clothing can substitute or simulate this state of happiness.

Thus, the YSL brand appears as a figure of the empathetic Other, ready to give (or compensate for) what is missing. Through the aesthetic experience of wearing YSL clothing, the brand metaphorically restores what a woman may lack—love and happiness.

In this way, the connotative message activated by the metaphor contributes to constructing YSL’s identity not merely as a fashion brand, but as a means of attaining emotional intimacy, love, and happiness. Thus, YSL is metonymically positioned as an emotional substitute for love—always present, always ready to give happiness.

Discussion

The analysis of the brand discourse, articulated through metaphorical statements by Yves Saint Laurent himself, demonstrates that the connotative network associated with the brand’s identity and its underlying mythology encompasses the values of happiness, freedom, confidence, self-realization, love, individuality, as well as conceptual oppositions such as complexity in simplicity and strength in femininity. These connotative meanings are dynamic elements, activated and elaborated through creative metaphorical blends at the stages of Composition, Completion, and Elaboration. Each metaphor contributes to the semiotic and emotional architecture of the brand by establishing symbolic links between the product and the consumer’s inner world—their desires, aspirations, and self-perception.

The metaphors examined in this study implicitly construct a conditional-causal relationship: engaging with the YSL brand—through wearing its clothing and identifying with its aesthetic—leads to the satisfaction of motivational needs such as the longing for love, uniqueness, empowerment, and emotional well-being. In this sense, the brand becomes a catalyst of identity

transformation. To wear YSL is not only to look different but to be different—to embody a version of the self that is more confident, free, more fully realized.

Thus, the metaphors serve as discursive instruments through which the brand's identity is not only articulated but projected onto the consumer, who is invited to merge with its symbolic values, underpinned by metaphorical connotations. The act of choosing YSL becomes an act of self-identification and self-affirmation: If I choose YSL, then I am refined, empowered, desirable, free. In this process, the brand identity and consumer identity become mutually reinforcing. By portraying the brand as a substitute for love, a passport to happiness, or a work of minimalist beauty, the metaphors position YSL as more than a fashion label—it is constructed as an aesthetic and emotional identity framework, offering symbolic belonging and self-expression.

In sum, the connotative meanings generated by the metaphors of Yves Saint Laurent's founder do not merely describe the brand—they construct its identity as a site of personal transformation. Simultaneously, they invite the consumer to partake in this identity, enabling a form of identity co-construction in which the brand and its audience are symbolically and emotionally intertwined.

Conclusion

This study has examined the role of creative metaphors formulated by Yves Saint Laurent in the construction of YSL's brand identity, applying the tools of Conceptual Integration Theory to reveal the cognitive and connotative mechanisms behind metaphor-driven meaning-making. The analysis has shown that metaphor is a core semiotic strategy through which the brand encodes values, evokes emotions, and communicates its distinct identity.

By blending conceptual domains such as clothing and art, clothing and love, fashion and happiness, or dress and identity, the metaphors construct emergent meanings that contribute to connotations that embody the values of the brand that shapes its identity. The metaphor "The woman in a black dress is a pencil stroke" merges elegance with minimalism, highlighting the aesthetic precision and expressive power of simplicity—a key component of the YSL identity. The metaphor "A good clothing is a passport for happiness" creates a connotative message of emotional access and transformation, implying that YSL is a means of crossing into a state of happiness, freedom, and self-confidence. The metaphor in the statement "The most beautiful clothes are the arms of the man she loves. But for those who have not found this happiness, I am there" positions the brand metonymically as a substitute for love and emotional closeness.

These metaphorical constructions imply a conditional-causal relationship between association with the brand and the satisfaction of motivational needs—love, recognition, self-expression, empowerment, and emotional well-being. In this way, the YSL brand is metaphorically positioned as a transformative force, capable of reshaping not only a woman's outward appearance but also her inner state. This reinforces the brand's mythical function, as it becomes a mediator between desire and fulfillment.

Importantly, these metaphorical blends also play a crucial role in shaping the identity of the consumer. They project the brand's values—individuality, confidence, emotional depth, aesthetic sophistication—onto the target audience, inviting consumers to see themselves reflected in the brand's symbolic framework. The metaphors not only describe what the brand

is, but also who the consumer becomes through engagement with it. Thus, metaphors serve as discursive tools of identity construction, both for the brand and its audience. Through these metaphorical structures, YSL is not only a producer of clothing but also a producer of identity and emotional experience.

The findings of this study contribute to a broader understanding of how metaphor operates in branding discourse—not merely as a rhetorical figure, but as a cognitive and cultural mechanism that shapes brand mythology and identity. They highlight the need to explore further the intersections between metaphor, culture, and consumer psychology, particularly in the domain of high-end branding, where identity formation is a key marketing strategy.

In sum, the metaphors coined by Yves Saint Laurent form a coherent system of connotative messages that establish YSL's brand identity, embodying the emotional, aesthetic, and existential values associated with the motivational needs of the brand's target customer. The brand is constructed not just through its products, but through the metaphors “it lives by”, and the identity it offers to those who choose to wear it.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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