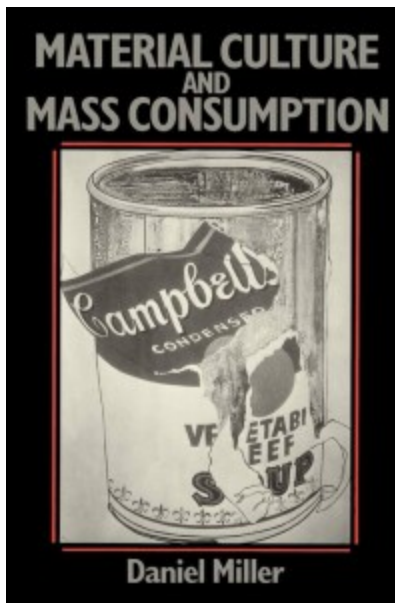


Metaphors in narratives on the ethical certification of diamonds and gold: Anthropological perspectives on effects on consumption

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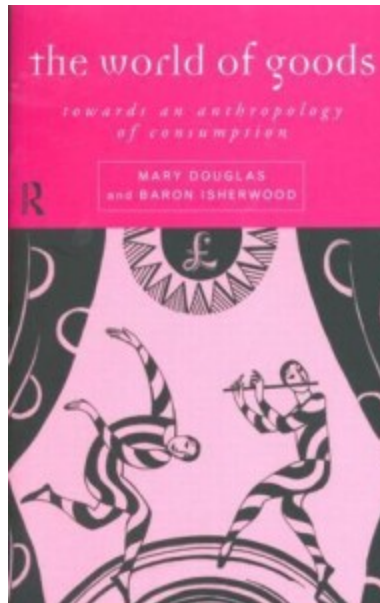
di *Linda Armano* [*]

Introduction

From the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, anthropology became increasingly interested in the study of consumption, and a growing number of scholars analysed its cultural dimensions. Goods and services were no longer understood solely in material or economic terms, but also as carriers of symbolic meanings and expressions of identity. Scholars such as Arjun Appadurai (1986) in *The Social Life of Things*, Jonathan Friedman (1994) in *Consumption and Identity*, and especially Daniel Miller have theorised extensively about the meaning of consumption in a series of books beginning with *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (1987). Miller in particular has laid the foundation for an anthropological interpretation of consumption that goes beyond viewing the consumer as a rational subject, instead emphasising the moral, affective, and relational systems that shape consumption habits and decisions (Moraes et al. 2017). However, David Graeber (2011) has highlighted that although each of these authors has developed their own theoretical framework on consumption habits, the more important problem is that they have helped to produce a standard narrative that has begun to shape classes, seminars and informal conversations between professors and students.

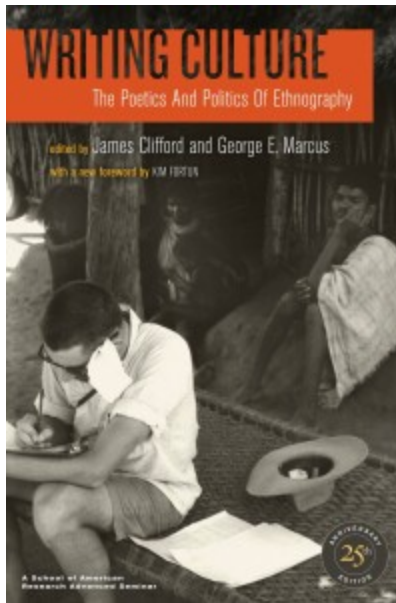
Based on the Marxist view of political economy, which sees production as the most important force in history, consumer demand has largely been analysed as the result of advertising and marketing manipulation. However, this perspective is limiting as it does not capture the cultural complexity of consumer habits and motives. Although the first and foremost interest in linking anthropology and economics was the work *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption* by Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood (1979), the anthropological community has generally refused to heed the call of economics. On the other hand, their work analysing consumption has attracted more attention from marketers, which has led to anthropologists working in departments of management or several business schools (i.e. University of Pennsylvania, North-western University, University of Nebraska, University of Utah, University of British Columbia) (Baba 2006). This framework creates a situation in which anthropologists working on consumption rarely have a true disciplinary community with which to collaborate, despite the importance of developing interdisciplinary perspectives. This isolation often forces them to justify, especially to scholars from other disciplines, why anthropological analysis plays a crucial role in the field. However, these constant efforts to justify themselves sometimes rob them of the time and intellectual resources for in-depth analyses and the development of innovative theoretical approaches.

Nevertheless, anthropology contributes significantly to understanding consumption not only as economic behaviour, but as a social and cultural practise that can generate meaning and belonging. In the applied field, so-called economic anthropology uses anthropological approaches to help companies and institutions align their branding, marketing and innovation strategies with the cultural practises of their recipients. This builds a bridge between theory and practise, with the anthropologist becoming a mediator between local contexts and commercial intentions (Jordan 2010). Furthermore, Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) perspectives link to the contemporary anthropological debate on consumption as they understand the practises of buying and using goods as culturally situated and symbolically charged acts. Although primarily developed in the fields of marketing and cultural studies, CCT draws on theoretical and methodological approaches from anthropology based on ethnography research, to examine the symbolic construction of commodities and focus on the relationships between objects, identities and social structures.

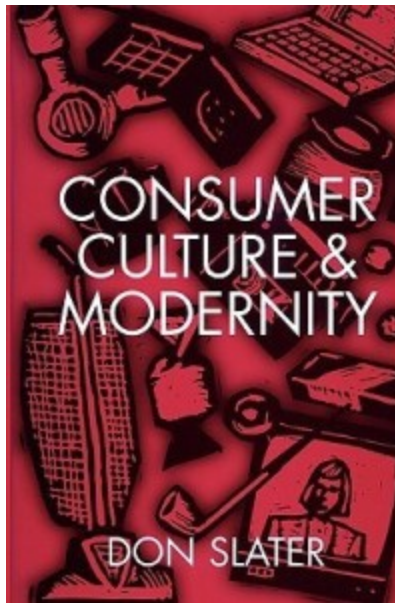


The study of metaphors between anthropology and consumption

Despite the increasing attention that anthropological research is devoting to consumption, analysis in this area tends to favour certain topics, such as the study of the motivations that guide the choice of products over others in different cultural contexts, while neglecting others. Among these topics, the use of metaphors in relation to consumption occupies a marginal position. Studies in this area remain fragmented and struggle to find a place in the broader research debates. In cultural anthropology, metaphor cannot be reduced to a figure of speech, but must be understood as a primary form of symbolic thought through which cultures organise reality. Metaphor thus plays a fundamental role in the construction of experience, in mediating between different conceptual domains and in cultural processes of meaning (Fernandez 1991; Lakoff and Johnson 1980). The anthropological study of metaphors lies at the intersection of language, thought and practise and is based on the idea that they are important in the construction of meaning in specific cultural contexts. Metaphors function as shared cultural models (Holland and Quinn 1987), i.e. as collective cognitive structures that shape experience and guide interpretation of the world. By transferring from a source domain (often concrete and material) to a target domain (more abstract), they make complex or ambiguous concepts understandable.



Numerous anthropological studies have emphasised that rituals are privileged spaces for the activation of cultural metaphors that mediate social and cosmological transitions. Victor Turner (1967, 1969), for example, has emphasised the role of metaphor in rites of passage, where concepts such as “death”, “rebirth” or “journey” convey profound changes in status, identity and belonging. In this sense, metaphor is not just language, but a performative act capable of having real effects on the experiences of social actors. Metaphors also contribute to the construction of ideologies and worldviews by often representing power relations or social and economic hierarchies as legitimate. Scholars such as Michael Herzfeld (2001) and Pierre Bourdieu (1990) have shown how certain metaphors, such as those relating to purity (Douglass 1966) or connection to the land, are used to legitimise collective identities, exclusionary practises or nationalist discourses. A prime example of this are the metaphors of development and progress (Escobar 1995), which portray modernisation as a linear and inevitable process, often described through images of natural growth that obscure the asymmetries of the global system. Since the 1980s, the so-called “reflexive turn” (Clifford & Marcus 1986) has opened up a new critical perspective on the role of metaphors in anthropological literature as well. Terms such as “field”, “immersion” or “participant observation” were examined as epistemological metaphors, revealing the theoretical and political assumptions that structure the production of ethnographic knowledge. Finally, other research in the fields of medical anthropology and the anthropology of the body (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987; Csordas 1990) has shown that metaphors are not only cognitive devices but also embodied forms of knowledge. In contexts of suffering, pain or illness, metaphors enable us to name and give form to the unspeakable by translating subjective experiences into a socially shared language (Good 1994; Das 1997).



Quite the opposite, the theoretical literature on the anthropology of consumption has traditionally focused on analysing the material practises, forms of value, and social and cultural dynamics that structure the symbolic economies of goods (Appadurai 1986; Miller 1995). More recent research continues to favour the phenomenological and performative approach, analysing the ways in which consumption constructs and negotiates identities, belonging and social status (Miller, Jackson, et al. 2015; De la Fuente 2014). While metaphors are recognised as relevant in revealing deep cognitive and cultural dimensions, they are often examined within interdisciplinary studies that integrate cognitive linguistics and semiotics, rather than as a central theme of consumer anthropology (Musolff 2016). Therefore, although metaphors recur in discourses and narratives about consumption, their analysis represents a secondary dimension compared to attention to the social and material dominions in which consumption takes shape. While recent research has increased the number of empirical studies on the use of metaphors in advertising discourse, there is little research on the relationship between metaphors and more segmented economic sectors, such as those related to luxury (Chen et al. 2024).

To partially fill this gap, this study aims to analyse the use of metaphors in the context of certified products. These metaphors are not only used as rhetorical tools, but assume a performative function in the construction of symbolic images of contexts characterised by respect for the environment and vulnerable communities. The article focuses on examining the development of certification in the luxury sector from an anthropological perspective, with a particular focus on the jewellery industry. In this context, this paper aims to analyse some recurring metaphors within the discourse that has developed around the extraction and marketing of gemstones and metals in recent decades. These metaphors have helped to legitimise strategies aimed at developing certification schemes to serve as devices to promote corporate social responsibility (CSR). These instruments include the so-called ethical certifications that qualify gemstones and metals in the jewellery sector that are mined in specific national contexts and subsequently placed on the international market.

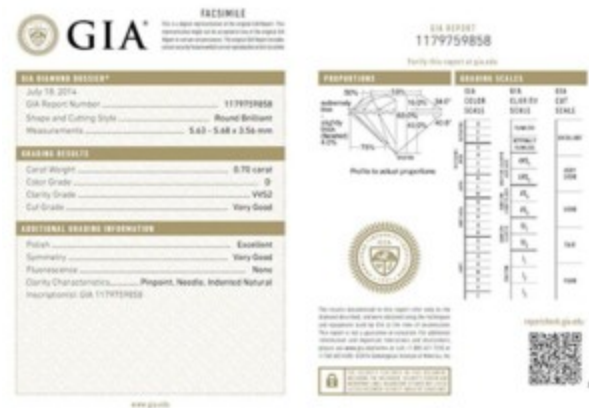
Metaphors in the narrative of luxury certification schemes: The case of jewellery certifications

The term luxury comes from the Latin word “luxuria”, which literally means extravagance or excess (Henninger and Athwal 2022). Claudia Henninger and Navdeep K. Athwal (2022) state that:

«Luxury items are commonly those that are ‘additional’ and thus may no longer fulfil a need but rather a want (...). Yet, herein lies the challenge. Our society has changed dramatically over the centuries and what was previously seen as luxury may no longer be the same today. Is luxury something that is unique and imported from different cultures, or it is an item that comes with a high price tag and (ideally) high quality, is it an experience? (...) The fact is that luxury can be anything depending on the individual and their interpretation, which makes it an exciting topic to investigate and their interpretation, which makes it an exciting topic to investigate» (Henninger and Athwal 2022: 2).

The concept of luxury has undergone a profound metamorphosis over time, both at the macro-economic level through its increasing exposure to the logic of a competitive global market and the resulting construction of heterogeneous and engaged consumer communities, and in its more internal semantic and symbolic structures, including storytelling and the use of metaphors in advertising narratives (Sergio, 2019). The centrality of storytelling in brand strategies has its roots in a long aesthetic and rhetorical tradition. Already in Aristotle’s “Poetics”, the “appropriate pleasure” that the protagonist feels when recalling the events and results of his journey is described as an essential element of the narrative experience (Hiltunen, 2002). Applied to the field of marketing, this mechanism enables the consumer to simultaneously assume the role of spectator and protagonist and to reactivate the meaning of the consumer experience through identification and symbolic repetition.

Despite the seemingly classical nature of the idea of telling a story, the last fifty years have marked a period of intense experimentation in which luxury brands have actively engaged with the world of media, entertainment, art and the press. This dialogue has generated a form of cultural reactivity that allows consumers to experience luxury not only as access to exclusive goods, but as immersion in an aesthetic-narrative dimension capable of constantly renewing itself and generating meaning (Sergio, 2019). From this perspective, the narratives woven by luxury brands appear as aesthetic and cultural devices capable of conveying profound values and enduring aspirations, often drawing on a multi-layered symbolic and cultural repertoire. It is no coincidence that many of the best-known luxury brands have their origins in European contexts characterised by historical events and far-reaching cultural movements. The Eighteenth-century paintings that evoke the splendour of the papal court in



Ethical certification of diamonds

Avignon or the scenographic opulence of Marie Antoinette's residences at Versailles continue to provide fertile aesthetic imagery for constructing the contemporary meaning of luxury. In this sense, luxury is deeply linked to forms of symbolic power and embodies archaic and collective desires for distinction, recognition and permanence.

In recent decades, the growing interest in branding in the luxury sector has spawned a plethora of academic work exploring the semiotic and communicative strategies that companies employ to strengthen the resonance of their brands (Keller, 2009). Metaphors in particular are a central tool in these advertising narratives and act as cultural mediators between the product and the consumer's experience. They serve persuasive and identity-building purposes and vary depending on the context of use and text function, but most importantly reflect broader socio-cultural dynamics (Semino et al., 2016). In the symbolic space of luxury, the use of metaphors in the context of narratives therefore has a privileged experiential value, precisely because they are able to mobilise shared cultural images and embed the act of consumption in a narrative and, above all, representative action that strengthens the emotional and value-oriented commitment of the audience (Chen et al., 2024). However, this context has not yet been sufficiently explored by anthropological research, let alone the metaphorical narratives that accompany certification systems in the global jewellery market. This market, closely interconnected with the supply chains of precious metals and gemstones, has seen the emergence over the past thirty years of certification systems that use metaphorical means to influence ethical perceptions and consumer purchasing behaviour internationally.



Ethical certifications in the jewellery industry have developed in response to increasing controversy over the environmental and moral impacts of mining precious metals and gemstones, particularly diamonds and gold. Since the 1990s, growing international attention to so-called conflict diamonds has prompted public and private actors and non-governmental organisations to promote certification schemes designed to ensure traceability, transparency and accountability along the entire supply chain (Smillie, 2010; Campbell, 2009). The Kimberley Process (KP), launched in 2003, represents one of the first global attempts to regulate the origin of diamonds in order to prevent the financing of armed conflict and marks a turning point in the establishment of international certification standards (Le Billon, 2008). Alongside KP and in parallel to certifications as tools for corporate social responsibility (Kapstein, 2012), a constellation of certifications has evolved, integrated by public and

private institutions and sectoral initiatives that have progressively broadened the regulatory focus and incorporated issues such as environmental sustainability and ethical practises aimed at ensuring the socio-economic well-being of local communities into the certification discourse. Among the most important certifications developed in recent decades, the so-called ethical certifications have particularly stood out for their dual function: On the one hand, they respond to the growing demand of consumers sensitised to issues of social and environmental responsibility; on the other hand, they serve as legitimation tools for companies seeking to distinguish themselves in an increasingly competitive and regulated market (Joy et al., 2012). In this context, ethical certifications are not only configured as technical and regulatory mechanisms, but also assume the function of symbolic instruments capable of constructing narratives of sustainability and moral value and contributing to the cultural reconfiguration of the very concept of luxury (Armano & Bosco, 2024).

Their development therefore reflects the complex intertwining of economic, political and social forces that redefine extractive practises and consumption patterns from a perspective of global justice and sustainability. In this scenario, metaphors play a crucial role in the construction of the discourses that accompany the certification processes. They contribute to conveying images and meanings that socially legitimise mining practises that are presented as ethical. Particularly in the context of ethical diamond certification, the strategic use of metaphors functions in different discursive registers. For example, the discourse on environmental sustainability mobilises images such as regenerated landscapes and pristine mines (Armano 2023b) and constructs a narrative of low-impact and responsible mining (Armano 2023a). The discourse on social justice and the rights of local communities uses metaphors that valorise care, protection and respect and describe the mine as a common heritage or social ecosystem to be preserved, reinforcing the ethical and community dimension of the mining process. Debates on transparency and traceability also rely on metaphorical images which idealise a clear and responsible supply chain and provide a symbolic contrast to opaque and illegal practices. Finally, the discourse of responsible luxury interweaves metaphors that, for example, combine the exclusivity of diamonds with values of sustainability by presenting the product as a carefully cultivated treasure (Armano 2025) or as a sort of rare fruit of a healthy environment (Armano & Joy 2021), thus helping to redefine the image of luxury from an ethical perspective. Far from being mere rhetorical embellishments, these metaphorical discourses have a performative function, actively contributing to the production of an extractive imagery that legitimises the presence of ethical diamonds and gold in global markets and steers consumption habits.

To provide an empirical example of how the metaphors embedded in gold and diamond certification schemes influence consumer choices, this article focuses on an ethnographic survey conducted in two Italian jewellery shops between 2020 and 2023. These shops stand out in the retail landscape by offering their customers jewellery made of gold and diamonds that are accompanied by ethical certifications.

Ethnographic research and findings

The certified ethical diamonds analysed come from the Ekati and Diavik mines in Canada's Northwest Territories (NWT), where they are mined according to processes that are described as ethical in advertising. These standards go beyond the mere absence of armed conflict, as required by the KP system, but include a comprehensive set of environmental, social and commercial regulations aimed at ensuring sustainability, social justice and transparency throughout the mining supply chain. From an environmental perspective, ethical refers to mining activities that are subject to very strict federal and territorial regulations that require continuous monitoring of local ecosystems, minimisation of impacts on water resources, wildlife and air quality, and a commitment to develop mine rehabilitation and closure plans before mining activities begin. In addition, the direct involvement of Indigenous communities in environmental monitoring through joint bodies such as Ni Hadi Xa helps to integrate scientific and traditional knowledge in land protection, which further strengthens the credibility of the Canadian model (Hall & Pryce 2023). However, the concept of ethics in relation to the certification of Canadian diamonds relates to a social perspective, which is emphasised by the fact that the Ekati and Diavik mines in the NWT are operated on the basis of Impact and Benefit Agreements (IBAs), concluded between multinational mining companies and local indigenous communities, including the Tłı̨ch̓, Dene and Inuit communities (Armano 2023b), which provide for preferential access to employment and vocational training, infrastructure investment and financial compensation. These agreements are considered a central component of the Canadian model of responsible mining. In terms of traceability and transparency, Canadian diamonds are accompanied by certifications such as the CanadaMark™, which guarantees the authenticity and geographical origin of the mined stone. Each diamond is labelled with a unique laser-engraved and registered code. This allows the consumer to verify the origin of the diamond and its journey through the supply chain. All of this helps to build the image of Canadian diamonds as an ethically certified commodity, characterised on the global market not only by the fact that they have no connection to conflict zones, but also by the use of sustainable and participatory mining practises.

Fairmined certification, on the other hand, is one of the most important international standards for gold mined in artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) and aims to ensure socially, environmentally and economically responsible mining practises. Introduced by the Alliance for Responsible Mining (ARM), a non-governmental organisation based in Colombia, the certification aims to improve the living conditions of artisanal miners while



Kimberley process certification scheme

promoting supply chain traceability and environmental sustainability. In particular, Fairmined ensures that gold mining is carried out in compliance with strict criteria, including the prohibition of child and forced labour, respect for human rights, the reduction of the use of toxic substances (such as mercury), the protection of local ecosystems and the introduction of safe working conditions. Certified mining companies receive an additional financial premium for every gramme of gold sold as Fairmined, which can be reinvested in community projects, education, infrastructure or improved production practises. Fairmined-certified gold comes mainly from South American countries, particularly Peru, Bolivia, Colombia and Ecuador, where numerous mining cooperatives have voluntarily joined the programme in order to gain access to international ethical markets. The certification system includes regular audits, documented traceability and labelling that enables consumers and businesses (particularly in the jewellery sector) to identify responsibly sourced gold. Fairmined is part of a wider range of fair and sustainable trade initiatives and complements the principles promoted by the Fairtrade movement, but is differentiated by a specific technical approach focussed exclusively on the mining sector. The certification has helped to redefine the concept of ethics in the gold supply chain, emphasising the role of local communities in the management of resources and offering a concrete alternative to gold sourced from industrial circuits with high social and environmental impacts.

Italian ethical jewellery shops as a context for cultural interpretations of metaphors

This article explores how Italian consumers culturally translate mining metaphors used in international advertising of ethically certified diamonds and gold, in particular those expressed through expressions such as “conflict-free”, “blood diamonds” (<https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/conflict-diamonds/the-truth-about-diamonds/>) or “carefully cultivated treasure” (Parda 2024).

The terms “blood diamonds” and “conflict diamonds” were introduced in the early 2000s by activists from Global Witness, a British non-governmental organisation that played a crucial role in exposing the link between the diamond trade and the financing of civil wars in Africa (particularly in Angola, Sierra Leone, and Liberia). The Global Witness campaign helped to popularise these metaphors, which were then taken up by international media, films and later even advertising campaigns and certification processes such as the KP. The term “carefully cultivated treasure” has recently appeared in advertising, particularly in the context of describing mining practises that comply with safety protocols. This concept has also been extended to synthetic or lab-grown diamonds. The expression combines two semantic contexts: On the one hand, “treasure”, which evokes the traditional notion of wealth and rarity, and on the other, “carefully



Fairmined certification

cultivated”, which introduces a vocabulary typical of agriculture and craftsmanship. The expression “carefully cultivated treasure” therefore represents a shift from the language of activism to the language of marketing (Moraes et al 2017). While terms such as “blood” or “conflict diamonds” evoke violence and exploitation, a reassuring, almost agricultural imagery is proposed here.

By analysing the representations of Italian consumers collected through in-depth interviews, this study explores how these metaphors are locally reinterpreted and re-cultured in relation to consolidated cultural frameworks, such as those of organic food and the Italian agri-food tradition (Armano 2023a). The study aims to show how mining metaphors, although originating from globalised marketing contexts, take on unique and situated meanings when they encounter discursive practises and symbolic categories specific to the Italian context. This analysis was conducted through ethnographic research. The survey was carried out between January 2020 and March 2023 in two jewellery shops in Milan and Bologna, which have introduced ethical diamonds from Canada and ethical gold from Peru and Bolivia to the Italian market. Specifically, the ethnographic research was conducted at Gioielleria Belloni (Belloni jewellery shop) in Milan, a retailer of ethical diamonds and gold since 2005, and Gioielleria Righi (Righi jewellery shop) in Bologna, a retailer and designer of Fairmined certified gold and Canadian diamond jewellery. Data collection was based on 25 semi-structured in-depth interviews lasting between 45 and 110 minutes, conducted both face-to-face and remotely. The interviewees included the two owners of the jewellery shop, Francesco Belloni and Simone Righi, as well as a sample of 23 customers who had purchased jewellery made from certified diamonds and/or ethical gold. The interviews were recorded, fully transcribed and then analysed using a content analysis based on a mixed approach: Inductive in the first phase of data coding and deductive in the subsequent interpretation phase, in dialogue with the existing literature on ethical consumption, certifications and cultural framing (e.g. Moraes et al. 2017; Armano & Joy 2021; Armano 2023a; Parda 2024). During the analysis, it became clear that the consumers interviewed tended to culturally rework the ethical certifications of diamonds and gold by overlapping them with already established symbolic categories, particularly those associated with Italian organic food (Armano 2023b). To represent these conceptual overlaps, a semantic and polysemic approach was adopted, creating concept maps and identifying recurring key concepts. This allowed me to trace the predominant lines of interpretation and implicit metaphorical frameworks used by the interviewees.

Belloni Jewellery, based in the centre of Milan, is an emblematic example of craftsmanship continuity and ethical change in the Italian goldsmith industry. Founded in 1926 by the current owner’s grandfather, initially as a watch repair workshop, the jewellery shop has maintained a strong family identity and a link with the Milanese goldsmith tradition. Since the 2000s, under the management of Francesco Belloni, the business has gradually integrated an ethical and charitable dimension, donating part of the sales proceeds to charity, in particular to cancer research.

A significant turning point occurred in 2003 when the organisation refused a donation to Survival International after learning that it had come from the sale of diamonds. This incident occurred amidst criticism of mining practises in Botswana and prompted Belloni to question the origin of the gemstones. At the organisation's urging, Belloni began searching for alternatives and discovered Canadian diamonds from the Ekati and Diavik mines in the Northwest Territories as an option that aligned with its values of traceability, legality and social responsibility. In 2005, the jewellery shop added officially certified ethical diamonds to its range, becoming one of the first Italian retailers to actively promote ethically certified gemstone products.

Belloni Jewellery's experience is thus a significant example of autonomous ethical change, guided by the jeweller's moral values combined with input from civil society. This has led not only to a new business concept in Italy, but also to a change in customer relations based on transparency, storytelling and social responsibility (Armano & Joy 2021).

Gioielleria Righi was funded by Simone Righi, an independent goldsmith and designer. The jewellery shop has established a distinctive profile on the Italian jewellery scene thanks to its commitment to sustainability and traceability in the production of fine jewellery. In 2010, Simone Righi was the first Italian jeweller to become a direct customer of Francesco Belloni, sourcing certified ethical diamonds from Canada. This business relationship was the beginning of a long-lasting collaboration in which Belloni acts not only as a retailer but also as a direct supplier of ethical stones and metals to other players in the industry. In addition to the use of traceable and certified diamonds, Gioielleria Righi is characterised by the exclusive use of Fairmined certified gold, sourced from artisanal mines in South America. The combination of certified raw materials and artisanal design allows Simone Righi to offer an "ethical" luxury product that fulfils both aesthetic criteria and the principles of social and environmental responsibility. In line with this vision, customers are involved in narrative and value-based processes that strengthen their sense of involvement in conscious consumption (Armano 2023a).



Gioielleria Righi a Bologna

The relationship between Belloni and Righi is therefore not only a commercial collaboration, but also an ethical and cultural axis for the diffusion of a new concept of jewellery in Italy, based on the traceability of materials throughout the supply chain, civic engagement and the ability to create shared meanings around jewellery.

Discussion. The Italian interpretations of metaphors in the advertising of ethical jewellery certification schemes

In an earlier article (Armano 2023a), I showed how Italian consumers, when confronted with new and culturally distant products, tend to activate familiar frames to make the object comprehensible and ascribe meaning to it. The reference to deeply rooted categories, such as food tradition or artisanal quality, acts as a “cognitive bridge” that allows them to transfer familiar values to products that are perceived as innovative or foreign. The analysis has shown that a novelty, that is presented in completely new terms, runs the risk of being perceived as opaque or rejected by consumers. If, on the other hand, the

communication succeeds in translating the novelty into familiar terms, it generates an emotional resonance that promotes the legitimacy of the product. This process has been described as the creation of a hybrid mental space (Cornelissen & Durand 2012), in which consolidated cultural codes are fused with innovative elements to create a shared meaning. The case study has clearly shown how consumers use references to familiar cultural areas such as organic products and traceability in the food sector, to understand the certification logic of completely different commodities such as ethical diamonds. Familiarity with organic products provided an emotional and cognitive framework through which the novelty of ethical jewellery could be assimilated, creating a form of symbolic acculturation of the product.

Along this line of continuity between metaphors, cultural frameworks, and legitimisation processes, the interviews also revealed how some specific linguistic expressions, such as “carefully cultivated treasure”, trigger images and references among consumers that oscillate between familiarity and distrust. A first difference that emerged during the interviews with Italian consumers and jewellers was that, the term “cultivated” in connection with the expression “carefully cultivated treasure” immediately made most of the study participants think of the world of agriculture and craftsmanship. In this sense, the metaphor was culturally reinterpreted as a sign of care and quality. However, in the interviews conducted, some consumers, albeit a minority, expressed concerns: While the term suggests a “clean” and environmentally friendly diamond, it can also come across as a rhetorical device, that is far removed from the technological reality of laboratory production. As for the terms “conflict-free” or “blood diamonds”, many Italian consumers remained stuck in the idea of violence and exploitation, and some even referred to links with military practises:

«The term blood diamonds immediately make me think of images of war. Child soldiers, mines controlled by rebels, people forced to mine under threat. It is a violence that I feel is far away and yet very real. (...) I have seen documentary films in which diamonds were used to buy weapons. For me, blood diamonds



Gioielleri Belloni a Milano

mean exactly that: stones used to finance massacres. When I hear that word, the jewel loses all its beauty» (Paolo, customer of the Gioielleria Belloni in Milano).

The interviews with jewellery customers have shown that, the metaphor of blood diamonds is not perceived neutrally in Italy: Although it is often conveyed in the cinema or in the media, for them it remains a strong symbolic link to violence in real life. For the consumers interviewed, the metaphor of “blood diamonds” evoked not only the blood spilt in armed conflicts, but also a broader horizon of injustice, exploitation, and the loss of human dignity. In many interviews, this symbolism was expressed in a tension between the desire for jewellery as a symbol of beauty and love and the awareness that it can be linked to chains of violence. The comparison between blood diamonds and conflict-free diamonds also reflected a linked narrative of violence and, moral resolution at the same time.

The interviews showed that, the participants often referred directly to the metaphors used in the jewellers’ stories or in the advertising campaigns when explaining their purchasing decisions: The words became vehicles through which they expressed care, attention, social responsibility, and respect for the environment. In this sense, the metaphors were not simple descriptive tools, but active instruments that shaped perceptions, emotions, and behaviour, contributing to the cultural co-construction of the legitimacy of ethical diamonds in the Italian context.

Another element that emerged from the ethnographic research is that metaphors also functioned as a means of social and moral distinction. Indeed, some consumers used expressions such as “conflict-free” or “carefully grown” to position themselves in relation to consumption that was perceived as more responsible and informed. In this sense, metaphors became discursive markers that served to affirm belonging to an “ethical” value horizon, in implicit opposition to consumer practises that were seen as superficial or indifferent to the global consequences of production:

«When I hear the term conflict-free, I think that this piece of jewellery is more than just an object, but a decision. It’s like saying: I buy with awareness, and not like someone who only pays attention to appearances. It is important to me that my purchase reflects a value, and is not just a luxury item» (Maria, customer of Gioielleria Righi in Bologna).

This dynamic shows that the processes of habituation and legitimation were not neutral, but intertwined with forms of cultural differentiation in which consumers redefined their moral identity through the narratives offered by the ethical jewellery market.

The expression “carefully cultivated treasure” has been interpreted as a particularly dense metaphor, capable of encompassing multiple layers of meaning. It is often regarded as synonymous with the care characteristic of artisanal gestures, conceived as a symbolic antithesis to the speed and aggressiveness of industrial extraction processes. The resulting slowness should not be understood merely as material temporality, but as a moral and social value, representing a type of extraction described as sustainable by many interlocutors and drawing a parallel with an almost agricultural act, associated with dedication, transparency, and responsibility towards the community and the environment. As Simone Righi, owner of

Gioielleria Righi, stated: «Cultivating a treasure means not tearing it away, but making it grow over time, like a vineyard or an olive tree. This way, the customer knows they're not just buying a stone, but a story of care». During the interview, Righi emphasised how the metaphor of cultivation evoked an imaginary in which nature is not only a source of resources, but also a space for reciprocity and regeneration. From this perspective, the “carefully cultivated treasure” contrasted with the violence of intensive exploitation that has historically marked the extractive industry. The effect of this narrative was twofold. On the one hand, according to the interlocutors, it legitimised contemporary ethical extraction practices, which appear technologically innovative yet rooted in an ethic of care and slowness. On the other hand, it offered jewellers and consumers a symbolic device to distinguish certified ethical jewellery from non-certified jewellery as an object embodying moral dimensions.

Conclusions

The ethnographic analysis of the interpretations of advertising metaphors related to ethically certified jewellery by the Italian consumers interviewed has shown that the language of marketing never functions neutrally, but is deeply interwoven with the cultural, emotional, and moral repertoire of consumers. Metaphors such as carefully cultivated treasures, conflict-free, and blood diamonds functioned as cognitive and emotional tools, that translated the novelty of Canadian ethical diamonds into familiar terms, allowing participants to negotiate complex ethical and social meanings. It became clear in the interviews that familiarity with deeply rooted cultural practises, such as craftsmanship, slow production, and the quality of Italian organic food, provided a framework through which the innovation and ethics of sustainably mined products could be interpreted, according to the research participants. In particular, the metaphors associated diamond mining with an image of slow, careful, and respectful labour, contrasting it with the violent mining practises associated with blood diamonds. In the case of Fairmined gold, the metaphors emerging from advertising narratives and consumer interpretations played a role similar to that observed for diamonds. Certified gold was often associated with the idea of a “pure” metal, not only physically but, above all, ethically, free from the shadow of violence, child labour, and informal economies that characterise much of traditional gold mining. These associations helped to build a form of symbolic acculturation of the product, where mining practises are reinterpreted through familiar cultural codes, creating legitimacy and emotional resonance. Finally, the study has shown that metaphors not only facilitate the understanding of novelty, but also fulfil a social and moral function.



Idealisation of pristine mines

Consumers use these linguistic devices to position themselves ethically, symbolically differentiate themselves, and reaffirm their sense of responsibility towards sustainable extraction practises.

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[*] Abstract

Questo studio, basato su una ricerca etnografica e su approcci teorici dell'antropologia economica, si propone di analizzare l'uso delle metafore nel contesto dei prodotti certificati. La ricerca, che si focalizza nel settore della gioielleria, mette in luce come l'uso di metafore nella comunicazione pubblicitaria costituisca un dispositivo complesso di mediazione culturale, emotiva e morale, capace di produrre significati condivisi e di promuovere nuove forme di consumo. In questo contesto, il presente articolo esamina alcune metafore ricorrenti nel discorso che si è sviluppato attorno all'estrazione e alla commercializzazione di pietre e metalli preziosi negli ultimi decenni. Queste metafore hanno contribuito a legittimare strategie volte a sviluppare schemi di certificazione che fungessero da strumenti per promuovere la responsabilità sociale d'impresa. Tra questi strumenti rientrano le cosiddette 'certificazioni etiche' che qualificano pietre preziose e metalli estratti in specifici contesti nazionali e successivamente immessi sul mercato internazionale. La ricerca si è svolta in due gioiellerie italiane, dove sono stati intervistati consumatori e gioiellieri, con l'obiettivo di approfondire come le metafore impiegate nelle

narrazioni pubblicitarie che accompagnano le certificazioni etiche nei mercati globali dei gioielli vengano interpretate in contesto italiano dagli interlocutori coinvolti.

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