

Visual Grammar and Vertical Formats: A Semiotic Analysis of Saturated Colors and Interactive SHEGLAM Packaging on TikTok

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Received: 5 March 2026 | **Accepted:** 17 August 2026 | **Published:** 19 September 2026

Abstract

In a world where vertical screens are everywhere, makeup packaging is not just about holding a product or showcasing it anymore. It has become a symbol that helps meet the needs of how things are displayed on digital platforms. This research examines how SHEGLAM uses TikTok, applying ideas about language from Kress and van Leeuwen. The research shows that bright colors and special effects, like those that change with heat or look different from various angles, are not just for aesthetics. They help tell a story by altering how people perceive items and how the message in the image is understood. The research also finds that adding elements you can touch or interact with to packaging makes it more than just a container. It becomes a part of storytelling. Interactive packaging does more than display the product; it helps create the meaning of the product through movement, touch, and play. In this context, the research examines a kind of realistic feeling in how brands communicate today. Here, the truth of an image is not solely about how close it is to real life, but also about how well it can evoke emotions and allow the viewer to see and experience it in a way that captures their attention.

Keywords: Multimodal semiotics / Visual grammar / Interactive packaging / Vertical formats.

Introduction

The contemporary media ecosystem is marked by the spectacular rise of vertical video formats—TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts—which profoundly reconfigure practices of content production and reception. These platforms, based on a logic of continuous flow and attention capture, require brands to adapt their discursive strategies. The 9:16 format is no longer merely a technical constraint; it becomes a production condition that informs the entire semiotic chain, from product design to editorial staging.¹

In this context, the cosmetics brand SHEGLAM, launched in 2019 by Sylvia Fu under the umbrella of Shein, constitutes a paradigmatic case for studying visual communication strategies in vertical environments. With 9.8 million TikTok followers and net sales reaching \$ 400 million in 2024, SHEGLAM embodies an economic and semiotic model based on visual virality and organic engagement. The brand is distinguished by a product-development approach conceived « *from the very beginning* » to be « *suitable for future TikTok* »

marketing.» This strategy, centered on Generation Z, prioritizes product categories—liquid blush, contouring, highlighter, and hair-care products—designed to be performed in front of the camera and shared in vertical feeds.

The specificity of SHEGLAM packaging is part of this logic of preparation for visual performance. Transparencies, chrome finishes, metallic finishes, material effects, and collaborations with global licenses (Harry Potter, Twilight, and Rick and Morty) contribute to an aesthetic designed to « *stand out in digital environments.*» The brand has thus developed packaging that is not merely a container, but a semiotic device—the packaging becomes an interface between the physical product, the consumer's gesture, and video performance.

SHEGLAM therefore offers a particularly fruitful field for examining transformations in visual grammar in the age of vertical formats. The central question guiding this study is: *how does the visual grammar of SHEGLAM packaging, designed for the vertical format, reconfigure the semiotic status of saturated colors and interactive affordances?*

To address this question, we adopt a multimodal semiotic approach based on the visual grammar of Kress and van Leeuwen. This theoretical framework, derived from Halliday's systemic functional linguistics, posits that images are not mere representations but possess a « grammar » of their own, organized around two metafunctions:

- **Representational metafunction:** construction of represented participants and actions;
- **Interactive metafunction:** the relationship between the image and the viewer (gaze, angle, distance, modality).

The corpus analyzed consists of fifteen (15) TikTok² videos published on SHEGLAM's official account between September 2024 and March 2025/2026, selected according to two criteria: (a) *representativeness of product categories (blush, contouring, highlighter, and event collections)* and (b) *diversity of packaging staging (close-up shots, material effects, and unboxing)*. Still images of the packaging extracted from these videos are subjected to systematic analysis according to the categories of visual grammar (saturation, salience, framing, and composition), as well as associated textual content (captions, hashtags, and comments), analyzed as elements of the multimodal configuration.

This approach makes it possible to articulate the analysis of visual and verbal dimensions, in accordance with the recommendations of social semiotics, which emphasizes that messages involving several semiotic modes cannot be interpreted using linguistic analysis alone. The analysis of relationships between the visual and verbal modes, particularly their articulation in vertical formats, constitutes an original contribution of this study.

1. Analysis of SHEGLAM's semiotic strategies on TikTok

1.1. Representational metafunction: packaging as an actant

1.1.1. The « performed » packaging

Within Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar, the representational metafunction refers to the way images construct participants and actions. Applied to SHEGLAM packaging, this framework reveals a fundamental transformation: the package is no longer a passive container but an actant that prepares the product for its video performance. Kress and van Leeuwen emphasize that visual participants may be people, objects, or geometric forms represented as complete entities. SHEGLAM packaging fits precisely into this category: it is represented as an autonomous entity endowed with a scenic presence.(Boeriis, 2023)

The identified characteristics—transparencies, chrome finishes, and metallic finishes—are not a matter of aesthetic chance. Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) describe the notion of *intensive attribution*, which concerns the visual properties of represented elements, such as size, surface structures, color, and form. The intensive

attributes of SHEGLAM packaging (shine, transparency, metallic reflections) are specifically designed for close-up capture. As a recent study of affordable brands points out, SHEGLAM is distinguished by « vibrant colors and dynamic layouts » that generate a sense of accessibility and visual relevance.³ These compositional choices contrast with the strategies of luxury brands (Dior, Chanel), which instead favor « *minimal design, aesthetic distance.* » (Khansa Maqsood, 2026).

The visual performance of SHEGLAM packaging forms part of a broader logic that Kress and van Leeuwen describe as a « *grammar of color* »: they argue that color is a semiotic mode, whose parameters- hue, value, chroma, and transparency- constitute the features of specific grammar. (Yu, 2023) The metallic finishes and transparencies of SHEGLAM packaging thus function as grammatical choices that signal membership in the digital universe while meeting the requirement for salience within a visually saturated flow.(Yu, 2023)

1.1.2.« Surprise » packaging and its narrative dimension

The narrative dimension of SHEGLAM packaging can be illuminated by the notion of the existential process that Kress and van Leeuwen borrow from Halliday. This type of process describes the « *meaning potential of the choice of what is represented and what is omitted.*» (Khansa Maqsood, 2026). SHEGLAM packaging, particularly that resulting from collaborations with global licenses (Rick and Morty, Harry Potter, Twilight), stages an aesthetics of revelation that transforms the act of opening into a micro-narrative.(Khansa Maqsood, 2026)

Research on affordable brands in the Pakistani context emphasizes that SHEGLAM, alongside Maybelline, NYX, and e.l.f., uses « *dynamic layouts* » and integrates « *its own products alongside everyday objects or in situations of use* » to create relevance to consumers' everyday experiences. This narrative strategy transforms packaging into an actant that tells a story even before the product is used. Kress and van Leeuwen stress that visual grammar is not universal but depends on cultural and situational contexts. (Yu, 2023) In the case of SHEGLAM, the TikTok context imposes a visual narrative in which packaging becomes the first chapter of a story intended to be shared.⁴ (Yu, 2023)

1.2. Interactive metafunction: saturating to engage

1.2.1.Chromatic saturation as a modality operator

The notion of modality is central to Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar. It refers to the « degree of reality » attributed to visual representation and is based on criteria such as color saturation, light, detail, and depth. (Gunther Kress, 2020) The third edition of *Reading Images* (2020) offers a renewed approach to the theory of modality, recognizing that the uses of images have changed considerably with the rise of digital media. SHEGLAM embodies this evolution: the saturated colors and gloss it employs do not aim at naturalistic realism but at an « *emotional realism* », in which visual and sensory credibility takes precedence over referential truth.(Gunther Kress, 2020)

This hypothesis is supported by a recent study of saturated colors as semiotic resources: Kress and van Leeuwen argue that color is not a fixed sign but a resource whose meaning potential becomes more precise in specific cultural and situational contexts. SHEGLAM's vibrant colors, combined with natural and warm lighting, create a « *welcoming atmosphere* » that suggests integration of the product into existing routines rather than an exceptional status.

From this perspective, chromatic saturation acts as a modal operator: it reduces naturalistic modality (fidelity to physical reality) while increasing sensory modality (the capacity to produce an emotional experience). Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) describe the grammatical system of *validity*, which « *determines how individual photographs should be perceived in relation to a given cultural and situational context* » (Boeriis, 2023). Manipulations of saturation and contrast that make skin brighter or colors more vivid are

retouching techniques that alter the intensive attributes of represented elements. In the case of SHEGLAM, this alteration is not deception but an intentional grammatical choice that constructs a truth regime specific to social media.

1.2.2. Interactivity as a relationship with the viewer

According to Kress and van Leeuwen, the interactive metafunction governs the relationship between the image and the viewer through parameters such as contact (gaze), social distance, and angle (Sarah, 2021). Analysis of SHEGLAM content reveals a particularly sophisticated interactive strategy that mobilizes both tactile affordances in packaging (thermochromic effects, material effects) and complementary linguistic strategies.

Research on affordable brands shows that SHEGLAM uses a « *conversational language incorporating direct questions, exclamations, and second-person address.* » (Khansa Maqsood, 2026). The phrase « *Light, dark, or a blend of both?* » illustrates this strategy of direct engagement. Calls to engagement (tag someone who...) foster the formation of a community and « *challenge traditional beauty hierarchies.* » The lexical emphasis on accessibility («customizable,» «variety,» «options,» «affordable») foregrounds consumer choice and accessibility, presenting beauty as an accessible form of self-expression regardless of budget or technical expertise.

The gesture of manipulation (swiping, rubbing, opening) thus becomes an enunciation that engages the viewer in a physical relationship with the product. Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) describe visual interactions through the notion of *contact*: an image can be a demand if the subject looks at the viewer, or an offer if it does not. In the case of SHEGLAM, tactile interactivity transforms the viewer into an active participant in an exchange in which the packaging responds to the gesture through a visual transformation. This interaction is not merely functional, it is semiotic, because it constructs a relationship of familiarity and complicity between the brand and its audience.

2. Methodology and corpus

2.1. Methodological framework

This study adopts a multimodal semiotic approach based on the visual grammar developed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, 2020). This theoretical framework, inherited from Halliday's systemic functional linguistics, posits that images are not pure passive representations but possess a grammar of their own, organized around two metafunctions:

- **Representational metafunction (ideational/representational meaning):** construction of represented participants and actions, corresponding to the representation of the experiential world through visual processes;
- **Interactive metafunction (interactive meaning):** the relationship between the image and the viewer, governed by parameters such as contact (gaze), social distance, and power relations.

This framework enables a systematic analysis of the visual choices made by SHEGLAM in its TikTok content, articulating the study of visual and verbal dimensions in accordance with the principles of social semiotics, which emphasize that messages mobilizing multiple semiotic modes cannot be analyzed through linguistic tools alone.

2.2. Selection of the SHEGLAM case

SHEGLAM constitutes a paradigmatic case for studying visual communication strategies in vertical environments. Launched in 2019 by Sylvia Fu⁵ under the umbrella of Shein, the brand has established itself as one of the most dynamic actors in the cosmetics sector on TikTok. Several characteristics justify this choice:

- **A massive presence on the platform:** the official @sheglam account has over 9.8 million followers and has racked up 10 billion views, making the brand the second-largest makeup account on TikTok.
- **A strategy tailored to the vertical format:** the product development process is designed « *from the very beginning* » to maximize organic engagement on TikTok. The brand prioritizes product categories-liquid blush, contouring, and highlighter-designed to perform well on camera.
- **Packaging specifically tailored to digital environments:** transparent designs, chrome finishes, metallic finishes, and collaborations with global franchises (Harry Potter, Twilight, Rick and Morty) all contribute to an aesthetic designed to « *stand out in digital environments.*»

2.3. Corpus Construction

The analysis focuses on a corpus of fifteen (15) TikTok videos, drawn either from SHEGLAM's official account or from content published by female influencers. The selection was made according to three criteria:

- **Representativeness of product categories: the videos cover the brand's main ranges:** Liquid Blush (Color Bloom Liquid Blush, the brand's iconic product), contouring, highlighter, and event collections (collaborations with popular licenses such as Harry Potter and Twilight).
- **Diversity of packaging staging:** the videos present a variety of visual devices—close-up shots of packaging, material effects (transparencies, metallic reflections, holographic effects), unboxing sequences, and usage situations.
- **Performance in terms of views and engagement:** the selected videos have a significant number of views (several million for the highest-performing content) and high engagement (comments, shares), in accordance with the brand's strategy of capitalizing on organic virality.

2.4. Analysis procedure

The analysis is structured around three complementary stages:

- a. **Analysis of still images.** For each video, two to three still images of the packaging are extracted, prioritizing close-up shots highlighting the product and its material characteristics (transparency, shine, light effects). These images are subjected to systematic analysis according to the categories of visual grammar:
 - **Saturation and modality:** assessment of the degree of color saturation, shine, and contrasts as modality operators (degree of "reality" attributed to the representation);
 - **Salience:** identification of prominence factors (size, color, contrast, sharpness, position within the frame);
 - **Framing:** analysis of devices for connecting/separating elements (lines, empty spaces, visual continuities);
 - **Composition:** study of information value (distribution of Given/New, Ideal/Real, Centre/Margin) in the vertical 9:16 format.
- b. **Analysis of associated textual content.** Captions, hashtags, and comments are analyzed as constituent elements of the multimodal configuration. The study draws on the work of Maqsood, Fatima, and Shahawar (2026), who identified specific linguistic strategies in SHEGLAM: « conversational language, direct questions, second-person address, and accessibility lexicon (« customizable, » « affordable ») » that contribute to constructing a relationship of intimacy and accessibility with the audience.
- c. **Multimodal articulation.** In accordance with the principles of social semiotics, the articulation between visual and textual modes is analyzed as a coherent whole. The study examines how the chromatic and compositional choices of images (saturation, salience) resonate with the lexical choices of captions (accessibility, community engagement) to construct a unified brand identity.

3.5. Summary presentation of the fifteen (15) videos

Table 1. List of videos collected on TikTok

No.	Product/Collection	Video Type	Key Features
V1	Color Bloom Liquid Blush – Lilac Dream	Direct application (face-to-camera)	Vertical format, tight shot, visible application gesture, pastel pink saturation.
V2	Color Bloom Liquid Blush – Love Cake	Direct application + comparison	Close-up of complexion, demonstration of coverage, rubbing gesture.
V3	Color Bloom Liquid Blush – Hot Topic	Outdoor application (festival)	Natural light, movement, use in context (festival setting).
V4	Twilight Collection – Eye Shadow Palette	Unboxing + swatches	Static shot of packaging, emphasis on the vampire theme.
V5	Twilight Collection – Lip Tint & Lip Oil	Unboxing + application	Staging of colors inspired by the Twilight universe, glossy texture.
V6	Twilight Collection – Solid Perfume	Unboxing + suggested olfactory test	Compact packaging, gothic aesthetic, unveiling gesture.
V7	Harry Potter Collection – Palette	Unboxing + swatches	Reference to the magical universe, themed packaging, light effects.
V8	Rick and Morty Collection – Holographic Palette	Unboxing + swatches	Holographic lenticular effects, packaging transparency, rotation gesture.
V9	Catwoman Collection – Palette & Lips	Unboxing + full face	Jewelry/accessory-like packaging, metallic finishes, nocturnal staging.
V10	Crimson Butterfly Collection – Palette	Surprise unboxing (gift)	Vibrant aesthetic, surprise package, theatrical opening gesture.
V11	Highlighter – Shimmer	Application + comparison	Light effect, rotation to capture reflections, close-up shot.
V12	Automatic Hair Curler – One Touch Airflow Pro	Technical tutorial	Close-up of the product, gestural demonstration, staging of ease of use.
V13	Automatic Hair Curler	Tutorial (beginners)	Didactic shot, step-by-step explanations, emphasis on multiple settings.
V14	Lip Balm – Unboxing + swatch	Texture demonstration	Macro shot of lips, glossy effect, creamy consistency.
V15	Advent Calendar – Sugar Spice	Daily unboxing (short format)	Christmas aesthetic, progressive unboxing, multiple mini products.

3.5.2. Analysis of the videos according to the metafunctions

Analysis 1. Representational metafunction: packaging as an actant

V1. Color Bloom Liquid Blush – Lilac Dream⁶

The video opens with a very close-up shot of the blush tube, highlighting its characteristic sponge applicator. The act of pressing the tube, followed by depositing pigments on the cheek, constructs an existential process in Kress and van Leeuwen's sense: the packaging is presented as an autonomous entity that exists even before the product is applied. The transparency of the tube reveals the lavender-pink shade, thereby creating visual anticipation.

V2. Color Bloom Liquid Blush – Love Cake⁷

This video illustrates the narrative dimension of packaging. The influencer (Rianna Major) applies the blush under the eye to neutralize dark circles, a viral technique that transforms the product into an improvised concealer. The tube is shown from every angle, with its matte and luminous finishes enhanced by lighting effects. The mention of the affordable price (approximately €6 / \$7) reinforces the accessibility value of the packaging, which does not seek to imitate luxury but to assert itself as a popular object.

V3. Color Bloom Liquid Blush – Hot Topic (Outdoor Application in a Festival Context)

Video V3 from the Color Bloom Liquid Blush – Hot Topic collection illustrates how SHEGLAM packaging functions as an actant in the sense of Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar. Filmed outdoors in a festival context, the video stages packaging designed for performance under natural light, with its sponge applicator integrating the act of application into a micro-narrative of performance. The transparency of the bottle and the vibrant saturation of the Hot Topic shade act as intensive attributes that anticipate the product's sensory promise: lightness, pigmentation, and ease of use. The gel-cream formulation, whose packaging reveals the texture through its design choices (soft bottle, foam tip), constructs a realism of immediacy specific to social media. The video thus demonstrates that packaging is not merely a container but a narrative partner whose visual attributes (transparency, ergonomics, integrated applicator) actively participate in constructing the brand narrative, performing the product promise even before application to the skin.

V4–V5–V6. Twilight Collection⁸

The unboxing of products from the Twilight collection stages themed packaging designed to evoke the vampire universe. Dark colors (black, burgundy, deep purple) and metallic finishes create an effect of « modal transfer »: the packaging articulates the product's promise (« a radiant glow like a vampire »). Each gesture—opening the case, taking out the palette, touching the texture—is filmed in close-up, transforming the packaging into an actant that tells the story of the collection even before the makeup is applied.

V7. Harry Potter Collection⁹

Similarly, the Harry Potter collection relies on the intertextuality of packaging. Magical motifs, vibrant colors (red and gold, associated with Gryffindor), and the opening gesture are filmed to maximize the surprise effect. Packaging becomes an object of desire, performing the promise of the license.

V8. Rick and Morty Collection¹⁰

The holographic palette from the Rick and Morty collection illustrates the concept of performative packaging. The lenticular effect (the image changes according to the viewing angle) is filmed in motion, with the wrist-rotation gesture becoming a micro-narrative that gradually reveals the characters. This semiotic choice transforms the viewer into an actant: it is the user's gesture that produces the image.

V9. Catwoman Collection: jewelry packaging¹¹

The Catwoman collection video illustrates the transformation of packaging into a fashion accessory. Metallic finishes and the nocturnal aesthetic « *dim lighting, silver reflections, deep black* » give the packaging an ornamental function that goes beyond its simple utility as a container. Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) describe this phenomenon as intensive attribution: the visual properties of the surface (shine, metallic texture) become signs that express the value of the product. The palette and lip products are filmed like jewelry placed in a jewel case, with the opening gesture resembling the unveiling of a precious gem.

This staging follows the logic of « trophy » packaging identified by Maqsood, Fatima, and Shahawar (2026): affordable brands such as SHEGLAM use premium finishes to create a sense of value and accessibility. Jewelry-like packaging does not seek to imitate luxury but to offer an experience of desirability at an accessible price, in line with Generation Z expectations.

V10. Crimson Butterfly Collection: surprise packaging¹²

The Crimson Butterfly collection video exemplifies the narrative dimension of packaging, which Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) describe as an existential process. The vibrant aesthetic « *warm colors (red, black, white), butterfly motifs* » constructs a strong visual identity that precedes and announces the product. The opening gesture becomes a micro-narrative: each layer revealed presents a new surprise (the integrated mirror, the brush, the palette shades). This unboxing narrative functions as an initiation story in which the viewer is invited to share the emotion of discovery.

V11. Shimmer Highlighter: packaging as an instrument of light¹³

The video devoted to the Shimmer Highlighter stages the packaging as an optical instrument. Close-up shots capture the reflections of the powder and the shine of the packaging, while hand-rotation movements « *to catch the light from different angles* » transform the product into a luminous device. Kress and van Leeuwen (2002) emphasize that light and shine are intensive attributes that modulate visual modality: they increase salience and produce an effect of sensory realism.

The highlighter is not simply shown it is performed. The video emphasizes the user's gesture (turning the product, bringing it toward the light, applying it to the skin) and the resulting effect (skin that shines, radiance that reflects). This staging transforms the packaging into an actant that collaborates with the user to produce the product promise.

V12–V13. Automatic Hair Curler: packaging as a technical tool¹⁴

The videos devoted to the automatic curling iron adopt a didactic approach. The packaging (the storage case) is presented as a technical instrument whose settings must be mastered. Macro shots of the device and step-by-step explanations (temperatures, heating time, direction of rotation) transform the unboxing into a learning process. Packaging thus becomes a mediating actant between technology and the user. The staging emphasizes the modernity of the design: silver-purple colors, smooth finish, streamlined curves. This technophile aesthetic is typical of affordable brands seeking to democratize access to technologies previously reserved for premium brands.

V14. Lip Balm: packaging as a case for texture¹⁵

The Lip Balm video is distinguished by its focus on texture. Macro shots of the lips, the glossy effect, and the creamy consistency are all designed to create an immediate sensory experience. The small transparent jar, with its golden lid, is presented as a case containing a promise of softness. These staging echoes Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020) analyses of possessive attributive processes: the packaging is not shown as a simple receptacle but as the bearer of a quality (shine, smoothness).

V15. Advent Calendar: packaging as a daily narrative¹⁶

The videos of the Sugar Spice and Beauty Box Advent Calendars adopt a sequential narrative structure. Progressive unboxing, day after day or in a single take, constructs a narrative of surprise in which each mini product is a revelation. The Christmas aesthetic « *festive colors, gift motifs, tissue paper* » creates a warm and playful universe that transforms the viewer into a participant. The opening gesture, authentic reaction, and discovery are all moments that engage the viewer emotionally.

Analysis 2. Interactive metafunction: saturating to engage

The interactive metafunction, in Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar, governs the relationship between the image and the viewer through four parameters: contact (demand vs. offer), social distance (close-up vs. long shot), perspective/angle (frontal vs. oblique, high angle vs. represented view), and modality (degree of reality attributed to the representation). Analysis of SHEGLAM videos reveals a coherent interactive strategy based on a threefold logic: direct engagement (contact), proximity (social distance), and emotional saturation (modality).

Contact: the image as demand

Kress and van Leeuwen distinguish images in which the represented participant looks directly at the viewer (demand—a request for engagement) from those in which the participant does not (offer—a simple provision of information). Almost all the SHEGLAM videos analyzed fall into the demand category: the influencers look at the camera, address the viewer, smile, and create a relationship of intimacy.

V1, V2, V3. Color Bloom Liquid Blush (Lilac Dream, Love Cake, Hot Topic)

In these videos, the influencer looks at the camera while applying the blush, creating direct contact with the viewer. The sustained gaze, combined with the smile, constitutes an invitation to interact. Facial expressions—curiosity, surprise, satisfaction—are interactive resources that transform the demonstration into an exchange. As research on interactive relationships in images points out, the smile « *invites the viewer into a relationship of social affinity.* »

V9. Catwoman Collection

The influencer's intense gaze, filmed in a close-up in a nocturnal setting, establishes a relationship of complicity. The absence of a smile, replaced by a mysterious expression, creates a playful distance; the viewer is invited to enter the Catwoman universe without the promise being explicitly formulated. This play on facial expressions illustrates what Kress and van Leeuwen describe as the ability of representations to « *express attitudes* » through demand relations.

V15, V16. Advent Calendar

The influencer's authentic reactions (smiles, satisfaction) to opening the calendar constitute emotional demands. The viewer is invited to share the joy of discovery. The influencer does not merely show the product: she performs the emotion, creating an affective bond that goes beyond simple presentation. This demand strategy is amplified by calls to engagement in captions and comments. Maqsood, Fatima, and Shahawar (2026) show that SHEGLAM systematically uses « *direct questions, exclamations, and second-person address* » to « *challenge traditional beauty hierarchies* » and foster community formation.

Social distance: intimacy through the Close-Up

Social distance, according to Edward T. Hall's proxemic theory as adopted by Kress and van Leeuwen, is determined by shot size: a close-up (head and shoulders) creates a personal distance, while a very close-up shot (face only) creates an intimate distance. SHEGLAM systematically exploits these scales to construct a relationship of proximity with the viewer.

V1, V2, V3. Color Bloom Liquid Blush

The close-up of the influencer's face, combined with the close-up of the blush application area, creates an intimate distance. The viewer sees the product's texture, its interaction with the skin, and the effect of light. This visual proximity, by reducing the distance between the product and the viewer, abolishes mediation: the product is not presented as a distant object but as an everyday companion.

V8. Rick and Morty Collection (Holographic Palette)

The close-up of the holographic palette, the fingers turning it, and the dancing reflections all contribute to creating a tactile distance. The viewer sees the gesture, imagines the touch, and senses the texture. This sensory intimacy is reinforced by the absence of verbal mediation: the product speaks through its effects of light and material.

V14. Lip Balm

The macro shot of the lips constitutes the most extreme example of intimate proximity. The enlarged lips fill almost the entire frame. This hyper-proximity creates an immersive experience: the viewer does not observe the product from the outside but is immersed in its effect, as if applying the balm themselves.

V15. Advent Calendar

The unboxing filmed in close-up, with authentic reactions, creates a ritual proximity. The viewer witnesses the opening as if they were present, sharing the emotion of discovery. This intimacy of the moment transforms viewing into participation. The predominance of close-up shots over wide shots, which create a more impersonal relationship, is not incidental. It reflects a strategy of democratizing beauty: the product is not presented as an inaccessible object (as a wide shot with a distant model might do), but as a familiar, manipulable, accessible object.

3. Discussion and interpretation

3.1. The emergence of « Emotional Realism »

The analysis reveals that SHEGLAM constructs a truth regime in which aesthetic and sensory authenticity supersede referential fidelity. Chromatic saturation and shine, which reduce naturalistic modality, increase sensory modality: the image is considered authentic not because it reproduces the world but because it generates an emotional experience. Packaging tells a story through IP collaborations, interactive effects, and « *dopamine* » aesthetics and constructs a desirable universe.

3.2. Packaging and affordable brand identity

SHEGLAM's semiotic choices (vibrant colors, conversational language, dynamic composition) systematically contrast with those of luxury brands (minimalism, distance, control). This opposition is not aesthetic but ideological: it constructs differentiated social identities. SHEGLAM embodies aesthetics of

participation, in which the consumer is invited to interact; luxury brands embody an aesthetics of exclusivity, in which the consumer is invited to contemplate.

3.3. Toward a semiotics of « Aesthetic Transitivity »

Packaging is no longer a passive support but an actant that links the product, the consumer's gesture, and video performance. The boundary between content and container becomes blurred: the packaging is the narrative. This aesthetic transitivity is embodied in three dimensions: material (packaging signs anticipate the promise), gestural (the act of manipulation produces meaning), and social (the packaging is co-produced by the community).

The study confirms that saturated colors and interactive packaging are semiotic operators that configure the viewer's relationship to the product promise. The vertical format is not an external constraint but an internal production condition of packaging design. The theoretical contributions include the original application of visual grammar to a contemporary object, the introduction of the concept of « *emotional realism* » and the proposal of the notion of « *aesthetic transitivity* ».

Conclusion

At the end of this analysis, it becomes apparent that the saturated colors and interactive packaging deployed by SHEGLAM on TikTok cannot be reduced to simple aesthetic ornaments or secondary decorative choices. Rather, they constitute genuine semiotic operators that configure the viewer's relationship to the product promise. By mobilizing Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar, the study has shown that chromatic saturation functions as a modality operator which, while reducing the naturalistic fidelity of representation, intensifies its sensory and emotional dimension. Indeed, color vibrates less to describe the world than to produce an experience. Similarly, interactive packaging—thermochromic and lenticular effects, innovative applicators—transforms the act of manipulation into a semiotic enunciation in which the object no longer merely contains the product but performs it, narrates it, and stages it. Packaging thus becomes a full-fledged actant, an active participant that co-produces the meaning of the cosmetic promise.

Furthermore, the 9:16 vertical format, far from being an external technical constraint to which the brand must adapt after the fact, imposes itself as an internal production condition of packaging design itself. The format precedes the product: it informs the design of transparencies, metallic finishes, and material effects, just as it determines compositional choices: subject centering, maximum salience, continuous framing, and a vertical reading path synchronized with scrolling. In other words, SHEGLAM packaging is not designed merely to be used, but to be filmed, performed, and shared within a vertical feed saturated with competing images. This early integration of format into the design process is precisely what distinguishes the brand and makes its packaging a total semiotic device in which the materiality of the object, the consumer's gestures, and media performance converge. Thus, the analysis confirms that the visual grammar of vertical formats is not a superficial layer of brand discourse: it is the very site where the product promise is constructed, negotiated, and transmitted.

In sum, this study, centered on the SHEGLAM case, has made it possible to identify a coherent semiotic grammar of vertical packaging and to propose the notions of « *emotional realism* » and « *aesthetic transitivity* ». Rather than closing the analysis, this singular case points toward further developments: a comparative semiotics of vertical formats, contrasting the strategies of affordable brands with those of other actors in the cosmetics ecosystem, would make it possible to assess the scope and variations of this grammar. It is in the gap between a single case and a series of cases that the theoretical validity of the proposed concepts will be tested.

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Notes

¹ The 9:16 format is the format of immediacy and intimacy. It occupies the entire smartphone screen, eliminating peripheral distractions. The editorial staging must capture the user from the very first second (the hook), because the swipe gesture makes rejection instantaneous.

² This number is not arbitrary: it results from a process of theoretical saturation, at the end of which additional videos no longer provided new analytical elements. In accordance with the principles of qualitative research, the sample size is justified by the informational richness of each case rather than by statistical representativeness. Each video, as an exemplary case, provides a semiotic density that allows an in-depth analysis of the three metafunctions of visual grammar. This limited corpus thus permits analytical granularity: shot-by-shot segmentation, chromatic analysis, and gestural study, which a larger corpus would make impossible.

³ SHEGLAM has established itself as a major reference in affordable makeup by relying on a strong visual identity and highly pigmented products. The brand, incubated by the e-commerce giant Shein, has successfully conquered social networks—particularly TikTok—through innovative packaging and highly visual capsule collections.

⁴ In a market such as Pakistan, where consumers seek both financial accessibility and social validation, this visual strategy is particularly effective for several reasons: the power of assimilation, the staging of use (in-context positioning), and dynamic layouts.

⁵ Founded in 2019 by Sylvia Fu (a former assistant to Shein's founder), the brand quickly established itself among Generation Z through a direct-to-consumer sales model and highly competitive prices. It experienced rapid growth by relying heavily on social media, particularly through products that became viral on TikTok (such as its famous liquid blushes) and aggressive influencer strategies.

⁶ <https://www.tiktok.com/@damlasu3650/video/7503677132665539862>

⁷ <https://www.tiktok.com/@beautyxianna/video/7340444841941273898>

⁸ https://www.tiktok.com/@hollyaustin_makeupartist/video/7550014614365277462

⁹ <https://www.tiktok.com/@the.bertilicious/video/7524659458518076680>

¹⁰ https://www.tiktok.com/@sara_bami/video/7648366636503780641

¹¹ https://www.tiktok.com/@maitha_abduljalil/video/7566998738833526024

¹² <https://www.tiktok.com/@imsimplynessa/video/7446547727892122910>

¹³ <https://www.tiktok.com/@sheglam/video/7665634884471508232>

¹⁴ <https://www.tiktok.com/@sirayah6/video/7642280035646180640>

¹⁵ https://www.tiktok.com/@mernayoussef_/video/7607842098875763988

¹⁶ <https://www.tiktok.com/@mimogeorge/video/7564740357213211912>