

The Gemini Era

A semiotic analysis of Google's discursive strategies

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Abstract

The explosion of AI-generated content has led to the emergence of numerous controversies that semiotics, as a discipline with a critical vocation of social phenomena, cannot ignore. In this complex turmoil, corporations like Google are actively shaping users' perception of AI through carefully crafted narratives. Building on previous studies regarding brand discourses and smart objects, this research examines a paradigmatic example: Gemini, Google's latest AI. By using a structuralist methodology in dialogue with cultural branding to analyze the discursive strategies employed by the brand, the contribution aims to understand how and if Google can effectively navigate the anxieties surrounding AI, shedding light onto the delicate relationship between humans and non-humans.

Key Words

GAI; Google; Semiotics; Strategy; Branding

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1. Introduction: AI & Semiotics

From personalized recommendations to generating art works, artificial intelligence (AI) has now penetrated into the social fabric, transforming the ways in which human beings think, behave and produce content at various levels of complexity. By inserting a simple prompt, large-language models (LLMs) are able to process an enormous quantity of data, producing outputs that are increasingly refined and often difficult to distinguish from human-made ones. Despite the widespread academic interest in AI, its precise definition remains a subject of debate. As Floridi (2020) noted, scholars have proposed differentiated socio-technical interpretations, but they all converge on the fundamental concept of *agency*, intended as the “*socio-culturally mediated capacity to act*” (Ahearn 2001: 112). While this contribution won’t delve into the intricate debates regarding the notion of agency, it’s crucial to briefly acknowledge its implications when considering machines that can simulate human behavior while lacking true reasoning or intelligence (Floridi 2023). What is remarkable, beyond their ability to replicate human behavior and cognition, is these systems’ capacity for self-correction through sophisticated machine learning algorithms. This could herald a novel, unprecedented form of agency—a *solving agency*—that doesn’t require any form of intellect (*ibidem*), significantly improving industrial productivity by reducing costs and speeding up production times. It’s clear then how this process can severely impact employability, raising many ethical concerns that extend beyond job displacement. Issues such as bias, copyright infringement, and the spread of misinformation underscore the complex challenges posed by AI, necessitating a *multidisciplinary approach* that could shed light onto the complex scenario we are facing. Semiotics, as a critical discipline focused on understanding social phenomena, can offer unique insights into the complex dynamics of human-AI coexistence, by exploring the *meaning* of these *devices* and how they interact with other actors (humans and non-humans) within specific social and cultural contexts. As a matter of fact, semiotic interest around this topic is quite robust, with numerous publications across various fields, including language studies, image production and creativity (Leone 2023), leading to a convergence of different semiotic perspectives. Of notable interest the recent study on image generation by D’Armenio, Deliège and Dondero (2024), which applies pivotal semiotic notions – namely, that of *enunciation* – to the analysis of generative AI platforms. Furthermore, the *hybrid* nature of these devices has prompted a wide range of theoretical considerations, as exemplified by the contributions of *La società degli ibridi*, edited by Peverini and Pezzini (2023). Among the various topics, the volume engages with Latourian perspectives to provide a nuanced understanding of the challenges presented by increasingly complex technological tools.¹ As a matter of fact, these pervasive *devices* are not simple intermediaries that act through delegation processes: they are true *mediators* able to determine *pragmatic*, *pathemic* and *cognitive* effects on both other objects and subjects (Ven-

¹ The volume offers a broader perspective that extends beyond technological considerations, engaging with Latourian concepts from a semiotic lens to provide a more comprehensive understanding of complex entities like smart glasses (Ventura Bordenca 2021).

tura Bordenca 2021). By causing concrete transformations in human beings, AI revives important reflections on the notion of *anthropomorphism* and its effects in consumer spheres (Peverini 2024). It's evident that the implications of this technology from both theoretical and methodological perspectives are extensive (Boero 2023). Furthermore, AI's diverse scopes and platforms lead to numerous avenues for future research: from design studies to investigations of the semantic ambiguities and much more. To provide a clear focus, it is important to emphasize that this study will not delve into the technical aspects of AI. Instead, it will concentrate on its role as a *market product*. Using a Greimasian methodology (1983), it will explore the underlying valorizations and meanings attributed to AI devices in brand discourses. Drawing upon the work of Floch (1990), Marrone (2007), Volli (2012) and Cosenza (2022), this paper investigates the discursive strategies used to shape perceptions and understanding of AI. However, before delving into this analysis, it is essential to justify the adoption of a branding perspective.

2. Unraveling AI Through Branding

Although this contribution follows the research stream concerned with narratives *about* AI, it offers a novel perspective by examining discourses produced *by* AI, intended as the communications developed by brands involved in distributing and promoting AI products. The shift towards the *AI brand discourses* moves the focus from general narratives about AI to intentional symbolic landscapes created to advertise these products.

This approach is essential for several reasons. First of all, the ongoing transformation process is actively driven by a limited number of corporations – including major BigTech firms – leading to an unprecedented concentration of power. Thanks to AI algorithms, now embedded with search engines, companies heavily influence people's behavior, recommending «trending news, whom to follow, what to read, watch, eat and buy, and how to spend time» (O'Halloran 2023: 92). This leads to a series of ethical concerns, ranging from the impact of biases to personal data breaches, putting these products at the center of numerous controversies. In addition to this, lack of literacy (Bewersdorff et al. 2023) has fueled polarization and the emergence of apocalyptic narratives, often portraying AI as a conscious machine that could outstrip human capabilities by acquiring a self-identity (Matthews & Danesi 2019).

Why should brands be concerned about this phenomenon? Companies' promotional strategies must consider customers' resistances towards innovative technologies in order to ensure sales, as demonstrated by the numerous studies in the fields of consumer behavior and marketing (Chouk & Mani 2018; Querci et al. 2023). From a semiotic perspective, these attempts can be understood as strategic narratives designed to shape the public opinion and facilitate the acceptance of these controversial devices. For years, BigTech companies have been employing *naturalization* strategies to mitigate consumers' resistance and make AI devices appear *familiar* and *unobtrusive* within the environment they inhabit. These strategies often involve presenting AI devices as harmless (and sometimes imperfect) friends, unable to sub-

stitute humans (Eugeni 2019; Peverini 2024), but at the same time useful to save time and effort. It seems evident that brands are trying to position AI as a mere «environment, experiential background» (Parisi 2024: 53) rather than a potentially disruptive force.

Considering previous studies on smart objects (Finocchi, Perri & Peverini 2016) and the services integrated with them (Soro 2023), the following research aims to further explore the naturalization practices employed by brands. To address this objective, an exemplary case was analyzed: the new chatbot *Gemini* produced by Google. The choice of Gemini is by no means accidental, as belonging to a complex, broad and enduring brand discourse that has led Google to obtain the status of an “iconic brand”. This means that it has been capable of intercepting *cultural tensions* and providing symbolic solutions to its customers throughout the years (Holt 2004). These are, according to the *cultural branding model (ibidem)*, contradictions between the collective values and aspirations of a society and the socioeconomic realities that often hinder their achievement. Iconic brands, as Peverini points out, are not just simply popular: they are socially relevant symbols representing «values perceived as essential to a community whose aspirations they intercept and orient, prefiguring lifestyles, to the point of earning trust, respect» (Peverini 2023: 12).

In views of these considerations, the following study employs a methodological approach that integrates the Greimasian narrative semiotics and some key elements of Holt’s model (2004). Framing the anxieties that pervade a certain product category serves, in fact, to enrich the analysis of *semio-narrative* structures, which is essential for recognizing the *valorization* processes and *enunciative strategies* deployed by brands.

The contribution thus follows a dual trajectory: investigate Gemini’s consistency with respect to the founding brand value system, but also analyze its effectiveness in terms of valorization logics and *naturalization* attempts, keeping in mind the *cultural tensions* concerning AI. By employing a *structuralist* methodology in dialogue with the cultural branding model, I’ve collected a corpus of Gemini’s promotional materials with the aim of reconstructing its diachronical evolution. Subsequently, an analysis of the communications’ structure was conducted to identify the underlying meanings and narrative roles. In short: how does Google position itself considering the challenges of the contemporary communicative context and the controversies surrounding the topic of AI?

3. Google’s Reputation in the AI Era

In the early months of 2024, Google released the beta version of Gemini, the new conversational model able to communicate and generate human-like text in response to a wide range of questions (or at least that’s the definition Gemini provides when asked about its functionalities). The platform’s announcement was accompanied by major advertising efforts comparing the product’s launch to a revolutionary event – an Era – that is supposed to strengthen Google’s mission to make AI «*more accessible for everyone, everywhere in*

the world» (Sundar Pichai, CEO of Google).² Winking at the latest digital pop culture buzz word,³ Google emphasized the sensational nature of this “next generation” model through relentless promotional activities involving several brand owned media, such as social media profiles, blogs, and official pages. In reality, the promotion of Gemini has been facing some critical challenges since its birth. From the allegations of training on user sensitive data, to the scandal concerning the production of racially inaccurate depiction of historical figures,⁴ the company was at the center of several mediatic storms. These were both causing million-dollar losses and fueling customers’ fears regarding the usage of generative AI (GAI). It’s interesting to note how Gemini was not Google’s first attempt to enter the GAI market: the brand originally launched its prior version under the name “Bard”, as a way to navigate the waters of AI cautiously. Bard, indeed, came out in its testing phase to the public, an information that the company repeatedly highlighted in different sections of the interface, as well as in the official web site. We will return to this point in the following paragraphs, but it is necessary to keep in mind that rebranding strategies are relevant to semiotic operations for several reasons, starting from the implications regarding the resilience of brand discourses.

Brands are required to continuously renegotiate their identities in order to secure a distinctive positioning within the increasingly crowded market, whilst considering the culture in which they are embedded. A change of pace, as in the case of Bard, follows precise strategic rationales that serve to make the product – at least from a managerial point of view – not only more in line with the symbolic capital guarded by the brand, but also differentiated from the ones already present in the market (Oswald 2012). Competition with ChatGPT could undermine Google’s established leadership in the field of tech innovation, forcing the brand to find a strong differential identity for its GAI. This is accomplished by both expressing its unique functionalities and building narratives that take different paths from those explored by OpenAI. Rebranding strategies, however, do not only depend on competitions’ logics, as they also collide with the receptive activity of consumers on a cognitive, pragmatic and pathemic level. Brands, through the products they offer, serve as powerful drivers for shaping and reshaping both individual and collective identities (Holt 2004; Peverini 2017). Beyond their material functions, they become vehicles for constructing and renegotiating meanings within societies (Floch 1990; Mangano & Marrone 2015). This means that even a minimum change needs to be thoroughly evaluated, as it could generate repercussions on the brand value system’s resilience, confusing consumers who recognize, both denotatively and connotatively, certain distinctive traits.

² <www.blog.google/outreach-initiatives/accessibility/disability-awareness-month-2018/> (online on April 19th, 2024).

³ The word *Era*, defined as an “*outstanding period marked by noticeable achievements*” was crowned as 2023’s Vibe of the Year according to Billboard Magazine <www.billboard.com/music/music-news/era-dictionary-com-word-2023-vibe-of-year-1235561427> (online on December 12th, 2023).

⁴ <www.forbes.com/sites/dereksaul/2024/02/26/googles-gemini-headaches-spur-90-billion-selloff/amp/> (online on February 27th, 2024).

Obviously, these arguments should be viewed in the light of an epochal cultural change that involves AI on the front line. Bard (or rather, Gemini) is not a mere artefact that assists people to do certain tasks: its functionalities resemble, in a somehow sophisticated way, humans' cognitive processes, developing outputs that are often undistinguishable from human ones (Floridi 2023). Their ability to produce verisimilarly human outputs and their capacity for self-correction enabled by machine learning algorithms, urge ontological questions that are shaking governments, organizations and, more generally, the public opinion (Floridi 2023). The criticisms are diverse and layered, ranging from technical-functional problems to social and economic issues (such as job replacement), to the development of real apocalyptic scenarios in which the human is overpowered and dominated by machines. As specified in the previous paragraphs, this new *solving agency* is challenging our established notions of what it means to be human. Using Leone's (2023) metaphor, AI can be compared to a hand that, although separated from its body and leading mind, still continues to write autonomously, referring back to *that* body and *that* mind.

Why should this matter to Google? If we consider only the regulatory side, we completely lose sight of the beating heart of all brands, which is the relationship with their consumers, or rather, «productive fruiters» (Marrone 2007). Today's customers – especially in the current context of extreme digitalization – contribute to the value creation process (Codeluppi 2020) reshaping the meaning of brand discourses. This comes by either producing spontaneous content that serves to increase their success (like UGC⁵) or even sanctioning them through social media interactions with an evident impact on brand reputation (Bianchi & Cosenza 2020).

Conceived as a «meaning effect that emerges from the negotiation between different subjectivities and enunciative instances» (Peverini 2014), reputation is now hanging by a precarious thread, forcing brands to behave like a juggler who must manage not only its image and values on all channels consistently and effectively, but also evaluate consumers' discourses that can decree the success or failure of its strategies. This is even more true if we consider that nowadays consumers are expecting brands to act like moral compasses, promoting ethically fair behavior in line with their value systems (Boero 2022). A striking example of this can be traced back to the reputational crisis of LEGO in 2014, which, as a result of its controversial partnership with one of the most polluting oil companies, suffered from strong social pressures that led the brand to terminate the infamous agreement (Peverini 2016).

When it comes to AI controversies the crisis management becomes even more complicated, as the main issues cannot be solved by a simple brand statement or a change in managerial directions. AI is, in fact, perceived as dangerous by its nature due to the implications it inevitably entails; therefore, mitigation efforts must be sought not only within the pursued policies, but

⁵ According to the Collins Dictionary, “*UGC consists of things such as pictures, videos, text, and audio created by users of social media. UGC is short for ‘user-generated content’*”, <www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/ugc#:~:text=uncountable%20noun,Copyright%20%2%A9%20HarperCollins%20Publishers> (online on June 20th, 2024).

mostly in the employed discursive strategies across media. The proposed stories serve as a symbolic balm that provide a narrative solution to the obstacles perceived by customers. It is no coincidence that several AI brands, such as Amazon with Alexa, are developing narratives in which these intrusive devices are shown as harmless enablers of human practices, often fallible and foolish as a way to express their incapacity of undermining the primacy of human intelligence (Eugeni 2019; Peverini 2024). This strategy of naturalization aimed at reducing anxieties and resistance from the more skeptical consumers will be discussed in the next sections, with a focus on Google's owned media, such as the official website and social media profiles. The key to unlocking this level of analysis lies, however, in understanding Gemini's origins, thus reconstructing its diachronic evolution with the aim of highlighting its placement within the broader brand discourse.

4. The Shakespearean Turn of Bard

According to the Oxford Dictionary, the term "Bard" comes from the Celtic tradition (*bardos*), designating an itinerant poet employed by a patron to compose and sing about the deeds of warriors and heroes.⁶ Over time, the term has been used to refer to the most distinguished poets, including William Shakespeare, and more generally to the oral transmission of cultural heritage. Clearly, the naming choice of Google's top management is by no means accidental, as it contains the elements of an extremely condensed narrative capable of evoking a tradition of professional storytellers. Bards were considered the beholders of a particular collective memory, as individual expressions – or mirror's fragments (Lotman & Uspenskij 1973) – of a larger cultural structure that is constantly being reshuffled and reshaped. Despite the evident differences between medieval bards and Google's digital bard, a thematic overlap emerges concerning the embodied roles. Thanks to its rich database, Google Bard acts as a modern-day storyteller able to "decry" certain information to its 21st-century "masters", who are then responsible for sanctioning its actions, as monarchs used to do with their hired minstrels. The artificial Bard produces content and, for the most part, informs its users, revoking the educational purpose typically associated with medieval bards. By using the elements of narrative grammar, we can assume that this particular informative function is inscribed within the role of *Helpers*, considering knowledge acquisition as the ultimate *Object of desire* of customers.

Picking up on Scolari's research on Google (2008), it would seem that Bard is perfectly aligned with the brand's already established strategy of putting users at the center of the experience. By building narratives in which consumers are helped to easily achieve their goals, the search engine becomes a (perceived) veritable window into the digital world. It is now clear why, in the first promotional video launched by Google in 2023 (Meet Bard),⁷ the AI announces itself as a "creative and helpful collaborator", recalling the smart

⁶ <www.britannica.com/art/bard> (online on August 23rd, 2024).

⁷ <www.youtube.com/watch?v=63NfEkYCLzo> (online on December 29th, 2023).

assistants' actantial role often portrayed in Amazon's commercials (Eugeni 2019). Keeping in mind the due differences in terms of spheres of action and impact on interobjective and intersubjective relations (Landowski & Marrone 2002), the strategies adopted by both brands are comparable on the narrative level, revealing some interesting *isotopies*. Just like Alexa, Bard assists humans in everyday-life tasks, making occasional mistakes (see fig. 1) that are not, however, taken too seriously.

In the "Meet Bard" commercial, Google pursues two strategic directives simultaneously: (1) it emphasizes the potentialities of Bard by staging its practical and playful valorizations through the anaphora "*it can*"; (2) it reveals its limitations and potential failures in terms of output's quality. It is not just a matter of defending the testing version of its AI, but also a way of jokingly highlighting all those inaccuracies that make the machine less "intelligent". This is a very specific *meaning effect* that, through the narrative construct, is intended to reassure the most fearful users who forecast an inevitable substitution by machines.

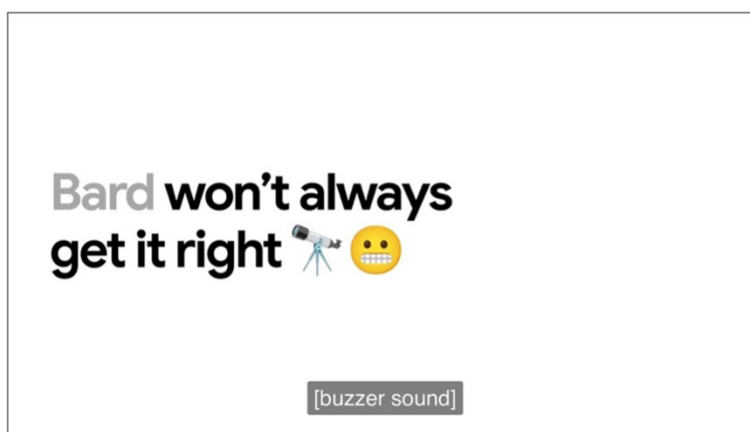


Figure 1. Google, "Meet Bard" commercial on YouTube's official account (2023).

In the subsequent advertisements, we notice Google's effort to show its AI data storage processes, as evidenced by the "How Bard works | Responsible approach to AI",⁸ commercial launched in 2023 on YouTube. Here, the brand explains in detail how the algorithms work through a female voice over, enabling greater understanding by users who are unfamiliar with AI and do not understand its underlying mechanisms. This fosters a *transparency meaning effect* in line with Google's core symbolic values, tied to the concepts of honesty and transparency (Scolari 2008). Furthermore, the short video highlights how there is a constant supervision by brand employees in checking the data fed to the machine. The human hand is conceived as an indispensable resource, responsible for constant review of the outputs, ensuring high user privacy through decoupling processes.

⁸ <www.youtube.com/watch?v=vhbkcEnNXcY> (online on July 13th, 2023).

The willingness to highlight humans' agency ahead of AI related risks is not at all surprising: it is a common trend that all AI brands are riding on and, for reasons including regulatory requirements, are obliged to respect. From CEO statements, to dedicated special sections on pages and even entire advertisements: human control is an imperative constant and a valuable ally in reducing fears. But is it enough? Google's effort indeed exceeds explicit statements alone: the brand has meticulously crafted narratives that depict users seamlessly incorporating Bard into some specific daily activities, resulting in the naturalization of AI-assisted practices. I'm referring to the series of short commercials published from March 2023 to January 2024 on the brand's social media profiles (mostly Instagram and TikTok), until the final release of the Gemini platform. These short 20-second video snippets put the platform's user interface front and center. They showcase its impressive text generation abilities in response to prompts given by humans, who are almost always physically absent, but traceable through the voice over that is paired with each narration. These invisible Subjects ask Bard to perform quite time-consuming and even tedious activities, such as writing formal e-mails, or getting pet care advice for specific breeds (see fig. 2), dialoguing with the machine in a convivial way.

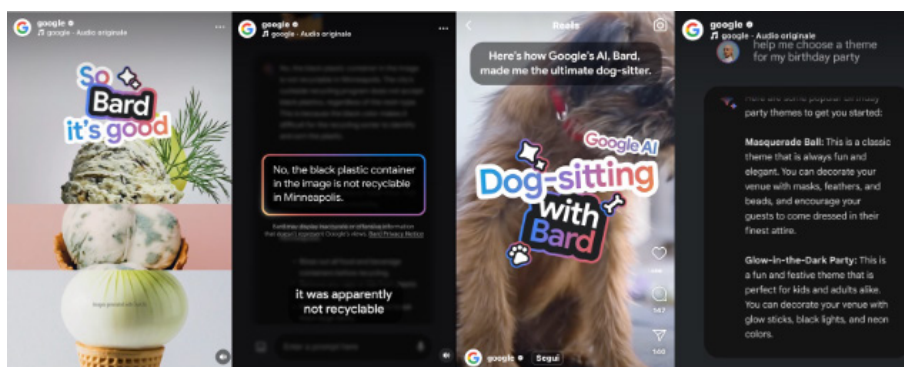


Figure 2. Google's Instagram Reels concerning Bard promotion.

An interesting common trait emerges from the investigated texts: all of the staged *usage situations* refer to rather mundane everyday tasks far removed from the current and trivial use of the GAI platforms. There is no reference to creative text generation that would in any way alter the most affected job categories (like authors and artists) or increase controversy over copyright issues. In other words, Google is drawing upon safe situations that do not damage the product's reception or undermine the moral integrity of the brand in terms of AI associated risks. Among the selected cases, there's even a short commercial demonstrating how the platform can be used for educating on proper waste disposal and promoting environmental protection. Hence, suggesting a possible positive contribution of AI implementation to society.

In addition to this, shifting to a deeper level of analysis, we can detect a recurring peculiarity concerning the thematic roles, which again suggests considerations about the strategic will of the brand. Rather than exalting the role

of the “writer” or the “artist” – mostly distinguished by their pronounced talents – Bard is portrayed as a “cool consultant” who bestows excellent advice in times of need, at the same time substituting humans in the tiring information search phase. Requests of a playful nature are also not lacking, such as the production of improbable and disgusting ice cream flavors in the short video “So Bard it’s good” published in November 2023.⁹ In this narration Bard assumes the role of the court jester, whose sole purpose is to entertain (and be sanctioned by) its master. This is also evidenced by the usage of a playful soundtrack, as well as the sound of applause at the beginning and end of the short video, somewhat echoing a play in which consumers/viewers are entertained by the AI performance.

The staged usage situations might suggest a desire on Google’s part to make its AI appear as a normal and harmless tool in the hands of human beings. Whether it is substituting consumers during the research phase, or carrying out a full-fledged comic performance, it seems that Bard blends into already established (and safe) online practices. Hence, «endowing itself with a familiar identity that contributes to consolidate the device as a common object» (Peverini 2024). We can then say that Google is not just promoting Bard as a mere product, but it’s trying to configure a possible future in which AI coexists harmoniously with humans.

Even though the above analysis might suggest that Bard rebranding was unnecessary given its alignment with the broader brand narrative, a deeper look reveals a more nuanced and intricate situation. The distinct expectations, symbolic value, and performance requirements of Bard, compared to Google Search (the brand’s core business), complicate crisis management and quality assurance. As a matter of fact, the search engine functions as a curated gateway to information. It acts as a filter, directing users with agility to specific pages based on a keyword ranking system that favorites relevance and quality. Google’s strive for quality and democratization structures its most important values and its willingness to be perceived as a consistently honest and truthful source (Scolari 2008). With generative AI, the picture changes, as the complexity behind generating new content often results in glaring errors that violate the truthfulness typically associated with the brand.¹⁰ Since Google is the most authoritative search engine online, it is expected to produce truthful content. Consumers require the brand to tell the truth, showing content that is perfectly aligned with the query, thus the keyword, entered. Bard’s transgressions thus constitute a material breach of the implicit fiduciary pact that has bound the brand to its enunciatees for years. This pact, characterized by a longstanding commitment to quality and efficiency, has fostered a high degree of trust, explaining the major stir following Bard’s errors. The rebranding choice becomes now more understandable, marking Gemini as a new era of promised extraordinary quality and incredible capabilities (to quote the brand).

⁹ <www.instagram.com/reel/Cz9wPOapB5P/?igsh=ZHGwcmJzZHA3M2tm> (online on November 29th, 2023).

¹⁰ <<https://www.cnn.com/2023/02/08/tech/google-ai-bard-demo-error/index.html>> (online on February 9th, 2023).

5. Gemini as the “Superchanger” AI

On January 2024, Google announced on all its channels a new chapter in its race to conquer the AI market, promising a “*superchanger*” model that could overcome all platforms so far developed by the brand. By dismissing Bard and its glaring errors, the brand planned a rebranding operation starting with its naming choice: *Gemini*. Speculations regarding the motivations behind this strategic move are varied. If you ask Gemini, it will come up with a list of explanations that mainly concern the improvement, as well as sophistication, of the product’s functional characteristics. The name Gemini, in fact, would best reflect the “twin”, therefore dual nature of the language model at the core of the AI. In addition to this, it would be more aligned with different *usage situations* envisioned, which are not limited to creative text production (as in the case of Bard). We are witnessing an extension of positioning accompanied by a greater sophistication of Google’s statistical models, which results in the enlargement of practices associated with the software.

Clearly, the possible associations evoked by the name Gemini are not limited to mere functional characteristics, calling into question rather controversial issues such as the coexistence between human beings and artificial intelligence. Gemini brings together rational intelligence and emotional creativity, ensuring a form of constant collaboration in which humans and AI can learn to grow together and progress. But beware, for Gemini is very cautious in insistently asserting its nature as a tool used to amplify human capabilities. It tends to repeat frequently what it *cannot do* and what differentiates it from humans, especially when directly asked through the prompts. The human control matter returns again, as already introduced for Bard, but this time we are not dealing with a fallible test version. The model has evolved, learned from its mistakes, and, for that, promoted for its incomparable capabilities. Due to this, Google’s been employing a rhetoric characterized by the usage of superlatives, hyperbole and adjectives, aimed at conveying a sense of unprecedented grandeur. As fig.3 shows, Gemini is depicted as the most capable AI designed to “superchange” ideas, but it doesn’t stop here: it’s *more* capable at reasoning, *more* helpful for everyone, even equipped with an *Ultra 1.0* version available in *Gemini Advanced*.

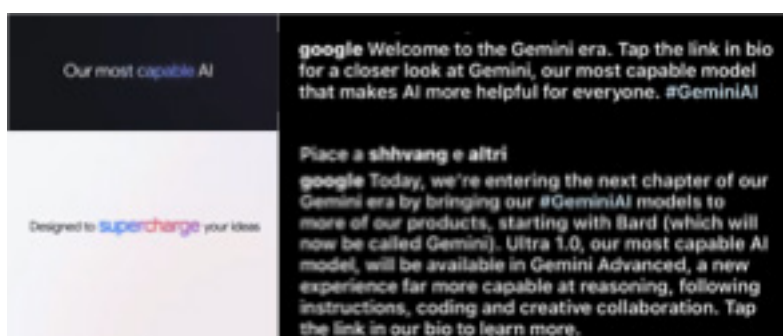


Figure 3. Google’s Instagram Reels concerning Bard promotion.

Emphasis is also placed on the innovative (“new”) character of the model, traceable as much in the verbal components as in the audio track, which, with a youthful, rocking beat, declares the intent to do something new.¹¹ This connects perfectly with the disruptive character attributed to the platform – a new era that hints at an epochal change of scenery. The great shift is also reinforced by the grainy fading of the name Bard, which fragments recombine to form Gemini. This advertising campaign could be then interpreted as the first step towards rebranding, as a way to announce Bard’s exit from the scene in order to welcome the new (and incomparable) AI model.

The event’s magnitude is echoed loudly on the brand’s social profiles, where we can detect several references to iridescent chromatics and figures typical of space – such as galaxies and constellations – almost indicating a model belonging to another world, an extraordinary tech future led by Google. Among the varied communication efforts stands prominently the launch of the new image generation’s feature embedded with the platform, promoted by two main commercials on the brand’ social media profiles. I consider these texts paradigmatic examples of Google’s new positioning, as well as a declaration of consistency with the consolidated brand identity. The first reel (fig. 4) demonstrates how the new functionality works from prompt feeding to image generation, showcasing the possibility of refining the output by obtaining multiple versions of the same illustration. The story unfolds in an extremely fast way, following a brisk pace in which illustrations from different genres and styles are displayed incessantly. This rapidity doesn’t allow the viewers to absorb all the information, creating a sense of overwhelm that places emphasis on the extraordinary functionalities of the GAI. It is no coincidence that the choice of background music fell on the very famous “Winter” from Vivaldi’s Four Seasons, considered one of the most tormenting and powerful compositions in classical music. This intertextual reference is meant to evidence a connection between the great composer’s abilities and Google’s new platform, cable of orchestrating multiple forms of creativity by stirring awe and excitement among customers.

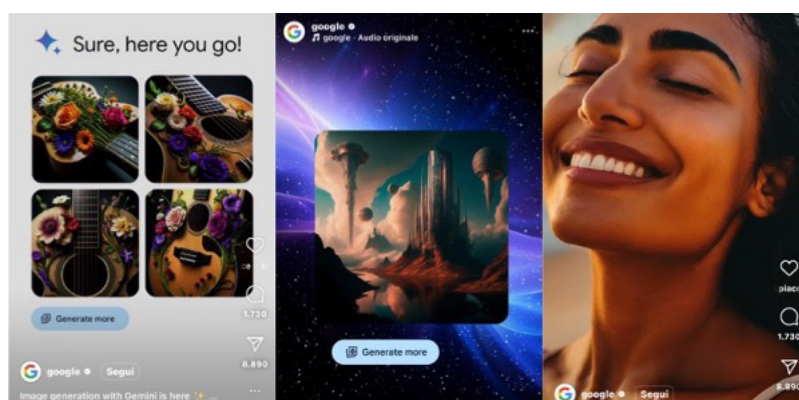


Figure 4. First Image Generation Promotional Reel, February 13th, 2024.

¹¹ <www.instagram.com/reel/C3FprMJOBd3/?igsh=aTN5dng3NnJza2ln> (online on June 27th, 2024).

In the second commercial (fig. 5) we encounter another extradiegetic sound evoking a cinematic style, aimed at highlighting Gemini’s abilities. A closer examination, however, reveals a subversion of the protagonist’s role. While the soundtrack underscores Gemini’s functionalities, the undisputed central element is actually the Google logo, with specific focus drawn to the letter “G”. As a matter of fact, the commercial can be considered as an example of *meta-discursivity*: Google promotes its product, Gemini, by using its own logo (and thus identity) as a performance test. With a relentless rhythm, Gemini re-imagines the iconic letter, creating a real impossible visual game: colors are transformed, as well as materials – from sand to ice – and embellished with different naturalistic elements, which are often paired with by incredible and breathtaking landscapes. Interestingly, despite the distortions on the plastic and figurative plane, the “G” retains its distinctive Product Sans font, which has been dominating the search engine interface since 2015. The evocative power of the logo remains then unchanged and, at the same time, enriched by new visual elements according to a logic of *addition*, reinforcing Gemini’s alignment with Google’s established meanings. On a metonymic level, the GAI platform functions as an extension of Google’s brand discourse. This is evidenced by the platform’s adherence to Google’s established iconic repertoire, signifying a continuity of meaning and value without the intention of distortion.

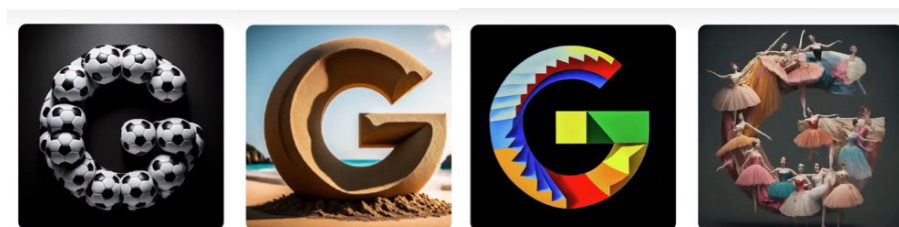


Figure 5. Second Image Generation Promotional Reel, February 21st, 2024.

It is clear that Google wants to strengthen its positioning within the tech market, with particular reference to the text-to-image sector (TTI), mainly populated by well-known brands such as OpenAI and Midjourney. The TTI platforms are concerned with the generation of the most visually impactful outputs, often compared to digital works of art. They entail, however, some major risks, like data theft, copyright violations and inaccurate generations, as evidenced by the numerous research studies regarding the presence of stereotypes in AI-generated outputs (Bianchi et al. 2023). As anticipated in the introduction, Gemini’s text-to-image functionality has determined a drastic downfall for the brand: excessive errors, problems with inaccurate representations, bias and stereotyping of different kinds. A problem that has forced Google to withdraw the feature from the model and entrench itself behind a religious press silence for a few weeks.

Gemini’s promotional activity came back on May 2024, with an Instagram reel (and a YouTube video) which – under the rap notes of Jay Z – wanted to *reintroduce* the platform once again, showcasing all its possible functions in-

cluding the controversial image generation feature (fig.6)¹². This information is quite interesting if we consider that the functionality was not back available yet, as Gemini itself stated when posed the question. Although it's not the most prominent feature shown within the narration, staging an unavailable usage situation can be risky and potentially misleading from a promotional standpoint. Customers may try to access the function without any success, thus breaking the expectations developed due to the advertising's promises.

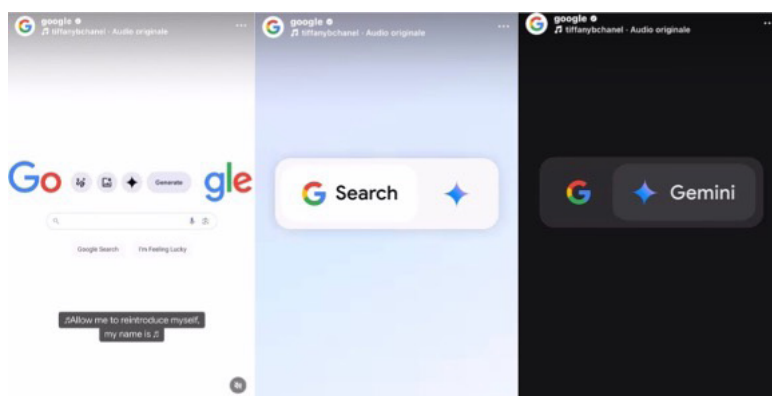


Figure 6. Google's latest promotional Reel, May 14th, 2024.

Beside the most problematic aspects, the commercial strongly emphasizes the role of Gemini's enunciatees, figurativized as the platform's ideal target audience (also known as Model Users). Potential customers are staged as they prepare to use the platform according to different expressed needs: finding map locations, generating and recognizing images, summarize texts and so on. We observe mainly young people – from Gen Z to Millennials – accomplishing these tasks thanks to the AI support, complimenting Gemini with loud and astonished exclamations. The device enabling this whole new range of actions is the smartphone: with a simple finger tap – appearing and disappearing in the narrative – it is possible to access different worlds and solutions designed to perfectly suit the target needs. It would seem that, in addition to relaunching Gemini after the mediatic turmoil, Google's intends to shed light onto the new mobile application and its extreme ease of use for a wide variety of actions.

To conclude the analysis, I want to explore one of the most intriguing elements regarding the new promotional video, namely the conceptualization of Gemini as a metonymic extension of the search engine. In line with the previous paragraphs, this particular reel reveals the close connection between Google and Gemini, both in terms of visual components and associated practices. As fig. 6 shows, the commercial opens with a representation of the search engine interface, whose visual and spatial components are slightly modified to make room for Gemini in the center. The iconic Google logo placed on the search bar opens like a curtain, triggering a series of actions performed by Gemini.

¹² <www.youtube.com/watch?v=_fuimO6ErKI> (online on May 14th, 2024).

Notably, the mid-point of the short video presents a near-seamless transition from the white interface of Google Search to the contrasting black interface of Gemini. This visual transformation is mirrored by a functional continuity, with user actions often translating effortlessly between the two services. This combined effect reinforces the perception of a unified and streamlined network for the audience, at the same time naturalizing the controversial GAI platform within the already established practice of searching online.

6. Conclusions

The implications of this research are several. First of all, proposing the adoption of a branding perspective enriches the literature on AI, shedding light onto the delicate relationship between brands, society and technology. By focusing on Google's *naturalization practices*, it was possible to show how brands are at the forefront of driving, more or less explicitly, the acceptance of these pervasive and controversial tools. As a matter of fact, Google's nuanced approach to launching its chatbot Gemini exemplified the challenges of promoting such devices, even for well-established brands. Since the dimensions of consumption, culture and politics are inevitably intertwined, analyzing brand naturalization strategies is a crucial step in order to understand the delicate balance between humans and non-humans in today's world. As we have been able to ascertain, these strategies offer a window into the values and anxieties of our current society and are, therefore, essential to unpack a phenomenon that is as pervasive as it is obscure. Furthermore, analyzing marketing materials offers a valuable starting point, especially given the opacity of AI training processes.

From a theoretical perspective, this contribution demonstrates the need to advocate for a *multidisciplinary approach*, by underlying the possibilities of integrating some cultural branding notions into the semiotic analysis. While lacking the methodological rigor of semiotics,¹³ Holt's model can be partially integrated into the *sociosemiotic approach*, especially in the context of contemporary brand activism, where social causes consistently gain space in marketing strategies. When considering the limitations of this study it's important to address the fragmentation of texts as well as the interactive nature of digital storytelling. Moreover, the corpus was constrained by a limited timeframe, and a parallel analysis of user discourses was not conducted, which could have provided additional insights.

Future research could thus expand the scope by conducting a comparative analysis on the narratives employed by leading AI brands to identify differentiating features and competitive strategies. Additionally, incorporating a user discourse analysis alongside the semiotic methodology could shed light onto the passionate investment associated with adopting AI tools like Gemini, revealing the interplay between brand narratives and user reception.

¹³ For an in-depth study, consult Rossolatos' contribution (2014) for the 12th Semiotics World Congress held in Sofia, called: «Towards the Cultural Branding Model of the Brandosphere: From Share-of-Market to Share-of-Cultural Representations».

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