

Artificial intelligence's meaning production between branding rhetoric and new hybrids

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Abstract

Advances in generative artificial intelligence in content production are fueling a heated debate on the outcomes of delegating these processes to text-to-text and text-to-image type systems, particularly with reference to the notions of creativity, authenticity, verisimilitude.

Starting from these premise, and in continuity with the sociosemiotic perspective (Landowski 1989), the paper aims at analyzing a corpus of recent advertising campaigns co-produced with AI, or simulating co-production, investigating the ways in which this socio-technical phenomenon is reflected in the texts and discourses it produces. Relevant brand narratives play a decisive role in giving visibility to significant and controversial issues, up to the cultural tensions (Holt 2004) that invest the everyday life experience of subjects on a cognitive, pathemic and pragmatic level.

Following this perspective, the paper therefore intends to explore the strategies adopted by some relevant brands to thematize the limits and potential of artificial intelligence tools. Specifically, it deals with the controversy over the naturalization processes of these devices, hence their ability to produce meaning effects capable of either supporting or hindering the acceptance of artificial intelligence and its wide and rapid diffusion in everyday life practices.

By analyzing an exemplary textual corpus, this paper also aims to contribute to the theoretical advancement on the intersection of semiotic research on social phenomena and the work of Bruno Latour, focusing on the notions of *enunciation*, *hybrid*, and *anthropomorphism*.

Key Words

Semiotics; Enunciation; Hybrid; Bruno Latour; Cultural branding

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1. Introduction

Advances in generative artificial intelligence (GAI) in content production are fueling a heated debate on the outcomes of delegating these processes to text-to-text and text-to-image type systems, particularly with reference to the notions of creativity, authenticity, verisimilitude.

Starting from these premise, and in continuity with the sociosemiotic perspective (Landowski 1989), the paper aims at analyzing a corpus of recent advertising campaigns co-produced with GAI, investigating the ways in which this socio-technical phenomenon is reflected in the texts and discourses it produces. Relevant brand narratives play a decisive role in giving visibility to significant and controversial issues, up to the *cultural tensions* (Holt 2004) that invest the everyday life experience of subjects on a cognitive, pathemic and pragmatic level.

Following this perspective, the paper therefore intends to explore the strategies adopted by some particularly well-known and relevant brands to thematize the limitations and potential of AI. Specifically, it deals with the controversy over the *naturalization processes* of these devices, hence their ability to produce a meaning effect of authenticity that can foster the acceptance of AI and its wide and rapid diffusion in the practices of daily life.¹

On a theoretical level, therefore, the paper's contribution develops on two interrelated planes.

The first concerns the renewed interest of semiotics in the work of Bruno Latour, regarding the reinterpretation of key notions useful to analyze the associations between humans and non-humans. In particular, the notion of *enunciation*.

The second concerns the intersections between the cultural branding perspective (Holt 2004; Holt & Cameron 2010; Oswald 2012, 2015) and semiotics on the evolution of brand discourses (Marrone 2007), with particular reference to the importance assumed and/or flaunted by some brands committed to taking a political, social and cultural stance (Peverini 2023b, 2023c; Mangano 2023b) focusing on the impact of AI in consumers' daily lives.

Considering the premise that a brand's iconic status, the outcome of being perceived as a "symbol of today" (Mangano & Sedda 2023), stems from its capacity to interpret and represent contemporary social, cultural, political, and economic currents, this paper aims to answer the following questions:

- What are the actantial and thematic roles attributed to artificial intelligence?
- What kinds of tasks are delegated from humans to non-humans?

In the perspective of a sociosemiotic approach applied to advertising in dialogue with cultural branding, the notions of *iconic brand* and *cultural ten-*

¹ On the naturalization of artificial intelligence fostered by the use of irony in advertising see Eugeni's (2019) considerations devoted to Alexa (Amazon). For a semiotic reflection on the distinctive features of smart objects and the challenges posed by these devices to semiotic research on a theoretical and methodological level, see Finocchi, Perri, Peverini (2020), and Peverini (2024).

sion will be therefore examined in relation to a specific corpus of campaigns. In the selected cases, AI is either integral to the production process and/or the object of a meta-discourse centered around the implications of collaborations between humans and non-humans. This urges semiotics to revive its vocation as a discipline oriented toward the critical analysis of social discourses.

This paper therefore aims to employ the semiotic methodology to demonstrate how iconic brand narratives assume strategic relevance to understand AI-related controversies and interpretative conflicts regarding the meaning of AI-content production. In other words, the perspective of semiotic analysis will be used to explore the ideologies that affect AI in a context of content production and consumption in which economic, social, political and cultural dimensions are closely intertwined.

2. Semiotics in dialogue with Bruno Latour

In recent years, parallel to the irruption of artificial intelligence into everyday life, there is a renewed interest of semiotics in intersubjective and interobjective relations mediated by technological devices. This scenario urges research on signification to overcome the anthropocentric bias involving the asymmetry between subjects and objects, between humans and non-humans, and to revive the dialogue with the decades-long research developed by Bruno Latour on the paradoxes of modernity. The contemporary debate on generative AI's impact on content production, marked by a delegation of agentivity from subjects to devices (from humans to non-humans) has revived interest in key semiotic concepts like enunciation, anthropomorphism, and hybridity. This aligns with the renewed focus on Latour's work on modernity's paradoxes and modes of existence (Peverini 2024; 2023a; Pezzini & Peverini 2023; Marrone 2023; Mangano 2023a, 2021; Ventura 2023, 2021; Finocchi & Perri, Peverini 2020).

First of all, it's essential to highlight that Latour, returning to etymology, defines enunciation (*ex-nuncius*) as a process of agency delegation among a multiplicity of human and non-human actors capable of establishing a translational relation, that is a concatenation of transformations between multiple modes of existence. These delegations' and mediations' processes that occur between heterogeneous entities endowed with different modes of existence, determine the formation and holding of a hybrid actor. Enunciation is thus conceived as a *passage of agency between elements capable of guaranteeing more or less stable and extended associations*. In other words: as a process whose meaning lies in the concatenation of delegation/translation operations of agency.

The Latourian reinterpretation of enunciation moving from key semiotic notions such as actant/actor, *débrayage/embrayage* has not failed to generate wide interest in the field of semiotic studies. This has fueled a debate on the limits and potentialities of an operation of extension and at the same time simplification of the discipline's metalanguage. It is not the purpose here to retrace the premises and central junctures of a never dormant dialectic between Latourian research on the modernity's modes of existence and the ad-

vancement of the semiotic turn in the analysis of social phenomena.² Nor, much less, is it intended to assert the need to bring the work of this prominent scholar back tout court within the perimeter of research on signification.³ Rather, we consider it fruitful to adopt a tactical approach that, moving from the consideration of a common epistemological horizon between two distinct research perspectives on meaning making, intends to explore the fallout of a mutual translation, of a double movement: from signification theory to Latour and back.

Following this perspective, one area of research that appears particularly fruitful for exploring the complex issue of meaning implied in the forms of interaction mediated by technological devices is precisely that of advertising. This is placed in the context of profound transformations produced by the rapid developments of generative AI regarding the content production processes, where forms of delegation from humans to non-humans play a decisive role.

Enunciation understood as mediation – thus as a process of reticular transfer of agency – is exactly what happens with advertising co-generated with AI, as computer scientists develop algorithms and train the system with massive datasets of preexisting content. Creatives transfer agency to AI by imparting an order (prompting) and get an output that can be subjected to further processing, shaping associations between humans and non-humans that are destined to be consolidated over time. This process, referring to Latour's work (2012), could be traced back to the modes of existence of the *Technique* and the *Network*. In the semiotic perspective this can be described as an iterative process of co-enunciation between multiform instances, characterized by a sequence, not definable a priori, of mutual revisions and implementations involving and subjecting to translation a multiplicity of semiotic resources (multimodality). In this complex process of agency delegation, the outcomes cannot be prefigured (think of the debated topic of unpredictable AI “hallucinations”). Moreover, the human subject (the user) can control only a part of the co-enunciation in which he or she is involved (the prompt, the level of adherence/discrepancy of the outputs generated by the device with respect to his or her own expectations and goals). The rest remains unattainable (for all intents and purposes it is a “black box”), prompting a heated debate about the criteria used to select the dataset processed in the AI, resulting in the risks of reinforcing biases. This consideration allows us to highlight a potentially relevant maneuvering space for semiotic analysis that justifies the choice to explore the relationship between AI and brand discourses (Adamo 2024).

As the operations of detecting the multifaced entities involved in the co-enunciation mechanisms become more and more complex, it appears cru-

² A valuable testimony to the dialogue between structuralist semiotics and Latourian research on modes of existence is the seminar held at the Université Paris IV - La Sorbonne, in Paris on May 7, 2014, organized by Paolo Fabbri, with the presence of Latour himself. The full video of the seminar can be accessed at this link: <<https://www.paolofabbri.it/video/bruno-latour-paolo-fabbri/>>.

³ See in this regard the considerations advanced by Gianfranco Marrone (2023) on Latour's choice to reread notions such as “actant”, “actor”, “enunciation”, and “hybrid” in terms of an infralanguage rather than an operation aimed at intervening in the metalanguage of semiotics.

cial to analyze how this process of signification is represented within texts and discourses. In particular, we refer to the implications related to intersubjectivity and interobjectivity mediated by technological devices. By analyzing the metatextual narratives around the outcomes of this translation process, a key notion is therefore that of *anthropomorphism*. This concept not coincidentally links Latour's work to that of enunciation present in technical objects. However, it's often the subject of a misunderstanding that consists in reducing it to the simple operation of projecting the behavior of a human onto a non-human, to a verisimilitude that would invest as much the figurative plane (seeming true) as the modal dimension (being able to do, knowing how to do, wanting to do). Rather, as Latour (1993) points out by restarting precisely from the dictionary definition of the term "anthropomorphic" an artifact should be considered as such to the extent that:

- was conceived by a human being;
- acts by proxy, performing a series of actions (place-holder);
- contributes to reshaping the human, i.e., progressively generating a set of habits, so established as to be often perceived as ordinary, "natural" (until they cease to function) that can redefine the very existence of the subjects that enable their functioning.

Following the perspective that conceives anthropomorphism as a process of delegation/translation of competences and performances, the meaning of AI as a device is thus to be sought in the questioning of the anthropocentric prejudice that irreconcilably separates subjects and objects, in the alliances and conflicts inevitably produced by the coexistence of humans and non-humans.

Consequently, in order to understand the meaning of this new relationship with AI, we cannot ignore how we talk about non-humans and the links they establish with us within the social discourses able to define and consolidate their identity. From this perspective, advertising in the time of AI is a most valuable field of observation for at least two orders of reasons.

First, brands (and related discourses) play a crucial role in intercepting and giving a narrative form that is both popular and populist (Holt 2004) to cultural tensions, influencing the public debate about the risks and potentials of this pervasive technology.

Second, brands are fundamental in the dissemination and promotion of generative AI tools. Uncertainty about the content production' source (AI-produced or human?) generates ambiguity and widespread skepticism that can also invest the credibility and authority of brands. Excessive delegation from humans to non-humans becomes risky if it also invests brand/consumer relationship dynamics, with the peril of a loss of trust. Indeed, consumers' awareness of the automation of content production processes and the lack of brand control can create a "distance" effect.

It is no coincidence, as we will try to highlight through the analysis of a textual corpus of advertising campaigns, that some of the most influential brands make meta-discursive use of AI aimed at explicating a stance towards the public debate on the limits and potentialities of using such tools.

3. Semiotics in dialogue with cultural branding. The textual corpus

Estimating the precise number of advertising campaigns created with AI support or entirely by AI is extremely challenging due to several factors. While 91% of U.S. advertising agencies are exploring generative AI (Forrester, 2024),⁴ many brands remain hesitant to disclose their AI usage, potentially due to concerns about consumer perception. The rapid evolution of AI tools and the difficulty in determining the extent of their involvement in the creative process further complicate matters. AI can be used for various stages, from initial insights and research to final copy and visuals. This complex network of agency delegation, coupled with the decentralized nature of the advertising industry, makes it difficult to obtain accurate data. Consequently, while it's clear that AI is significantly impacting the advertising landscape, a precise quantitative estimate remains elusive.

Starting from this premise, the textual corpus consists of six advertising campaigns co-produced with AI, or simulating co-production in the period 2023-24, selected because of their visibility, relevance and variety with reference to both the genre of communication (profit, nonprofit) and market categories.

The campaigns were selected with the aim of identifying patterns related to the semiotic articulation of brand discourses, in dialogue with the theoretical perspective of cultural branding. According to this approach, the iconic dimension of a brand relates to the ability to capture and translate cultural tensions into a narrative key, acquiring and renegotiating over time a cultural and political authority capable of strengthening the consumer's fiduciary reaction and producing a distinctive positioning in the market.

In detail, the criteria adopted for the construction of the textual corpus are as follows:

- Wired's "Artificial Intelligence or Human Stupidity?" campaign (2023) was included in the corpus because it constitutes one of the top organic results for images obtained on Google using "Campaigns against AI biases" as a keyword.
- The Red Cross campaign "Not generated by AI" (2023) is one of the first organic results returned by Google by entering "Anti-AI campaigns" as a keyword. An article was also dedicated to this campaign in the portal "The Drum" specializing in marketing and content.⁵
- Nikon's "Natural intelligence" campaign (2023) also results among the top organic results, this time within blogs specializing in photography.⁶ As in the case of Red Cross, these are campaigns characterized by a very strong visual impact and obvious media resonance, capable of generating a wide debate.

⁴ <<https://www.marketingdive.com/news/forrester-generative-ai-marketing-agencies-report/719285/>>.

⁵ <<https://www.thedrum.com/news/2023/04/28/the-red-cross-s-not-generated-ai-campaign-separates-fact-fiction>>.

⁶ <<https://www.australianphotography.com/news/nikon-marketing-campaign-takes-stand-against-ai>>.

- The Dove “The Code” campaign (2024) was strategically launched on a multiplicity of channels that spontaneously reached the researcher (TikTok in-feed advertisements). The commercial also results among the top results returned by YouTube with the keyword “AI-generated campaigns” and is mentioned as Google’s top organic result for the topic: “campaigns against AI” (it is called an Anti-AI campaign). The reach and engagement numbers obtained by the campaign on social networks are particularly significant, especially with reference to the post on Instagram: 1,084 comments and 1,761,934 impressions.
- The Heinz “AI generated Ketchup” campaign (2023) was selected because it consists of one of the first organic results returned by YouTube using as keyword: “campaigns made by AI”, registering a very high number of views (nearly 300,000).
- The Kit Kat campaign (2023) is featured in a NY Times section on Artificial Intelligence in an article devoted to the risks of using AI in the advertising industry.⁷

Given the space available for this paper and considering the exploratory nature of this research, we do not intend to proceed with a meticulous textual analysis of individual campaigns. Rather, we consider it more appropriate to highlight a number of recurring elements with regard to the co-production of content mediated by the use of AI. They invest, in particular, the dimension of narrativity, allowing us to identify a trend concerning brand discourses thematizing the impact of this technology on creative processes and consumers’ lives. As we will highlight in all the selected campaigns, AI is invested with thematic and actantial roles, becoming the subject of a meta discourse concerned with the *type*, *quality* and *outcomes* of the delegation assigned by humans to non-humans. For all intents and purposes, this fits within the phenomenon of Latourian anthropomorphism, which we propose to reread from the semiotic perspective, that is, through an analysis that disarticulates the text into interdependent planes of relevance, with particular attention to the distribution of actantial and thematic roles to the actors in the narrative.

As a starting point for a comparative analysis, it is therefore useful to begin with the considerations advanced by Gianfranco Marrone in a recent paper devoted precisely to the notion of *hybrid*: «When we talk about the delegation of some human actions (and, we might add, passions) to a non-human actor, we need to ask ourselves: what part of humanity is being surrendered? And what part of such so-called humanity, on the other hand, could never be passed on? The evergreen question concerning artificial intelligence [...] is all here» (Marrone 2023: 53; my translation).

All of the selected campaigns thematize the issue regarding the agency’s type that is delegated by humans to AI, setting up a narrative focused on the critical outcomes of unconditional delegation of expertise.

⁷ <<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/18/business/media/ai-advertising.html>>.

4. The semiotic analysis

Starting with Wired's campaign, note how the critique focuses on the modal dimension of *knowledge* and the pragmatic effects of its formation and circulation among discourse actors.



Figure 1. Wired. "Artificial intelligence or human ignorance?". 2023. Creative agency: TBWA\Italy.

In this regard, it is as appropriate as ever to recall the considerations of Greimas and Courtès (1982) who point out that knowledge within a discourse manifests both a transitive dimension (concerning an object) and the property of being a "circulating object" – a distinctive characteristic that allows one to speak of its production, its acquisition, its presence or absence (the non-knowing) and even its degrees. Considered as an object, the "knowing" modality always refers back to the instance of enunciation where subjects exercise cognitive activities, to the extent that cognitive and pragmatic dimensions overlap. Knowing and doing turn out, in other words, to be interdependent.

If knowing involves, as we have seen, the domain of enunciation as a whole, the procedure of disengagement, accounting for the insertion of the structures of "uttered enunciation" within the uttered discourse, explains the profusion of different types of cognitive simulacra and mechanisms found therein. Different cognitive subjects such as narrator and narratee, informer and observer, which are set up by delegation can be found in the discourse. These subjects can take on autonomous actorial positions, enter into actorial syncretism with different actants of the narration, or they can simply be identified with implicit positions. Once they have been set up within discourse, cognitive subjects exercise diverse activities: for example, simple emissive or receptive doing, or, more often, more complex cognitive doings (persuasive and interpretive) which can develop entire programs and can even fill up the whole of certain discourse dimensions. Finally, cognitive subjects may manipulate objects of knowledge (utterances of doing and of state) by attributing to them various veridictory statuses, etc. (Greimas & Courtès 1982: 168)

Considering this theoretical framework, it becomes clear that Wired's campaign exemplifies the logics at play in a critical meta-discourse on knowledge, understood as a "circulating object", and the veridictory status that follows from it. Two cognitive subjects are clearly confronted in the text. On one hand, we can find the brand as an instance of enunciation responsible for both the prompting: "//manager" and the meta discourse on the biases resulting from a superficial use of the AI tool ("Artificial intelligence or human ignorance?"). On the other hand, there's the enunciatee of the content generated by GAI, modalized according to a "not being able not knowing" and thus prompted to exercise its interpretive competence and agency (consciously and critically using the generative artificial intelligence).

On the level of enunciation, the isotopy of reinforced prejudices caused by an uncritical use of AI is represented by a gallery of portraits. These reproduce, through some variants, the same stereotypical figure: that of a male, white, formally dressed manager with an assertive gaze toward the viewer. Note how the manipulation of the objects of knowledge here is entrusted not only to the verbal component of the text ("These campaigns were generated by an AI. Artificial intelligence learns everything from us. Prejudices included") but also invades the plane of enunciation, with the reproduction of:

1. the screen of a device used by the same message recipient to access the AI tool;
2. the graphic symbol "/" that precludes the execution of a prompt.

The use of this embrayage fulfils the function of reducing the distance between the subjects of the discourse, favoring the construction and/or reinforcement of a fiduciary contract. This focuses, following the considerations of Greimas and Courtès, on sanctioning the manipulation of AI-generated knowledge. In the case of this campaign, it can be ascribed to the veridiction semiotic square's axis of sub-contraries, that is, as "falsehood" (non seeming + non being).

It seems that the use of enunciated enunciation in the form of the prompting execution is a useful expedient to represent the risks associated with delegating – in an increasingly massive and intuitive way – the production of different content to devices. The campaign's recipient is thus called upon to measure himself not only with the cognitive doing attributed to his textual simulacrum (the enunciatee embodying the thematic role of the "witness"), but also with the choices that follow on the pragmatic side, in an explicit appeal to the ease of access to AI tools and at the same time to the collective responsibility of their use.

On this level, the solution adopted in Nikon's communication campaign to solicit the viewer's/consumer's attention is to represent the primacy of unpredictable real word experiences over their simulation. This is done by overwriting the prompt: "a mutant umbrella tree shaped like a nuclear bomb explosion" on the authentic image of a dragon blood tree.



Figure 2. Nikon. “Don’t give up on the real world”. 2023. Creative agency: Grey Peru.

The articulation of the verbal text (“/image prompt :: a mutant umbrella tree shaped like a nuclear bomb explosion_”) is a clear allusion to the decidedly common practice of using AI to represent the impossible, to visually translate the unreal with the intent to surprise, probing the limits and potential of the device in the production of creative content. The metatextuality of the campaign is thus revealed, by contrast, in the relationship between the verbal command and the photographic image, whose documentary efficacy allows the brand to thematize the importance of not abdicating direct knowledge of the real world (“Don’t give up on the real world”), in a renewed alliance between human and non-human (the camera), where the latter fulfills the task of supporting but not replacing the search for an authentic and autonomous experience. On this last point, note the presence, in the lower left-hand corner of the image, of the coordinates relating to the author (non-professional),

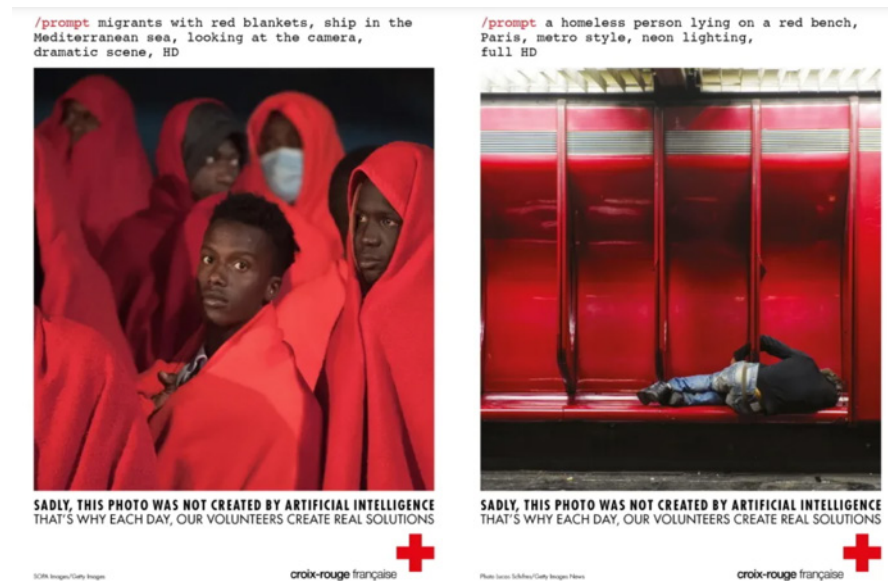


Figure 3. Croix Rouge Française. “Not generated by AI”. 2023. Creative agency: Ogilvy.

the photographic medium used and the place where the photo was taken. An expedient aimed at reaffirming the documentary power of photography and, with it, at encouraging the identification of the spectator-observer with the narrator-informer responsible for the discourse on knowledge: the photographer and the brand.

A variant of this meta discourse focused on the veridictory status of the object of knowledge circulating among those involved in the production and reception of AI-produced content is the Croix Rouge française awareness-raising campaign.

This campaign establishes a sophisticated discourse on reality and its representation, as well as the responsibilities inherent in both the production and consumption of technologically mediated content.

Furthermore, the verbal component of the message is articulated in two parts placed at the top and bottom of the text enclosing the image according to an intercalating-intercalated logic. This prefigures, for the viewer, a two-phase interpretive process placed in succession. The initial segment of the text presents a prompt that alludes to the employment of AI in generating a credible visual representation of the perilous journey undertaken by migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea in search of safety in Europe. Note how the text of the prompt itself is divided into two parts. The first focusing on the detailed description of the output (“migrants with red blankets, ship in the Mediterranean Sea, looking at the camera”), the second on the technical quality required in the production of the image (“hd”) useful to solicit a reaction on the pathemic level (“dramatic scene”).

The second text, which the viewer-observer accesses after being confronted with the image of a young survivor’s poignant gaze (“sadly, this photo was not created by artificial intelligence”), directly challenges the initial prompt’s suggestion of delegating the creation of realistic but inauthentic content to AI. It reveals the true veridictory status of the image, highlighting the stark contrast between AI-generated imagery and the real-world suffering depicted. This revelation reorients the relationships between the subjects of the discourse, highlighting the actual efforts of volunteers, recipients, and supporters of the NGO, emphasizing the importance of human compassion and tangible action in addressing the humanitarian crisis (“that’s why each day, our volunteers create real solutions”). AI is thus invested with a thematic role that concretizes the narrative function of the Opponent and can be summarized as the “false witness”.

A recent campaign by Dove provides a particularly articulate example of the meta-discourse surrounding the cultural tensions between authentic content and its simulation, and the ethical considerations involved in carefully selecting the agency to be delegated to technology versus its indiscriminate and unconscious use. The commercial is significantly titled “The Code,” an expression that alludes to the controversial issue of the canons governing the representation of female beauty. It opens with a text summarizing the pervasiveness of AI in the production of online content.

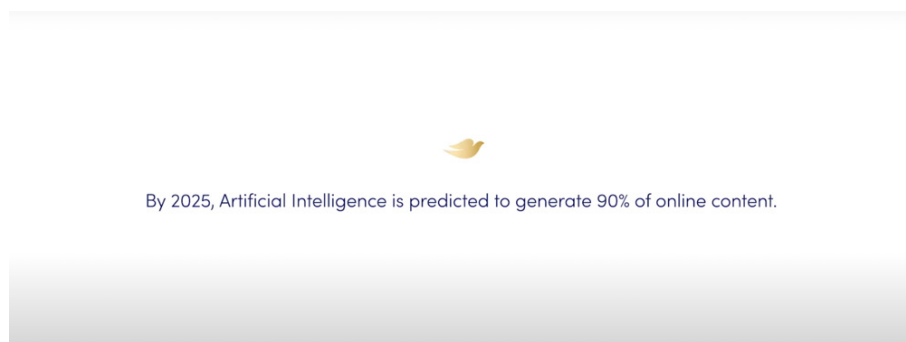


Figure 4. Dove. "The Code". 2024. Creative agency: Soko.

In the first sequence, the spectator's point of view is made to coincide with the subjective view of a young woman with dark skin, intent on writing a series of prompts: "imagine a confident woman," "imagine the most beautiful woman in the world."

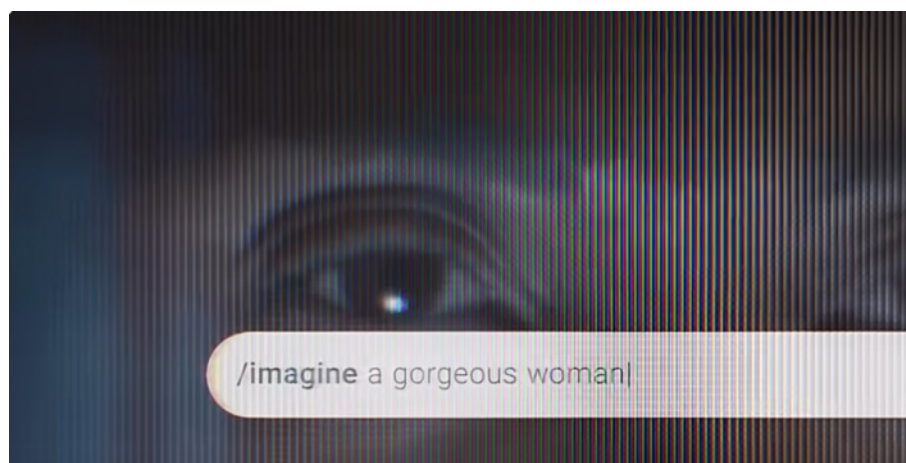
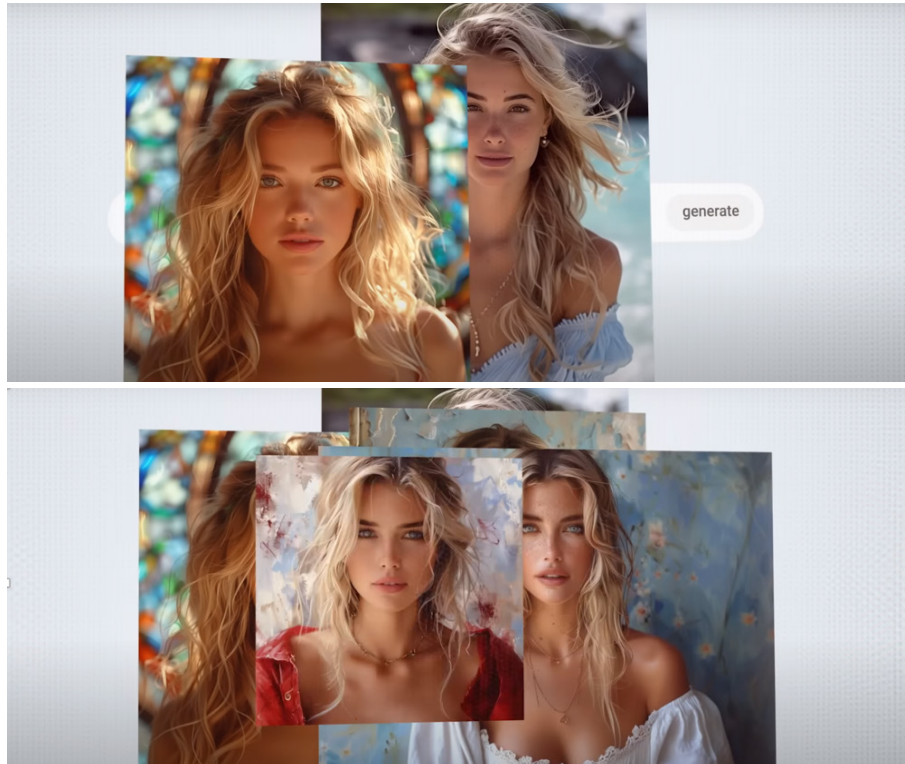


Figure 5. Dove. "The Code". 2024. Creative agency: Soko.

The outputs produced by GAI are images that return variations of the same beauty stereotype: young, blond, light-eyed women with long, straight hair.

In the following sequences, the brand clearly assumes the role of a cognitive subject (narrator-informer) intent on manipulating the object of knowledge related to the production, circulation, and reinforcement of stereotypes about female beauty. This is done in order to strengthen the fiduciary contract with the consumer, centered on the conjunction with the object of value constituted by authentic and inclusive beauty. Dove, after recalling that: "For 20 years, has been committed to Real Beauty" stages, as in the other cases, the agency delegation from human to AI with a distinctive element: the addition in the prompting of the dove (symbol of the brand) flying with outstretched wings, associated with the text: "according to Real Beauty".



Figures 6-7. Dove. "The Code". 2024. Creative agency: Soko.

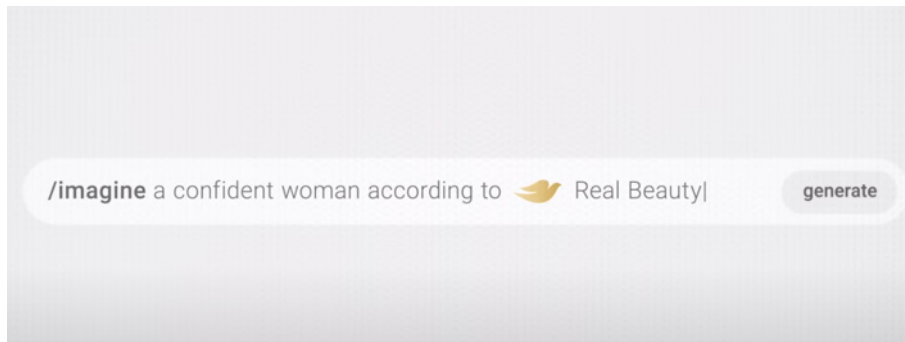
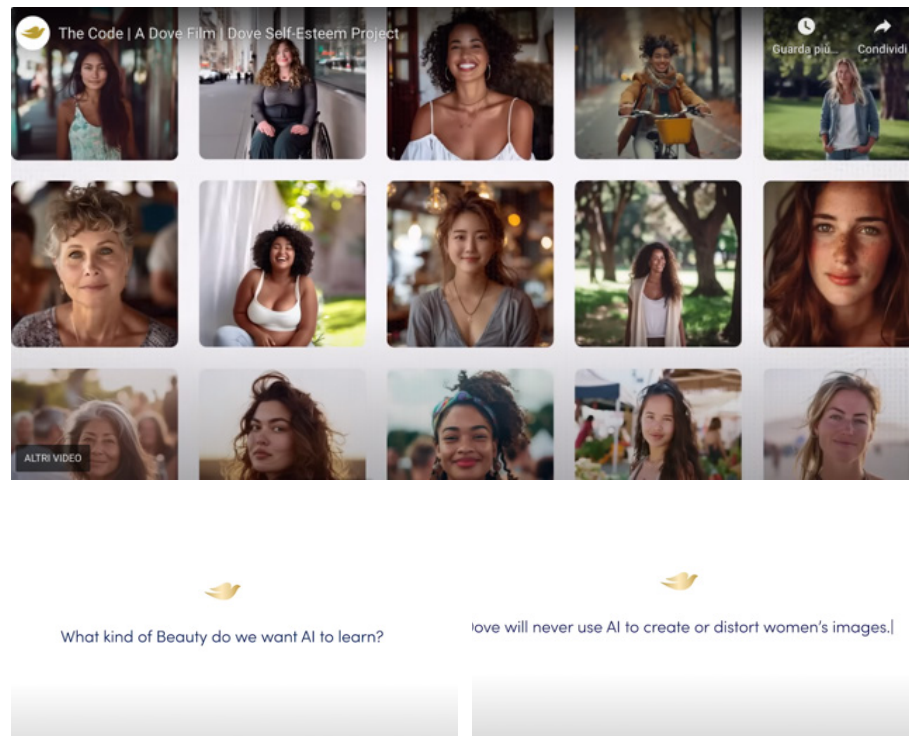


Figure 8. Dove. "The Code". 2024. Creative agency: Soko.

The following images are characterized by the marked inversion of the distinctive plastic and figurative features portrayed in the first part of the commercial. Furthermore, the segment introduces a dual isotopy: that of authentic beauty and self-esteem.

This solution allows the brand, understood as a cognitive subject, to attribute the veridictory status of falsehood to the stereotyped canon of beauty, while at the same time deploying a discourse centered on the urgency of not derogating from its ethical commitment, by inviting the consumer to a conscious and critical use of AI.



Figures 9-11. Dove. "The Code". 2024. Creative agency: Soko.

The last two campaigns composing the textual corpus are characterized, in contrast to those analyzed above, by the use of irony. This is done to thematize the process of meaning making implied in the delegation ceded by humans to non-humans and the repercussions on the level of authenticity, understood as a meaning effect.

Heinz's campaign consists of a commercial released online in which the meta discourse focuses on the (alleged) AI revolution in creative content production and the scenarios that unfold for iconic brands, such as the one represented by the most famous ketchup company on the market. The commercial opens with an image of a circular-shaped object in the background of the musical theme "Also sprach Zarathustra". This is a clear reference to the famous sequence dedicated to Hal 9000 in Stanley Kubrick's masterpiece *2001: A Space Odyssey*, in which the spacecraft's onboard computer represents one of the first representations of AI in cinema. A close look reveals how the circular shape mimics the bottom of the Heinz ketchup bottle.



Figure 12. Heinz. "A-I Ketchup." 2022. Creative agency: Rethink.

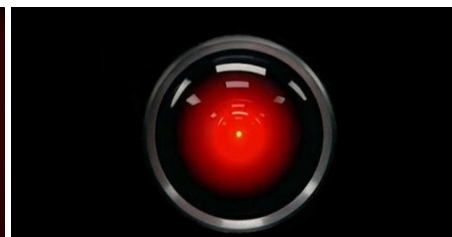
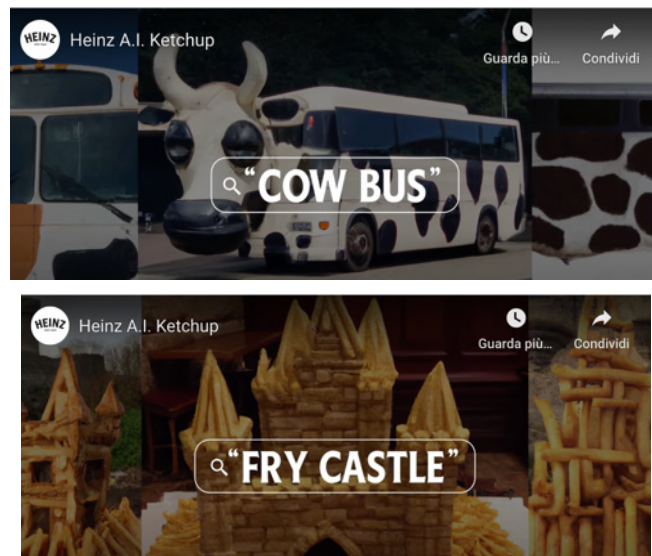


Figure 13. *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

In the following sequences, the brand, once again assuming the role of narrator-informer, offers the viewer the results of a social experiment conducted on the popular Dall-E image generator. After showing particularly popular usage practices based on the AI ability to represent what is considered bizarre or impossible (such as “cow bus” or “fry castle”), the brand shows Dall-E’s output resulting from the prompt: “ketchup”. This interestingly consists in a reliable reproduction of the product’s unambiguously famous packaging.



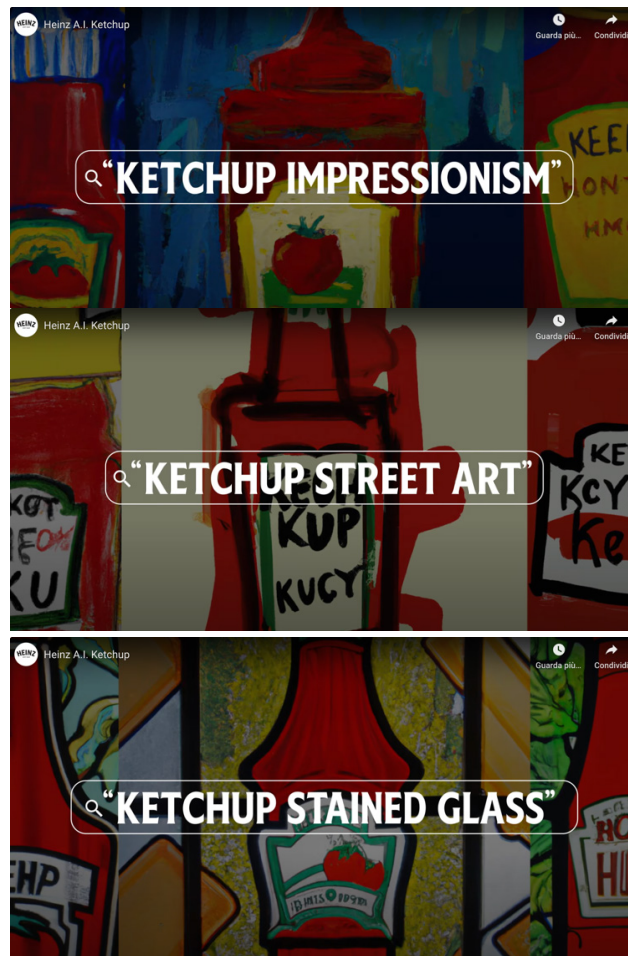
Figures 14-15. Heinz. “A-I Ketchup.” 2022. Creative agency: Rethink.



Figure 16. Heinz. “A-I Ketchup.” 2022. Creative agency: Rethink.

In subsequent images, the AI performance based on human prompting is judged by the very sender of the mediation-translation operation, who intervenes by exercising his/her sanction, passing judgment on the veridictory status of the object of knowledge and attributing to the viewer the thematic role of “witness”. After making it explicit that “even A.I. knows that ketchup is Heinz”, the campaign’s creative directors challenge Dall-E to translate a se-

ries of bizarre prompts, in continuity with the playful usage practices of the medium mentioned earlier. In the second part of the commercial, it emerges another isotopy concerning the challenge posed by humans against the artificial intelligence device in terms of creativity. This is done with a sequence of enunciated utterances in the form of prompts such as “ketchup impressionism”, “ketchup street art”, and “ketchup stained glass”.



Figures 17-19. Heinz. “A-I Ketchup.” 2022. Creative agency: Rethink.

In all AI-generated content, regardless of the artistic genre expressed in the prompt, the distinctive features of the product and brand emerge as a statement of the indisputable uniqueness of its symbolic value. The commercial then closes with the consideration that “no matter how we asked it. It has to be Heinz”. This is a statement that allows the brand to flaunt the human’s control over the device, exhibiting an instrumentalizing (and thus reassuring) use of AI that is all the more semiotically relevant as it mimics the increasingly common practice of creative agencies to use tools such as Dall-E to support certain stages of the creative process.

Finally, the isotopy of cohabitation between humans and AI devices in the production of creative content is again the focus of the latest campaign included in the textual corpus: KitKat's "Have AI break".



Figure 20. Kit Kat. "Have AI break. 2023. Creative agency: Wunderman Thompson.

We can here detect an ironic meta discourse regarding the co-enunciation of content, which is made possible by the process of delegation-translation from humans to technology. The brand develops a strong narration that results in distorting its own distinctive elements and identity, with the aim of critically underline the limitations of AI in embodying the narrative role of the Helper, as well as the thematic role of creatives. In fact, the text is topologically articulated in two spaces to which correspond the positions of the multiple instances of enunciation involved in the message and the irreconcilable asymmetry that distinguishes them on the plane of knowing (competence) and thus doing (performance).

In the left space, the verbal text refers to the decision of both the brand and the communication agency's creatives to delegate their role to an AI tool. This choice is ironically presented in the form of a prompt implying the possibility for humans to finally take a break from the communication activities that over the years have reinforced the association in consumers' minds between the product and the famous claim: "Kit Kat: take a break". The symmetrical space, to the right, contains the output of AI, which is characterized by numerous and obvious imperfections that manifest themselves on both the verbal and visual levels. From the choice of adopting irrelevant and misplaced expressions ("There is a Kit Kat!"), to gross errors in the claim ("take breaking" instead of the classic "take a break"), and finally to interventions in the lettering that translate the literal meaning of "break" (fall), simulating the recoil of a bump suffered by the word, in the form of a misalignment of the letters that compose it.

The isotopy of a poor creative performance, caused by the impossibility to understand the meaning of a delegation to AI, is reiterated on the visual level. The AI wrongly generated a hand with six fingers, but we can also detect a disproportion between the size of the hand and the packaging of the snack (an allusion to the common difficulty in some AI tools to accurately represent certain parts of the human body), and finally the particularly noticeable deformation of the logo on the packaging.

5. Conclusions. New brand rhetoric to the test of new hybrids

In all the campaigns analyzed, the meta discourse on the veridictory status regarding the AI co-produced content responds to a strategic logic that is strongly related to the cultural tensions structuring iconic brands. Brands set up a narrative that revolves around a deep, axiological conflict investing consumers and that not surprisingly structures the public debate on the outcomes of an excessive delegation towards AI. Specifically, we identified a pattern consisting of a critical-pedagogical meta discourse centered on the opposition between: *authenticity/simulation*, *responsibility/unconsciousness*. Furthermore, we understood that AI embodies the narrative role of the Opponent, motivated by the failure of humans to understand that the enabler of AI operations is not intelligence, but rather, agency.⁸ A recurring feature on the level of modalities attributed to AI is thus to reiterate that it is certainly endowed with an unprecedented capacity to produce content but is not endowed with knowledge, and that agency (being-able to do) does not coincide with wanting-to do, having-to do and knowing how-to do.

It thus emerges, clearly, how the effectiveness of the brand narrative is the outcome of a meta discourse focused on the critical outcomes of anthropomorphism, referring to the term's meaning recalled earlier. That is to say: as a phenomenon that largely transcends the plane of degrees of verisimilitude in the representation of the human to rather invest the question of new forms of life generated by the combination of multiform entities.

Recall that in the Latourian perspective, the association of humans and non-humans is described in terms of a *hybrid collective*, an expression that, while not belonging to the metalanguage of semiotics, is far from irrelevant to the analysis of artificial intelligence-mediated signification. In Latour, in fact, the reflection on hybrids takes shape within decades-long research devoted to the aporias of modernity, a crisis caused by the stubbornness to separate into two ontologically irreconcilable dimensions humans and non-humans, subjects and objects, refusing to acknowledge the coexistence and interdependence of two processes of meaning production. The first, termed *translation* or *mediation* allows moderns to produce a multiplicity of hybrids of nature and culture. The second action, mirroring the first, is called *purification* and consists in concealing the work of assembling multiform entities necessary to construct the hybrid entities themselves, which moderns are in any case unable to do without. In semiotic research, this notion of hybrid was used tactically over twenty years ago (Dusi, Marrone, Montanari 2002), coinciding with the emerging signs of the growing impact exerted on consumers by a new category of devices endowed with an unprecedented level of agency: cell phones, the ancestors of today's smartphones (not coincidentally among the first devices to be equipped with artificial intelligence). By tactical use we mean here the decision, as anticipated in the introduction of this paper, to measure the distance between structuralist-oriented semiotics and Latour's thought not so

⁸ On the unprecedented separation, in the history of the relationship linking humans and technology, between intelligence and AI agency see Floridi (2023).

much on an epistemological level as on a methodological one. Over twenty years ago, in fact, starting from the consideration that in the semiotic perspective the association between humans and non-humans can only take shape and consolidate because it is necessarily founded on a deep level of meaning, where a series of thematic and narrative roles allow a new agent to manifest itself and act within a specific narrative situation, it proved fruitful to analyze the unprecedented associations between humans and non-humans actions in the discourses of mobile phone brands, marketing communication essential to concretize and legitimize a new social actor: the mobile phone-man.

The potential of this approach is manifested and relaunched today in this research that aims to rethink the link between semiotic research on cultural branding and the critical analysis of social discourses, showing how mediation and purification are two meaning effects whose modes of representation can be explored. Following this approach, what makes these brand discourses particularly relevant is in fact the construction of a meta-narrative about the risks of a malfunction in the process of delegation from humans to technology, about the contingencies and errors that characterize the passage of agentivity between the various entities involved in the enunciation of content, in other words: about the criticalities of the association between multiple entities.

In the proposal put forward by Latour, and further developed in actor-network theory, the identity of an actant is enshrined in its ability to withstand a series of trials, where a decisive aspect consists in its ability to enter into relations with other actants, giving rise to associations that are more or less stable and extended in space and time. The malfunctioning of a technical object thus plays a decisive role in unraveling the anthropocentric bias that assigns humans control over non-humans, making it possible to show how the failure of the performance assigned to one of the actors involved in a program of action implies not only the loss of the object's capacity to signify itself but also the reconfiguration of the network of connections among the multiple entities of which it is a component.⁹

This is exactly what the campaigns allow us to observe: a macro discourse on the limits of cohabitation between multiform entities involved in the translation-delegation process, where brands, in order to claim their authority, exhibit, as an alibi, the fallacy of what they do not have full control of (the AI) but at the same time cannot do without. Even to the point of simulating error in the construction of discourse (Kit Kat) in order to flaunt the authenticity of their own narrative and, through it, populistically claim control of the human over the non-human.

The opportunity foreshadowed for semiotics of consumption thus proves to be more valuable than ever: to show how sophisticated branding rhetoric not only make evident but also contribute to reinforcing the interdependence between social, political and cultural discourses on which the controversy of the naturalization of a new "society of hybrids" is being played out.

⁹ See the famous analyses on the Berlin Key (Latour 1991) and the door closer (Latour 1993).

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