

The Thin Line between Real and Unreal A Semiotic Approach toward AI-generated Content in the Fashion Domain

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Abstract

Nowadays the fashion advertising scenario is rapidly changing. The rise of new technologies has notably influenced the way the apparel industry produces, distributes, and communicates. Among these technologies we find Artificial Intelligence (AI). Despite its widespread adoption, however, semiotics research has yet to focus on the verisimilitude meanings conveyed by AI-generated ads. This paper aims to fill this gap by focusing on two forms of textuality that are challenging the contemporary notion of advertising, namely Computer-Generated Imagery (CGI) and Deepfakes. For each of these communication forms, a semiotic analysis will be undertaken. The two content will provide valuable insights on the capabilities of AI in generating verisimilitude meanings for fashion brands as well as on the growing empowerment of the consumer to appropriate the brand's discourse, respectively. Implications for both theory and practice will be highlighted in the conclusion.

Parole chiave

Artificial Intelligence; Computer-Generated Imagery; Deepfakes; Fashion; Verisimilitude

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1. Introduction

It has been 20 years since the release of Steven Spielberg's sci-fi cult movie *Minority Report*, which ignited futuristic imaginations about the future of society in terms of the interaction between people and computers. Today, in a climate of abundant data and almost limitless processing, some of the bigger futuristic themes of the film – such as autonomous vehicles navigation and personalized ads in public spaces – are a current part of everyday life, thanks to the widespread adoption of Artificial Intelligence technologies.

Artificial Intelligence (henceforth AI) represents the simulation of human intelligence processes by machines performing complex tasks that previously only humans could do, such as reasoning, making decisions, or solving problems (Xu et al. 2021). A wide range of technologies that power many of the goods and services that people use every day make use of AI, such as apps that recommend movies or series as well as chatbots that provide customer support in real time. In 2023, the global market for AI technologies was around 200 billion U.S. dollars, and it is expected to grow over 1.8 trillion U.S. dollars by 2030 (Thormundsson 2024).

Nowadays AI is being used in a wide variety of industries, including advertising. For instance, advertisers make use of AI technology to decode customer data in order to derive insights (Mogaji et al. 2021) and thus optimize ads based on consumers' interests and preferences (Ford et al. 2023). Moreover, recent years have seen an increasing usage of AI-algorithm based tools such as *Machine Learning*, *Natural Language Processing*, and *Image and Speech Recognition* to generate unique and original ads (Tripathi et al. 2023).

Two of the most popular techniques based on machine learning algorithms are Computer-Generated Imagery (CGI) and Deepfakes. CGI is a specific computer graphics technology used to create images in movies, videogames, and advertising (Motioneditsmarketing 2023). Whilst CGI is not fully powered by AI, machine learning algorithms are used to animate characters and objects in a more realistic way, as well as to create virtual 3D environments and special effects (*ibidem*). Deepfakes instead use AI to synthesize new visual products, for instance by replacing the face or voice of a source (Floridi 2018). Their models are trained on real and authentic datasets to give birth to audio or footage that closely resemble authentic artifacts (Gramigna 2023).

The widespread adoption of AI in advertising, along with the increasing sophistication of technology (Karnouskos 2020), has enabled the creation of more refined and lifelike pictures and videos, making it difficult to distinguish between what is real and what is powered by an algorithm.

With its mimicry of human cognitive processes, artificial intelligence represents a fascinating topic for semiotics (Leone 2023a). Notwithstanding AI increasing dissemination, however, semiotic research on CGI and deepfake is still scant (Dondero 2021; Leone 2022; Santangelo 2022). More specifically, scholars have yet to focus on the effects of verisimilitude that these “synthetic ads” (Campbell et al. 2021) convey when shown up to human consumers.

This paper aims to fill this gap by focusing on two AI-generated and fashion-related content: the Instagram post “I think I like Paris now” by French

luxury brand Jacquemus, and the Youtube video “Harry Potter by Balenciaga” by the user Demonflyingfox. Fashion has been chosen as the context of the study because it represents one of the most creative industries in terms of advertising. The two cases will be analyzed using the veridictory square by Greimas and Courtés (1979). Since nowadays semiotics cannot ignore the social and cultural contexts in which AI systems are developed and used, the semiotic analyses will be integrated with the sentiment of social media users, thus furnishing valuable insights into how AI-generated verisimilitude meanings are perceived and interpreted by human consumers.

The semiotic approach can indeed provide a useful framework for understanding the complex interactions between AI systems and human beings (Leone 2023b), providing evidence of how meaning is generated in a human sense, and not from a software or algorithms standpoint (Matthews & Danesi 2019). This may be particularly important for understanding how AI systems may be perceived and used by different users as well as their potential biases and limitations (Leone 2023b).

The article is structured as follows: the first part will examine the concept of *fake* and how it has been treated according to semiotic literature. The second paragraph will offer an explanation of CGI from a verisimilitude perspective, also providing a semiotic analysis of the CGI-generated post “I think I like Paris now” by Jacquemus. In the third section, deepfake will be framed as a form of forgery. Then, the “Harry Potter by Balenciaga” deepfake video will be analyzed accordingly. Finally, theoretical contributions and managerial implications will be discussed in the last section.

2. The concept of *fake* in semiotics

Since AI currently offers a simulation of human intelligence, it can be studied by semiotics as a particular case of forgery (Leone 2023a).

Throughout the years, several scholars have dealt with the concept of forgery or “fake” in the semiotic realm. For instance, Charles Peirce (1878) provided a foundation for understanding the formation of true beliefs and false beliefs, including the possibility of falling into deception. Furthermore, Umberto Eco (1976), by analyzing the manipulation of meaning in contemporary culture, famously said that semiotics is the discipline that studies everything which can be used in order to lie. While not directly using the terms “fake” or “falsehood” in their essays, other academics implicitly contributed to the advancement of the semiotic literature on forgery, such as Roland Barthes (1957), who extensively discussed the theme of constructed representations, unveiling how everyday objects and images are imbued with meanings that construct particular myths. Similarly, Jean Baudrillard (1981) deeply addressed the concept of “simulation”, that is, the process by which reality is replaced by representations that are disconnected from it, thus inherently involving the idea of falsehood.

According to Massimo Leone (2023a), every historical era – and, thus, every culture – is characterized by specific modalities for the production of false representations that do not correspond to any ontological reality, and artificial

intelligence represents the predominant technology of fakery in current times. Within the realm of AI technologies, everything can be the subject of digital representations without ontological reference, as any digital representation that has an indexical relation to its object can be reproduced identically even when this relation is absent (Leone 2023b). To unfold this concept, the example of the photo aging apps, namely AI-powered free photo editors that make users' faces look decades older, can be used. In this case, any digital image of an aged face in a future whose ontology does not exist yet can be reconstructed in the present by means of a digital simulation. As a result, AI-generated artifacts can also represent nonexistent objects and make people believe in their existence (Leone 2023a), thus raising questions about the authenticity of digital content.

The blurring of the distinction between authentic and fake content poses important ontological and epistemological questions that semiotics needs to address (Gramigna 2023). In an essay on the production and recognition of copies and fakes from a semiotic standpoint, Daniele Barbieri (1987) argued that reality itself is a fake, since its hidden properties are often different from the expectations that its most evident properties arouse in us, which in turn are influenced by our values and general hopes. For instance, if we see a piece of brass we may think and hope it is gold, but compared to our hopes it can be considered a fake. Drawing from Hjelmslev's concept of substance (1961), Barbieri added that it is precisely this latter that deceives, because it is what remains unknown to us.

Within a similar vein, in a famous essay on the veridiction contract, Greimas, Collins and Perron (1989) argued that the subject of enunciation should no longer produce a true discourse, but rather one which produces a "truth" meaning. Hence, truth is nothing more than a meaning effect, and the discourse function is to be read as true by the recipient. Put simply, the construction of the effect of truth is greatly conditioned by the sender's manipulation, which is responsible for the success or failure of his discourse. In turn, the receiver's trust can be acquired only if it corresponds to his expectations (Greimas, Collins, & Perron 1989).

A useful tool for unveiling the meaning effects of AI-powered content is Greimas and Courtés' veridictory square (1979; fig. 1). This communication model focuses on the opposition being/seeming, making it relevant for texts in which truth/falsehood is a prominent theme (Hébert 2020). For this reason, it seems appropriate in order to analyze the verisimilitude meanings conveyed by AI-generated images and videos.

Six factors are taken into account by the veridictory square:¹ (1) an evaluating subject; (2) an object being evaluated according to (3) a specific characteristic; (4) a veridictory status: truth (being + seeming), falsehood (not-being + not-seeming), lie (not-being + seeming) and secret (being + not-seeming), (5) the time of the evaluation, and (6) any changes or transformations in any of these factors.

¹ The veridictory square must be distinguished from the semiotic square built on the opposition true/false. To the best of our knowledge, the relations between these two schemes have not been examined so far (Hébert 2020).

Since the four veridictory status (truth, lie, falsehood, and secret) result from the twofold contribution of the sender and the receiver, the veridictory square can also be used to analyze whether and how verisimilitude meanings are accepted, negotiated, or refused by the recipient of the communication.

For AI-generated ads, we assume that there are two subjects (the sender/content creator and the receiver/web user) who are supposed to evaluate an object (the content of a specific advertisement) according to a specific characteristic being evaluated (the object's verisimilitude). In the manipulation phase, the sender will evaluate the ad content as truthful, and as such wants it to be evaluated by the receiver, who in turn must recognize its verisimilitude before accepting the veridiction contract. Within this context, the truth results from the proximity between the AI-generated material and its ontological reference. If this happens, that is, if *being* corresponds to *seeming*, the sanction will be positive and will give rise to a second-generation evaluation, i.e. the truth. Falsehood instead occurs when the advertisement is neither truthful nor appears as such, and thus *non-being* corresponds to *non-seeming*.

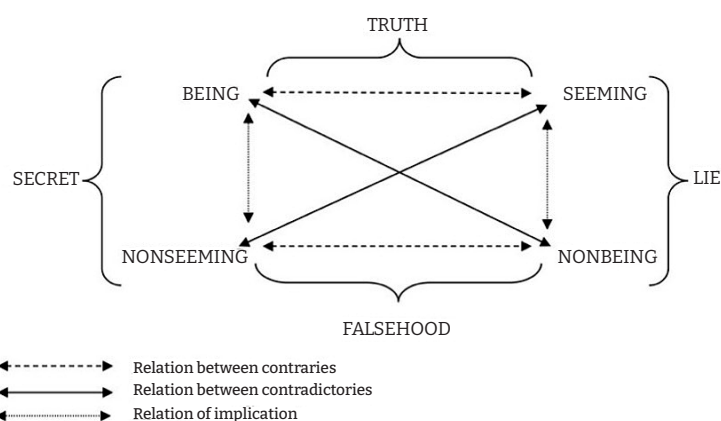


Figure 1. The veridictory square by Greimas and Courtés (1979).

A little bit trickier are the cases of lie and secret. To uncover them, we can adopt Aage Brandt's (1995) alternative terms for lie and secret, namely *simulation* and *dissimulation* respectively. While the purpose of simulation is to display the false, the aim of dissimulation is to hide the real (Bowyer 1982). Therefore, we can hypothesize that whether an AI audio or video content simulates a situation of reality – hence it seems to be real, but it is not, being it AI-generated – we are in the domain of the lie. Finally, when an advertisement depicts an object that does not seem to be real, but it turns out to be so, we have a dissimulation of reality and thus we are in the secret realm.

The veridictory square is more than just a static scheme illustrating a series of alternative status; it's a dynamic instrument for tracing the movement of meaning in a given text. Within this context, the evolution of the verisimilitude meaning of an AI-generated content can be read as a path that goes from an initial state of truth (both *seeming* and *being*), until the moment of resolution of the communication, in which the recipient realizes the artificiality of

the content and formulates a second evaluation (*lie*) which will then flow into the falsehood domain (*non-seeming* and *non-being*).

The following paragraphs will focus on two different kinds of AI-generated content, namely CGI and deepfakes. As both these contemporary forms of advertising create and communicate meaning through signs and symbols, they will be framed as a form of textuality and therefore analyzed through the lens of the veridictory square. Moreover, since as mentioned above the boundaries between what is considered as “true” or “false” at a given historical moment are not fixed, but constantly negotiated by the sender and the receiver (Gramigna 2023), a glance at users’ reaction to AI-generated content on social media will further enrich the analysis.

3. CGI as a new form of textuality

Computer Generated Imagery (CGI) refers to the process of using computer graphics to create pictures or characters in art, film, television, videogames, and advertising. Over the past few years, technologies for creating CGI have notably advanced (Miao et al. 2022), driving innovation in various marketing strategies and capturing consumers’ interest and attention (Yu et al. 2024).

In order to understand the capabilities of CGI, the concept of fake-out-of-home (FOOH) advertising needs to be explained. FOOH campaigns are outdoor advertisements based on CGI that use public spaces to create realistic images that are entirely fictional (Gupta 2024). These ads seamlessly blend with real-world environments, tricking the viewer’s eye and triggering emotional responses and amazement. One example is the video of London’s Big Ben wearing a yellow North Face jacket, published by JD Sports on its Instagram and Tiktok pages.²

This kind of advertising reshapes the way brands impress their audiences in the online realm by blurring the boundaries between authenticity and falsity. When users first see CGI images and footage on social media, they may initially perceive these scenarios as real and therefore they like, comment, or share the content, thus boosting brand engagement. However, a deeper look at the media content as well as at other users’ interactions can reveal the artificial nature of the ad material and make individuals reassess their evaluation. In other words, CGI exploits the difficulty of our brain to distinguish whether what it seems is what it is (i.e., in semiotic terms, the *truth*), or what it seems is not what it is (i.e., the *lie*), leading users to question whether what they are witnessing is authentic or just an illusion.

The rise of AI-powered content has led to the emergence of “synthetic advertising”, that is, ads that are generated or edited through the artificial and automatic production and modification of data (Campbell et al. 2021). To date, it is almost impossible for consumers to distinguish synthetic advertising from reality, and it is likely that advances in technology will make it even more difficult in the future (ibidem). The capabilities of AI algorithms in generating verisimilitude meanings will be further explored in the next paragraph.

² <<https://www.instagram.com/jdsports/reel/CzZIZLMN1yr/>>.

3.1. Case study 1: “I think I like Paris now” by Jacquemus

Nowadays the social media impact on fashion brands’ communication cannot be underestimated. This is mostly the case of the French brand Jacquemus, whose owner and designer Simone Porte has harnessed the power of new media – especially Instagram – to create a visual moodboard for his company (McLean 2020), thus earning the label of fashion’s favourite “Insta-brand” (Fury 2019).

As a digital-first company, most of Jacquemus’ Instagram content consists of CGI-based images and video posts that depict branded products in surrealist contexts, often distorting them in size and playing with the objects’ benefits to the consumer. These over-the-top advertisements can gain fashion and marketing enthusiasts’ interest and contribute to enhancing brand awareness.



Figure 2. Frame from Le Bambino 2023 campaign.

A particularly successful case was April 2023’s campaign for the iconic Le Bambino bag.³ The campaign depicts some giant, brightly coloured bags on wheels passing in front of the Opera Garnier in Paris (fig. 2). The content takes the form of a reel, namely a short-form highly constrained vertical video that is well suited for the fast-paced fruition of the typical social media user. The eight-second spot was published synchronously on Instagram and Tiktok and adopts a subjective shot, as if someone had filmed the scene and it had gone viral. At the time of writing the content has obtained around 2 million likes and 15.000 comments on both social media. The choice of Instagram and Tiktok channels was strategic, since these platforms have always pushed for the creation of short and informal videos that allow for a more natural

³ <<https://www.instagram.com/reel/CqQcfr-uovy/?igshid=MzRIODBiNWF1ZA%3D%3D>>.

and spontaneous tie between content creators and consumers (Barta et al. 2023). As well, the format perfectly fits the storytelling of Jacquemus' company, which has built its Instagram feed as if it were the personal blog of the founder Simone Porte, alternating travel and private moments with corporate communication content.

From a denotative perspective, the reel is quick and fast-paced, with no verbal explanation beyond the content caption. The use of CGI to animate the purses results in the distortion of the products' size as well as in the manipulation of the surrounding urban setting, with the horizontal street signs featuring the words "Bambino" and "Jacquemus".

The bags are portrayed in an everyday situation, as they proceed along the street trying to blend into the normal flow of Parisian traffic. The Haussmannian buildings and the familiar landmarks of Paris are chosen as setting as they symbolize the elegance and tradition associated with fashion, and thus connects the Jacquemus brand to an idealized and fashionable semantic universe. However, the contrast between the neutral tones of the Parisian architecture and the hyperbolized and brightly coloured bags creates a visual tension between the ordinary (i.e., Paris and, more broadly, fashion) and the fantastic (i.e., Jacquemus), emphasizing the playful and surrealistic image of the brand.

On a connotative level, the brand become associated with an imagery that mixes everyday life and fantasy, inviting consumers to reinterpret reality through its playful and innovative lens. Whilst the urban context of Paris embodies meanings of elegance and high-end fashion, Jacquemus distinguish itself for its creative and avant-garde identity, inviting the audience to participate in its distortion of the ordinary by embracing the brand's narrative. The oversized bags indeed are not just fashionable symbols of luxury and status but becomes entangled with meanings of playfulness and excess. Moreover, the CGI manipulation metaphorically amplifies their importance and desirability among consumers, turning a common accessory into a cultural symbol representing how dominant luxury consumption can be in the lives of Jacquemus' followers. Hence, the deeper meaning suggested by the CGI-made ad is that Jacquemus can transform the mundane into something surreal and extraordinary. By distorting the size of the bags and integrating them into an everyday Parisian scene, Jacquemus invites the consumer to embrace an altered and playful view of reality, where the brand's prominence is magnified and luxury consumption is portrayed in an exaggerated form.

Nonetheless, what makes the user understand the artificiality of the situation are the traces of enunciation, namely the previously mentioned signs on the ground depicting the words "Bambino" and "Jacquemus". The Jacquemus brand, which acts as the enunciator, manifests itself within the text through an embrayage/engagement, created by the two simulacra of the enunciation (i.e., the brand name and the product name). The two simulacra of the enunciation therefore raise doubts about the verisimilitude of the content. While setting up a bus as a giant bag is plausible – albeit time-consuming and expensive, but still acceptable considering the marketing budget of a luxury brand – changing Parisian street signs is not feasible. Moreover, even if the content adopts the subjective short reel format, the situation is not experienced direct-

ly by the target, but narrated through social media, as if it were a *débrayage*/disengagement of the realistic (but not real) situation recreated by the brand thanks to the usage of CGI.

From a spatial semiotics perspective, the topic space is represented by Paris, whose Haussmannian buildings allow for an immediate recognition of the city in which the narrative takes place. The topic space encompasses a paratopic space and a utopic space. The former is metaphorically represented by the computer program aimed at generating CGI images, thus giving the brand the competence to undertake the performance of showing bags rolling in the utopic space, i.e., the road and the urban transport line in front of the Opera Garnier. Lastly, since the heterotopic space is where the subject is sanctioned, we can consider the comment section on Instagram as such. Here, the recipients of the communication decide whether or not to accept the veridiction contract.

Among the Instagram and Tiktok comments,⁴ excluding bots and people who interact only with emojis to the content, users' reactions can be classified mainly into two strands: the incredulous and the ironic ones. The first ones question the verisimilitude of the advertising message, asking other users if the advert is real or generated by artificial intelligence (fig. 3a). The second ones prevail on Tiktok and seem to accept the verisimilitude of the communication, replying to the content with irony and therefore transforming themselves from enunciator to enunciatee of the brand's discourse. These comments can be seen as a contemporary manifestation of what the English poet and philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge called the "suspension of disbelief", suggesting that the reader agrees to accept as true what the writer is telling him, despite knowing that it might be fictitious. More specifically, comments like "I take my bag and arrive" or "A bag hit me" (fig. 3b; my translations) transform the brand narrative into a collective one, in which dynamics of negotiations of the veridiction contract occur, and the production of truth meaning is decentralized. The narrative is no longer solely in the hands of the brand, but users become themselves producers of verisimilitude meanings, thus enriching the brand resonance as well as its cultural relevance.



Figure 3a. Screenshot of Instagram comments.

⁴ <<https://www.tiktok.com/@jacquemus/video/7218514305401031941?lang=it-IT>>.

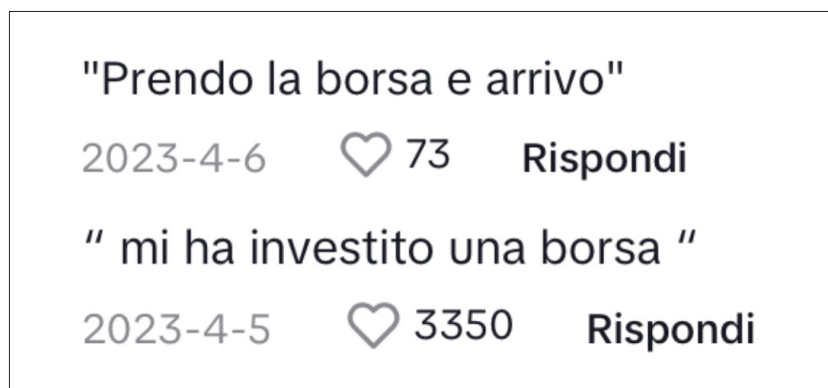


Figure 3b. Screenshot of Tiktok comments.

4. The semiotics of deepfakes

Deepfakes are AI-generated content that depicts a highly convincing yet artificial and fake version of reality (Campbell et al. 2021). These AI-driven procedures leverage powerful techniques from machine learning and generative adversarial networks (GANs) to replace the attributes (e.g., face or voice) of a source with those of a target (Floridi 2018; Karnouskos 2020), thus creating false scenes or statements that appear authentic. Since these tools are able to emulate the style and the way authentic videos work, they make the AI-generated materials almost indistinguishable from the real ones and therefore have a high potential to deceive (Kietzmann et al. 2020)

Nowadays a wide variety of deepfakes exist and circulate on social media. A commonly used technique is the so-called “Face Swap”, through which the face of a famous individual is changed with that of another with a very realistic and disturbing effect (Gramigna 2023). Probably one of the most famous examples is Barack Obama’s 2018 video⁵ ironically warning about the dangers of deepfakes (Karnouskos 2020). Through repeated iterations and refinement, and using vast amounts of original Obama footage as training data, the former US President has been depicted in a situation he has never actually participated in and saying things he never actually said.

Deepfakes are a direct consequence of the massive amount of data and images available on the web, as well as their ease of access and manipulation (Gramigna 2023). The spread of images and videos enabled by digital media has allowed deepfakes not only to emulate and mimic authentic content but also to produce it ex-nihilo from pre-existing datasets, that is, already existing content circulating on the web.

From a veridictory standpoint, deepfakes fall between the domain of lie and falsehood. When given sufficient clues about their falsity, individuals are both surprised by deepfakes’ ability to simulate something that does not exist, and at the same time worried about being tricked into believing what is false (Leone 2023a).

⁵ <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cQ54GDm1eLo>>.

The following paragraph provides evidence of the simulation of reality that can be performed by a deepfake content. The video offers a representation of what the Harry Potter cast would look like if they were dressed by Balenciaga, combining high fashion with pop culture. Although it is not a real advertisement but rather a user-generated content, the footage proves useful for undertaking a reflection on how artificial intelligence is likely to influence the apparel sector in the coming years.

4.1. Case study 2: “Harry Potter by Balenciaga” by @demonflyingfox

“Harry Potter by Balenciaga” is a 54-second video created by a Youtuber who goes under the name of @demonflyingfox with the aid of Midjourney, a generative AI instrument that converts natural language descriptions prompts into images. The video was released in March 2023 and has garnered over 12 million views and 9,600 comments so far.⁶

The 22 short shots depict a fake trailer for a hypothetical film from the Harry Potter saga set in a world where everyone wears Balenciaga (fig. 4). The video does not feature a conventional narrative with a well-defined plot. Rather, it is a series of close-ups of more or less recognizable characters – among whom we can find Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger, Rubeus Hagrid, Albus Dumbledore, Minerva McGranitt, Severus Snape, Draco Malfoy, Dobby, and Voldemort – who find themselves wearing outfits from the Balenciaga’s fall-winter 2023/2024 collection.



Figure 4. Frame from “Harry Potter by Balenciaga” footage.

On a denotative level, the use of deepfake AI tools (such as MidJourney) to generate visual content has created a sort of algorithmic aesthetics following precise rules and conventions typical of fashion campaigns, such as zoom-ins, slow movements, and unnatural poses. As well, the deep house music and the

⁶ <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iE39q-IKOzA>>.

sounds of photographic shoots contribute to recreating an atmosphere consistent with the high-end fashion imagery.

The dark setting, the predominance of black-Balenciaga outfits, the cold facial expressions of the characters as well as their exaggerated fashion poses are expressive elements that seem familiar yet also alienating (e.g., the subjects' resemblance to famous actors). All these elements delivered by AI indeed diverge from the traditional personalities of Harry Potter characters in the mind of the target users. Within a similar vein, the cold and almost hypnotic rhythm of the sound in the background have nothing to do with the fantasy realm of Harry Potter, creating a disruption between the depicted setting and viewers' expectations.

From a connotative standpoint, the AI-generated video replaces traditional meanings related to the Harry Potter universe with those of Balenciaga. Whilst Harry Potter characters typically embody meanings of bravery, youthfulness, and magic, these traits are subverted by the high-fashion context of the apparel brand, where values such luxury, minimalism, coldness, and mystery prevail. This shift translates into the transformation of Harry Potter characters into high-end fashion models. For instance, Harry Potter is no longer depicted as the wizard who fights against Voldemort, but rather as a model representing the prestige linked with Balenciaga. Iconic statements from the movies are also adapted to fit the fashion context, such as "What is the difference, Potter, between H&M and Balenciaga?" and "There is no good and evil. There is only Balenciaga". Hence, the characters appear to be transformed into mannequins for expensive clothes, suggesting a sense of disenchantment where magic is replaced by elitism and social prestige.

Within the context of this video, two levels of enunciation occur. The first one is between the creator of the content and the AI, in line with Latour's idea of delegation of human agency to machines (Latour 1987): the former inserts a human input in the software and obtains a response from the AI program, which in turn is reworked by the user's human agency and so on until the formation of a final co-constructed content. Through advanced AI algorithms, the output of the software used by @demonflyingfox is a multimedia content that captures voices and faces of real actors (which differ from the traditional Harry Potter cast) and re-proposes them in a cold and dark Hogwarts-like setting.

The second level of enunciation instead takes place between the creator @demonflyingfox and the final target of the content, that is, Youtube users, who are responsible for sanctioning the creator's work by accepting or rejecting the verisimilitude contract. What makes users understand the artificiality of the situation here is no longer the utopic space, as in the case of Jacquemus, but rather the appearances of the subjects. On the one hand, Dobby's suspicious resemblance to Tilda Swinton or Hagrid's similarity to Jason Momoa (fig. 5a) reveal the fact that the AI program was not able to choose real Harry Potter actors, but rather trained on images of famous people and adapted them to the cultural context in question. On the other hand, the creepy mimicry as well as the asepticity of the characters uncovers the inability of AI to realistically imitate facial expressions and emotions (fig. 5b).

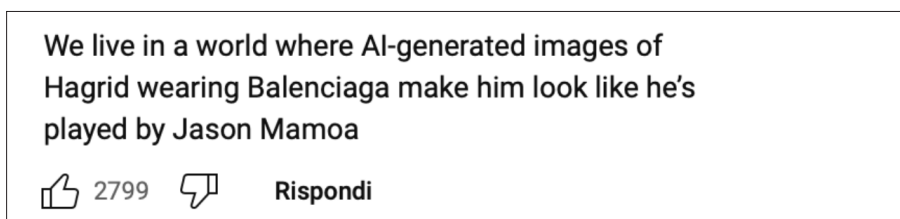


Figure 5a. Screenshot of Youtube comments.

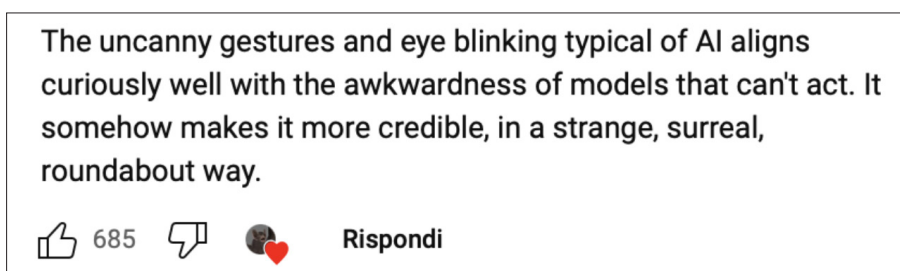


Figure 5b. Screenshot of Youtube comments.

A final reflection on the potential of deepfakes in the advertising realm is worth mentioning. Even if they are not a real form of advertisement, but rather an example of user-generated content (UGC), they still have important implications for the awareness and reputation of brands, as they too represent a form of textuality that complement the conventional forms of advertising communication. UGC refer to any form of content created by users and published on the Internet (Santos 2022), including all those discussions regarding the brand that are beyond its control because they are driven and dominated by consumers (Halliday 2016), as in the “Harry Potter by Balenciaga” case. On the one hand, the widespread dissemination of deepfakes can cause brands to lose control of their image and risks diluting their desirability, since deepfakes confuse people about which messages come directly from the brand and which from the fans. Furthermore, they are also dangerous because they equally participate in the construction of the brand image in an uncontrolled way. However, if well directed, they can certainly implement a strategic advantage in terms of communication, as bottom-up conversations generated spontaneously by the audience represents the highest form of cultural relevance a brand can get (Campbell et al. 2011).

5. Conclusion

This article provides a semiotic conceptualization of two contemporary forms of textuality that complement traditional forms of advertising, namely CGI-generated ads and deepfake content. Although the two discursive forms slightly differ from each other, some similarities can still be traced.

First, findings provide evidence of how AI technologies influence both the denotative and connotative level of communication. In the Jacquemus ad, CGI

was found to reshape expressive features by amplifying the dimension of the bags, thus metaphorically increasing the importance of luxury in everyday life. The Balenciaga case instead reveals how the algorithmic constraints imposed by Midjourney – which assembles pieces from pre-existing data – generate a cold and sterile aesthetics. Although AI-generated visual features mimic real-world faces and gestures, they often remain imperfect and uncanny also from a content standpoint (e.g., not using the actual Harry Potter actors in the footage).

Second, both CGI and deepfake technologies were found to create tensions that reveal the artificiality of the content. In the CGI-generated video, the surrealist contrast between the hyperbolized, brightly colored bags and Paris' elegant urban setting reflects Jacquemus' juxtaposition of reality and imaginary, transforming an ordinary object like a purse into something extraordinary. The Balenciaga video, on the other hand, turns Harry Potter cast into high-fashion models, presenting them in a prestigious luxury setting that clashes with the characters' traditional magical attributes, which still persist as hidden properties (Barbieri 1987) in the mind of the audience.

For what concerns the veridiction contract, both campaigns rely on the audience's acceptance of their non-realistic content. The sender's intent in both cases is playful, using excess or fantasy to encourage receivers to temporarily suspend disbelief. Whilst CGI moves from a status of truth to lie, with users eventually realizing that what they are witnessing is just illusory, deepfakes stand between the domain of lie and falsehood. By detecting some limits of AI, such as the difficulty in replicating human mimicry and emotions, the communication recipients know that these content are fake, yet they are surprised by AI models' ability to simulate something that does not exist. In both campaigns, viewer reactions – whether incredulous or ironic in response to Jacquemus or unsettled by the creepy nature of Balenciaga – contribute to brand discourse, enhancing consumer engagement as well as brand awareness.

Furthermore, both campaigns demonstrate how AI-powered ads can impact brand image, inviting viewers to engage with the brands in a new and creative way. While Jacquemus leverages AI to enhance its desirability and status, the Balenciaga video, as a form of user-generated content, blurs the line between official and fan-created content. This innovative use of technology boosts the brands' cultural resonance, though also raising questions about authenticity and control over brand messages.

Of course, AI-powered ads offer clear advantages in terms of time, cost, and creativity. If used appropriately, they can help build strong brand images as well as offer ways to connect with consumers. The use of AI algorithms in generating ad content offers the possibility of gaining consumers' attention, playing with their expectations, and thus stimulating their involvement. However, brand managers and advertisers should not overuse AI to avoid endangering the relationship of trust between brands and consumers. AI-powered content indeed raises questions about the authenticity of the firm's message, increasing the risk of consumers being deceived, which could lead to negative outcomes for the company.

To sum up, advertisers should find a balance between creative innovation and authenticity: brands themselves must be transparent with their con-

sumers and use AI responsibly, without compromising the trust they have managed to build in their audiences. Finally, the findings of this article offer pivotal communication insights for fashion companies, suggesting that verisimilitude meanings will be likely to become the most important brand asset in the coming years.

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