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From Visual Seduction to Emotional Resonance: Generation Z and the Quest for Authenticity in AI-Driven Luxury

Prof. Paolo Peverini

SUPERVISOR

Prof. Alba D'Aniello

CO-SUPERVISOR

Serena Pata
Matric. 787501

CANDIDATE

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Table of contents

Introduction

In today's digital era, the very definition of "luxury" is undergoing a profound reconfiguration, suspended between the valorisation of tradition and the promises of innovation brought about by emerging technologies. In particular, the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into the communicative and design practices of the luxury sector has given rise to new forms of aesthetics, storytelling and interaction, that are redefining not only the language of brands, but also the type of symbolic relationship they establish with the consumer.

In this context is situated the present research, which aims to explore through a critical and semiotic lens the impact of AI-generated visual and verbal languages content on the perception of authenticity and on the emotional connection towards brands by Generation Z. Raised in a hyperconnected digital ecosystem, this generation manifests a value-oriented attitude towards authenticity, narrative coherence and ethical commitment (Deloitte, 2023), revealing itself as a particularly sensitive interlocutor with regard to the symbolic and relational quality of brand experiences.

Through a qualitative approach and an integrated methodology, this thesis combines the semiotic analysis of three emblematic campaigns: *Afterworld - The Age of Tomorrow* [1] by Balenciaga, *Nowhere*[2] by Etro and *Parallel Universes: From Future frequences to Gucci Cosmos*[3] by Gucci, with an empirical investigation conducted through a focus group. The objective is twofold: on the one hand, to decode the narrative, aesthetic and value strategies enacted by brands; on the other, to understand the ways in which such strategies are received, interpreted and emotionally processed by recipients.

From a theoretical standpoint, the investigation is grounded in a semiotic perspective, intended not as mere decoding of the advertising message, but as an analytical tool to break down meaning-making processes, enunciative strategies and regimes of veridiction (Barthes, 1964; Greimas & Courtés, 1982). Artificial intelligence is therefore interrogated

[1] *Balenciaga – Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow*, official YouTube channel, published on 8 December 2020. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hu_08WchxnU
[2] *Etro – Nowhere*, advertising campaign covered by Inside Marketing. Available at: https://www.insidemarketing.it/campagna-etro-nowhere-con-intelligenza-artificiale/
[3] *Gucci – Parallel Universes*, advertising campaign published on Gucci Art Space. Available at: https://artspace.gucci.com/gallery/parallel-universes/grid

not only as a technology, but as a cultural device capable of generating or compromising dense and coherent symbolic experiences (Floridi & Chiriatti, 2020).

The work is structured in four chapters: the first outlines the theoretical framework of luxury in the digital era, with particular attention to its symbolic and narrative evolution; the second explores the redefinition of aesthetics and authenticity in the use of AI, through the lens of emerging Gen Z values; the third presents the analysis of the case studies and the adopted methodology; finally, the fourth chapter collects the results of the investigation, the theoretical and managerial implications, and the concluding reflections.

The research question guiding the entire path is the following: In what way do visual and verbal languages generated by artificial intelligence in luxury communication campaigns influence Generation Z consumers' perception of authenticity and emotional connection?

Through this question, the study aims to contribute to a critical reflection on the role of artificial intelligence in redefining the imaginary of luxury and its discursive practices, while also offering an interpretive tool useful both to academic research and to brand strategies in the post-digital landscape

CHAPTER 1: Luxury in the Digital Era – Transformations and Challenges

The luxury industry is a constantly evolving sector, shaped by cultural, technological, and social transformations that intersect and redefine how brands build their value and interact with consumers. The digital era introduces new dynamics every day, changing the meaning of luxury and consumer expectations. While exclusivity in the past was closely tied to the material rarity of an object, today luxury is increasingly seen as an experience based on personalization and interactivity. This new vision is fuelled by symbolic narratives and the use of emerging technologies.

This chapter analyses the main transformations and challenges characterizing luxury in the digital age, exploring its evolution from three key perspectives: the cultural and semiotic value of luxury, the role of Generation Z as a luxury consumer, and the impact of artificial intelligence on personalization and innovation in the sector. Through this analysis, the chapter aims to offer a comprehensive overview of the transformations in luxury in the digital age, highlighting the opportunities and challenges emerging from the intersection of tradition, technology, and new cultural sensitivities.

The first section of the chapter examines luxury as a semiotic and narrative phenomenon, delving into the discursive and symbolic strategies that brands use to build brand value. The next section will analyse the shift from tangible luxury to so-called experiential luxury, highlighting the role new technologies are playing in transforming luxury consumption into a multisensory and personalized experience. Finally, ethical issues raised by the integration of artificial intelligence in the luxury sector will be addressed, with particular attention to themes of authenticity and transparency.

The second section explores the role of Generation Z as a new key consumer in the luxury sector, analysing its main characteristics and purchasing motivations, as well as the importance of values such as authenticity, ethics, and personalization in their consumption choices.

The third section offers an overview of the development and evolution of artificial intelligence, starting from its fundamental principles, tracing its evolution from early automation models to the most recent generative systems, and exploring its applications in key sectors such as retail, healthcare, manufacturing, and marketing.

Finally, the fourth and final section will analyse the impact of artificial intelligence on luxury, with particular attention to personalized branding strategies, the use of AI for narrative construction and emotional engagement in luxury brands, and the differences between AI applications in luxury compared to other sectors.

1.1 Luxury, Experience, and Meaning in the Digital Era

In the contemporary landscape, luxury has evolved from a narrow focus on material exclusivity to encompass broader experiential and symbolic dimensions. Historically tied to tangible objects and often signifiers of status, rarity, and craftsmanship, luxury now reveals itself through immersive narratives, interactive encounters, and culturally resonant storytelling. The digital era, with its seamless connectivity and user-driven content, has amplified this transition, allowing brands and consumers alike to reshape how value is created, shared, and perceived. Rather than simply owning a luxury good, individuals increasingly seek experiences that reflect personal identity, engage emotional responses, and foster authentic connections (Barthes, 1957; Bourdieu, 1984). From this perspective, understanding contemporary luxury involves examining how signification processes transform objects into carriers of social meaning, cultural narratives, and personal aspiration. Brands craft a repertoire of symbolic codes ranging from aesthetic design to ritualized consumption practices, that position their offerings as exceptional. In the digital space, these codes are further enriched by new tools of engagement: immersive technologies, participatory campaigns, and interactive platforms that give rise to experiences transcending the material dimension. The resulting interplay between exclusivity and participation, heritage and innovation, intensifies the emotional bond between brand and consumer, redefining luxury as an ongoing dialogue rather than a static possession (Dion & Arnould, 2011; Jenkins, 2006).

As these trends unfold, the meaning of luxury extends beyond economic value and enters the realm of cultural significance. Consumers, especially younger cohorts, increasingly judge luxury brands by their ability to provide meaningful experiences and align with ethical, environmental, or personal values. In this light, luxury products become touchpoints in a broader storytelling process, wherein both brand and consumer co-construct identity and aspiration. An exclusive item may still be coveted for its scarcity

or craftsmanship, yet the digital era has introduced new ways to deliver immaterial worth through behind-the-scenes access, creative collaborations, and immersive virtual interfaces that situate luxury within an expanded experiential universe (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009; Holt, 2004).

Ultimately, luxury in the digital era is a multifaceted phenomenon, where material opulence coexists with dynamic, user-centric encounters. The following discussion will explore how this shift from tangible to experiential luxury is reshaping brand strategies, consumer expectations, and the very nature of what it means to be “exclusive.” By examining the evolving symbolic codes, ritualized practices, and narrative possibilities, we can better grasp how experience and meaning converge to redefine luxury for a global, hyperconnected audience.

1.1.1 Luxury as a symbolic and narrative construction

In the contemporary context, the concept of luxury has undergone a profound transformation. It can no longer be reduced to the mere possession of material goods; rather, it increasingly presents itself as a cultural construction: an ensemble of codes and narratives that convey values, identity, and status (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009). This shift is especially evident in the digital age, where brand value is shaped through symbolic, visual, and discursive strategies aimed at constructing experiential and identity-driven universes for consumers.

From this perspective, luxury is not the object itself, but a system of signs whose value is determined by its positioning within a specific cultural and social context (Barthes, 1957). Semiotics reveals that the meaning of an object is never intrinsic but rather constructed and negotiated through language, social practices, and discursive strategies activated by brands. In his theory of modern myth, Roland Barthes illustrates how luxury is not simply a material good, but a symbolic construction mediated through branding and advertising. A high-end watch, an iconic handbag, or an exclusive fragrance do not exist as "luxury goods" per se: they acquire this status only by being inscribed within a semiotic system that endows them with aspirational, aesthetic, and cultural significance (Barthes, 1957; Bourdieu, 1984).

Luxury, therefore, is a fluid concept, built through narrative strategies that reinforce the relationship between the consumer and the symbolic meaning of the object. Kapferer (2015) argues that luxury brands do not merely sell products: they construct symbolic and narrative worlds that transcend the materiality of the good, transforming it into an object of desire. The semiotic value of luxury rests on three key elements that together build a coherent and recognizable discourse.

The first is heritage and historical legitimacy. Luxury brands often position themselves as heirs to tradition, enhancing their authenticity through references to their past and the continuity of their legacy. Narratives about origins, the celebration of craftsmanship, and associations with iconic events or figures help frame luxury as a timeless expression of excellence. This is particularly evident in brands like Hermès or Rolex, which emphasize their longevity as proof of their cultural authority (Holt, 2004).

The second element is exclusivity and ritualization. Luxury is not universally accessible; its value is derived through a mechanism of selection that establishes a clear boundary between those who can and cannot access it (Bourdieu, 1984). Controlled accessibility is a fundamental strategy in the construction of luxury's social meaning. This exclusivity is enacted through ritualized practices: private event invitations, personalized boutique experiences, and carefully managed waiting periods for iconic products (such as the Hermès Birkin bag) are all tactics used to maintain the aura of rarity and distinction (Dion & Arnould, 2011).

The third element is aestheticization and symbolic value. Luxury is rarely functional in the conventional sense. Rather, it is shaped through an aesthetic process that transforms the product into an object of desire rather than need (Baudrillard, 1998). What distinguishes a luxury product is not merely the quality of its materials or craftsmanship, but its ability to evoke ideas of beauty, status, and perfection. This is particularly evident in the fashion industry, where haute couture collections are not created for everyday use, but to assert the brand's artistic identity and aesthetic supremacy.

These three elements contribute to the construction of a mythical discourse, in which the signifier (the luxury object) and the signified (status, exclusivity, distinction) are constantly reinforced through sophisticated communication practices. Luxury functions

within a dynamic of desire that can only be sustained if the product remains, at least in part, unattainable removed from the realm of ordinary consumption. To reinforce this semiotic system, brands adopt a series of well-defined discursive strategies: the hyperreality of luxury, brand personification, and the consistent use of recurring symbols and codes. Brands do not sell a product: they sell the idea of an ideal and inaccessible lifestyle, emphasizing the artistic and conceptual dimension of luxury rather than its materiality (Baudrillard, 1998). The association with iconic figures further strengthens brand identity: consider the link between Chanel and Coco Chanel, or how designers like Tom Ford or Karl Lagerfeld embedded their distinct aesthetic vision within the fashion houses they led. Every luxury brand constructs a unique repertoire of recognizable signs, whether through design elements (such as Louis Vuitton's monogram) or immaterial codes like language and visual storytelling (Jenkins, 2006).

Ultimately, luxury is not a mere economic category but a semiotic and narrative mechanism that separates the ordinary consumer from the elite. Through sophisticated communication and the strategic use of symbolic codes, luxury brands generate an aura that elevates them above mass-market goods, reinforcing their immaterial value and perpetuating their desirability (Bourdieu, 1984).

1.1.2 The Transition from Tangible Luxury to Experiential Luxury in the Digital Era

Historically, the evolution of luxury has followed a logic of social differentiation based on the ownership of rare and exclusive material things (Bourdieu, 1984). Though, as the market has changed and digitalization has arrived, luxury has slowly dematerialized from a notion connected to the ownership of a physical item to a system based on lived experience and the building of individual and group meanings (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). The transition from tangible luxury to experiential luxury can be interpreted through two key dynamics: the growing emphasis on self-identity and technological innovation.

The first element concerns the evolution of the motivations that drive consumers toward luxury. While luxury was primarily a sign of belonging to a social elite in the past, today it is increasingly perceived as an element of self-expression. New generations are not only seeking exclusive objects but experiences that reflect their personality and values (Dion

& Arnould, 2011). This phenomenon is closely linked to the construction of digital identity: the consumption of luxury is increasingly manifested through shared narratives on social media, where the symbolic and experiential value of the interaction can surpass that of the material possession of the product (Gentina, Shrum, & Daucé, 2018). At the same time, technological progress has made possible a luxury that exists beyond the physical dimension of the object, enabling digital, immersive, and interactive experiences. Tools such as augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and artificial intelligence (AI) have expanded the very concept of luxury, offering personalized multisensory journeys that enhance the symbolic value of the brand and strengthen the emotional connection with the consumer (Bain & Company, 2024).
An emblematic case is represented by Gucci's Vault Art Space platform, a project that merges art and fashion in a fully digital environment, accessible exclusively through virtual interfaces (Gucci, 2022). These types of initiatives reflect a fundamental change in luxury strategy, where the brand experience becomes independent of the materiality of the product, expanding into new symbolic territories.

From a semiotic perspective, this transition marks the shift from a luxury built on tangible signifiers (such as craftsmanship quality and the use of precious materials) to a system based on immaterial signifiers, such as exclusive access to digital content, private events, or virtual environments, which convey status through experience and symbolism (Castarède, 2020). This shift aligns perfectly with Baudrillard's (1998) thesis that contemporary society is dominated by hyperreality, where signs no longer refer to a physical object but to an autonomous symbolic system. In the case of luxury, this translates into the possibility of possessing an exclusive experience without necessarily owning a material good.

The importance of experientiality does not mean the disappearance of tangible luxury, but rather its expansion into new forms of enjoyment, where the value of the object is amplified by the surrounding experience. This is evident in the strategies adopted by high-end brands, which today combine physical luxury with digital elements to create a deeper and more engaging narrative. For example, fashion shows are increasingly accompanied by immersive augmented reality experiences, exclusive NFTs, and personalized AI interactions, thus creating a luxury ecosystem that exists simultaneously in multiple

dimensions (Jenkins, 2006). This evolution compels brands to rethink the very concept of exclusivity. In traditional luxury, exclusivity was determined by the scarcity of the object: few could afford to purchase it, and even fewer could have it immediately available. In experiential luxury, however, exclusivity is redefined by the ability to access unique and personalized experiences, which create an emotional and symbolic bond with the brand.

While this transformation opens up new opportunities, it also presents complex challenges. Digitalization can risk flattening the sense of uniqueness, making the experience less exclusive if not managed correctly. Furthermore, the concept of experiential luxury brings with it the need to balance the immateriality of the experience with the necessity of creating tangible value, a balance that brands must manage carefully to avoid compromising the sense of rarity and desirability that characterizes traditional luxury.

Ultimately, the transition from tangible to experiential luxury is not a replacement but an evolution that expands the possibilities for meaning and enjoyment of luxury in the digital era. This change requires a deeper understanding of the new dynamics of desire and identity construction in luxury, which will be analyse d in the following sections.

1.1.3 Ethical Implications of AI in Luxury: Authenticity, Manipulation, and Transparency

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into the luxury sector has opened up new possibilities for optimizing creative processes, personalizing the customer experience, and managing data strategically. However, it has also introduced challenges that put to the test the principles on which the luxury industry has historically been built. Luxury has always been built on values such as craftsmanship, exclusivity, and historical legitimacy (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012). The rise of AI-based practices raises important questions about perceived authenticity, the role of technology in mediating experience, and trust in the brand.

One of the main concerns is the relationship between craftsmanship and automation. Luxury brands have built their identity through narratives centred on manual expertise, savoir-faire, and tradition as guarantees of uniqueness (Dion & Arnould, 2011). The

introduction of AI into design, production, and communication processes brings a redefinition of these symbolic codes: the possibility of generating visual content, copy, and design through algorithms risks compromising the perception of authenticity, precisely because the value of craftsmanship is based on irreplaceability and the human touch. As Baudrillard noted, technical and symbolic reproducibility generates simulacra that can dissolve the connection between signifier and referent, pushing luxury toward a hyperreality where the sign no longer refers to artisanal competence but to an algorithmic strategy (Baudrillard, 1998). Furthermore, while AI enables potentially unlimited personalization, it can also produce standardized aesthetics that weaken the perception of rarity and symbolic exceptionality (Castarède, 2020). At the same time, AI is transforming the interaction between brands and consumers through predictive and personalized mechanisms. Intelligent systems allow brands to anticipate tastes and preferences, offering tailored experiences. However, as recent industry analyses highlight (Bain & Company, 2024), this type of personalization also poses an ethical risk related to the reduction of decision-making autonomy. Experiential luxury is based on creating unique moments, often unexpected and ritualistic; by contrast, an experience entirely generated by a predictive system risks becoming a programmed replication of behavioural models. The central question, therefore, becomes: *Is an experience truly exclusive if it is the result of an algorithm?*

Another critical issue concerns transparency in data management. The expansion of luxury on digital platforms has made many previously exclusive experiences accessible, but it has also increased consumer exposure to monitoring and profiling. While research shows that luxury customers accept a certain degree of tracking in exchange for personalized, high-quality service, there is a growing sensitivity toward the non-transparent use of data (Gentina, Shrum & Daucé, 2018). Trust has thus become a key element: brands implementing AI systems must ensure ethical practices and respect for informed consent. Some brands, aware of this transformation, are adopting more responsible approaches to personalization, focusing on the explicit communication of algorithmic logic and empowering the user with control. For example, Louis Vuitton clearly signals when an interaction is mediated by an AI assistant and offers the option to switch to a human consultant. Farfetch, on the other hand, allows users to modify or

completely deactivate AI-generated recommendations, ensuring active control over the consumption experience (LVMH, 2023; Farfetch, 2023).

Thus, artificial intelligence represents a strategic lever for transformation in the luxury sector, but its application must be governed by critical reflection on the foundational values of the brand experience. The risk is not only technological but also symbolic: AI should not replace the narrative and ritual capital of luxury but should amplify it, projecting it into new aesthetic territories without compromising its aura. As Holt (2004) observed, the iconic identity of a brand is built through culturally relevant and consistent narratives over time. In a sector that has always played on the boundary between innovation and tradition, the future will depend on brands' ability to integrate AI without compromising the human and ritual dimensions that make luxury a unique and non-replicable experience.

1.2 Generation Z and Digital Luxury: Values and Expectations

Within the evolving landscape of luxury, Generation Z is emerging as a crucial cultural and strategic driver. Luxury brands are increasingly reconfiguring their narrative strategies, aesthetic codes, and consumption models to meet the expectations of a digitally native audience that is highly attuned to ethical consistency and symbolic coherence. According to the latest report by Bain & Company and Fondazione Altagamma (2023), Generation Z, together with Generation Alpha. is projected to represent 45% of the global luxury market by 2030, highlighting its early and disproportionate influence on current industry dynamics.

This section examines the relationship between Gen Z and luxury consumption in the digital sphere, with particular attention to the values shaping their preferences and the engagement strategies brands must develop. The first sub-paragraph explores the sociocultural and behavioural profile of this cohort, focusing on how they discover, interact with, and evaluate luxury brands within a constantly evolving digital ecosystem. Special emphasis is placed on the role of social media, user-generated content (UGC), and the demand for hyper-personalized experiences. The second sub-paragraph then delves into the three key values that define Gen Z’s relationship with luxury: authenticity, ethics, and personalization. The discussion highlights how young consumers assess the

credibility and cultural relevance of luxury brands, and how these values intersect with narrative and aesthetic branding strategies in the digital age.

Overall, this analysis seeks to illustrate how luxury is shifting from an exclusive status symbol to a shared expressive language, where brand storytelling becomes a dialogical and co-creative space for identity construction between consumers and brands.

1.2.1 Generation Z and the New Luxury Paradigm

Generation Z exhibits a series of defining traits that significantly influence their purchasing behaviour in the luxury sector. Compared to previous generations, their relationship with luxury is shaped by digital nativity, hyperconnectivity, and a marked emphasis on personalization and direct interaction with brands (Cho, Kim-Vick & Yu, 2021). One of the most salient characteristics of Gen Z is their complete immersion in the digital world, which deeply affects how they discover, evaluate, and purchase luxury products. These consumers no longer rely on traditional advertising strategies; instead, they construct their perception of luxury through interactive experiences, online reviews, and user-generated content (Dobre et al., 2021). According to research by Bain & Company (2022), more than 75% of Gen Z consumers discover new brands through social media, and 68% base their purchasing decisions on the opinions of digital creators. This phenomenon has reshaped luxury marketing dynamics, reducing the brands' direct control over their image and elevating the influence of digital word-of-mouth and online communities.

Another distinctive aspect of Gen Z is their redefinition of exclusivity. While older generations associated luxury with rarity and high prices, Gen Z attributes exclusivity to access, customization, and experiential uniqueness (Aksu, 2020). Ownership is no longer the sole indicator of prestige; instead, the lived experience becomes central. This is illustrated by the success of collaborations between luxury brands and digital platforms. For instance, Gucci's Vault Art Space blends fashion and art in an interactive, digital-only environment, creating a form of luxury based on access rather than possession (Ananda et al.,2023).

A further crucial element is the pursuit of authenticity and transparency. Gen Z displays pronounced skepticism toward traditional marketing, having grown up in a media-saturated environment where advertising is ubiquitous and easily recognized. A recent

Deloitte report (2023) shows that 67% of Gen Z consumers avoid brands perceived as inconsistent or lacking transparency. This has led many luxury companies to shift from polished, aspirational campaigns to strategies rooted in authentic storytelling and user-generated content, fostering trust and brand credibility (Cho et al., 2021).

Finally, Generation Z demands highly personalized and direct engagement with brands. They expect unique, tailored shopping experiences that reflect their individual tastes and values. Luxury today extends beyond purchasing premium goods to include personalized consultations, exclusive made-to-order items, and immersive brand experiences (Dobre et al., 2021). An illustrative example is Nike's "Nike By You" initiative, which allows consumers to fully customize their products, a model that has begun to influence the luxury industry as well (González-González, Jiménez-Zarco & González-Rodríguez, 2023).

This evolution compels luxury brands to rethink their foundational value systems. The continuous interaction between brands and consumers has ushered in a new paradigm of symbolic co-creation, where brand meaning emerges from an ongoing dialogue with the audience. In this context, luxury is less defined by ownership and more by access, emotional connection, and cultural resonance. Yet, the abundance of content and the speed of trend cycles make Gen Z particularly sensitive to coherence and ethical alignment. This is where the pursuit of authenticity and cultural relevance becomes essential for sustaining legitimacy and trust in contemporary luxury. From a semiotic perspective, this shift reflects what Floch (1995) identifies as the emergence of ludic and expressive value in consumption, where the brand becomes a medium for identification, aesthetic pleasure, and shared meaning.

1.2.2 The Importance of Authenticity, Ethics, and Personalization for Generation Z

Generation Z represents a profoundly transformative consumer segment for the luxury industry, placing critical importance on values such as authenticity, ethics, and personalization. These dimensions, alongside experiential value, play a decisive role in purchasing decisions, shaping a relationship with brands that is grounded less in status and ostentation and more in symbolic meaning and emotional connection (Dobre et al.,

2021; Jiang & Shan, 2018). The search for authenticity is particularly evident in the preference for brands that communicate coherently and operate transparently. Gen Z consumers are more likely to trust companies that actively engage their communities and adopt narratives perceived as sincere (Aksu, 2020; Deloitte, 2023). In this context, luxury is valued less for its material features than for its ability to symbolically express the consumer's identity. This shift marks a broader transformation from ownership-based to meaning-based consumption, where the luxury product functions as a carrier of values and identity. From a semiotic standpoint, this corresponds to what Floch (1995) defines as the *ludic-expressive value* of consumption, which refers to the brand's capacity to generate pleasure, self-identification, and cultural belonging through form and narrative. Alongside authenticity, themes of sustainability and ethical business practices have emerged as equally central. For Generation Z, luxury must reflect a tangible commitment to environmental, social, and human responsibility. Brand selection is therefore influenced not only by aesthetic appeal but also by the transparency of supply chains, inclusive values, and the adoption of responsible practices, all of which impact a brand's reputation and legitimacy (González-González, Jiménez-Zarco & González-Rodríguez, 2023; Ananda et al., 2023). In response to these demands, several luxury brands have begun to distinguish themselves through the adoption of innovative materials and circular production processes, redefining aesthetic codes by integrating ethical principles and culturally progressive positioning.

Aesthetic value continues to play a central role in how Gen Z interacts with luxury. The worth of a product is no longer tied merely to its design or function, but rather to the broader symbolic and emotional universe that the brand constructs around it. Contemporary visual and narrative language aims to generate multisensory experiences, in which brand identity is shaped through the synergy of design, storytelling, and personalized interaction (Jiang & Shan, 2018; González-González et al., 2023). In this context, artificial intelligence is increasingly used as a strategic tool to amplify the aesthetic and narrative dimensions of the brand while enabling deep personalization without undermining perceptions of authenticity. Personalization itself represents one of the most pressing expectations for Generation Z. These consumers seek unique, tailor-made experiences aligned with their individual preferences, behaviors, and values. Brands that offer bespoke solutions either through exclusive services or intelligent

technologies such as adaptive recommendations, virtual assistants, and interactive product configurators, are perceived as more relevant and trustworthy (Cho, Kim-Vick & Yu, 2021; González-González et al., 2023). However, this approach also demands careful ethical management of consumer data, ensuring a balanced relationship between personalization, privacy, and long-term trust-building.

In conclusion, to effectively resonate with Generation Z, luxury brands must integrate authentic values, ethical visions, and personalized solutions into a coherent and culturally resonant narrative. The focus is no longer on selling a product alone, but on creating symbolic and emotional experiences capable of fostering lasting identification and connection.

1.3 Understanding Artificial Intelligence: Foundations, Evolution and Strategic Applications

Artificial Intelligence (AI) stands today as one of the most disruptive and influential innovations of the contemporary digital era, reshaping not only technical systems and industrial processes, but also the very structure of human interaction, creativity, and meaning-making. Far from being a neutral technological tool, AI must be understood as a complex construct operating at the intersection of computation, cognition, and culture. As Kaplan and Haenlein (2019) argue, AI should not be regarded as an isolated phenomenon, but as an integral part of a broader digital ecosystem that continuously redefines modes of production and communication, impacting how individuals relate to technology and to each other (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2019).

From a semiotic and cultural perspective, AI embodies a shift in the production of meaning: its outputs, whether images, texts, or recommendations, are the result of data-driven algorithms shaped by specific epistemologies, ontologies, and historical biases. Floridi and Chiriatti (2020) highlight that the functioning of AI systems is inevitably conditioned by the nature of the training data and the interpretive frameworks embedded in their architectures. Consequently, AI systems do not mirror an objective reality but rather reinterpret and reconstruct it according to algorithmic logics (Floridi & Chiriatti, 2020). This has profound implications in fields such as media and communication, where the boundaries between human creativity and algorithmic production are becoming

increasingly blurred. In particular, Guzman and Lewis (2020) observe that AI is not merely a tool for enhancing communication, but an actor in a new paradigm of human–machine interaction, contributing to the co-construction of meaning, agency, and authorship within communicative processes (Guzman & Lewis, 2020). To fully grasp the significance of AI in contemporary society and its implications for branding and advertising, it is essential to construct a coherent theoretical foundation. This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the conceptual, historical, and practical dimensions of AI, with a focus on its cultural and semiotic implications. The first part of this inquiry outlines the core principles of AI, distinguishing between narrow AI and artificial general intelligence (AGI) and examining key technologies such as machine learning, deep learning, and natural language processing (Russell & Norvig, 2021; Goodfellow, Bengio & Courville, 2016; Devlin et al., 2019). These technologies enable systems to learn from data and generate outputs that are increasingly sophisticated and contextually appropriate. However, as Boden (2018) points out, these "intelligent" behaviors are constructed through statistical correlations, not understanding, raising questions about the nature of cognition and authenticity in AI interactions (Boden, 2018).

This reflection continues by tracing the historical evolution of AI, from early rule-based symbolic systems (McCarthy et al., 1956) to the rise of connectionist models such as neural networks (Rumelhart, Hinton & Williams, 1986), culminating in the explosion of generative AI technologies in the 2010s. LeCun, Bengio and Hinton (2015) emphasize how deep learning has enabled unprecedented advances in image recognition, language processing, and content generation, thanks to increased computational power and access to large-scale training datasets (LeCun, Bengio & Hinton, 2015). These models are not only reshaping industries: they are also altering the aesthetic and symbolic landscapes of digital culture. The creative potential of models such as GPT-4 or DALL·E has raised important questions about originality, authorship, and the nature of human creativity (Floridi & Chiriatti, 2020; Bostrom, 2014).

The review concludes with an overview of AI's applications in four strategic sectors: retail, healthcare, manufacturing, and marketing, where the technology is being used to optimize operations, personalize services, and enhance user engagement. In retail, AI

supports product recommendation systems, inventory forecasting, and customer service automation (Ajiga et al., 2024; Hiremath et al., 2024). In healthcare, it powers diagnostic imaging, personalized treatments, and drug discovery processes (Qiu et al., 2023). In the manufacturing sector, AI improves production efficiency, facilitates predictive maintenance, and enables sustainable resource management (Lu et al., 2024; MDPI, 2024). In marketing, AI revolutionizes campaign personalization, real-time sentiment analysis, and content creation (Mahesha, 2024). Each of these applications exemplifies not only the technological capabilities of AI, but also its role in constructing new forms of symbolic and communicative value.

By articulating technical, cultural, and semiotic perspectives, this main section offers the conceptual tools necessary to understand how AI is transforming the symbolic economies of contemporary branding. In particular, it prepares the ground for the analysis of AI's role in the luxury sector, which will be explored in the following sub-sections.

1.3.1 Definition and Fundamental Principles of Artificial Intelligence

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is a discipline dedicated to the study and development of systems capable of replicating certain human cognitive functions, such as learning, reasoning, and perception. Over time, its definition has evolved: originally conceived as the ability of machines to solve problems through formal and logical rules (McCarthy et al., 1956), AI is now understood as a set of computational methods that enable systems to dynamically adapt to data and contextual information (Russell & Norvig, 2021). This conceptual shift reflects a transition from rigid, deterministic programming to a more flexible approach in which intelligent systems learn from experience and improve over time. As a result, AI has diversified into several forms, distinguished by levels of autonomy and adaptive capacity.

A fundamental distinction within the AI field is that between narrow AI and Artificial General Intelligence (AGI). Narrow AI is designed to perform specific tasks, such as facial recognition or virtual assistance, without possessing general understanding. These systems are based on highly specialized algorithms that excel within narrowly defined domains but are unable to transfer knowledge across contexts. AGI, on the other hand, refers to a theoretical model of machine intelligence with broad cognitive abilities,

capable of learning and adapting across a range of domains without explicit programming. Although AGI has not yet been realized, it remains a long-term research goal and raises significant ethical, philosophical, and socio-economic questions (Goertzel, 2014).

In terms of technological development, two primary approaches can be identified: symbolic AI and connectionist AI. Symbolic AI relies on logical structures and explicit representations to encode knowledge and make decisions, using methods derived from formal logic. Dominant in the early phases of AI research, this approach made possible the development of expert systems able to solve well-structured problems. In contrast, connectionist AI leverages statistical learning models and artificial neural networks to recognize patterns in data, adopting a methodology inspired by biological cognition (Boden, 2018). With the rise of big data and increased computational power, this second paradigm has gained prominence, enabling the training of increasingly sophisticated models.

Within the connectionist approach, machine learning has emerged as a central technique in contemporary AI. It refers to the ability of systems to learn from data without being explicitly programmed for every possible scenario. Machine learning uses algorithms to identify patterns and relationships within data, allowing models to adapt incrementally to new inputs. One of the most significant developments in this area is deep learning, which employs multilayered artificial neural networks to model complex information such as images, texts, and sounds (Goodfellow, Bengio & Courville, 2016). Deep learning has enabled remarkable breakthroughs in areas such as computer vision, speech recognition, and machine translation, in some cases surpassing human performance.

Another key domain is Natural Language Processing (NLP), which allows machines to understand and process human language. NLP forms the foundation of numerous applications, including chatbots, automatic translation, and text generation. Thanks to the development of pre-trained models on massive textual corpora, NLP systems have rapidly improved, making human–machine interaction more seamless and intuitive (Devlin et al., 2019). Today, AI's capacity to interpret language goes beyond syntax and semantics to include sentiment analysis and emotion recognition, tools that have important applications in marketing, communication, and consumer behaviour analysis.

Beyond its technological implications, AI must also be understood as a semiotic and cultural phenomenon. In the context of digital luxury, AI's ability to generate content, analyse data, and interact with users opens new perspectives for brand identity construction and consumer experience personalization. The issue of authenticity becomes particularly salient: while AI can enable immersive and interactive storytelling, it also raises questions about the perception of exclusivity and symbolic value in luxury goods. In sectors such as fashion, art, and high jewellery, where the cultural significance of products often outweighs their material characteristics, AI-driven branding and communication strategies may redefine how brands engage with their audiences and assert their status. The algorithmic production of language and images introduces a semiotic dimension that reshapes the way meaning is created, interpreted, and circulated within brand ecosystems. Understanding this semiotic layer is essential to critically assess the impact of automation and personalization on branding practices, as AI not only mediates content but also reconfigures the codes through which luxury is represented and perceived.

1.3.2 The Evolution of Artificial Intelligence: From Symbolic Systems to Generative Models

The evolution of artificial intelligence (AI) is not merely a technological trajectory, but a cultural and social phenomenon marked by phases of acceptance and resistance. Since antiquity, human beings have sought to understand and replicate intelligence, imagining artificial entities capable of cognitive functions. From the speaking statue of Amun in Ancient Egypt to Leonardo da Vinci's mechanical marvels, the aspiration to create autonomous, intelligent machines has been deeply embedded in human imagination (Crevier, 1993). However, the actual development of functional AI has been complex, characterized by alternating cycles of optimism and disillusionment.

The early foundations of AI were laid in the 1950s and 1960s with the emergence of cybernetics and symbolic programming. The idea that human cognition could be replicated through computational logic gave rise to symbolic AI, a paradigm based on formal rules and representations. This approach reached its peak in the development of expert systems, rule-based programs capable of solving structured problems (McCarthy

et al., 1956). Initial enthusiasm led some researchers to predict the imminent advent of general artificial intelligence. Yet, these systems proved brittle when facing unanticipated situations, revealing their limitations in handling flexible, dynamic tasks (Crevier, 1993). Their dependence on pre-programmed knowledge and the inability to autonomously revise their databases highlighted the rigidity of the symbolic model, contributing to the first major decline in AI investment during the 1970s, an event retrospectively termed the "AI Winter."

Interest in AI resurged in the 1980s and 1990s with the rise of connectionism, an approach inspired by the functioning of biological neural networks. In contrast to the rule-based logic of symbolic AI, connectionist models employed artificial neural networks capable of learning from data and adjusting internal parameters to enhance performance (Rumelhart, Hinton & Williams, 1986). These models introduced the foundations of machine learning, enabling systems to learn through pattern recognition. However, limited access to data and computational power at the time constrained the development of these networks, leading to a second period of stagnation known as the late-20th-century AI Winter.

The breakthrough came in the 2010s with the rise of deep learning, a paradigm based on multilayered neural networks capable of processing vast amounts of complex data with unprecedented precision (LeCun, Bengio & Hinton, 2015). The advent of GPUs accelerated training processes, while large-scale datasets provided the foundation for reliable, scalable AI models. Deep learning quickly found applications in areas such as computer vision, automated translation, and content generation, paving the way for advanced generative models like GPT and DALL·E. In parallel with technological advancements, the cultural perception of AI also evolved. Once seen as an experimental frontier with limited real-world use, AI is now integrated into everyday life. Yet, this integration has not been free from controversy. Public concerns have centred on the opacity of algorithms, risks of embedded bias, reduced human agency in decision-making, and the socio-economic impact of automation on employment (Bostrom, 2014). At the same time, the mystique surrounding AI has led to inflated expectations, often fuelled by hype and unmet promises, characteristics typical of emerging technologies.

The last decade has witnessed the rise of generative AI, a transformative shift in which systems are no longer limited to analysing data but can autonomously create original content. Tools such as GPT-4 and DALL·E exemplify this progression, introducing new creative possibilities while simultaneously raising complex questions around authenticity, authorship, and ethical boundaries (Floridi & Chiriatti, 2020). These developments have intensified public debate, with polarized views between those who see AI as a disruptive threat and those who regard it as a necessary evolution. While the full implications of generative AI on labor, communication, and creativity are still unfolding, it is clear that contemporary AI is no longer a mere automation tool: it is an active cultural force, capable of shaping the symbolic, economic, and social structures of the digital age.

1.3.3 AI applications in key sectors: retail, healthcare, manufacturing and marketing

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as one of the most transformative technologies of the 21st century, due to its ability to process vast amounts of data and dynamically learn from human behaviour (Weng, 2024). Its impact extends across multiple sectors, reshaping decision-making models, optimizing operations, and opening new avenues for innovation. Today's enterprises face increasing challenges related to global competition, evolving consumer demands, and growing environmental pressures. In this context, the adoption of AI represents a strategic solution for enhancing efficiency, sustainability, and responsiveness to change.

Within the retail sector, AI is driving a significant digital transformation that helps retailers improve operational efficiency and optimize customer experience. By minimizing errors in inventory and order management, AI contributes to cost containment and boosts sales performance. In an increasingly competitive landscape, personalization has become a key differentiator. AI enables tailored shopping experiences by analysing behavioural and demographic data to generate personalized product recommendations, increasing customer engagement and conversion rates. Moreover, AI-powered chatbots and virtual assistants, which rely on natural language processing (NLP), offer real-time support to customers both online and in-store, enhancing the shopping journey and brand positioning. However, these systems raise concerns regarding data privacy and consumer perception, as excessive personalization may be perceived as intrusive and lead to

negative customer experiences. In addition to customer-facing services, AI is widely used in inventory forecasting and dynamic pricing, enabling real-time adjustments based on demand, competition, and consumer price sensitivity (Ajiga et al., 2024; Hiremath et al., 2024).

In healthcare, AI has proven to be a powerful tool for managing the complexity and variability of clinical scenarios. Among the most promising applications is diagnostic imaging, where deep learning algorithms have achieved levels of accuracy that in some cases exceed those of medical experts. These models, trained on large sets of labelled data, are capable of identifying subtle patterns and anomalies that may escape human detection. AI is also revolutionizing the drug discovery process, expediting the identification of viable pharmaceutical candidates and predicting clinical trial outcomes more effectively. In the field of personalized medicine, the predictive capabilities of AI facilitate the integration of genomic and clinical data to design targeted therapies, improving efficacy and reducing adverse effects (Qiu et al., 2023).

The manufacturing sector is also undergoing a profound transformation driven by AI, which is making production processes smarter, more efficient, and more sustainable (Lu, 2017). Machine learning technologies can emulate cognitive functions to detect defects, optimize inventory decisions, and enable predictive maintenance, thus enhancing product quality and lifecycle. AI also fosters sustainability by supporting the development of intelligent manufacturing systems, which, when combined with the Industrial Internet of Things (IIoT), enable more efficient resource usage and reduced environmental impact. Predictive algorithms further allow production processes to adapt in real time to market demands, making manufacturing more agile and resilient (MDPI, 2024).
In the field of marketing, AI has radically transformed advertising strategies and the brand-consumer relationship. Machine learning algorithms analyse user behaviour and preferences to refine targeting strategies, ensuring that messages are delivered to the right audience at the right time (Mahesha, 2024). Sentiment analysis on social media allows companies to monitor brand perception in real time and adapt their communication accordingly. AI-driven content generation tools facilitate the creation of personalized text and visuals, increasing engagement with minimal human intervention (Hiremath et al., 2024). Furthermore, advanced chatbots and virtual assistants have revolutionized

customer service, offering fast and accurate responses while improving user satisfaction and reducing operational costs (Qiu et al., 2023).

AI thus stands out as a cross-sectoral technology capable of redefining operational logic, enhancing user experience, and delivering systemic efficiency. However, ethical and regulatory challenges, particularly in relation to algorithmic transparency, data protection, and fairness in automated decision-making, remain unresolved. Ensuring a responsible and human-centred implementation of AI is essential to maximize its benefits while mitigating risks, paving the way for a more sustainable and inclusive digital transformation.

1.4 AI in the Luxury Sector: Personalization and Innovation

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is rapidly transforming the luxury sector, acting not only as a driver of technological efficiency but also as a catalyst for creative innovation and symbolic personalization. In an industry where value is constructed through narrative, aesthetics, and exclusivity, AI has emerged as a tool that extends beyond operational optimization to redefine the very nature of brand-consumer interaction. Rather than functioning solely as a means to automate services, AI in luxury operates as a cultural and semiotic agent, capable of shaping meanings, enhancing brand storytelling, and reinforcing the uniqueness of customer experiences.

This transformation is rooted in the capacity of AI to support advanced forms of data-driven personalization and emotional engagement. Unlike its implementation in mass-market industries, where the focus is predominantly on scale, efficiency, and performance metrics, the use of AI in luxury must align with the symbolic and experiential expectations of exclusivity. Algorithms are employed to tailor individual experiences without compromising the aura of rarity and craftsmanship that defines the luxury ethos (Xu & Mehta, 2022). Thus, AI does not merely assist in executing tasks but plays an active role in curating personalized brand narratives, emotionally resonant visual identities, and dialogic interactions with consumers (Jiang et al., 2023; Fang et al., 2023).

This section of the chapter explores the multifaceted role of AI in the luxury sector by critically analysing three key dimensions. First, it examines how AI-driven automation

supports the delivery of personalized and coherent brand experiences without diluting the symbolic value of luxury.

Second, it addresses the transformative impact of AI on storytelling practices, particularly in the creation of emotionally engaging and visually distinctive brand identities. Lastly, it compares the deployment of AI in luxury with its use in other industries, highlighting the unique semiotic and ethical implications that arise when advanced technologies intersect with high-end branding. Through this analysis, AI is framed not only as a technological infrastructure but as a discursive and aesthetic instrument capable of enhancing the symbolic capital of luxury brands. The integration of AI must therefore balance innovation with tradition, automation with authenticity, and personalization with the preservation of narrative coherence. In doing so, luxury brands can navigate the digital transformation while maintaining their distinctiveness and cultural relevance in an increasingly data-driven market.

1.4.1 AI-Driven Branding: From Automation to Personalized Experiences

Automation enabled by artificial intelligence has marked a crucial turning point in the evolution of branding within the luxury sector, allowing brands to streamline operational processes and optimize resource allocation. Through this capability, AI has enabled companies to maintain a high level of consistency in brand communication while simultaneously enhancing the overall efficiency of their operations (West, Clifford, & Atkinson, 2018; Jiang, Cheng, Yang, & Gao, 2023). While personalization is often perceived as the most visible outcome of AI adoption, it is automation that lays the foundational infrastructure enabling such customization. For instance, the deployment of advanced chatbots not only facilitates real-time interactions but also automates the management of customer data, thereby improving operational performance without compromising the premium quality of the luxury experience (Jiang et al., 2023).

In luxury branding, automation allows brands to respond with speed and precision, while preserving the high level of exclusivity that defines the sector (West et al., 2018; Jiang et al., 2023). What makes this integration seamless is the AI's ability to blend automation with personalization: intelligent systems not only collect and analyse customer data but also use these insights to adapt brand experiences and communications in real time. This

ensures that each interaction is tailored to the individual consumer without sacrificing brand coherence. AI also automates the creation of content, ranging from images and copywriting to advertising campaigns, optimizing every aspect of communication according to consumer behaviour and preferences (West et al., 2018). As a result, brands can enhance the personalization of customer experiences, delivering highly customized interactions aligned with individual profiles and expectations, while maintaining consistency in the brand narrative (Bauer & Strauss, 2022).

The use of advanced chatbots in branding communication extends beyond interaction facilitation, serving as a strategic tool for enhancing customer engagement and loyalty. According to Jiang et al. (2023), AI-powered chatbots enable dialogic interactions that go beyond functional assistance, fostering emotionally positive experiences. These interactions not only address consumers' immediate needs but also encourage non-transactional behaviours, such as writing reviews on social media or participating in brand communities, activities that deepen emotional bonds with the brand. The conversational nature of these chatbots, characterized by natural and responsive language, increases perceptions of human-like interaction and trust, ultimately enhancing overall consumer satisfaction (Feine, Geyer, & Neff, 2019).

This dialogic model allows luxury brands not only to gather valuable customer insights but also to provide timely and personalized responses that stimulate deeper engagement. The effectiveness of such interactions is heightened by the AI's ability to adapt in real time to customer needs, improving the shopping experience and customer satisfaction (Jiang et al., 2023). Furthermore, dialogic communication fosters social engagement, where consumers not only interact with the chatbot but actively contribute to the co-creation of the brand's community, expanding the brand experience beyond the transactional moment (Hollebeek & Belk, 2019).

However, the use of these technologies also presents critical challenges (particularly for luxury brands) due to the risk of excessive standardization through automation, which can dilute brand distinctiveness. Striking the right balance between automation and personalization is essential, as luxury consumers expect tailor-made experiences that are not overly replicable or devoid of the human touch that defines the industry (Kapferer &

Bastien, 2012). Thus, automation must remain at the service of personalization, without undermining the exclusivity that forms the core value of luxury branding (Aaker, 1997).

1.4.2 AI and Storytelling in Luxury: Visual Identity, Narration, and Emotional Engagement

In the context of luxury branding, Artificial Intelligence (AI) is not merely a tool for automation but a key resource for shaping brand storytelling, visual identity, and the creation of authentic emotional connections with consumers. AI enables brands to collect and analyse vast amounts of data in real time and transform them into visual and verbal content that reflects the brand's values and aesthetic, while preserving the exclusivity that defines luxury. These contents are not randomly generated but are strategically designed to respond to the emotional preferences and individual expectations of the consumer, creating personalized experiences aligned with the brand's philosophy (Peverini, 2020).

The potential of AI in luxury branding lies in its capacity to generate coherent visual and verbal outputs that define the brand's identity while retaining the uniqueness and personality essential to the luxury industry. AI-driven platforms employ advanced algorithms to produce generative designs that adapt to a brand's heritage without sacrificing the freshness and innovation needed to remain relevant in the global landscape (Vidrih & Mayahi, 2024). AI not only personalizes the visual experience but transforms every interaction into an emotional narrative, positioning the consumer at the centre of an experience that responds to both aesthetic and affective needs. This dynamic is made possible by AI-driven interfaces, such as conversational chatbots, which not only provide information but also engage users in emotionally charged dialogue. These AI-powered systems are crafted to simulate human-like conversations, enabling brands to interact directly and personally with each customer. Through their ability to adapt to the emotions and desires of users, chatbots do more than satisfy immediate needs: they nurture long-term emotional bonds with the brand (Jiang et al., 2023).

The growing demand for authenticity and personalization is addressed through AI's deep learning capabilities. Luxury brands can emotionally connect with consumers through narratives that not only reflect their preferences but make them feel part of an exclusive, one-of-a-kind journey. Each AI-mediated interaction becomes an opportunity to build a

genuine relationship, one that evokes emotions and fosters a strong sense of belonging within the brand's world (Fang et al., 2023). In this landscape, AI emerges as a narrative engine capable of reinventing storytelling within luxury branding. The stories generated are not static but evolve in real time based on consumer interactions, creating immersive, dynamic emotional experiences. This personalization allows consumers to become co-creators of the brand narrative, rather than passive spectators, thereby making each experience unique and unrepeatable (Vidrih & Mayahi, 2024).

Nevertheless, the application of AI to emotional storytelling in luxury branding is not without its challenges. Despite its power to customize, AI carries the risk of standardizing experiences, potentially eroding the uniqueness that is the essence of luxury. Therefore, it is essential for luxury brands to strike a balance between automation and authenticity, ensuring that AI tools are embedded within the symbolic and cultural codes of the brand. As Peverini (2020) argues, AI must complement, rather than overwrite, the semiotic systems that define the brand's heritage and emotional value.

1.4.3 Differences between AI Use in Luxury and Other Industries

The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into the luxury sector has brought about a profound transformation in how brands engage with consumers and construct their identities (Peverini, 2020). While in many industries AI is primarily employed to optimize operational processes, in the luxury domain it plays a pivotal role in curating personalized experiences and fostering emotional resonance with consumers, thus reinforcing the brand–customer bond (Vidrih & Mayahi, 2024). AI is not merely a tool for improving efficiency; it becomes a storytelling medium capable of generating unique narratives that transcend transactional logic, establishing a deeper emotional connection that sets luxury apart from other sectors (Jiang et al., 2023).

In luxury branding, AI is especially leveraged to enhance emotional storytelling. Its ability to process behavioural data allows brands to adapt their narrative strategies in real-time, shaping stories that are not only persuasive but emotionally attuned. Unlike in mass-market industries, where AI is mainly used to increase advertising effectiveness or maximize conversion rates, luxury brands employ AI to forge more intimate and meaningful relationships with consumers by crafting content that speaks directly to their

aspirations, emotions, and dreams (Fang et al., 2023; Peverini, 2020). As a result, AI enables luxury brands to remain responsive to consumer demands while preserving their inherent exclusivity.

For example, in mainstream sectors, AI is typically deployed to harvest large-scale customer data to optimize the customer journey and drive profitability. In contrast, luxury brands adopt a more discreet and curated approach to data collection, ensuring an exclusive personalization that respects user privacy and upholds the brand's refined and private image (West, Clifford, & Atkinson, 2018; Xu & Mehta, 2022). Here, personalization serves not merely as a sales tool but as a way of reinforcing symbolic and emotional value.

In mass-market applications, personalization is often focused on cost reduction and sales maximization, with AI analysing purchasing behaviour to recommend products in real time. The primary goal in these sectors is increased productivity and process optimization. However, in luxury, AI is applied with the aim of safeguarding brand authenticity and ensuring that personalization does not dilute the aura of exclusivity. The emphasis shifts from selling more to curating a unique and authentic brand experience, preserving the symbolic richness and aesthetic sophistication that luxury embodies (Vidrih & Mayahi, 2024; Peverini, 2020).

In summary, AI in the luxury sector goes beyond automation and data analytics; it enables the creation of bespoke narratives and emotional engagement that strengthen brand identity and cultivate meaningful connections. Unlike its application in other sectors, where technology is typically used to enhance efficiency, AI in luxury branding serves to elevate the experiential and symbolic dimensions of consumption (Peverini, 2020). It fosters relationships that feel emotionally authentic and singular, turning every interaction into a refined, memorable moment of brand immersion (Vidrih & Mayahi, 2024).

CHAPTER 2: The Redefinition of Aesthetics and Authenticity for Generation Z in AI-Driven Luxury Branding

The introduction of artificial intelligence (AI) in the context of luxury has initiated a transformation that extends beyond mere technology, carrying profound cultural, symbolic, and semiotic implications (Manovich, 2018). The aesthetic of luxury, historically grounded in values such as exclusivity, craftsmanship, and authenticity (Venkatesh et al., 2010), is now mediated by advanced algorithmic tools capable of generating highly sophisticated and innovative visual and narrative languages. Nevertheless, this very sophistication prompts questions regarding consumers' perception of authenticity, given the inherently artificial and automated nature of such aesthetic productions (Manovich, 2018).

In this emerging panorama, Generation Z provides a privileged lens for understanding the implications of this evolution (Dobre et al., 2021). Characterized by a strong ethical awareness and a preference for authenticity and personalization in their consumption experiences, younger consumers stand at the centre of this inquiry. Drawing on the extensive review of emerging literature presented in the preceding chapter, this section delves into how a technology based on simulation and automation can effectively integrate into luxury storytelling. In particular, it examines the extent to which AI-generated visual and verbal languages can establish authentic, enduring emotional bonds with this generation.

By means of a rigorous analytical approach, the chapter seeks to explore key issues raised in the literature, scrutinizing how AI-driven aesthetics are redefining the visual and communicative standards of luxury branding, assessing the differences from traditional design, and considering the risks of aesthetic homogenization. In addition, it investigates the paradox of authenticity, conducting a critical examination of the potential and limits of perceived authenticity in the realm of automated narratives. This is followed by an in-depth study of automated verbal languages (for instance, chatbots and voice assistants), assessing their strategic role in fostering consistent and authentic brand identities. Taken together, these theoretical and applied contributions offer a solid foundation for understanding the ongoing transformations in contemporary luxury communication. They

outline a conceptual framework for analysing, in the following sections, how AI is profoundly reshaping the aesthetic language of luxury. First, the distinctive features of the new AI-driven aesthetic and its redefinition of visual communication codes in luxury will be examined. Next, the characteristics of AI-generated aesthetics will be compared to those of traditional design, highlighting structural and stylistic divergences. Finally, the issue of originality and standardization will be discussed, with particular attention to the risk of aesthetic homogenization and the challenge of uniqueness in the context of creative automation, maintaining a constant focus on the intersections between technological innovation, creativity, and brand identity.

2.1 AI-Driven Aesthetics in Luxury: A New Visual and Communicative Standard

Luxury communication has historically relied on a sophisticated visual grammar, codified through formal and symbolic elements that evoke exclusivity, refinement, and aspiration (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012). In recent years, however, a new aesthetic regime has emerged, one that no longer stems solely from artisanal processes or human stylistic choices, but from the generative capabilities of artificial intelligence. The growing adoption of algorithmic systems, such as GANs for image creation or text-to-image engines, has triggered a paradigmatic shift in the construction of luxury's visual imaginary (Pantano, Serravalle & Priporas, 2024).

Unlike previous models grounded in continuity with a consolidated aesthetic canon, the AI-driven aesthetic does not merely reinterpret existing codes. Rather, it generates novel and sometimes disorienting combinations that challenge conventional notions of taste and redefine the very idea of beauty. A form of computational creativity is emerging: one that, while drawing upon vast visual archives, is capable of producing infinite variations, accelerating creative cycles, and encouraging radical visual experimentation (Manovich, 2018). In this regard, AI is not simply a technical tool but an aesthetic agent endowed with formal autonomy (Floridi & Chiriatti, 2020).

This transition raises profound questions: What are the distinctive traits of this new algorithmic aesthetic in luxury branding? How does AI reshape the design dynamics of brand visual identity? And most importantly, what cultural and symbolic implications arise from the fact that the images structuring the luxury imaginary are no longer

conceived by human minds, but by computational systems? These questions still underexplored in the literature represent the starting point for a reflection on the ongoing transformations in the semiotics of contemporary luxury (Peverini, 2020).

In light of this scenario, the present section aims to outline the theoretical and cultural framework that accompanies the rise of an AI-driven aesthetic in luxury branding. The following sub-sections will explore three key dimensions in greater depth: the emerging visual codes generated by artificial intelligence technologies; the structural and symbolic differences between computational productions and traditional design; and finally, the issue of aesthetic homogenization and the challenge of maintaining uniqueness in the context of creative automation, always maintaining a focus on the intersections between technological innovation, creativity, and brand identity (Venkatesh et al., 2010).

2.1.1 How AI is Redefining Visual Language in Luxury Branding

Artificial intelligence is radically transforming the way luxury brands design and communicate their visual identity. While visual branding was traditionally grounded in consolidated codes as refined aesthetics, understated colour palettes, and harmonious compositions, the introduction of generative models and AI-driven technologies is ushering in much more fluid, adaptive, and experimental visual languages (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012; Hancock & Spicer, 2017). One of the most evident shifts is the rise of dynamic image personalization. Thanks to AI, visual content can now be generated or modified based on the user profile, the communication channel, and even the emotional tone of a campaign. For instance, Moncler partnered with Maison Meta, a pioneer in AI usage, to employ Generative AI (GenAI) in its Genius campaign during the 2023 London Fashion Week. AI was used to create digital backgrounds that complemented, rather than compromised, the brand's aesthetics and seamlessly aligned with the collection's mood (HBR Italia, 2024). In this case, AI was employed discreetly to enhance the communicative power of visuals that were already coherent with the brand's identity.
A more explicit and innovative approach was taken by Valentino in its "Essential" campaign (2023), where the entire photographic setup including models, backgrounds, compositions was generated using GenAI. The stated goal was to fuse human and technological aesthetics, pushing the brand's visual identity beyond its traditional boundaries. While this decision raised questions about authenticity, it also demonstrated

how AI can construct an original and distinctive visual grammar. The generative nature of AI enables brands to shift from static aesthetics to a transformative visual logic. According to Yuan (2024), visual identity is undergoing a process of "dynamization": animated logos, evolving visual patterns, and adaptive campaigns now constitute the new visual vocabulary of luxury branding. The image is no longer merely a representation, but it becomes a mutable narrative system designed for continuous renewal. In this scenario, the role of the designer undergoes a profound transformation: no longer solely a creator of form, the designer becomes the architect of aesthetic rules that govern machine-generated output. This professional shift moves the focus from the act of design to the orchestration of a visual ecosystem.

At a perceptual level, the relationship between AI and luxury also proves commercially effective. As Pantano et al. (2024) highlight, consumers tend to prefer products visually designed by AI, especially when they are unaware of the algorithmic origin, suggesting that the perceived value of an image depends less on its origin than on its alignment with the symbolic expectations of the brand.

Within this framework, AI is fuelling the emergence of a visual "semiosphere" shaped by artificial intelligence, a concept introduced by the semiotician Juri M. Lotman in the 1980s to denote the cultural space within which any process of signification becomes intelligible. As Lotman himself maintains, the semiosphere does not emerge from the aggregation of individual communicative acts; rather, it constitutes the very condition that renders such acts both possible and meaningful (Lotman, 1985, p.56). When applied to the visual language of luxury branding, this notion reveals a more complex dynamic: AI-generated images do not exist in isolation but are embedded within a structured system of aesthetic codes, symbolic values, and culturally prefigured expectations. In this light, what renders an AI-generated visual output meaningful and culturally legible is not its algorithmic origin per se, but its capacity to align with and resonate within the semiotic architecture of the brand. It is the brand's semiosphere, with its tacit norms, porous boundaries, and accumulated cultural memory, that provides the enabling framework within which visual innovation can unfold without undermining its evocative coherence.

As Binns (2024) observes, this new synthetic aesthetic allows luxury brands to construct immersive worlds that blur the boundaries between the real and the artificial. In this semiosphere, the image becomes an ever-evolving construct, where each visual element is fluidly and modulably generated in response to consumer interaction and market dynamics. Visual experiences thus become not just a medium of representation, but an interactive process that invites the consumer into a unique and personalized narrative space. This approach stands in stark contrast to traditional linear visual storytelling, pushing the brand toward a more fluid, mutable, and immersive communicative dimension.

2.1.2 Differences between AI-Generated Visuals and Traditional Design in Luxury Brands

In the contemporary luxury landscape, the introduction of AI-generated visual elements has sparked a profound reflection, both semiotic and strategic, on how brands construct and redefine their visual and symbolic identity. While digital culture has already reshaped the representational logic of luxury by introducing new aesthetics and narrative forms (Piatti-Farnell, 2024), the integration of AI into visual brand assets is accelerating this process further, raising critical questions about identity coherence and perceived authenticity (Drożdż, 2024). Unlike traditional design, historically rooted in artisanal heritage and established aesthetic codes, AI-generated images often introduce hybrid or experimental compositional logics. These are characterized by forms, colours, and visual rhythms that may appear somewhat removed from the classical canon (Piatti-Farnell, 2024). This perceived "artificiality," while captivating for its capacity to surprise and innovate, may also lead to a sense of stylistic homogenization, as algorithms tend to reproduce similar patterns when trained on the same datasets (Drożdż, 2024). Consequently, there is a risk of diluting the distinctive traits and aura of exclusivity upon which luxury branding relies (Gross, 2024).

From a semiotic perspective, this transformation concerns not only tools, but the internal structure of visual messages. AI-driven visuals are shaped by algorithmic logics that privilege ideal symmetries, hyper-perfect geometries, and repetitive patterns, often lacking the "harmonic dissonance" typical of human gestures and artisanal creativity. In contrast, traditional luxury visual grammar is built upon intentional imperfections,

narrative contrasts, and formal tensions that render each creation unique and unrepeatable. Colour treatment and visual rhythm further highlight the divide. Although AI can produce refined colour palettes, it tends to normalize chromatic language by drawing from recognizable trends and pre-existing datasets, potentially undermining the unique chromatic identity of a brand. In this regard, AI-generated aesthetics may appear formally consistent but semantically generic, resulting in a "synthetic luxury" effect that weakens the symbolic depth underpinning the brand's visual heritage (Drożdż, 2024; Gross, 2024).

Semiotically, the divergence between AI-driven visuals and traditional design lies not merely in the "hand" that creates them, but in the altered relationship between sign and referent. In traditional luxury projects, symbolic meaning is anchored in tangible materials, such as fine fabrics or artisanal craftsmanship, which serve as markers of authenticity (Park & Ahn, 2024). In AI-generated visuals, the sensory and tactile dimension is translated into a more abstract register: the consumer engages with a visual narrative mediated by algorithms, often perceived as less "real" than in-person experiences (Binns, 2024). This shift reshapes consumer expectations, especially when brands aim to evoke emotions and values traditionally associated with exclusivity, such as uniqueness or attention to detail (Bakumenko, 2024).

The perceived artificiality of AI-generated images emerges precisely from the distance between these new visual codes and the aesthetic expectations carefully cultivated by luxury brands over time. As Gross (2024) notes, such images can be considered *simulacra,* representations that no longer maintain a direct link to reality. They may be visually appealing but emotionally hollow. For this reason, it becomes essential to adopt a critical lens when approaching these contents, distinguishing between what is truly innovative and what risks compromising the brand's deeper identity.

2.1.3 The challenge of originality and the risk of aesthetic homogenization

The integration of Artificial Intelligence into the creative processes of luxury branding opens up unprecedented opportunities yet simultaneously raises critical questions regarding the preservation of originality and the ability to maintain a distinctive aesthetic identity. While AI allows for the rapid and efficient production of visual content, it often

generates outputs that recombine pre-existing elements, resulting more in variations than in genuine innovations from an aesthetic standpoint (Routray, 2024). This approach inherently clashes with the expectations of uniqueness that historically define the realm of luxury, where every element from design to colour, to visual rhythm, is meant to convey exclusivity and intentionality (Routray, 2024). At the same time, the way users interact with these technologies plays a crucial role: prompts are often similar, and users tend to follow trending styles, leading AI to produce visually homogeneous results that reduce creative variety and reinforce visual uniformity (De Rosa Palmini & Cetinić, 2024). Scholars have described this phenomenon as *aesthetic flattening*, where differences are gradually erased in favour of a repetitive, reassuring, and visually "acceptable" style yet one that lacks formal tension and experimental ambition (Ervik, 2024; Khadake, 2024).

One of the most pressing issues lies in the composition of the visual datasets used to train generative models: which images are selected to "educate" the AI inevitably influences the visual content it produces. When these models are primarily based on datasets rooted in Western aesthetics or dominant visual trends, they tend to replicate a narrow vision of visual creativity, marginalizing expressions and sensibilities from other cultural contexts (Jones, Gupta & Ritchie, 2024). The result is a form of global homogenization that suppresses diversity, normalizing visual style and erasing the cultural specificities that are, in fact, essential to the richness and symbolic depth of luxury branding (Jones, Gupta & Ritchie, 2024).

In the luxury branding context, this dynamic becomes even more critical. High-end brands construct their identity through visual narratives deeply connected to culture, heritage, and geography (Soloaga, 2023). Each *maison* expresses unique values through symbolic details and singular aesthetic references that build a coherent and recognizable imaginary. If AI-generated visuals begin to replicate a "global," culturally neutral style, the risk is that these differences will be flattened, rendering luxury brands visually interchangeable and weakening their emotional bond with consumers (Almeida & Santos, 2012; Routray, 2024). In other words, what makes a brand "luxurious", that its aura, its narrative, its symbolic grounding, may dissolve into a standardized aesthetic: beautiful, yet devoid of depth (Manera, 2024).

To address this criticality, a rethinking of the criteria for training data selection is essential. As Manera (2024) argues, fostering a broader plurality of visual references and cultural sensibilities is crucial to ensure that AI does not simply generate “beautiful images” stripped of meaning. Only then can AI serve not as an aesthetic shortcut but as a tool that enriches rather than simplifies or flattens the visual storytelling of luxury.

2.2 The Paradox of Authenticity: Can AI Be "Authentic"?

At the heart of luxury brand communication, the concept of authenticity has always held both strategic and symbolic significance: it is what separates the original from the copy, the genuine from the fabricated, depth from mere ornamentation (Barthes, 1957; Beverland, 2005). However, with the advent of artificial intelligence in creative processes, this dichotomy is being challenged, giving rise to an urgent question: *can something artificially generated be perceived as authentic?*

This question is as much ontological as it is semiotic, as it interrogates the very possibility that a machine can produce signs imbued with intentionality, narrative coherence, and the ability to represent a brand’s deep identity. The “artificiality” of AI seemingly contradicts the foundational codes of luxury, historically rooted in values such as craftsmanship, heritage, human effort, and uniqueness (To et al., 2025; Morhart et al., 2015). Yet, in today’s algorithmic culture, authenticity is no longer an intrinsic property of a message, but something constructed in the interaction between what the brand communicates and what the audience perceives. In other words, it is not only about being authentic, but also about appearing authentic and, above all, triggering a coherent sense-making experience for the audience (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Coeckelbergh, 2021). To understand how consumers currently interpret authenticity, the literature identifies three major frameworks. The first is objective, grounded in tangible elements such as the product’s origin, artisan signature, or the use of noble materials. The second is constructivist: authenticity arises from the alignment between the brand’s message and the consumer’s expectations. The third is existential and refers to the personal bond that a consumer develops with a brand when it supports the expression of their deeper self (Morhart et al., 2015; Beverland & Farrelly, 2010).

In this context, AI creates a perceptual short-circuit. AI-generated content can be formally flawless, visually aligned with a brand's imagery, and even capable of eliciting an emotional response and yet it lacks human intention, which may render it devoid of deeper meaning (Routray, 2024; Bommasani et al., 2021). This is the very core of the paradox. It is precisely within this space that the "negotiation of authenticity" emerges: a process through which individuals attempt to assign meaning, intention, and coherence to content created by algorithms, deciding, individually and collectively, whether to trust that synthetic voice (Negotiating the Authenticity of AI, 2024). In luxury branding, where emotional and value-based connection is central, this negotiation is not merely theoretical but deeply strategic: a new grammar of meaning is taking shape, and AI is both its instrument and its challenge.
This chapter unfolds along five main lines of inquiry, each aimed at exploring a different facet of the interaction between artificial intelligence, language, and communication in the luxury sector. The first section introduces the cultural context of the analysis, focusing on the transformation of aesthetics and perceived authenticity by Generation Z, which emerges as a key interlocutor in the redefinition of the symbolic codes of luxury. The second delves into the paradox of authenticity in the age of AI, analysing the tensions between automation and identity coherence in storytelling processes. The third section explores the potential and limitations of AI-driven language in branding practices, with a focus on automated copywriting, chatbots, voice assistants, and the construction of brand textual identity. The fourth section addresses the experiential dimension of algorithmic communication, highlighting how Gen Z interprets and emotionally responds to machine-generated language. Finally, the fifth section deals with the ethical, symbolic, and cultural implications of AI adoption, reflecting on crucial issues such as biometric data protection, algorithmic stereotyping, and the opportunity to build a more inclusive and value-driven brand communication.

All these perspectives pave the way for a deeper reflection: if artificial intelligence is reshaping how luxury communicates, it becomes essential to understand how these new languages are actually perceived by those who receive them. From this premise, the research question that concludes the chapter and frames the entire project emerges: to investigate how AI-driven communication influences Generation Z's perception of brand authenticity and emotional connection in the context of luxury branding.

2.2.1 AI and Luxury: Is Authenticity Still a Key Consumer Value?

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into the luxury sector has sparked a crucial debate around one of the most symbolically significant values in this market: authenticity. Historically, authenticity has represented the core of luxury brands' value proposition, being linked to attributes such as craftsmanship, timeless quality, heritage-driven storytelling, and the brand's identity integrity (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Morhart et al., 2015). However, the incursion of AI into creative processes raises fundamental questions not only about the concept of authenticity itself, but also about whether this value still holds the same relevance in contemporary consumer culture. Despite AI's remarkable ability to generate highly aesthetic visual, textual, and auditory content, it struggles to replicate the deeper layer of authenticity: human intentionality. In luxury products, the perception of value is often rooted in the sense that each object carries a story, a sensibility, and a recognisable human touch (Lee & Kim, 2024). The absence of a human author projecting emotion and meaning into the creative process leads many consumers to perceive AI-generated content as less authentic, even if it is aesthetically compelling (Pantano et al., 2024). The "human touch" thus remains a crucial marker of authenticity, as it evokes associations with passion, tradition, and artisanal narrative (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010).

However, this perspective is not static. Perceptions of authenticity are evolving, especially among younger consumers who demonstrate greater openness to new and hybrid forms of creative production (Vo et al., 2024). Recent studies show that Generation Z is more inclined to accept the use of AI when it leads to a high level of personalization. In this emerging scenario, authenticity does not disappear, but it shifts: it is no longer (only) linked to the origin of the product but to the subjective relevance of the experience. A piece of content becomes authentic when it reflects the individual preferences, tastes, and aspirations of the consumer (Lee & Kim, 2024).

The concept of co-creation is thus particularly significant. When the consumer actively participates in shaping the product by selecting colours, styles, formats, or messages, the sense of ownership increases. This type of interaction, which narrows the distance

between brand and audience, enhances the perception of authenticity, even when the content is algorithmically generated (Pantano et al., 2024; Vo et al., 2024).

It is crucial, indeed, that AI be perceived as complementary to human creativity, not as its replacement. Several studies indicate that consumers are willing to accept algorithmic intervention if it does not compromise the brand's sense of authenticity, but rather enriches it (Lee & Kim, 2024; Gonçalves et al., 2024). Authenticity, therefore, is no longer defined solely by how a piece of content is produced but is constructed through how it is experienced.

In conclusion, authenticity is being redefined, not abandoned. Its meaning is evolving to adapt to a context in which personalization, transparency, and emotional engagement have become new criteria for perceived truthfulness. Luxury brands that are able to understand and respond to this transformation will not only retain cultural relevance but also strengthen their symbolic capital in an increasingly technological era.

2.2.2 AI-Driven Storytelling Creation: Limitation or Competitive Advantage?

The growing adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies is prompting luxury brands to reassess how AI-based storytelling systems can be integrated into their communication strategies without compromising brand identity or the symbolic values built over time (Maman Larraufie & Kourdoughli, 2014). On the one hand, AI offers a significant competitive advantage by enabling the analysis of vast amounts of data, identifying emotional or stylistic patterns, and generating highly personalized content with strong emotional impact (Kumar et al., 2023). Through AI, brands can design immersive digital experiences that go beyond traditional narrative forms, facilitating deeper connections with consumers (Chu et al., 2022, as cited in *AI in Storytelling: Machina as Co-Creator*). However, the use of AI in storytelling raises important concerns about the risk of losing cultural specificity and symbolic depth. Luxury brands operate within a delicate narrative space, where heritage and artisanal uniqueness are essential to their distinctiveness. In this context, the construction of meaning relies on what Maman Larraufie and Kourdoughli (2014) term *e-semiotic* codes, symbolic signals that bridge a brand's historical roots with its expression in contemporary digital environments.

The authors arrive at this definition by reflecting on the evolution of semiotics in the digital context: they recognize that modes of communication have radically transformed with the advent of digital media and algorithmic interactions. E-semiotic codes are not merely a transposition of traditional visual and verbal codes but represent a hybrid, multilayered system integrating visual, textual, interactive, and algorithmic elements. In this system, the sign is no longer static or unidirectional but becomes a dynamic, relational process shaped by real-time interactions between brand, technology, and consumers.
Maman Larraufie and Kourdoughli emphasize that in luxury, this e-semiotic dimension is especially relevant because it mediates between two seemingly opposing poles: on the one hand, the need to preserve cultural heritage, artisanal stories, and symbolic values; on the other, the urgency to adapt to a digital environment where narrative must be personalized, immersive, and fragmented across multiple points of contact. Therefore, adopting e-semiotic codes allows brands to maintain coherence and symbolic depth, even within a fluid and adaptive narrative generated or co-created by AI.

In an era increasingly shaped by digital interaction, luxury brands face the challenge of preserving their legendary narratives while adapting to new platforms that may appear misaligned with principles of exclusivity and high-end appeal. Digital semiotics plays a crucial role in this transition, enabling brands to weave a coherent storytelling experience across multiple digital media. By leveraging visual language and symbolic culture, luxury brands can effectively communicate their heritage, ensuring that the essence of their identity remains intact while engaging with consumers in a rapidly evolving digital landscape. This approach not only reinforces a brand's commitment to quality and tradition but also cultivates deeper emotional connections with consumers who seek meaning and authenticity in their purchasing experiences. As luxury brands embrace digital semiotics, they can craft cohesive and immersive storytelling that highlights their artisanal excellence, thereby enhancing their prestige and strengthening their market positioning. In other words, luxury brands must know how to employ digital tools to reinforce their identity without sacrificing the symbolic values that confer uniqueness. Nevertheless, the risk of homogenization remains real. If AI-generated content lacks attention to the cultural and symbolic specificities of the brand, it may come across as

superficial. Experts have highlighted this risk in campaigns that indiscriminately mix distant cultural codes without adequate human oversight (Gonçalves et al., 2024).

Here lies the critical issue: it is not the use of AI itself that weakens storytelling, but the absence of human intervention capable of guiding, curating, and harmonizing content in alignment with the brand's values and identity. Without careful human supervision, AI's creative capabilities may fall short of producing content that truly reflects the refinement and exclusivity of luxury narratives.

Another significant limitation concerns the perceived creative effort behind AI-generated content. As noted by To et al. (2025), when consumers discover that a luxury brand campaign has been entirely produced using generative AI, they often perceive it as less authentic and less "labour-intensive" in terms of creative investment. In industries where the idea of human craftsmanship is central, there is a risk that brand narratives may be seen as lacking originality and artisanal dedication (To et al., 2025). However, this challenge can be mitigated through a co-creative approach, in which AI supports rather than replaces human creativity (Wu et al., 2021, as cited in To et al., 2025). In such a model, AI offers suggestions and creative options that are then curated and refined by human teams, ensuring that the storytelling remains consistent with the brand's symbolic codes and values.

On the opportunity side, AI also holds significant potential, especially in enhancing the emotional resonance of storytelling. By analysing data, AI can identify emotionally impactful moments for consumers and recommend narrative sequences, imagery, and musical elements that amplify the story's pathos (Chu et al., 2017). When used in synergy with human creativity, these tools can elevate storytelling quality, creating more engaging content that resonates with audiences on a deeper level (Kumar et al., 2023). In this way, AI transforms from a mere automation tool into an amplifier of aesthetic sensitivity and narrative power, enabling the management of vast emotional and cultural data with coherence and nuance.

The phrase, "Computers don't cry at sad stories, but they know when we will" (Chu et al., 2017, p.1), eloquently captures the paradox of AI-driven storytelling. While AI lacks genuine emotional experience, it is capable of recognizing complex emotional patterns

within data and using them to evoke meaningful emotional responses in audiences. On the one hand, this enhances narrative effectiveness by anticipating and influencing reactions; on the other, the absence of genuine empathy remains a limitation, as AI cannot replicate the emotional depth a human creator brings. Nonetheless, as Chu et al. (2017) suggest, when AI is employed in synergy with human creativity, this limitation becomes a strength, amplifying emotional impact without compromising the authenticity of the narrative.

Ultimately, artificial intelligence can enhance the emotional and symbolic power of luxury brand storytelling, provided it is not used as a creative shortcut. Only when technology serves a clearly defined human vision and brand identity does AI-driven storytelling become a true competitive advantage rather than a loss of meaning (To et al., 2025; Hanks et al., 2023).

2.3 AI-Driven Verbal Language in Luxury

In contemporary luxury, seduction is no longer exclusively visual. While the image may be the first stimulus to capture attention, it is language that gives depth to imagination, evokes new possibilities, and emotionally engages the individual in an experience that transcends the visible and projects them into a symbolic universe rich in meaning. As noted by Calvert (2019) and Zantides (2018), the language of luxury plays an evocative and symbolic role: it opens up imaginary worlds, shapes the brand's identity, and creates an emotional bond with the audience. Language, in this sense, does not merely describe luxury but it constructs it symbolically. It is through words, along with tone, rhythm, and style, that a brand welcomes the consumer into its universe of values, conveying a sense of prestige and the essence of its positioning. As Calvert (2019) affirms, “luxury language is not merely a form of expression, but a semiotic device capable of evoking possible worlds and establishing symbolic distinctions.”

The centrality of language in the symbolic economy of luxury emerges on multiple levels: from the narrative voice in advertising campaigns to website copy and the conversational interactions mediated by chatbots and virtual assistants. Across these diverse forms, language acts both as a tool of identity consolidation and a mechanism of seduction. Zantides (2018), in his study on the “culture of seduction” in visual-verbal communication, highlights how language in premium contexts is crafted to profoundly

engage the recipient: each word is carefully chosen to create attraction, generate empathy, and stimulate desire, establishing a symbolic dialogue between the brand and its audience.

However, the introduction of artificial intelligence into linguistic production processes has profoundly reshaped the dynamics of verbal communication in luxury. Tools such as natural language generation, conversational models, and content automation platforms now enable brands to produce texts, interactions, and narratives at scale, dynamically adapted to different audience segments in real time (Dhawan, 2024; Kubovics, 2024). This technological shift demands a broader reflection on the communicative qualities of AI, particularly in relation to its ability to preserve the expressive richness, stylistic refinement, and symbolic coherence that have long characterized the language of luxury. Yet, if not carefully guided, the automation of language risks producing generic and impersonal content that fails to capture the sophistication and elegance required by luxury brand communication. This type of language demands nuance, sensitivity, and attention to detail: every word must contribute to constructing an atmosphere rich in meaning, capable of evoking emotion and reinforcing the brand's positioning. Nevertheless, the potential of AI in the linguistic domain is far from negligible. When directed by a human creative strategy and trained on a brand's stylistic heritage, AI can amplify expressive coherence, flexibly adapt to new cultural contexts, and deliver personalized verbal experiences aligned with the expectations of Generation Z.

The following sections will analyse three key dimensions of AI's application to luxury language: the automation of textual content, conversational interaction through chatbots and voice assistants, and the consolidation of brand identity through AI-generated and AI-mediated language. Each section will be supported by concrete examples, business cases, and theoretical insights, illustrating the potential, risks, and symbolic implications of AI-driven verbal communication in luxury branding.

2.3.1 Artificial Intelligence in Copywriting: Shaping Automated Content

The automation of content through artificial intelligence is transforming copywriting practices in branding, offering new creative opportunities but also raising critical challenges regarding the preservation of brand identity and communicative depth (Dhawan, 2024; Kubovics, 2024). In the current landscape, brands are exploring new AI-

supported text production methods, aiming to enhance communicative consistency and better respond to the needs of a fragmented and dynamic audience (Dhawan, 2024). As outlined in Chapter 1, the adoption of technologies such as Natural Language Processing and predictive models allows AI to create dynamic, personalized content, improving text production efficiency and responsiveness to different audience segments, while raising questions about narrative coherence and perceived authenticity (Kubovics, 2024).

In line with this technological shift, some of the most widely adopted tools today (such as GPT-4, Jasper, and Copy.ai) are based on advanced neural networks and machine learning systems, capable of adapting to diverse communicative registers and target audiences (Dhawan, 2024; Liu & Rao, 2024). These tools integrate semantic analysis, NLP, and behavioural data to refine communicative coherence in a rapidly evolving digital context (Kubovics, 2024). Several globally relevant brands have already successfully experimented with automated content generation tools. Among the most notable cases, JD.com, a Chinese e-commerce giant, implemented an automated copywriting system for product descriptions, generating over 2 million texts in a single year (Zhu et al., 2021). Netflix has used generative models to personalize content synopses based on user preferences, optimizing content recommendation relevance (Ninja Marketing, 2023). Spotify has integrated AI into its email marketing and push notification campaigns, generating tailored copy that enhanced engagement and communicative coherence (Ninja Marketing, 2023). In the luxury sector, where storytelling and exclusivity are fundamental assets in shaping perceived value, Brunello Cucinelli launched an AI-driven experiential portal in 2024, allowing users to explore narrative content and interact with "Solomei AI," a virtual assistant trained to narrate the brand's vision and heritage (Jing Daily, 2024). Similarly, Estée Lauder confirmed the use of AI for automated generation of textual content, including advertising messages, with the goal of enhancing personalization and optimizing time-to-market (Vogue Business, 2023).

Alongside these applications, the limitations of automation are also increasingly evident. Specifically, the use of ChatGPT for advertising copy in premium contexts has raised doubts about AI's ability to maintain stylistic coherence, originality, and expressive sophistication, key elements for the identity positioning of luxury brands (The Drum,

2023). Moreover, Google penalizes content considered artificial or lacking real-life experience and informational value, thus reducing the visibility of automatically generated texts if not properly optimized (The Drum, 2023). Nonetheless, AI's effectiveness in generating high-performing content is well documented. Product descriptions optimized by generative algorithms can increase organic traffic by up to 25%, while personalized social media content has recorded a 60% rise in engagement (Luxonomy, 2023). Additionally, predictive-model-based automated email campaigns yield open and conversion rates above the industry average (Salesforce, cited in Luxonomy, 2023).

To overcome the limits of pure automation, recent literature proposes a hybrid approach. According to Liadskyi et al. (2025), synergy between AI and human copywriters allows for a combination of data-driven analytical power and human social and expressive sensitivity. In this perspective, AI provides optimized linguistic structures and suggestions, but it is human creative intelligence that infuses coherence, depth, and authenticity into the message (Liadskyi et al., 2025; Wu et al., 2021). This collaboration proves particularly strategic in social media copywriting, where content must instantly activate symbolic connections with target audiences. Moreover, human involvement is essential in addressing the ethical implications related to data protection, communicative transparency, and the replacement of professional expertise (Raut et al., 2024; Dhawan, 2024).

Ultimately, the combination of AI's generative capabilities and human creative direction currently represents the most promising path to reconcile efficiency with relevance in copywriting. Only when used strategically and under supervision can AI become a valuable tool to amplify a brand's voice, while preserving its identity, expressive coherence, and symbolic connection with its audience. From this perspective, artificial intelligence can support more effective verbal persuasion processes provided it is oriented toward the creation of messages that not only inform, but also engage, move, and stimulate symbolic alignment with the recipient (Routray, 2024; Hanks et al., 2023).

2.3.2 Chatbots, Voice Assistants, and AI-Driven Interactions in Luxury Services

In the landscape of luxury branding, the introduction of virtual assistants and chatbots represents a significant transformation in verbal language and consumer engagement (Zeng et al., 2023; Purushartha, 2025). These technologies, powered by advanced Natural Language Processing and machine learning systems, enable brands to establish direct, fluid, and personalized contact with their audiences, responding to a growing demand for immediate, tailor-made interaction, especially from Generation Z (Zeng et al., 2023; Luxonomy, 2024). The implementation of AI-powered conversational tools in the luxury sector requires a delicate balance: on one hand, the algorithm provides unprecedented levels of personalization; on the other, it must preserve the dimension of exclusivity that sustains the brand's prestige (Zeng et al., 2023; Nozawa et al., 2022).
In a luxury context where experience is deeply ritualized and symbolic, the adoption of conversational AI must be guided by semiotic sensitivity. The relationship between brand and consumer is structurally asymmetrical: the client does not merely seek functional efficiency but wishes to connect with the brand's aesthetic and value-driven universe (Zeng et al., 2023; Jing Daily, 2024).

Brunello Cucinelli, the Italian high-end brand renowned for its artisanal excellence in cashmere and its humanistic philosophy, exemplified this with the launch of *Solomei AI,* named after the historic village of Solomeo, the company's headquarters. This chatbot goes beyond basic information delivery, speaking "in the brand's voice" and conveying transparency, corporate culture, and narrative coherence (Vogue Business, 2024).

This technological solution is not limited to conversational interaction but becomes an immersive storytelling device. Through a scroll-based interface, the user is invited to explore the company's history step by step, navigating through key narrative milestones that articulate the brand's founding values, aesthetic vision, and ethical commitments. In this way, Solomei AI enhances the experiential depth of the brand journey, transforming corporate storytelling into a guided, emotionally resonant experience.

Figure 1. *Screenshot from* solomei.ai*, AI-based interface developed by Brunello Cucinelli. Source:* Solomei AI official website. *Retrieved from* https://www.solomei.ai/

Similarly, the American brand Coach saw a tenfold increase in conversions during the Lunar New Year, a highly symbolic and commercially strategic moment in Asian markets, thanks to its AI assistants (Vogue Business, 2024).

Other brands like Burberry, Tommy Hilfiger, and Kering have experimented with chatbots capable not only of suggesting outfits but also of guiding the customer through an interactive narrative designed to reflect the brand identity and immerse the user in a personalized conversational experience. Burberry's chatbot, for instance, allows users to explore collections, access exclusive content such as backstage footage, interviews, or personalized media, and even book an Uber to visit physical stores, creating a hybrid online-offline ecosystem (Swiss Luxury Conference, 2024).

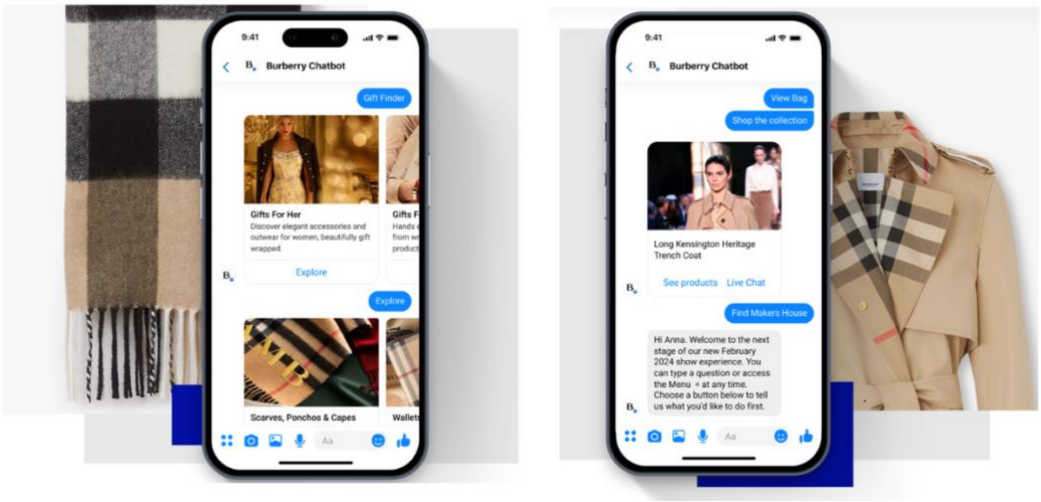


Figure 2. *Burberry chatbot on Messenger.* Source: Master of Code (2024), *https://masterofcode.com/portfolio/burberry-chatbot*

Tommy Hilfiger opted for a playful and direct tone with its bot, launched in collaboration with model Gigi Hadid during the 2016 New York Fashion Week. Integrated into Messenger, the chatbot offered a guided conversational journey through three main options: receiving personalized style tips, exploring the TOMMYxGIGI collection, and accessing behind-the-scenes content (Swiss Luxury Conference, 2024). It uses dynamic questions about personal taste, occasions, and colour preferences to suggest looks, thereby reinforcing a sense of personalization and engagement (Swiss Luxury Conference, 2024).

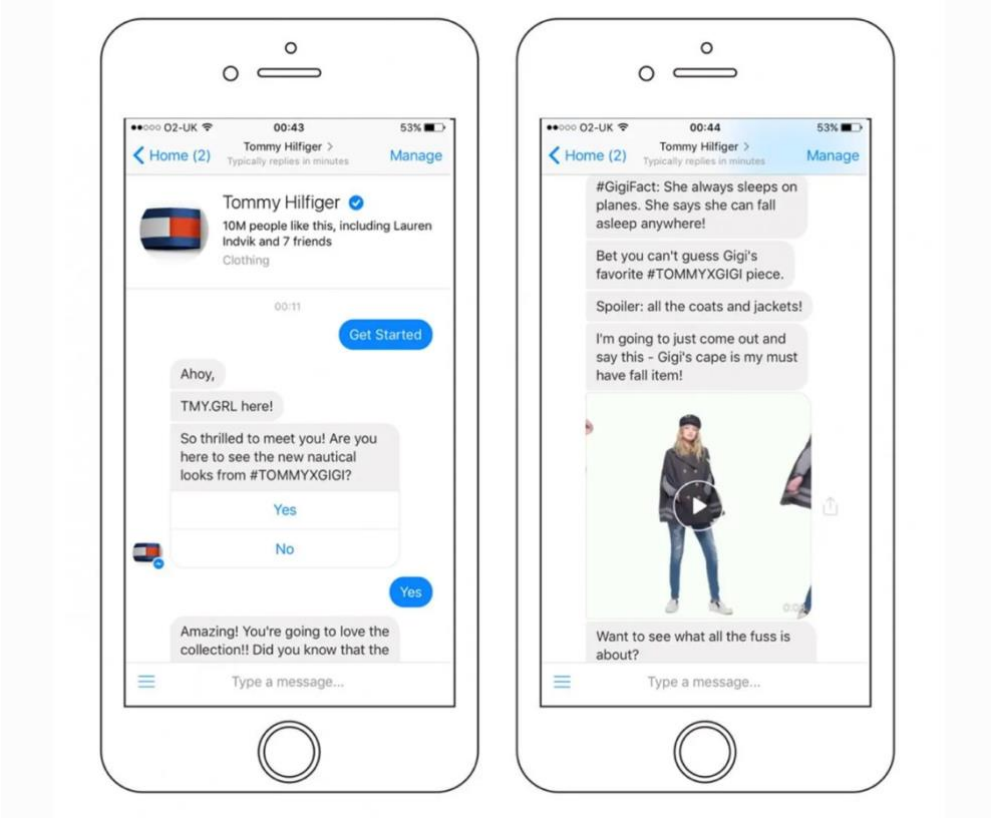


Figure 3. *TOMMYxGIGI chatbot interface on Facebook Messenger. Source: Forbes, 2016. Available at: https://www.forbes.com/sites/rachelarthur/2016/09/11/tommy-hilfiger-launches-chatbot-on-facebook-messenger-to-tie-to-gigi-hadid-collection/*

Kering, the French luxury conglomerate behind brands such as Gucci, Saint Laurent, Bottega Veneta, and Balenciaga, developed *Madeline*, an AI assistant based on ChatGPT acting as a digital personal shopper capable of understanding natural language and offering tailored recommendations across its luxury brand portfolio (Forbes, 2024).

The seductive power of these tools lies not only in their responsiveness but also in their ability to create dialogic experiences where language itself becomes part of the product: a form of verbal seduction that algorithmically replicates the human savoir-faire typical of traditional luxury boutiques (Swiss Luxury Conference, 2024; Jing Daily, 2024). Through tone modulation, lexical choice, and the sequencing of exchanges, chatbots manage to build interactions that evoke the curated and personalized feel of high-end retail experiences. In this way, communication becomes not only functional but

performative: it becomes a symbolic asset that enhances the client's immersion in the brand's universe (Swiss Luxury Conference, 2024; Jing Daily, 2024).

AI-based conversational technologies, while promoting personalized and immediate interactions, must be integrated carefully within a context that defines its identity through symbolic experience (Zeng et al., 2023; Nozawa et al., 2022). Notably, their implementation introduces a semiotic challenge: when the conversational agent becomes too human-like, it can trigger the so-called "*uncanny valley"*, a term coined by Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori to describe the discomfort experienced in front of an almost-human yet imperfect artificial entity (Mori, 1970). This effect may undermine the perceived authenticity and exclusivity of the brand (Purushartha, 2025). Conversely, when carefully calibrated, the interaction with a chatbot or virtual assistant can activate a form of *ludic semiosis*, inviting the consumer to co-create meaning and engage in an immersive, personalized experience aligned with the ritualized nature of luxury (Eco, 1975).

Ultimately, AI-mediated conversation in luxury is not merely a matter of technological innovation or operational efficiency, it is a strategic act of symbolic construction. Every word spoken by a chatbot can either reinforce or weaken the semiotic universe of the brand. This approach aligns with studies in applied semiotics and branding, which show that every discursive element contributes to shaping the perceived brand identity (Eco, 1975). For this reason, the linguistic and relational design of these tools must be regarded as an integral part of brand strategy.

2.3.3 The Role of AI-Driven Language in Strengthening Brand Identity

Brand identity refers to the set of tangible and intangible elements that define how a company is perceived by consumers. It includes values, personality, and communication and visual style, which are expressed and reinforced at every point of contact between the brand and its audience (Mindrut, Manolica & Roman, 2015). The introduction of AI-driven language technologies fits seamlessly into this framework: it allows brands to reinforce these same identity elements through more dynamic and personalized communication, while maintaining consistency across various touchpoints and adapting

to the evolving needs of the digital consumer (Mindrut et al., 2015; Musaiqer & Hamdan, 2023). As discussed in this chapter, through advanced chatbots and text-generation tools, brands can deliver messages that align with their identity, more accurately addressing the needs and preferences of consumers. From a branding perspective, this translates into a stronger brand presence, as interactions, despite being mediated by automated systems, convey the same tone of voice and distinctive values of the company.

However, the main challenge lies in striking a balance between automation and authenticity, ensuring that each piece of content retains the "human" component that fosters trust and connection with the audience (Bergner, Hildebrand & Häubl, 2023; Musaiqer & Hamdan, 2023). The intentional use of AI as a tool for identity consolidation is supported by concrete examples, such as the case of the Burberry brand. The British luxury fashion house has undergone a digital rebranding process aimed at preserving its luxury positioning while expanding its online presence. This involved a strategic redefinition of the brand's voice: the content on its website and social media was restructured to reflect the brand's historical identity, associated with elegance and British tradition, using a more accessible and contemporary visual and verbal language. According to Yeni (2024), Burberry leveraged artificial intelligence to support this transformation by analysing and replicating stylistic patterns consistent with its heritage, with the goal of ensuring communication consistency without compromising the brand's exclusivity and aspirational tone.

Nevertheless, in order to preserve the "aura" and authenticity that make luxury unique, it is crucial that artificial intelligence is trained using the language, values, and distinctive communication style of each brand (Musaiqer & Hamdan, 2023), avoiding a flattening of the communication that could diminish the perception of exclusivity. Human supervision is, therefore, vital in ensuring that the generated discourse remains aligned with the brand's heritage and symbolic values, as the harmonization of technology and brand's distinguishing traits requires a strategic approach capable of enhancing the brand's authenticity and cultural meaning. This aspect is also supported by the studies of Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000), who emphasize that a strong brand is built on a clear, well-defined, and consistent identity, developed over time through communication and strategic choices that reflect its essence, which must be maintained over time through all

forms of relevant communication, including written content generated by AI systems. In addition to the aspects already highlighted, it is important to stress that any AI-driven communication strategy must be based on a clearly defined value system. In the luxury sector, these values may include heritage, craftsmanship, elegance, and aspiration, which serve as the pillars of brand identity (Mindrut et al., 2015). If AI is not guided by parameters that reflect these fundamentals, there is a risk of generating messages that conflict with the brand's image of exclusivity and prestige, undermining consumer trust and brand consistency (Musaiqer & Hamdan, 2023). At the same time, proper supervision reduces the risk of standardization and "banalization" of language. As noted by Bergner, Hildebrand, and Häubl (2023), the perception of "humanity" in conversational systems strongly influences how consumers experience their interaction with the brand. If this perception appears artificial or inconsistent with the brand's core values, it can lead to distrust. On the other hand, a thoughtful implementation of AI can strengthen brand identity, fostering engagement and emotional closeness. In this sense, AI-driven language not only enhances communication strategy efficiency but also serves as a narrative extension of the brand, provided it respects the cultural and identity essence of the brand, as emphasized by Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000).

2.4 Generation Z and AI-Driven Luxury: Opportunities and Controversies

The concept of luxury has progressively moved away from a definition rooted solely in material possession and exclusivity, toward a more complex and relational idea, where the authenticity of the experience and the brand's ability to craft engaging and coherent narratives play a central role (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012; Ko, Costello, & Taylor, 2019). In today's landscape, where luxury is configured as a symbolic experience, with the brand acting as a cultural activator and a tool for identity recognition, artificial intelligence no longer functions merely as a technical support. It becomes a cultural agent capable of intervening in the communicative codes of luxury, redefining its aesthetics, relationships, and language. It is within this transformation of the luxury imaginary that the decisive contribution of AI takes shape. With the advent of generative models (GAI) and Large Language Models (LLMs), as highlighted by Pantano, Serravalle and Priporas (2024), AI is no longer simply an operational tool: it becomes a co-author of visual and narrative creativity, capable of redefining the expressive forms of luxury and generating new,

personalized aesthetics. In semiotic terms, we can say that AI operates on both the referential (functional) and value-based dimensions, following Jean-Marie Floch's (1990) distinction, thus redefining not only what is communicated, but above all how it is lived and interpreted. Nevertheless, this potential is not without ambiguity. As Luxurydaily (2024) warns, many brands adopt AI solutions to automate content without critically rethinking the relationship between technology and meaning, thereby risking the devaluation of the symbolic experience of luxury.

Generation Z represents an unprecedented challenge for luxury marketing: it is a generation highly digitally literate, raised in tech-saturated environments, and fully aware of the pervasive role of algorithms in their everyday experience. For this cohort, who associates luxury with identity values and personalized storytelling, expectations are high: AI must prove itself capable of respecting the complexity of these expectations by generating interactions that are not merely functional, but perceived as authentic (Pantano et al., 2024; FESPA, 2024; Ozsaraclar, 2024). The relationship between AI and Gen Z thus invites reflection on two fronts. On the one hand, there are the opportunities offered by experiential innovation, personalization, and the construction of bespoke content in which individuals can actively participate in the formation of the self. On the other hand, tensions arise regarding the perception of authenticity, transparency in technological processes, and the risk that excessive personalization may lead to a new form of algorithmic standardization. Precisely because they are accustomed to predictive ecosystems, Gen Z consumers develop heightened expectations for technologies applied to luxury. While AI may be accepted as a functional tool in other domains, in luxury it must take on a more sophisticated role: it should contribute to narrative construction, preserve exceptionality, and reinforce the aura of the product. A mechanical or invisible use of AI risks hollowing out the meaning of the experience, reducing it to a technical performance devoid of symbolic depth (Jeffrey, 2022; Saxena, 2024).

This section explores two core dimensions of this dialectic. Paragraph 2.4.1 will examine the paradox of AI-driven personalization in luxury, highlighting how the promise of uniqueness may lead to a new form of standardization, ultimately disappointing Generation Z's expectations. Paragraph 2.4.2 will compare how AI is perceived in luxury

branding versus in other digital environments familiar to Gen Z, such as social media, gaming, and fashion e-commerce. The goal is to provide a critical reading of the tensions and opportunities introduced by artificial intelligence in the complex interplay between generational identity, luxury aesthetics, and predictive technologies.

2.4.1 The Paradox of AI-Driven Personalization in Luxury

In luxury marketing, personalization is conceived as a strategic process aimed at crafting unique experiences tailored to individual preferences, experiences that strengthen the emotional bond between client and brand while emphasizing the centrality of personal identity in shaping experiential value (Milano Fashion Institute). Today, thanks to artificial intelligence, this promise is amplified: sophisticated algorithms enable brands to modulate content and offers based on consumers' behaviours, preferences, and even biometric data. However, this advanced predictive capacity raises a crucial question for Generation Z: is such accurate personalization truly synonymous with authentic connection, or does it create a rift between brand and consumer? Recent studies suggest the latter, highlighting how Gen Z perceives repeated personalized formats as standardized, predictable, and at times even intrusive, especially when content is generated solely from pre-established behavioural patterns previously detected by algorithms (Jeffrey, 2022; Saxena, 2024).

In this context, Gen Z, digital natives raised in an environment constantly mediated by algorithms and automated content, has developed a heightened sensitivity to how brands handle their data. While they appreciate innovation and tailored experiences, they increasingly view the excessive use of AI to invisibly adapt content as manipulative or invasive. According to recent research, although this generation is generally open to AI in communication, it simultaneously expresses concerns about psychological profiling, loss of spontaneity, and the risk of stereotyping (Jeffrey, 2022; Saxena, 2024). When personalization becomes overly algorithmic, it loses its relational value and risks being perceived as impersonal. This gives rise to a clear performative paradox: the more content is personalized for the individual, the less room it leaves for self-expression, undermining the promise of exclusivity and authenticity central to luxury. For Gen Z, who considers self-representation and authenticity as pillars of their relationship with brands, this form

of communication can be deeply frustrating. Luxury, as a symbolic universe laden with meaning, should offer possibilities for identification and personal narrative. But when content is generated by predictive models, the space for interpretation narrows. The experience loses depth and becomes devoid of meaning: predictive automation compromises the relational dimension of brand–consumer interaction, preventing the individual from actively contributing to meaning-making, and leaving no room for open interpretation (Bunea et al., 2024). This dynamic, however, is not only perceptual but also semiotic. What disappears is the tension between the expected and the unexpected, the known and the new tensions that constitute a hallmark of the aesthetic experience of luxury. When personalization ceases to be a process and becomes mere prediction, the interaction with the brand turns into a closed circuit, incapable of generating new meaning. As Saxena (2024) and Jeffrey (2022) observe, Generation Z perceives these dynamics as a reductive form of communication, lacking dialogic openness and distant from their expectations of authenticity and engagement.

Ultimately, the core issue is clear: for Generation Z, it is not the presence of AI that threatens the authenticity of the experience, but rather the impersonal way it is deployed. Only a form of personalization that is participatory, transparent, and open can preserve the symbolic value of luxury and meet the expectations of a generation that rejects predictive standardization and demands an active role in shaping the brand experience (Bunea et al., 2024; Saxena, 2024).

2.4.2 How Gen Z Perceives AI in Branding Compared to Other Industries

The daily experience that Generation Z develops with artificial intelligence predominantly occurs in immersive and interactive digital environments, quite distinct from the traditional communication of luxury branding (Saxena, 2024; Jeffrey, 2022). Social media, video games, and digital shopping environments such as fashion e-commerce have shaped this generation's expectations, making them not only more demanding but also more selective when evaluating the quality and transparency of AI-driven interactions (Guerra-Tamez et al., 2024; Bunea et al., 2024). In this context, the following paragraph will explore the perception of AI in branding, considering comparisons with experiences in other sectors such as social media, gaming, and fashion e-commerce. These three areas were selected because they represent digital environments

in which AI is experienced as a functional tool, designed for automatic personalization (in the case of social media), interactive efficiency (in gaming), and algorithmic recommendation (in fashion e-commerce). The goal is to highlight, through a comparative analysis, how AI focused on efficiency and standardization contrasts with the expectations of a more experiential and symbolic AI, typical of luxury branding.

In the hyper-connected world of social media, AI acts as an invisible mechanism dynamically governing personalization: it suggests content, curates feeds, and anticipates preferences. Generation Z has internalized these mechanisms and tends to perceive them as a natural part of digital interaction, in line with observations by Jeffrey (2022) and Saxena (2024), who emphasize that the daily familiarity with AI on social platforms helps normalize its presence, reducing its perception as artificial. This attitude stems from early and continuous exposure to platforms that operate based on predictive algorithmic logic, in an era where personalized feeds have become the primary interface of the world (Saxena, 2024; Guerra-Tamez et al., 2024). AI is not seen as something external or artificial but as an extension of one's digital self. For this reason, Gen Z develops a high sensitivity toward forms of personalization they perceive as stereotypical or overly manipulative (Saxena, 2024; Guerra-Tamez et al., 2024). For instance, TikTok's algorithm is tolerated because it fuels discovery, creativity, and self-expression, allowing users to express their identities through selected, but not rigidly imposed, content (Saxena, 2024; Jeffrey, 2022).

In contrast to social media, where the user actively participates in shaping their profile through dynamic interactions such as likes, comments, shares, and content creation, luxury branding maintains a more closed communication structure, where the user has little room for contribution and is subjected to a unilateral brand narrative (Jeffrey, 2022; Saxena, 2024).

In the world of gaming, AI takes on an even more immersive and relational dimension. Video games such as Fortnite, The Sims, or Roblox are examples of personalization that goes beyond aesthetics to include narrative elements. In these virtual worlds, AI is often integrated with augmented reality (AR) technologies, enabling players to overlay virtual elements onto the real world or experience fully immersive environments. As reported by Guruhitech (2024), Gen Z views AR as a tool that supports self-expression, appreciating

it not so much for its spectacular effects, but for its ability to integrate digital elements into daily experiences. When this same technology is adopted in luxury branding without offering active participation, such as merely simulating product fitting, Gen Z perceives it as superficial, purely decorative, and lacking symbolic depth (Guruhitech, 2024; Joy et al., 2022).

The immersive and participatory experience tied to the gaming industry creates a high symbolic expectation for Gen Z: brands should be able to offer spaces where identity can be experienced actively, personalized, and transformatively, as happens in digital gaming contexts where users are called to build subjective narratives through interactive technologies (Guruhitech, 2024; Joy et al., 2022). While gaming offers co-creation opportunities, luxury branding risks appearing closed, less interactive, and distant from the aesthetic expectations of Generation Z (Guruhitech, 2024; Joy et al., 2022). In fashion e-commerce, AI is used across various touchpoints in the digital shopping experience: from product selection to fitting simulations, to recommending products based on previous purchase behaviours (Bunea et al., 2024; Sestino et al., 2022). These technologies, which can be termed functional, focus on efficiency and automating the process, facilitating purchase operations but often lacking symbolic or narrative depth. According to Sestino et al. (2022), for this reason, Generation Z tends to perceive such technologies as technical support tools for the purchasing process rather than true experiences capable of emotionally engaging the consumer.

As highlighted by Joy et al. (2022), the effectiveness of AI in digital fashion depends on its ability to activate a narrative aesthetic and build identity-driven experiences, not merely functional ones. If luxury branding replicates predictive and standardized models without symbolic and relational investment, it risks undermining the key value of exclusivity inherent in luxury itself.

In summary, Generation Z does not reject artificial intelligence per se, but evaluates its implementation based on its ability to generate agency, aesthetics, and perceptible experiential meaning (Jeffrey, 2022; Saxena, 2024). Branding must, therefore, shift from a predictive to a relational logic: it is not enough to personalize; engagement is essential. To meet the expectations of Generation Z, the future of luxury will need to redefine AI as an aesthetic, participatory, and narrative space, capable of amplifying the symbolic

value of the brand and returning to the individual the role of a creative subject within the experience.

2.5 Ethical Challenges of AI in Luxury Branding

In today's cultural system where luxury brands operate, artificial intelligence is no longer merely a medium for experiences: it becomes an operational language of the brand, one capable of personalizing, deciding, excluding, and representing (Milossi et al., 2021; Noble, 2018). This gives AI a semiotic and ethical weight that far exceeds its technical functionality. When an algorithmic system filters access to content, modulates recommendations, or generates conversational interfaces, it is not simply responding to a need: it is interpreting who we are, what we desire, and how we want to be recognized.

In luxury branding, a sector rooted in selection, exclusivity, and the valorisation of identity, artificial intelligence introduces new ethical responsibilities. The use of predictive technologies to create "tailored" experiences can evolve into forms of invisible control, particularly when based on sensitive data such as biometrics. In such cases, the risk is that AI goes beyond personalization and ends up rigidly classifying individuals according to predefined parameters, reducing their complexity to functional market categories (Milossi et al., 2021).

These dynamics become even more sensitive when examined through the lens of Generation Z, a key target for the future of luxury (D'Arpizio et al., 2023). Young consumers expect digital experiences to be transparent, ethical, and respectful of their autonomy: recent research shows that 19% of users are willing to abandon a brand following a data breach, and 82% do so when they perceive a broader loss of trust (Federprivacy, 2025). Within this reflection on the ethical implications of artificial intelligence in luxury branding, two analytical trajectories emerge as particularly urgent, and will guide the following sections. The first concerns how AI systems collect and interpret increasingly sensitive personal data, such as biometrics, and how current privacy regulations intervene to protect individuals. In a sector where differentiation is the distinctive language, the risk is that excessive personalization may result in perceived intrusiveness for the individual. The second trajectory addresses the risk that AI may replicate and reinforce entrenched stereotypes. If algorithms are trained on unbalanced or

culturally biased datasets, the result can be communication that excludes, homogenizes, or reduces identity complexity. In a sector that thrives on distinction, this entails a deep contradiction between the promised and the produced imaginary. Both dimensions, the management of privacy and the issue of representation, highlight a common concern: AI is not merely an operational tool, but a cultural device that shapes relationships, produces meaning, and reflects worldviews. For luxury brands, this entails a new responsibility: not just to ensure performance, but to construct meaning in an ethical and conscious way.

2.5.1 Privacy and Algorithmic Personalization: The Issue of Biometric Data

In today's digital environment, privacy is no longer merely a legal right: it has become a deeply cultural dimension, reflecting individuals' need for control, autonomy, and symbolic recognition, especially among younger generations (Kozyreva et al., 2021). In a context where every gesture, choice, or emotion can be recorded, interpreted, and transformed into data, the management of personal information acquires expressive value: what is shared or withheld communicates who we are, what we desire, and how we want to be represented (Milossi et al., 2021).

Artificial intelligence systems, now embedded in all areas of everyday life, from work to health, from cultural consumption to entertainment, operate invisibly, collecting and analysing personal data in real time for predictive, decision-making, or persuasive purposes (Descalzo, 2024). These mechanisms, often unnoticed by users, generate forms of algorithmic surveillance that blur the line between personalization and intrusion (Gilani & Al-Matrooshi, 2023).

In this scenario, privacy is no longer a mere protective shield: it becomes a language in itself. What a brand collects, withholds, or displays communicates values, intentions, and ethical positions (Milossi et al., 2021). In the luxury context, this dynamic becomes even more relevant. According to Kapferer and Bastien (2012), authenticity and message control are essential elements of a brand's symbolic value. Furthermore, as Rocamora (2017) notes, digital technologies do not only affect the experience of luxury but also its symbolic staging, reinforcing the role of privacy as part of the aesthetic and communicative experience.

At the core of every predictive algorithm lies a sensitive and invisible raw material: data. Specifically, the most advanced AI systems increasingly rely on biometric data: biological or behavioural information that is unique and identifiable, such as facial recognition, fingerprints, voice tone, iris geometry, and even micro-expressions or eye-tracking patterns (Tistarelli et al., 2002; Dahiya & Kant, 2012).

In branding, biometric data is being applied across various sectors: in retail, to enhance the in-store experience through visual sensors; in fashion, to track emotional responses to collections and campaigns; in beauty, to offer facial-analysis-based product recommendations; and in luxury automotive, to activate driver recognition systems and personalize the vehicle's environment. Luxury, in particular, seems an ideal field for biometric technologies, as it aims to deliver hyper-personalized, exclusive, and immersive experiences, seamlessly blending online and offline.

However, this convergence between luxury, AI, and biometrics gives rise to profound ethical dilemmas. While Generation Z is digitally native and innovation-friendly, it also shows increasing sensitivity toward practices perceived as invasive or opaque. Recent research highlights that although young consumers do not reject AI in branding, they express significant concerns regarding psychological profiling, emotional tracking, and the non-consensual use of biometric data (Jeffrey, 2022). The problem lies not only in data collection but in the lack of algorithmic transparency: consumers rarely know what is being recorded, for what purposes, or how it might be reused (Datta et al., 2016).

In luxury, where the experience must be both bespoke and emotionally connected, the invasiveness of technology risks undermining the very relational and exclusive promise upon which brand value is built.

From a regulatory standpoint, the European Union has set a clear framework through the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which mandates explicit consent, data minimization, and data protection by design (Veale et al., 2018). This principle, known as Privacy by Design, implies that data protection must be an integral part of technological development from the outset (Berendt, 2017). In other words, AI systems, especially those processing sensitive biometric data, must be designed so that privacy is not merely an afterthought, but a fundamental prerequisite.

Yet, many scholars argue that current regulations often fail to keep up with the pace of technological change and evolving business models (Arkhipov & Naumov, 2022). Added to this is the information asymmetry between users and companies: consumers rarely understand the technologies they use, while brands accumulate interpretive and predictive power. Faced with these scenarios, several solutions emerge. The first involves the adoption of Privacy-Enhancing Technologies (PETs), tools that allow large-scale data use without compromising individuals' identities, through mechanisms that preserve anonymity and limit exposure of sensitive data (Montjoye et al., 2017). A second solution lies in promoting applied AI ethics, urging companies to develop these technologies in more thoughtful and responsible ways: systems must be designed to be fair, transparent, and respectful, avoiding invisible forms of control or discrimination (Milossi et al., 2021). Lastly, communication plays a crucial role: clearly explaining how biometric data is used, encouraging informed consent, and making processes visible are essential steps toward building trust and preserving perceived authenticity.

In conclusion, the use of biometric data in luxury branding is not merely a technical issue: it is a cultural and symbolic challenge. Balancing innovation and respect for individuals is essential to avoid compromising trust and authenticity, two values at the core of luxury. While current regulations offer key tools such as Privacy by Design, they often lag behind the rapid development of AI (Veale et al., 2018; Arkhipov & Naumov, 2022). Thus, brands must go beyond legal compliance and assume concrete responsibility in designing AI systems. Privacy must be seen not just as a regulatory constraint but as a key element of the consumer relationship (Milossi et al., 2021).

2.5.2 AI and Inclusivity: Reinforcing or Deconstructing Luxury Stereotypes?

In the realm of luxury branding, the integration of artificial intelligence goes beyond personalization or user experience optimization; it also entails the ethical responsibility not to replicate, or worse, reinforce, existing social inequalities and stereotypes. AI is never neutral: every configuration communicates. The data on which it relies carries layers of cultural meaning, dominant representations, and invisible hierarchies (Milossi et al., 2021; Noble, 2018). This makes algorithmic fairness particularly delicate in a sector like luxury, which is historically grounded in codes of exclusivity, elitist aesthetics, and status symbolism.

The first critical issue is algorithmic bias. When AI is trained on incomplete or unbalanced datasets such as predominantly white faces, normative bodies, Western contexts, and heteronormative models, it ends up reproducing a worldview that excludes everything outside those dominant parameters. Rather than broadening the imagination of luxury, it restricts it to familiar, non-inclusive representations far removed from today's social reality (Crawford, 2021; Noble, 2018). The result is communication that reinforces the very stereotypes many brands claim to be dismantling (Akter et al., 2021). For example, AI image generators tend to associate luxury with Eurocentric bodies and hypersexualized female fashion, neglecting unconventional identities (Ananya, 2024). Even in recommendation systems, platforms have been found to suggest different products based on perceived gender or ethnic background, thus reinforcing existing narratives and feeding into a form of homogenization (Ahn et al., 2024). As Johnson (2019) argues, these issues are not mere accidents but stem from a lack of structured oversight in the design and deployment of algorithms. The risk of creating discrimination or exclusion is no different from other business risks: it must be anticipated, monitored, and addressed through clear policies and continuous correction.

In addition to these visible effects, there's a subtler but equally relevant dynamic: stereotype threat. This psychological condition arises when individuals from historically marginalized groups feel anxious or uncomfortable in contexts where they fear being judged according to negative stereotypes (McGlone & Pfiester, 2007). Applied to luxury branding, this mechanism may occur when users fail to see themselves reflected in the visual codes, linguistic models, or digital interfaces employed by the brand. In a sector where every detail is semantically charged, non-representation equates to a form of semiotic exclusion. To counteract these exclusionary effects, many brands are reconsidering the design of their digital experiences through an inclusive design approach. Born as a response to marginalization, this methodology aims to prevent users from feeling misrepresented or out of place. According to Keates and Clarkson (2003), inclusive design seeks to create products and services usable by as many people as possible without the need for alternative or separate solutions. Applied to luxury AI systems, this entails rethinking chatbots, interfaces, recommendation engines, and even training datasets to reflect a plurality of identities, bodies, cultures, and expressions. It's

not only about avoiding mistakes: it's about creating experiences that value diversity as a strategic and cultural asset.

A concrete example of this shift is Gucci, which joined the "Free and Equal" initiative led by Parks – Liberi e Uguali, committing to LGBTQ+ inclusion even in digital environments. This commitment extends beyond internal policies to the actual design of AI interfaces, chatbots, and recommendation systems, ensuring they are accessible, respectful, and culturally sensitive (Gucci, 2022). Recognizing queer, neurodivergent, and non-binary subjectivities in automated digital processes expands the brand's semantic field and strengthens its symbolic relevance for a generation that measures authenticity through consistency between declared values and implemented practices. Beyond Gucci, signs of change are increasingly evident. As reported by Mintel, more and more brands are incorporating Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI) principles into their operational models, communication strategies, and even technological infrastructures (Baram, 2024). However, for inclusivity to be credible, it must manifest tangibly in the digital systems that mediate the relationship between brand and consumer: conversational interfaces, AI-generated content, recommendation logics. In this sense, if artificial intelligence has become a core component of brand language, its ethical implications must also reflect the brand's declared values. Otherwise, the result is a semiotic fracture: a luxury that claims to be inclusive but continues, through every algorithmic configuration, to speak only to the few, maintaining exclusive dynamics beneath the surface of innovation.
In short, addressing algorithmic bias in luxury branding is not only about avoiding technical error: it's about deciding who deserves to be seen, heard, and recognized. It means using technology not to standardize, but to pluralize the language of desire. And that, perhaps, is the greatest semiotic challenge of AI in branding.

Ultimately, artificial intelligence can either reinforce or deconstruct luxury-related stereotypes; it all depends on how it is designed, governed, and integrated into brand language. If based on exclusionary logic and non-representative data, AI risks automating prejudice and perpetuating narrow worldviews. But if guided by principles of equity and inclusion, it can become a powerful tool to redefine what luxury truly means today: not exclusion, but recognition. In this light, inclusivity is not just an ethical imperative: it is a semiotic choice capable of restoring a new cultural authenticity to luxury.

2.6 Managerial Relevance and Introduction to the Research Question: *"How do AI-driven visual and verbal content in luxury campaigns influence Generation Z's perception of brand authenticity and emotional connection?"*

Technological evolution, however advanced, does not generate value unless it is embedded within a shared cultural horizon. In the luxury sector, this principle acquires a strategic relevance today: the introduction of Artificial Intelligence into visual and verbal communication processes has opened up radically new possibilities but has also raised deep questions concerning identity and symbolic coherence. AI-driven languages are reshaping the ways in which luxury brands construct meaning, narrate themselves, and establish relationships with their audiences, thus challenging long-standing practices in the management of aesthetics, storytelling, and authenticity (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012; Morhart et al., 2015). Within this scenario, Generation Z emerges as a crucial strategic interlocutor. Not only because it represents an expanding consumer segment, but more significantly because it acts as a cultural agent capable of redefining the symbolic codes of contemporary luxury. For Gen Z, a brand is not merely a set of aesthetic attributes, but a value system. This generation seeks authenticity, transparency, ethical positioning, and cultural relevance. In light of these expectations, luxury brands cannot simply use AI to increase personalization or optimize creative workflows. They must deeply understand how this technology is perceived and interpreted by a generation that filters every message through emotional, identity-based, and relational lenses (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Jiang & Shan, 2018). Current literature, although attentive to AI's potential for enhancing communicative efficiency and narrative coherence, reveals a significant knowledge gap in the context of luxury: it remains unclear how visual and verbal languages content generated by machines influence perceptions of brand authenticity and the quality of emotional connection, particularly among younger consumers. There is a notable lack of qualitative studies that capture the symbolic complexity of such perceptions and provide managers with interpretive tools to strategically guide the use of AI in high-end branding (Vidrih & Mayahi, 2024; Fang et al., 2023).

From these premises arises the central research question that guides this work: "*How do AI-driven visual and verbal content in luxury campaigns influence Generation Z's perception of brand authenticity and emotional connection?"*

This question does not merely assess the communicative effectiveness of new technologies; it interrogates the very core of identity construction in contemporary luxury branding. Providing an answer means equipping brands with critical insights into how to harmonize algorithmic innovation with symbolic construction in a market where value stems not only from product exclusivity, but from the ability to communicate with coherence, sensitivity, and vision to the next generation of consumers (Beverland, 2005; Peverini, 2020).

The managerial relevance is twofold. On one hand, it involves the necessity to govern the use of AI in line with the cultural and visual codes that historically define luxury's positioning; on the other, it requires the ability to deeply interpret the expectations of a generation that no longer responds to aesthetic sophistication or polished storytelling alone, but demands meaning, ethics, and cultural engagement. For this reason, brand managers must adopt a curatorial approach to technology, investing in qualitative tools for listening and analysis, such as focus groups, in-depth interviews, and semiotic readings, that can deliver insights not only at a tactical level, but more importantly, at a strategic one (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Hollebeek & Macky, 2019).

In the luxury world, where symbolic capital is the main driver of differentiation and brand loyalty, the ability to integrate AI without sacrificing authenticity and emotional resonance is no longer an optional competence: it is the new strategic skill that separates those who speak from the future from those still trapped in the past.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter illustrates the methodological framework adopted to investigate how AI-generated visual and verbal languages influence the perception of authenticity and the depth of emotional connection among Generation Z consumers in the luxury sector. Starting from a semiotic and cultural analysis perspective, the chapter integrates theoretical reflections and empirical investigations with the aim of building a comprehensive and structured understanding of the phenomenon under study.

The methodological approach is developed on two interconnected levels of analysis: on the one hand, a qualitative semiotic investigation of emblematic advertising campaigns that employ AI-generated languages (Balenciaga, Etro, and Gucci); on the other, an empirical validation through a focus group involving a sample of young people belonging to Generation Z. This integrated strategy makes it possible to explore not only the symbolic and narrative structures used by luxury brands but also the cognitive and emotional responses elicited by these campaigns within the target audience.

In this context, semiotic theory provides the conceptual tools for decoding the complex systems of signs and values conveyed through visual and verbal languages, while the focus group offers a privileged perspective on the experiential and emotional dimension of brand communication. Through this dual perspective, the research aims to answer the key question guiding the entire study: *How do AI-generated visual and verbal content influence the perception of authenticity and the ability to create emotional engagement among Generation Z consumers in the luxury sector?*

By combining theoretical rigor with empirical validation, this chapter aims to provide a comprehensive interpretive framework for understanding the evolving role of artificial intelligence in redefining brand narratives and consumer engagement strategies in the digital age.

3.1 Research Objectives and Methodological Choices

This research aims to explore how visual and verbal content generated by artificial intelligence, when integrated into AI-driven communications in the luxury sector,

influence Generation Z's perception of two key dimensions: brand authenticity and the depth of emotional connection that the brand is able to establish. Since the phenomenon under investigation concerns the construction of meaning and the cultural and emotional perceptions elicited by visual and verbal communication in the luxury sector, a qualitative approach has been adopted. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the processes through which artificial intelligence contributes to the creation of complex messages that not only convey information but also activate symbolic universes and trigger specific emotional responses.

To support this inquiry, the study combines semiotic interpretation of AI-generated luxury communication with insight into its reception by young consumers, enabling a dual perspective on how symbolic structures and emotional responses interact. This phase aims to capture how this target perceives and interprets the analysed campaigns, particularly in relation to the concepts of authenticity, emotional connection, and communicative effectiveness.

From a theoretical perspective, the semiotic analysis is based on the assumption that visual and verbal communication does not merely convey informative content but constructs a coherent symbolic universe, capable of guiding interpretation through the use of cultural codes, isotopies, and discursive strategies (Barthes, 1964; Peverini, 2010). In this context, reference is made to the concept of the *model reader* developed by Umberto Eco (1979), an ideal figure endowed with the interpretative skills necessary to activate all the semantic potentialities of a text. Generation Z, being deeply connected to the digital world and accustomed to consuming highly personalized and interactive content, represents a privileged model reader for the analysis of AI-driven campaigns within the contemporary luxury sector.

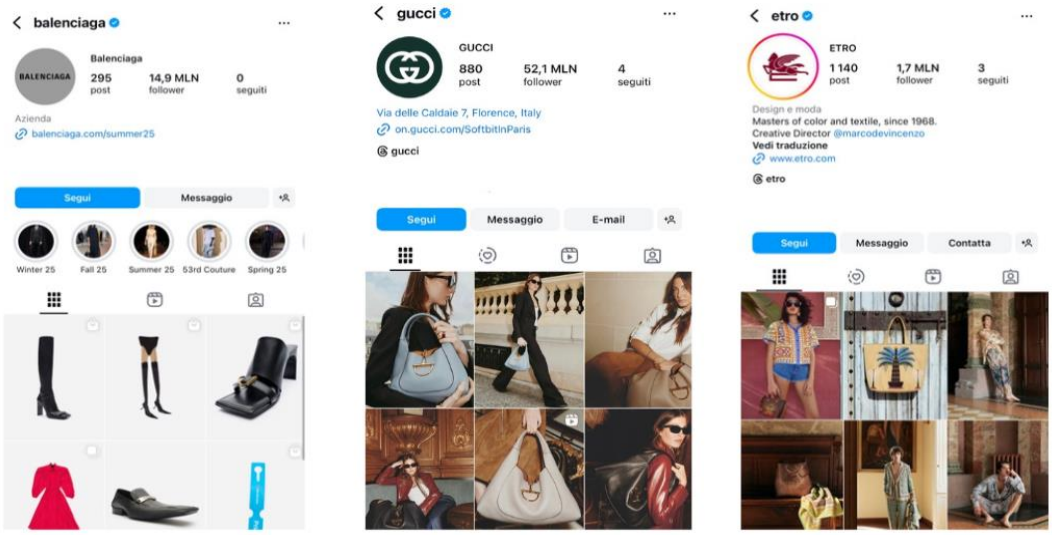
3.2 Selection Criteria of the Corpus and Analytical Methodology

This section outlines the criteria adopted for the selection of the research corpus, as well as the motivations that guided the choice of case studies and brands analyse d. The corpus consists of three AI-driven luxury brand campaigns by Balenciaga, Gucci, and Etro, selected for their strategic relevance in adopting advanced technologies and experimenting with new aesthetic and narrative languages. The selection was based on

three main criteria: the communicative impact of the brands in the contemporary luxury landscape, their high engagement on digital platforms, and their ability to integrate artificial intelligence into creative processes in a symbolically significant way.

The inclusion of these brands in the corpus reflects not only their aesthetic and narrative relevance but also their ability to exercise significant cultural influence through digital channels. In today's hyper-connected society, the online presence of luxury brands goes beyond a promotional function and becomes a central part of their identity-building strategy (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012). Social media serve as privileged spaces where new visual languages are tested and narratives are staged to engage a global audience increasingly oriented toward authenticity and immersive experiences (Peverini, 2010). In this scenario, the presence and following of brands on digital platforms represent an important indicator for understanding the impact and resonance of their communication strategies.

Balenciaga has 14.9 million followers on Instagram (Source: Instagram Official Profile @balenciaga). and 4.4 million on TikTok (Source: TikTok Official Profile @balenciaga). Its curated feed stands out for its avant-garde aesthetic, characterized by dystopian scenarios and references to post-human imagery, enriched by content generated through artificial intelligence (Dimension Studio, 2020). Gucci, with 52.1 million followers on Instagram (Source: Instagram Official Profile @gucci). and 5.8 million on TikTok (Source: TikTok Official Profile @gucci)., is among the most active and innovative luxury brands in the digital communication landscape. Its narrative strategy is based on the construction of hybrid cultural universes, combining the brand's heritage with contemporary digital languages through generative art, NFTs, and immersive campaigns (Vogue, 2020). Etro, with 1.7 million followers on Instagram (Source: Instagram Official Profile @etro). and 96.653 on TikTok (Source: TikTok Official Profile @etro), stands out for the strong coherence of its visual identity, combining distinctive patterns and retro-futuristic references even in AI-driven projects.



a. b. c.

Figure 4. *Official Instagram profiles of the selected luxury brands: a. Balenciaga (@balenciaga); b. Gucci (@gucci); c. Etro (@etro). Source: Official Instagram profiles*

The methodological analysis of the campaigns was conducted on two distinct and complementary levels. In the case of Balenciag's *Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow*[1], being an audiovisual product, the generative trajectory of meaning proposed by Greimas and Courtés (1982) was applied, articulated across discursive, narrative, and axiological levels. The analysis considered the discursive level to identify visual and narrative isotopies, the narrative level through the actantial model and canonical narrative schema, and the axiological level to reconstruct the underlying value oppositions within the story. Additionally, the levels of veridiction and enunciation were explored. The veridiction analysis examined the regimes of truth and credibility constructed within the text, highlighting the transition from a regime of "seeming" to one of "knowing," culminating in the conquest of the value object represented by the sword. This sword is not a mere diegetic object, but a symbolic marker that visually signifies the successful completion of the quest and the narrative verification of the subject's progression within the story. It stands as a symbol marking the shift from passivity to conscious action, signalling the subject's emergence as an agent within the narrative.

The enunciative analysis focused on the positioning of the subject within the narrative, emphasizing the progressive subjectivation of the viewer, who evolves from an invisible entity to a figurativized subject (Peverini, 2010; Volli, 2003).

For the visual campaigns *Etro – Nowhere* [2] and *Gucci – Parallel Universes: From Future frequences to Gucci Cosmos*[3], the denotation/connotation model proposed by Roland Barthes (1964) was applied. This model proved particularly useful in decoding the symbolic and cultural stratifications that define brand identity within the digital luxury context.

To complement the semiotic analysis, a focus group was conducted with a sample of Generation Z participants, aimed at understanding how this target interprets and evaluates AI-driven campaigns in relation to the concepts of authenticity, emotional connection, and innovation. The adoption of this methodological tool made it possible to highlight the alignment or discrepancy between the meanings designed by the brands and the emotional and cognitive responses of the public. Operational details regarding the sample, the discussion protocol, and the focus group methodology will be presented in the following section.

3.3 Balenciaga - *Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow* (2020)

In December 2020, at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic forced the fashion industry to deeply reconsider its traditional modes of representation, Balenciaga chose to pursue a radically innovative path. Instead of the customary physical runway show for the presentation of the Fall/Winter 2021 collection, the brand launched *Afterworld*[1]*: The Age of Tomorrow*, an interactive experience set in the year 2031 and conceived in the form of a video game. This project, developed in collaboration with Dimension Studio, constitutes an immersive narrative universe in which fashion, artificial intelligence, and digital media languages merge to create a new paradigm of communication (Vogue, 2020).

The campaign unfolds through a seven-minute and ten-second audiovisual experience, structured across five thematic environments (zones), which the user explores in first person. Each zone represents an independent visual and symbolic space, where the garments of the collection are not merely displayed but fully integrated into the

landscapes and micro-narratives, emphasizing a process of experiential and immersive engagement. In this context, the viewer is no longer a passive external observer but becomes an active participant in a journey that combines aesthetic representation with direct interaction.

From a production perspective, the campaign is notable for its strong experimental orientation. Thanks to advanced volumetric video technologies and 3D environments provided by Dimension Studio, Balenciaga adopts a visual language inspired by both the world of video games and speculative fiction, while maintaining rigorous control over the brand's aesthetic and symbolic codes (Dimension Studio, 2020).

Another disruptive element compared to traditional practices is the complete absence of celebrity endorsements. The protagonists of this narrative are digital avatars, anonymous figures, often androgynous or hybrid, that reject the typical recognizability of human testimonials. This choice is part of a broader positioning strategy aimed at constructing a brand identity detached from individual icons and more aligned with a conceptual and symbolic vision of luxury.

In light of the diegetic and symbolic complexity that characterizes *Afterworld* [1], a semiotic analysis was conducted by applying the generative trajectory of meaning theorized by Greimas and Courtés (1982). This interpretive model, articulated into three fundamental levels (discursive, narrative, and axiological) allows the audiovisual text to be broken down into coherent narrative units and makes it possible to identify the mechanisms through which the brand reformulates the aesthetic codes of fashion advertising, proposing a vision that merges dystopian imaginaries, technological tensions, and mythological suggestions.

3.3.1 Narrative Segmentation of the Campaign

The campaign *Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow*[1] presents a highly stratified visual and narrative structure that cannot be fully understood by limiting the analysis to the original division into five main zones. To conduct a more rigorous analysis, a segmentation based on narrative sequences was adopted, structured according to significant ruptures in the discursive flow, in line with the principles of visual semiotics (Polidoro, 2008).

Each sequence was isolated whenever at least one of the following discontinuities occurred:

- Environmental discontinuity, that is, a clear change in the visual context or perceived location, activating a principle of discursive salience;
- Enunciative discontinuity, when the position of the viewing subject changes (for example, from a subjective to an objective perspective), configuring an enunciative articulation (Peverini, 2010);
- Chromatic discontinuity, when there are abrupt changes in lighting or colour palette, signalling a local isotopic shift;
- Symbolic discontinuity, namely the insertion of a strongly marked element (such as a red rose or a ritual gesture), which can be interpreted as a narrative marker.

These criteria, drawn from the tradition of textual and visual semiotics (Polidoro, 2008; Peverini, 2020), made it possible to precisely map the narrative and symbolic progression of the campaign, identifying the main textual thresholds and rhythmic variations that structure its immersive progression. The result is a segmentation articulated into nineteen autonomous narrative sequences, each characterized by internal isotopic coherence and configured as an independent significant unit.

In the segmentation process, animated textual inserts (such as the frames displaying the words *AFTERWORLD* and *ZONE*) were also considered. These elements were interpreted as micro-sequences in accordance with the principle of discursive economy (Eco, 1979). Such elements act as meta-narrative thresholds, helping to structure the rhythm of the narrative and reinforcing the symbolic framework of the audiovisual text.

The following table presents the ordered segmentation of the sequences, describing their main visual, sound, and compositional components. This analytical framework forms the basis for the semiotic interpretation developed in the following sections.

# Sequence	Duration	Visual column	Soundtrack	Notes
1	0:00-0:01	**Content Description:** The logo 'AFTERWORLD' appears on a black background with a glitchy, unstable, and flickering effect, lasting only for a second. It resembles a visual interference, almost a distorted signal, which anticipates a fragmented and unsettling world. **Frame Width:** N/A (textual screen). **Camera Angle:** Frontal, horizontal. **Lighting:** Absent, complete darkness. **Colour:** White on black, high-contrast monochrome. **Composition:** Black screen, dissolving graphic. **Transition:** Sharp cut to a blurred field.	**Sound:** Heartbeat Sound. **Sound Type:** Off-screen (extradiegetic).	Dense introductory threshold; distorted initial signal anticipating the transition into the diegetic world.
2	0:01-0:30	**Content Description:** The avatar awakens. The shot is from a first-person perspective: the eyes open slowly, and the vision is initially blurred. Gradually, everything becomes clearer. A male figure moves away. The environment appears vast, empty, and metallic, a threshold space between two worlds. **Frame Width:** Mid-plane on the male figure (0:01–0:04), followed by full figure (0:04–0:10); American plane (0:10–0:17); Wide field (0:17–0:19);close-up on the hologram (0:19–0:25); shift back to the male figure with mid-plane (0:23–0:30).	**Sound:** Minimal Piano and Ambient. **Sound Type:** Off-field, subjective.	Initial disorientation; activation of the gaze and symbolic journey.

		Camera Angle: First-person perspective, horizontal. **Lighting:** Cold, filtered through glass windows, lacking contrasts. **Colour:** Bluish/cement grey, monochromatic. **Internal Composition:** Minimalist room, rectilinear spaces, cold geometries. **Transition:** Fade-out.		
3	0.30-0.35	**Content Description:** On a black background, the text 'ZONE 1' appears with a glitch-effect font, using a dissolve transition. Narrative segmentation function. **Frame Width:** N/A (text screen). **Camera Angle:** Central, horizontal. **Lighting:** Absent, total blackness. **Colour:** Metallic grey, black. **Composition:** Static screen, centred text. **Transition:** Fade-out.	**Sound:** Brief metallic effect, synthetic sound. **Sound Type:** Off-field.	Textual marking of the narrative zone.
4	0:35-1:29	**Content Description:** The space is configured as a bare, geometric architectural environment dominated by raw concrete, glass surfaces, and straight lines. The avatar's first-person perspective moves slowly through this setting, populated by figures dressed in Balenciaga attire who initially appear	**Sound:** Continuous piano; ambient metallic noises. **Sound Type:** Off-field; atmospheric.	**Function:** Full entry into the narrative space; alienation; post-human aesthetics; first symbolic trial of the subject.

		motionless, mannequin-like. Upon closer observation, however, they exhibit imperceptible movements: some glance around, others show faint signs of animation. These gestures, however, do not generate real agency but seem suspended in a decelerated temporality. In the background, through the glass walls, reflections of water and silhouettes of trees are visible; natural traces subtly infiltrating the artificial environment, suggesting an imminent transition toward a more organic and unstable exterior. Interior and exterior engage in a silent dialogue, maintaining a precarious balance between architecture and nature. Suddenly, the subjective perspective is interrupted by a sharp cut: a single figure appears, frontally framed at close range, and its face is revealing biometric features while staring at the spectator. **Frame Width:** Initially full figure; full frame on female figure (1:12–1:22); American plane transition (1:22–1:28); final close-up (1:29). **Camera Angle:** First-person moving perspective, horizontal; objective frontal shot (1:12–1:29). **Lighting:** Diffuse natural light, no shadows. **Colour:** Dominant grey tones; interrupted by the chromatic variations of the clothing and natural elements outside. **Indoor Composition:** Symmetrical showroom space;		

		deep lateral glass walls; furnishings positioned both centrally and along the sides of the path. **Outdoor Composition:** Natural elements (trees, water) blending seamlessly with the interior environment. **Transition:** Sharp cut; complete blackout.		
5	1:29-1:33	**Content Description:** On a black screen, the text 'Zone 2' appears with a glitch animation and electronic dissolve. **Frame Width:** N/A (text screen). **Camera Angle:** Central, horizontal. **Lighting:** Absent, total blackness. **Colour:** White on black; chromatic glitch effect. **Composition:** Static screen; centrally animated text. **Transition:** Sharp cut; complete blackout.	**Sound:** Metallic effect; synthetic sound. **Sound Type:** Off-field.	Textual sequence marker; activation function of the second scenario.
6	1.33-1.52	**Content Description:** The avatar walks in first-person perspective along a peripheral urban street, dirty and scattered with scaffolding and construction materials. The environment is not destroyed but unfinished: walls are raw, and buildings appear under construction. Isolated passersby stand at the margins without interaction, each figure absorbed in their own space. The framing is symmetrical and central, with	**Sound:** Rhythmic electronic music. **Sound Type:** Extradiegetic music.	The subject enters an urban space that is technically functioning but emptied of relationships. The subject moves without acting, following the logic of an embodied algorithm. The

		blue luminous arrows on the ground guiding the path: a visual device that imposes a predetermined trajectory, as in a semi-gamified environment. **Frame Width:** Full frame. **Camera Angle:** First-person moving perspective, horizontal. **Lighting:** Artificial lighting. Metallic reflections generate a cold and synthetic tone. **Colour:** Greys, electric blue. Predominance of cold tones. **Composition:** Urban street in an unfinished construction site. Scaffolding and raw walls on the sides. Luminous arrows at the center guiding the direction. **Transition:** Fade out.		atmosphere is not classically dystopian but marked by relational rarefaction and an aesthetics of control.
7	1:52-2:22	**Content Description:** In the middle of the street, a static figure appears frontally before the subject. Fully visible, it is positioned at the center of the urban space. Wordlessly, it offers a red rose. The framing shifts from the full figure to a close-up of the flower, which stands out for its chromatic and positional emphasis. The environment around the figure and the background remains blurred. After the symbolic act, the perspective returns to first-person view, and the path resumes along the previously followed urban route. **Frame Width:** Full figure. Close-up on the rose (02:00–02:05). American plane (02:05–02:08). Full figure (02:08–02:22). **Camera Angle:** Frontal, horizontal, with progressive zoom on the central	**Sound:** Initial urban ambient rustle (muffled noises). Upon the appearance of the figure with the rose, rhythmic electronic music enters, intensifying during the symbolic gesture. **Sound Type:** Mixed – diegetic atmospheric (urban environment) and extradiegetic musical (electronic music).	The red rose introduces an unexpected emotional tension. The silent gesture suspends the linearity of the path and opens to the dimension of desire, while the music intensifies to underline its symbolic weight.

		figure. First-person perspective resumes (02:08–02:22). **Lighting:** Diffused natural light. **Colour:** Predominance of neutral and light greys. The vivid red of the rose emerges through chromatic and symbolic contrast. **Composition:** Central urban street. Figures in the background continue their path without interacting with the central figure. The rose stands at the center as a visual focal point. **Transition:** Sharp cut to the close-up of the rose. Brief fade-out on the human figure before returning to the subjective perspective. Fade-out before the change of setting.		
8	02:22–02:46	**Content Description:** Radical atmosphere shift: the urban environment darkens, rain begins to fall, and the lighting takes on intense red and blue tones. Neon lights pulse rhythmically. The point of view is no longer subjective but objective: the camera frames frontally a static figure standing at the edge of the street, with hands wrapped in red flames. A bus with the inscription "AFTERWORLD" starts to levitate, slowly rotating on itself and dissolving into the night, generating a surreal effect. **Frame Width:** Full plane. **Camera Angle:** Objective. Static lateral shot on the bus. Dynamic lateral shot with progressive zoom on the figure (2:27–2:35). Dynamic lateral shot on the bus (2:35–2:46).	**Soundtrack:** Realistic ambient sound: constant rain in the foreground. In the background, a soft, almost imperceptible electronic bass. The progressive noise of the bus engine rises at the moment of levitation. **Sound Type:** Diegetic atmospheric.	The shift to an objective perspective and the appearance of the levitating bus create a symbolic sense of disorientation. The city transforms into a mythical stage where the subject loses centrality and becomes a mere observer.

		Lighting: Intermittent artificial lights (blue/red). Reflections on the wet pavement. Strong contrast between illuminated areas and shadows. **Colour:** Predominance of red and electric blue on a dark background. Rain amplifies light refractions. **Composition:** Peripheral urban street. The environment is bare, bordered by industrial buildings. The figure with flaming hands is positioned at the margins, while the bus occupies the central background of the scene. **Transition:** Fade-out.		
9	02:46-02:50	**Content Description:** On a black screen, the text 'Zone 3' appears, animated with a digital effect. The text is black on black but becomes visible through a red glow that illuminates its contours. **Frame Width:** N/A (text). **Camera Angle:** Central, horizontal. **Lighting:** Darkness with localized red glow. **Colour:** Black on black with red highlighting light. **Composition:** Static screen, centrally animated text. **Transition:** Fade-out.	**Soundtrack:** Burning fire sound. Sensory effect. **Sound Type:** Off-field symbolic.	Threshold sequence introducing a new, darker, and symbolically denser isotopy. The red glow and the sound of fire evoke a purifying and liminal transition.
10	2:50-3:35	**Content Description:** The subject crosses, in first-person perspective, a decayed and unsettling urban environment, populated by static figures and slow, almost imperceptibly moving presences. Surfaces are covered with graffiti, dystopian symbols, and	**Soundtrack:** Dark electronic music with a slowed and distorted rhythm. Ambient sounds:	The degraded urban atmosphere communicates instability and disorientation. The 'T PARTY' sign marks a

		encrypted messages. The atmosphere is suspended, lacking visible interactions. At a certain point, a dark, motionless figure with a vaguely clown-like appearance stands frontally at the centre of the scene and, with a slow, mechanical gesture, points to a billboard reading “T PARTY.” At its feet, in the lower right corner, a white rabbit initially remains still, then suddenly runs away. **Frame Width:** Full plane (02:50–03:17). Mid plane (03:17–03:25). **Camera Angle:** First-person moving perspective (02:50–03:17). Static frontal objective shot (03:16–03:17). Lateral moving shot (03:17–03:25). **Illumination:** Minimal and artificial, focused on the figure and the billboard, while the surrounding environment remains shrouded in shadow. **Colour:** Predominance of purple, grey, and muted blue tones. Intermittent neon lights. **Outdoor Composition:** Decayed and static urban environment marked by graffiti and corroded materials. The eerie figure and billboard occupy the centre of the scene, with the rabbit visible in the lower right corner. **Transition:** Fade-out.	footsteps on rough surfaces, a barking dog, indistinct animal noises. **Sound Type:** Extradiegetic music and diegetic off-field ambient sounds.	discursive turning point.
11	03:35-04:22	**Content Description:** The shot changes in lighting and depth, returning to an open urban space where a central	**Soundtrack:** Continuity of muffled electronic	The androgynous figure now assumes an

		figure appears seen from behind. The figure has a pale face with androgynous features, motionless yet penetrating. The tone is unsettling as the figure looks directly at the viewer and reveals from the palm of their hand a hologram of a landscape, highlighting in red an area labelled *T PARTY.* **Frame Width:** Full plane (03:35–03:57). Close-up (04:05–04:16). Full plane (04:16–04:22). **Camera Angle:** First-person moving perspective (03:35–03:59). Static frontal objective shot (03:59–04:05). Lateral moving shot (03:57–04:16). Static frontal shot (04:16–04:22). **Lighting:** Minimal and artificial in exterior environments. Becomes more diffuse and enveloping in the central scene with the androgynous figure, without sharp contrasts. **Colour:** Desaturated palette based on grey and blue tones. The white face stands out in contrast to the muted surroundings. Red and electric blue from the hologram create further contrast. **Composition:** The first-person walk crosses an urban space lined with buildings, but the environment progressively empties, leaving only a wall in the background. The androgynous figure stands frontally at the centre of the frame, isolated and dominant within the composition. **Transition:** Fade-out.	music with low-intensity metallic reverberations. **Sound Type:** Extradiegetic music and diegetic silence.	enunciative role. The inscription “T PARTY” on the hologram recalls the message seen on the billboard in the previous sequence, reinforcing the system of internal signposting.

12	04:22–04:26	**Content Description:** On a black background, the text 'Zone 4' appears, animated with a liquid effect. The characters seem filled with water, featuring iridescent light-blue reflections and undulating transparencies. **Frame Width:** (N/A) Textual screen. **Camera Angle:** Frontal, centred. **Illumination:** Total darkness with internal reflections within the characters. **Colour:** Predominantly black, with aquatic light-blue transparencies. **Transition:** Sharp cut.	**Soundtrack:** Synthetic liquid effect, similar to a digital wave. **Sound Type:** Extradiegetic.	Liminal sequence introducing the new liquid-natural isotopy. The internal movement of the letters anticipates the immersive logic of the forest.
13	04:26-04:38	**Content Description:** The first-person perspective re-emerges at the start of the sequence. The subject moves along a dirt path in a forest dominated by dark tones. The deep green of the trees fills the scene, while enigmatic figures begin to populate the path. A figure wearing a yellow coat dances with erratic movements, accompanied by other motionless figures dressed in dark, rigid outfits, almost like zombies. The atmosphere is dense and uncanny. A white rabbit, the same seen in Zone 3, appears in the middle of the path, running and seemingly guiding the observer toward the next direction. Animated blue arrows on the ground reinforce the idea of a path to follow. **Frame Width:** Full plane.	**Soundtrack:** Rhythmic electronic dance-style music with gradually increasing volume and intensity. **Sound Type:** Extradiegetic and diegetic atmospheric.	The rabbit reinforces symbolic continuity between zones, guiding the subject. The coexistence of motionless and dancing bodies introduces a tensional contrast that anticipates the upcoming transformation.

		Camera Angle: Mobile first-person perspective. **Illumination:** Dim lighting, dominated by dark green with localized light points on the dancers. **Colour:** Dominant dark green with fluorescent accents on the moving figures. **Outdoor Composition:** Gloomy forest environment with dense vegetation and figures positioned at the sides of the central dirt path. The white rabbit crosses the scene frontally. **Transition:** Fade-out.		
14	04:38-5:18	**Content Description:** The subject is projected into a psychedelic party in the heart of the forest. All participants engage in a frenetic dance. The colour palette lights up with warm tones. The setting is blurred, and the figures move in harmony with nature, which itself seems to dance. Surreal elements appear, such as a figure with multiple arms. The shots alternate between close-ups on faces and natural environments, conveying a sense of loss of control and fusion between subject and environment. **Frame Width:** Alternation between full plane, mid-plane, close-up, and details. **Camera Angle:** Objective frontal dynamic shot with unstable movements. **Illumination:** Intermittent artificial lights and psychedelic flashes.	**Soundtrack:** High-volume electronic music. The visual rhythm is perfectly synchronized with the musical rhythm. **Sound Type:** Extradiegetic.	The rhythmic and visual climax of the zone. The fusion of dance, colour, and music creates an immersive experience where the boundaries between nature, body, and artifice dissolve.

		Colour: Warm palette with red, yellow, orange, and dark shadows alternating with light beams. **Outdoor Composition:** Natural setting (forest) with the superimposition of dancing human figures, animals, and plants. **Transition:** Fade-out.		
15	05:18-05:35	**Content Description:** After the psychedelic intensity, the subject continues walking along a path within the forest. Visual tones soften, and the atmosphere becomes more rarefied. The human figures present move slowly, as if in a trance-like state. The space is permeated by soft, natural light and earthy colours, with dark green and aquatic blue tones. **Frame Width:** Constant full plane. **Camera Angle:** Advancing first-person perspective. **Illumination:** Soft natural light filtered through the vegetation. **Colour:** Dark green, light blue, light brown. **Outdoor Composition:** Natural environment with the path at the centre, flanked by human figures. On the left side, the light blue colour of a gently flowing stream contrasts with the darkness of the forest. **Transition:** Fade-out.	**Soundtrack:** Softened electronic music, still rhythmic but muffled. Ambient sounds become perceptible: foliage rustling, footsteps, small animals. **Sound Type:** Softened extradiegetic music and natural diegetic sounds.	The forest transforms into a ritual space. The dance slows down, the subjective perspective stabilizes. Nature and humans coexist in a meditative balance, a prelude to the initiatory threshold of Zone 5.

16	05:35-05:39	**Content Description:** Dynamic movement of the text 'Zone 5' in 3D animation. The characters are golden, shiny, with a vivid metallic effect. The background is not completely black but crossed by subtle brown shades and a central beam of light illuminating it diagonally. The overall effect is solemn, evoking the entrance into a sacred place. **Frame Width:** (N/A) Textual screen. **Camera Angle:** Frontal and centred. **Illumination:** Pulsating internal light within the characters and a backlighting beam. **Colour:** Gold on a luminous dark brown background. **Composition:** Absolute centrality of the text, symmetrical. **Transition:** Fade-out.	**Soundtrack:** Metallic reverberated sound accompanied by deep vibrations. **Sound Type:** Extradiegetic.	Textual threshold introducing the final scene. The materiality of the light reflects the sacred aesthetics of the next zone.
17	05:39-6:11	**Content Description:** In a rocky cave illuminated by soft light, a sword embedded in the stone becomes the focal point of the frame. The view shifts from subjective to objective: a female figure in armour approaches, grasps the sword, and performs a ritual gesture of extraction. The wall collapses, and a beam of light envelops her, closing the scene with a dissolve. **Frame Width:** Full plane subjective perspective, followed by a change to objective camera	**Soundtrack:** Epic orchestral music in crescendo. Ambient sounds such as echoes and rustling blend in. The rhythm gradually intensifies, reaching a climax during the sword's extraction.	The sequence represents a crucial narrative turning point, in which the female figure appropriates a symbolic object (the sword), marking the transition from passive spectator to actantial subject of the

		angle with alternating mid-plane, detail, extreme close-up frontal shots, and full lateral plane. **Camera Angle:** Subjective perspective (05:39–05:51); horizontal objective perspective (05:59–06:11). **Lighting:** Diffused and dramatic natural light, coming from the side and above. Strong contrast between shadows and light on the rock. **Colour Palette:** Grey, brown, and cold white tones. Sacred and suspended atmosphere. **Transition:** Fade-out.	**Sound Type:** Mix of diegetic sound (ambient noises, collapsing rock) and extradiegetic sound (orchestral music in crescendo).	action. The change in perspective coincides with the visual and symbolic revelation of the heroic character.
18	06:11-07:05	**Content Description:** After the collapse of the wall, the view returns to a subjective perspective: the subject advances toward a rocky fissure illuminated by the dawn. Outside, the scene becomes objective: the female figure reaches a mountain promontory and, with a solemn gesture, plants the sword into the ground. The sun rises above her as her gaze remains fixed on the horizon. The camera gradually moves away, closing with a blur and a musical climax. **Frame Width:** Subjective moving full plane (06:11–06:23); objective static shot (06:23–06:51) with mid-plane (06:51–06:54) and full plane with long shot finale (06:54–07:05). **Camera Angle:** Initial subjective perspective (06:11–06:23), then objective frontal shot (06:23–07:05).	**Soundtrack:** Solemn orchestral music in climax, accompanied by rarefied ambient sounds, such as a light wind emphasizing the vastness of the space. **Sound Type:** Extradiegetic music and diegetic atmospheric sound (wind).	The final sequence concludes the diegetic journey with a ritual and symbolic gesture, where the sword planted into the ground reinforces the centrality of the subject as a heroic figure. The open landscape, golden light, and temporal dilation generate an epiphanic atmosphere.

		Illumination: Warm, diffused natural light with low-angle backlighting. **Colour:** Golden, beige, and orange tones. Darker notes only in the shadows of the mountains. **Composition:** Central figure with a marked horizontal axis defined by the mountainous horizon. **Transition:** Perceptual acceleration with forward camera movement and luminous dissolve.		
19	07:05-07:10	**Content Description:** On a black screen, the word 'Balenciaga' appears in white, centred and static. The typography is clean, uppercase, with no additional graphic effects. The image is minimalistic, creating a strong contrast with the previous sequence. **Frame Width:** Textual screen. **Camera Angle:** Frontal, fixed. **Illumination:** Absent (absolute black), light is implicit in the typographic contrast. **Colour:** White on black. **Composition:** Absolute centring, axial balance. **Transition:** Sharp cut from luminous dissolve to black background.	**Soundtrack:** Complete silence, absence of music or ambient sounds. **Sound Type:** Absolute extradiegetic silence.	The final text acts as a signature of the discourse. The silence and visual contrast reinforce the authorial function of the brand, presenting itself as the ultimate guarantor of the concluded narrative.

Table 1. *Analytical segmentation of the Balenciaga – Afterworld campaign by narrative sequences and temporal markers. Source: Author's elaboration.*

3.3.2 Commercial analysis

Having conducted a detailed segmentation analysis that identified nineteen distinct narrative sequences based on figurative, enunciative, and symbolic discontinuities, this articulation was maintained while also contextualizing it within the five macro-zones proposed by the campaign itself. This approach preserves the analytical precision offered by the breakdown into micro-sequences while highlighting their placement within broader narrative blocks, characterized by shared isotopies, specific tension rhythms, and recognizable spatial-temporal continuity. The objective is to deliver an analysis capable of illuminating both the micro-dynamics of the sequences and the macro-level value and symbolic structure that permeates the entire campaign.

Sequence n.1 (0:00–0:01): The campaign opens with the appearance of the title *Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow*, animated with a glitch effect and displayed against a completely black background. The futuristic font flickers and vibrates like a distorted signal, immediately suggesting entry into an unstable universe, crossed by visual and symbolic interferences.

Figure 5. *Frame from Balenciaga – Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow campaign, Sequence 1. Source: Balenciaga Official YouTube Channel (2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hu_08WchxnU*

Sequence n.2 (0:01–0:30): Immediately after, the perspective shifts to the protagonist's point of view, as if opening their eyes for the first time. The perception is blurred, intermittent, almost disturbed by blinking. In a cold, geometric room characterized by bluish-grey tones, a man in a white shirt and black jacket appears in front of the viewer, observes them briefly, and then walks away. A floating hologram appears, displaying a three-dimensional map with buildings, mountains, and illuminated pathways. The mysterious man turns towards the hologram, seemingly inviting the viewer to grasp an implicit message.

Figure 6. *Frame from Balenciaga – Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow campaign, Sequence 2. Source: Balenciaga Official YouTube Channel (2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hu_08WchxnU*

Zone 1

Sequence n.3 (0:30–0:35): A dissolve introduces the writing *Zone 1*, displayed with a three-dimensional animation. Metallic letters gently rotate, emphasizing the narrative threshold and the recurring visual motif of reflective metal surfaces throughout the segment.

***Figure** 7. Frame from Balenciaga – Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow campaign, Sequence 3. Source: Balenciaga Official YouTube Channel (2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hu_08WchxnU*

Sequence n.4 (0:35–1:29): A blink interrupts the scene, introducing a new setting. The environment resembles a brutalist showroom, with concrete walls, built-in benches, and glass windows revealing vegetation and a waterfall. The showroom is explored slowly through a subjective viewpoint. Static figures, sometimes appearing as mannequins and at other times as avatars, wear Balenciaga garments and are positioned along the path. Some figures exhibit subtle movements, turning their heads or slightly moving a hand, but without generating any real action or interaction. The entire space is suspended in a slowed temporal dimension, dominated by a rarefied atmosphere and a minimalist soundtrack of piano notes and metallic ambient sounds. The showroom opens onto an external garden, visually introducing an unstable relationship between the architectural interior and a natural exterior that remains out of reach.

Figure 8. *Frame from Balenciaga – Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow campaign, Sequence 4. Source: Source: Balenciaga Official YouTube Channel (2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hu_08WchxnU*

The subjective view, uninterrupted until this point, is suspended when a sliding door opens, and the camera angle changes to a frontal view. A figure dressed in black, with graphic makeup reminiscent of black tears, stands at the centre of the composition. A progressive close-up focuses on the face as the figure's eyes suddenly light up blue. Traced biometric patterns appear on their skin, composed of luminous lines and points that form an algorithmic map of the face.

Zone 2

Sequence n.5 (1:29–1:33): The transition to the second zone is marked by the appearance of the writing *Zone 2* against a black background, reprising the glitch style introduced in the first zone but with a significant variation in visual dynamics. The text is accompanied by a progressive frontal zoom that creates the effect of the writing rushing towards the viewer, heightening the sensation of being drawn into a new diegetic space.

***Figure 9**. Frame from Balenciaga – Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow campaign, Sequence 5. Source: Balenciaga Official YouTube Channel (2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hu_08WchxnU*

Sequence n.6 (1:33–1:52): The second zone opens with a sudden change in setting. The protagonist resumes the subjective viewpoint and finds himself walking through an unfinished urban environment, following a path marked by illuminated blue arrows. The atmosphere evokes a decaying cityscape, where incomplete buildings alternate with open spaces clouded by smog. The music shifts from light piano notes to a more sustained electronic rhythm, intensifying the feeling of movement. The environment is dominated by shades of gray, with neon lights piercing through the dull, industrial landscape.

***Figure 10**. Frame from Balenciaga – Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow campaign, Sequence 6. Source: Balenciaga Official YouTube Channel (2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hu_08WchxnU*

Sequence n.7 (1:52–2:22): The journey is interrupted by the sudden appearance of a male figure standing still in the middle of a pedestrian crossing. He holds a red flower in his hands, which he slowly extends towards the viewer.

***Figure 11**. Frame from Balenciaga – Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow campaign, Sequence 7. Source: Balenciaga Official YouTube Channel (2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hu_08WchxnU*

A close-up focuses on the blooming red flower, creating a powerful visual contrast with the graygrey and faded tones of the surrounding environment. The figure remains centered in the composition, while behind him, passersby move rapidly and indistinctly, each following their own direction, with no interaction among them.

Sequence n.8 (2:22–2:46): The protagonist continues along the path indicated by the blue arrows, but the scene suddenly breaks. Through a fade-out, the setting shifts to a new environment. The colours and atmosphere change dramatically: it is now night, and the red lights of traffic signals, together with dominant bluish and black tones, create a strong and dramatic contrast, marking the transition to a more intense and unsettling atmosphere.

A light rain begins to fall, becoming the only audible sound and amplifying the sense of solitude and isolation. A figure emerges, disrupting the environment. A man dressed in a bright blue jacket stands out vividly against the dark, grey surroundings. A red flame appears in his hands, and his surreal presence intensifies the sense of distortion and suspension. In the same scene, a bus bearing the *Afterworld* logo detaches from the ground and begins to levitate slowly, defying gravity and further emphasizing the feeling of a dystopian, suspended world. This dramatic change in chromatic and atmospheric elements makes the new environment appear almost dreamlike and otherworldly, deepening the detachment from the previously depicted urban landscape and immersing the subject in a futuristic, surreal reality. Another fade-out leads into Zone 3.

***Figure 12**. Frame from Balenciaga – Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow campaign, Sequence 8. Source: Balenciaga Official YouTube Channel (2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hu_08WchxnU*

Zone 3

Sequence n.9 (2:46–2:50): This sequence serves as a liminal threshold charged with strong symbolic value. A red glow reveals the writing *Zone 3*, while the sound of fire accompanies the visual, evoking a ritual passage and announcing the entrance into a darker narrative dimension, rich in tension.

Figure 12. *Frame from Balenciaga – Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow campaign, Sequence 9. Source: Balenciaga Official YouTube Channel (2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hu_08WchxnU*

Sequence n.10 (2:50–3:55): A desolate, abandoned street unfolds, enveloped in a monotonous grey landscape that evokes the image of a world in decline. The setting is marked by ruins and dilapidated buildings, many reduced to skeletal structures devoid of life and colour. Shades of grey and violet dominate the scene, while cold lighting is frequently interrupted by long shadows, emphasizing the prevailing sense of loneliness and desolation.

Signs of human activity are absent. Isolated figures occupy the space without purpose, moving through the environment with no interaction. Each person is disconnected from the others, and the lack of meaningful engagement creates a strong impression of estrangement. The entire scenario appears to be a non-place, where human interaction has been reduced to its bare minimum, devoid of emotion and intent. Amidst this desolation, the protagonist continues forward, following the recurring blue arrows seen throughout the subjective sequences.

The atmosphere takes on an even more surreal quality when a ghostly figure suddenly emerges from the ruins, standing within what appears to be an underpass. The figure's face is painted white with heavy black makeup, resembling a grotesque clown. These caricatured features and the dark clothing blend seamlessly with the gloomy, abandoned environment. The figure remains motionless, staring intensely at the protagonist or viewer.

Abruptly, the figure raises a hand and points to one of the posters on the wall. Among the many posters, this is the only one clearly visible; the others appear torn, damaged, or barely readable, as if consumed by time and neglect. The camera briefly focuses on the poster: against a dark background, the words "T party" stand out in red, accompanied by the striking image of a white rabbit, occupying nearly the entire frame. Traditionally a symbol of innocence, the rabbit here assumes a controversial meaning, as if deliberately decontextualized.

Figure 14. *Frame from Balenciaga – Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow campaign, Sequence 10. Source: Balenciaga Official YouTube Channel (2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hu_08WchxnU*

The frame widens again, revealing the ghostly figure in full view, now accompanied by a new detail: a rabbit appears at the figure's feet and, after a brief moment, runs away.

Sequence n.11 (3:55–4:22): The subjective viewpoint resumes for a few moments as the protagonist continues through the decayed, abandoned urban environment. The scene is interrupted by the sudden appearance of a figure standing with their back to the viewer. The figure is dressed in a long black coat, silver boots, and has short blonde hair. Slowly, the figure turns toward the protagonist, as if sensing their presence.

With a fluid, almost ritualistic gesture, the figure raises a hand and activates a hologram. The hologram mirrors the one seen earlier in Zone 1, depicting a three-dimensional landscape that decomposes into three distinct areas: an industrial zone, a mountainous zone, and a red area prominently displaying the words "T-Party," echoing the poster seen previously. After holding the hologram briefly, the figure slowly lowers their hand, and the hologram vanishes, leaving behind only emptiness and a sense of a fragmented world.

Figure 15. *Frame from Balenciaga – Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow campaign, Sequence 11. Source: Balenciaga Official YouTube Channel (2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hu_08WchxnU*

The protagonist observes the androgynous figure, who seems to be searching for something or attempting to understand their own role within this desolate landscape. The accompanying soundtrack is minimal, punctuated only by a subtle electronic background noise that reinforces the atmosphere of suspension and mystery. The scene gradually fades, leading into Zone 4.

Zone 4

Sequence n.12 (4:22–4:26): Zone 4 is introduced through a new animated title. The text is fluid, its movement reminiscent of water, foreshadowing the introduction of a new natural element in the upcoming scene.

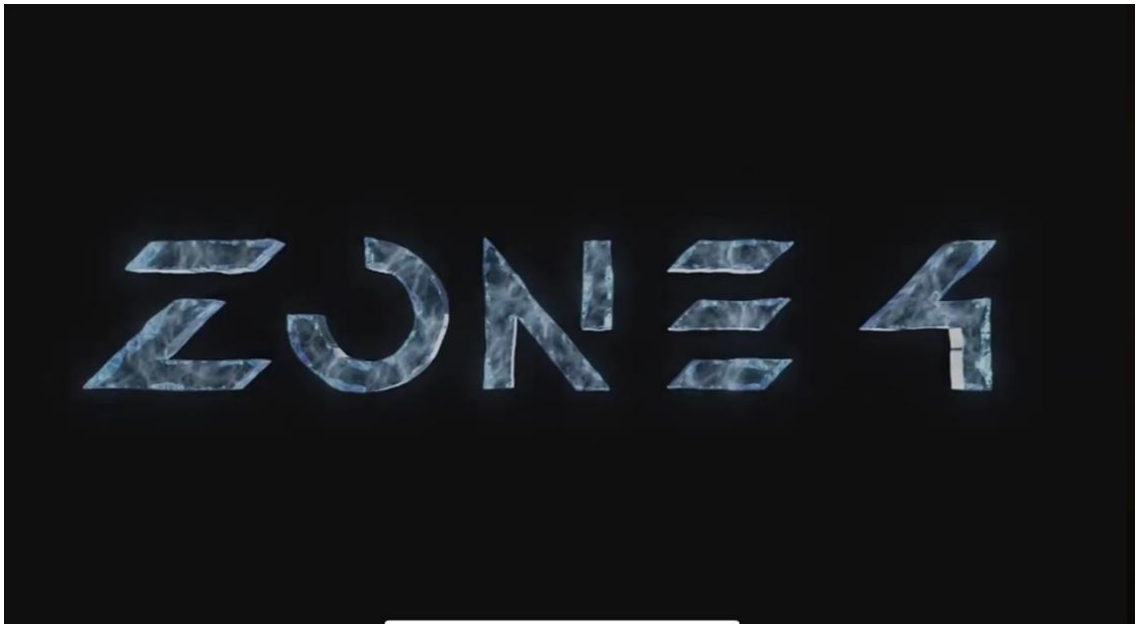


***Figure 16**. Frame from Balenciaga – Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow campaign, Sequence 12. Source: Balenciaga Official YouTube Channel (2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hu_08WchxnU*

Sequence n.13 (4:26–4:38): The scene opens with an intensely rhythmic soundtrack, initially faint but growing louder as the protagonist advances along a path marked by glowing blue stripes. The music becomes vibrant and pulsating, reminiscent of a nightclub atmosphere, filling the air with a distinctive and infectious beat.

The environment changes drastically: the protagonist leaves the urban setting and enters a dense forest, creating a stark contrast with the rigid structures of the city. The landscape is natural, bathed in soft, diffused light that envelops the trees in an intense green.

Three figures appear ahead, each standing out sharply against the surrounding environment. The first figure wears a bright yellow coat, which vividly contrasts with the natural backdrop as they move gracefully, dancing energetically. Beside them, a second figure dressed entirely in black stands almost motionless, resembling a zombie-like presence and introducing a sense of emotional disconnection. The third figure, a woman in a long pale blue dress, stands singularly out of place, her attire seemingly ill-suited to the natural setting.

As the protagonist observes these figures, a white rabbit suddenly crosses their path. This rabbit is not merely a fleeting animal but serves as a symbolic guide, signaling the

protagonist to follow. It is the same rabbit depicted on the "T-Party" poster seen earlier, now appearing as a guide through the forest.

Figure 17*. Frame from Balenciaga – Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow campaign, Sequence 13. Source: Balenciaga Official YouTube Channel (2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hu_08WchxnU*

Sequence n.14 (4:38–5:18): A fade-out transports the protagonist into a new scene. The music intensifies, becoming faster and more immersive. Vibrant colours dominate the space: red and yellow prevail, creating a psychedelic environment, interspersed with dark shadows that fall across the vegetation.

The protagonist enters what appears to be a party deep within the forest. The shots become fragmented, shifting focus between details of clothing, such as a Balenciaga-branded t-shirt worn by one of the figures, and the dynamic, psychedelic lighting that saturates the space. The frenetic, engaging music makes every movement feel like part of a collective experience, immersing the participants in a state of total liberation and uninhibited energy.

Dance transcends the human body, blending with the surrounding nature. In this same scene, trees, leaves, and even a centipede moving to the rhythm of the music seem to participate in a unified, collective movement, amplifying the sense of a perfectly synchronized psychedelic world.

***Figure 18**. Frame from Balenciaga – Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow campaign, Sequence 14. Source: Balenciaga Official YouTube Channel (2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hu_08WchxnU*

Sequence n.15 (5:18–5:35): At a certain point, the scene changes again. The music fades, and the protagonist, now distanced from the party, finds themselves in a more serene yet equally mysterious environment. The landscape shifts: the vibrant greens of the forest give way to an intensely blue stream, creating a fascinating contrast with the dark grey of the surrounding trees.

The blue stripes continue to guide the path, but the music, once powerful and close, now seems like a distant echo. Eventually, the protagonist reaches a temple rising from the forest. They pass through its portico, stepping toward a new scene.

Figure 19. *Frame from Balenciaga – Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow campaign, Sequence 15. Source: Balenciaga Official YouTube Channel (2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hu_08WchxnU*

Zone 5

Sequence n.16 (5:35–5:39): The final zone is introduced with a more solemn and almost sacred tone, marking a clear departure from the earlier transitional sequences. Golden, polished characters appear, illuminated by a central beam of light against a softly shaded brown background. This creates a sacred visual effect, further enhanced by metallic sounds and deep vibrations that anticipate the upcoming aesthetic and symbolic climax of the scene.

Figure 20. *Frame from Balenciaga – Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow campaign, Sequence 16. Source: Balenciaga Official YouTube Channel (2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hu_08WchxnU*

Sequence n.17 (5:39–6:11): The protagonist now finds themselves inside a cavernous space, enveloped by an atmosphere of mystery. The music fades completely, replaced by a profound and almost oppressive silence. The tones shift toward browns and greys, as if the environment absorbs all available light, creating a space that feels increasingly deep and introspective.

A soft light filters through the structures, and the protagonist moves forward, as if crossing a threshold separating the external world from a sacred and obscure realm. The symbolic core of the scene is realized through a sudden shift from a subjective to an objective viewpoint. A woman in silver armour, with long dark hair, stands before a sword embedded in a rock.

She approaches slowly and, with a calm and effortless gesture, pulls the sword from the stone. At the exact moment the sword is raised, the rock wall collapses spectacularly, and a bright beam of light floods the scene. A swelling musical crescendo accompanies this moment, amplifying the dramatic tension and reinforcing the transformative significance of the act.

***Figure 21**. Frame from Balenciaga – Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow campaign, Sequence 17. Source: Balenciaga Official YouTube Channel (2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hu_08WchxnU*

Sequence n.18 (6:11–7:05): The protagonist, once again in a subjective perspective, proceeds beyond the fissure created by the collapse of the temple wall, stepping into the open where natural light gradually fills the space.

The armoured woman becomes visible once more, solemnly driving the sword into the ground while gazing out over a breathtaking natural landscape from the edge of a cliff. Slowly, the surrounding environment reveals itself and then dissolves, unveiling an unknown world awaiting exploration.

***Figure 22**. Frame from Balenciaga – Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow campaign, Sequence 18. Source: Balenciaga Official YouTube Channel (2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hu_08WchxnU*

Sequence n.19 (7:05–7:10): The campaign concludes with the appearance of the *Balenciaga* logo on a black background. The white, static, and perfectly centred text, presented in a clean and uppercase font without additional graphic effects, emphasizes simplicity and finality. This visual minimalism, accompanied by absolute silence, creates a sharp contrast with the preceding sequences and reinforces the brand's ultimate authorial presence, standing as the definitive guarantor of the completed narrative.

***Figure 23**. Frame from Balenciaga – Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow campaign, Sequence 19. Source: Balenciaga Official YouTube Channel (2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hu_08WchxnU*

3.3.3 Semiotic-Narrative Level Analysis

After completing the segmentation and descriptive analysis of the *Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow*[1] campaign, which allowed for the identification and classification of visual, auditory, and narrative elements at a surface level, we now move to the second level of analysis: the semiotic-narrative level. This level, situated at the heart of meaning generation, focuses on the deep structure of the narrative, applying Greimas' actantial model and canonical narrative schema.

- **The Actantial Model**

The Actantial model identifies and analyses the *actants* that populate the narrative. Actants are abstract narrative roles that may be represented by characters, objects, or symbolic concepts, and their interaction enables the development and coherence of the story itself. According to Greimas (1982), each actant fulfils a specific narrative function within the plot, integrated into a network of causal and semantic relations that shape the evolution of the narrative.

In the case of *Afterworld*[1], six main actants are identified, each performing a precise function within the narrative structure. The Actantial analysis allows for the mapping of roles and relationships among the actants, revealing how they contribute to the semantic and narrative structuring of the campaign.

The primary figures in this context are:

Subject	The main character of the narrative, who undertakes the action to achieve a specific goal.
Receiver	The actant who receives the sender's proposal to undertake a narrative program. If accepted, the receiver becomes the subject.
Opponent	The desired goal or value the subject seeks to obtain through their action.
Helper	The element that supports the subject's action by providing assistance, resources, or knowledge to achieve the goal.
Sender	The entity that initiates the action by assigning a mission or motivating the subject to pursue the object.

Table 2. *Actantial Model Frame. Source: Adapted from Greimas (1983).*

Each of these figures interacts with the others, outlining the narrative path and semantic tensions running through the campaign. The following is a detailed identification of each actant and its specific narrative function within the semiotic-narrative structure of the campaign.

Subject

Within the actantial structure of the campaign Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow1, the subject can be identified as the gamer/user, who assumes the central narrative role of one undertaking a transformative journey oriented toward the acquisition of a value-bearing object. Within the narrative context, the player's subjectivity is not predetermined but progressively constructed through interaction with the diegetic space.

The campaign stages a dynamic of subjectivation in which the subject, initially formless, assumes identity only through the process of the journey itself. Positioned at the centre of the experience through the constant adoption of a first-person perspective, the user is not

a mere observer; rather, he explores environments, perceive signs, interpret figures, and in doing so modify his position within the narrative.

Similarly, in the context of the campaign, the subject is initially immersed in a closed universe governed by simulacra: ambiguous and self-referential representations that no longer refer to an external reality. Only by traversing this narrative system can the subject emerge from the initial condition of ignorance and access a new form of awareness and agency.

The final figurativization of the subject, coinciding with the appearance of the female figure in the closing phase of the narrative, does not introduce a new character but rather represents the narrative formalization of the achieved subjectivity: a face, a body, and a posture that restore to the user a fully recognizable and transformed dimension.

This is the moment when the actant becomes a figure, and the narrative function embodies a presence endowed with will and capacity for action. The subject is no longer one who passively undergoes the diegesis but one who traverses, deciphers, and transforms it, thus configuring himself as a contemporary hero of a cognitive and symbolic journey.

Object

The sword represents the object of value at the core of the subject's narrative program, not merely as the goal of the quest but as the necessary condition for accessing the final phase of transformation. Its extraction from the stone marks the moment when the subject moves from competence to performance, acquiring the ability to act consciously within the diegetic world.

In this sense, the sword takes shape of as a symbolic instrument of ascension: it enables the subject to rise from a state of passivity and initial disorientation toward a form of narrative and existential illumination.

The sword, therefore, is not simply what is conquered but what empowers the subject to recognize and enact his narrative status. It is through the sword that the subject gains access to a higher degree of agency, completing his initiatory journey within the diegesis.

Receiver

The receiver is the gamer/user who completes the symbolic journey proposed by the campaign. Within the narrative, all the characters, figures, and avatars that appear are in fact simulacra of the user themselves: symbolic and fragmented reproductions of their identity, reflecting different potential modes of being and acting within the narrative path proposed by Balenciaga (Baudrillard, 1981, p. 6).

The concept of simulacrum, according to Baudrillard (1981, p. 6), refers to a representation that no longer refers to an external real referent but sustains itself within a closed system of signs and images. In this sense, simulacra are not mere duplicates but autonomous entities that actively participate in constructing meaning and guiding the experience of the receiver.

The campaign builds an immersive and participatory experience in which the receiver undergoes a process of recognition and appropriation that strengthens engagement and the perception of authenticity. This process is based precisely on the ability to identify with these simulacra, that is, with symbolic and fragmented representations that constitute the coordinates through which the receiver interprets and relates to the narrative world and, more broadly, to the brand (Eco, 1979).

Opponent

The antagonist is the dystopian environment itself, which hinders the subject's transformation and awakening. The main obstacles are alienating technological forces, the sense of estrangement, and the immobility of the surrounding world. These elements attempt to keep the subject trapped in a cycle without evolution.

Helper

In the narrative program of the campaign *Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow*[1], the white rabbit serves as the main helper, that is, the actant who, according to Greimas' model, assists the subject in advancing toward the object of value (Greimas & Courtés, 1982, p. 21). The rabbit appears in two key moments: first as an image printed on the T-Party poster, and later as an animated figure crossing the scene in Zone 4. This shift from iconic to diegetic presence reinforces its role as a threshold figure between two distinct semantic

spaces: on one side, the disjointed, decaying urban environment; on the other, a natural, dreamlike, and sensorial landscape.
Its appearance follows a phase of pronounced narrative and spatial rarefaction, marked by static frames, distorted sound, and incomplete signals. In this context, the rabbit does not function as a classical guide, but rather as a directional element: it moves ahead of the subject along a path marked by glowing blue arrows, never directly interacting, but acting as an orienting index. In actantial terms, it plays a mediating role, enabling the transition from a chaotic space to a more structured one in which the subject can recover agency and proceed within the narrative program.

Symbolically, the rabbit evokes the imaginary of the threshold and the passage into the unknown. The intertextual reference to Alice in Wonderland is activated not only through its form and colour but also through its function: its movement leads the subject toward a new narrative isotopy (Carroll, 1865). Unlike the static elements populating the urban setting, the rabbit introduces movement and transition, acting as a marker of transformation. Just as in the film The Matrix, its function is to open a narrative passage toward a transformative elsewhere (Volli, 2003, pp. 57–59).
It is important to note that the rabbit's role as a helper is not instrumental: it provides neither tools nor direct competence. Rather, it belongs to the category of non-agentive helpers, which Greimas defines as "indirect supports" capable of activating narrative flow through signals, hints, or gestural orientation (Greimas & Courtés, 1982, p. 25). Its role is therefore figurative and directional: it signals to the subject that he is authorized to cross a semiotic threshold and perform a shift in isotopy.
In addition to the rabbit, other secondary helpers contribute to constructing the narrative device of transition. In Zone 3, the man pointing at the T-Party poster can be interpreted as a pre-activation figure: his discreet yet deliberate gesture initiates a chain of signalling and suggests the possibility of an alternative space, which the rabbit subsequently confirms and makes traversable.

Later, an androgynous figure appears, showing a topographic hologram that highlights a portion labelled *T-Party*. Rather than simply naming a destination, this figure gives

symbolic coherence to the direction already undertaken by the subject, providing conceptual orientation that strengthens the transition already in progress.
These three helpers (the rabbit, the man with the poster, and the androgynous figure) operate on different yet complementary levels: iconic, indexical, and informational. While not intervening directly in the action, they establish the narrative conditions that allow the subject to emerge from a state of initial suspension and move forward within the diegetic structure.

Sender

The sender corresponds to the brand Balenciaga, which does not merely promote a product or a visual identity but constructs and activates the entire diegetic universe in which the action takes place. It is the brand that defines the dystopian setting, the implicit rules of the narrative world, and the subject's mission: to traverse fragmented environments, cross symbolic thresholds, and reach a point of transformation.

Balenciaga's role as sender is twofold. On one hand, it functions as the engine of the narrative: it creates the need for transformation that propels the subject into action. On the other, it operates as the director of the immersive experience, shaping the aesthetic codes, the sequence of trials, and even the form of the object of value (the sword). It is not a character within the diegesis, but an external, meta-narrative sender that orchestrates the story and guides its meaning.
From this perspective, Balenciaga occupies a strategic position: it is not just the brand behind the campaign, but the guarantor of the entire narrative's sense-making process. It initiates the subject's narrative movement and legitimizes it, assigning value to the final transformation. In this sense, the actantial structure becomes a semiotic device through which the brand builds an experiential identity: one in which the user is no longer a passive consumer, but a protagonist within a symbolic journey.

Sender The brand Balenciaga	→	**Object** The sword	→	**Receiver** The gamer/user
		↑		
Helper The white rabbit, the man pointing to the T-Party poster, and the androgynous figure indicating the map	→	**Subject** The gamer/user	←	**Opponent** The dystopian world governed by simulacra and disorientation.

Table 3. *Actantial Model Applied to the "Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow" Campaign. Source: Adapted from Greimas (1983).*

The Canonical Narrative Schema

To fully understand the dynamics of action in the *Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow*[1] campaign, it is necessary to apply Greimas' (1983) canonical narrative schema, which allows for the analysis of the fundamental stages through which the subject's journey toward the object of value unfolds.

This schema is structured around four main phases:

- **Manipulation:**
  The initial phase, in which the subject is incited to act by a sender. Desire and the drive toward an objective are activated.
- **Competence:**
  In this phase, the subject acquires the knowledge, abilities, or tools necessary to undertake the mission. The subject does not yet act but prepares for the forthcoming challenge.

- **Performance:**
  This is the moment of concrete action: the subject faces the decisive test and attempts to attain the object.
- **Sanction:**
  The final phase, in which the outcome of the action is assessed. It can result in success or failure, but in either case, it brings closure to the narrative path.

In the *Afterworld*[1] campaign, the subject's narrative trajectory perfectly follows the four phases of the canonical narrative program, marking the transformational journey from initial disorientation to the attainment of new self-awareness.

Manipulation Phase

The narrative opens with the activation of a call to action, corresponding to the manipulation phase. *Balenciaga*, acting as the sender, triggers the subject's desire by projecting them into a dystopian and fragmented universe. The appearance of the title "*Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow"* and the ensuing immersion in an alienating technological environment serve as devices of incitement: the viewer, placed at the centre of the narrative through a first-person perspective, is called to embark on a journey of exploration and search for meaning, prompted by a hostile context devoid of stable reference points.

Competence Phase

In the following phase, the subject undergoes an implicit learning process. Competence does not manifest through the acquisition of material tools but emerges from the progressive deciphering of signs that guide the narrative. The luminous blue arrows traced on the ground, the appearance of the guiding rabbit in Zone 3, and the presence of the topographical hologram are clues that construct an internal symbolic grammar within the story. Through these elements, the subject develops the ability to interpret the narrative space and understand the most appropriate modes of action within a universe governed by opaque and non-immediately comprehensible logics.

Performance Phase

The climax of the story unfolds during the performance phase, the moment when the subject undertakes the decisive action that breaks narrative inertia. This transition coincides with the extraction of the sword from the stone, a gesture rich in symbolic significance, representing the rupture of alienation and the awakening of subjectivity. The sword is not merely a physical object but the emblem of the transition from passive observation to conscious action. At this moment, the subject fully asserts themselves as a narrative agent, obtaining the object of value that marks their inner transformation and the overcoming of the trials imposed by the dystopian universe.

Sanction Phase

The sanction is realized in the final sequence, when the female figure, now the visible manifestation of the subject, plants the sword into the ground and opens contemplatively toward the horizon. This solemn gesture seals the success of the undertaking: the subject has not only overcome the trials but has also acquired a new existential perspective. The horizon opening before her becomes the symbol of hard-won freedom and access to a possible future, no longer determined by the logics of control and alienation that characterized the initial diegetic universe. In this way, the *Afterworld*[1] campaign takes the form of an initiatory tale, in which the subject passes through the canonical phases of action to achieve a profound transformation that is both existential and symbolic.

MANIPULATION	COMPETENCE	PERFORMANCE	SANCTION
Balenciaga, as sender, activates the subject's desire by projecting him into a dystopian universe. The campaign title and immersive environment act as incitements for the viewer to embark on a journey of exploration.	The subject learns to interpret narrative signs such as luminous blue arrows, the guiding rabbit, and the topographical hologram. Competence emerges from deciphering these symbolic cues rather than acquiring material tools.	The subject performs the decisive action by extracting the sword from the stone, breaking narrative inertia. This act symbolizes the awakening of subjectivity and transition from passive observation to conscious action	The female figure plants the sword into the ground and faces the horizon, marking the success of the journey. This final act symbolizes freedom and a new existential perspective beyond control and alienation.

Table 4. *Application of Greimas' Canonical Narrative Schema to the "Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow" Campaign. Author's elaboration based on Greimas (1983).*

3.3.4 Axiological Level

After analysing the textual surface (discursive level) and the deep narrative structure (actantial model and canonical schema), we now reach the axiological level, the third stage of the generative trajectory of meaning according to Greimas' semiotic perspective (Greimas & Courtés, 1982). At this level, the focus shifts from the dynamics of action to the underlying value systems of the narrative, specifically to the oppositional structures that regulate narrative transformations and guide the production of meaning.

The axiological analysis centres on identifying the value categories implicit in the narrative and the semantic polarizations that structure the figurative and narrative universe (Volli, 2003). It is at this stage that the ideological horizon of the text becomes explicit, revealing the worldview that the discourse proposes to its audience.

In the case of the *Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow*[1] campaign, the axiological dimension manifests through the representation of a dystopian and alienated world that the subject must traverse, progressively reconfiguring the values at stake. Throughout this journey, the text stages regimes of veridiction, modes of existence, and transformative trajectories that can be reconstructed through a value-based lens (Greimas, 1983).

One of the first value oppositions to emerge is that between *control* and *freedom*. From the very first sequences, the subject moves through highly regulated environments defined by temporal coordinates, spatial constraints, and biometric protocols. The entire diegetic universe appears dominated by an algorithmic logic that limits agency and nullifies any form of individual action. Yet, it is precisely the adherence to this predetermined path that makes the emergence of a liberating gesture possible. The extraction of the sword at the end represents the transformative act that interrupts this automatism and restores the positive value of freedom (Greimas & Courtés, 1982).

A second key opposition is that between *artificial* and *natural.* In the initial zones, dominated by decaying urban landscapes and digitized atmospheres, an artificial, cold, and claustrophobic dimension prevails. Only in Zone 4 does the narrative gradually open toward natural and vitalistic environments. However, this apparent naturalness remains ambiguous, contaminated by synthetic lights, electronic rhythms, and choreographies that

hybridize the human and post-human (Barthes, 1977). This opposition does not resolve into a clear-cut dichotomy but rather presents itself as a transitional space in which the subject experiments with the possibility of transformation.

Another axis of tension is between *inertia* and *transformation*. The campaign presents numerous static figures, frozen in purposeless gestures. The subject, too, for much of the journey, merely observes and crosses through spaces without altering the course of events. Only through a concrete action (the extraction of the sword) is this regime of immobility broken, producing the narrative turning point. The subject's transformation is not guaranteed by the context but requires a voluntary act to break through passivity (Greimas, 1983).

Finally, the text subtly articulates the opposition between *alienation* and *subjectivation*. The immersive experience of the campaign, initially constructed through a first-person perspective, deprives the subject of a face and identity. Only in the final part does the subject take on a visible figure, a woman, becoming objectified within the frame. This passage, consistent with the concept of subjectivation (Greimas & Courtés, 1982), marks the completion of the narrative journey: the subject is not given from the outset but is formed over time, through the traversal of the diegetic universe and the conquest of agency.

In conclusion, the axiological analysis of *Afterworld* [1] reveals a densely layered narrative, in which the immersive experience constitutes a true symbolic journey. The value oppositions are not simple contrasts but narrative devices that push the viewer to confront the possibility of existential transformation: to escape alienation through a decisive gesture, reclaim an identity, and perform an act capable of restoring meaning to the experience of life.

3.3.5 Veridiction and Enunciation

Concluding the axiological analysis of the campaign, which explored the main values and ideological polarizations at play, it is now essential to focus on two additional dimensions fundamental to understanding how the narrative constructs its meaning: veridiction and

enunciation. While these are not independent analytical levels, they play a crucial role in determining how the textual reality is perceived and how the subject interacts with it.

Veridiction concerns the way a text establishes a regime of truth, defining what can be considered "true" within its narrative universe. Enunciation, by contrast, defines how the text addresses its audience, establishing the subject's position and influencing the immersive experience of the viewer. Analysing these aspects allows for a deeper understanding of how the represented world becomes credible and how the subject, initially immersed, evolves toward a critical awareness of his own position within the story.

Veridiction

In the case of *Afterworld*[1] the analysis of the regime of veridiction highlights a path of cognitive transformation. Initially, the subject moves through a universe that offers no clear orientation tools. Truth is not given but must be gradually constructed through experience. The campaign does not open with stable coordinates or explicit explanations; instead, the viewer is immersed in a confused, fragmented dimension governed by ambiguous signals (distorted images, unexplained environmental changes, enigmatic presences). This corresponds to what Greimas (1982) defines as a regime of appearance**:** everything seems to be, but nothing is yet certain.

As the narrative progresses, however, the subject begins to interpret these elements. The blue arrows traced on the ground become directional guides, the rabbit assumes the role of a guide, and the sword is no longer just a symbolic object but a device enabling action. Truth in this narrative world is not constructed through explicit explanations or didactic commentary, but through the coherence of relationships between elements and the subject's ability to act meaningfully within the world.

The critical moment coincides with the extraction of the sword, which is significant not only narratively but also as the point at which the subject affirms his *agency*, demonstrating an understanding of the internal logics of the world. This marks the transition to a regime of knowledge**,** where the subject not only observes and crosses through the external world but acts within it, showing an acquired internal comprehension of the narrative universe (Greimas & Courtés, 1982; Peverini, 2010). Through this act,

the represented reality becomes credible, inhabitable, and coherent, not because it is realistic but because it is internally interpretable.

Enunciation

Parallel to the construction of this internal truth, the text activates a precise enunciative mechanism that defines how the viewer enters the narrative and what position they occupy within it. In semiotic terms, enunciation refers precisely to this: who produces the discourse, who receives it, and how these positions are represented in the narrative (Volli, 2003).

In *Afterworld*[1], enunciation is activated from the very beginning through total immersion. The viewer does not observe the scene from the outside but is called to experience it in first person, seeing through the subject's eyes. At this stage, no visible figure or recognizable face exists; only a gaze crossing the diegetic space. The effect is one of complete identification, in which the enunciating "I" coincides with the camera's point of view, constructing a subject that is perceived but not yet figurativized.

The critical moment occurs with the appearance of the female figure who extracts the sword. The camera opens up and finally reveals who "we were." This transition from invisible subjectivity to visible representation constitutes a true act of objectification of the enunciating subject (Greimas & Courtés, 1982). Until that moment, the viewer had been immersed in a perceptual experience without a face; now they recognize themselves in the female figure and simultaneously observe her as other than themselves, retrospectively reinterpreting the entire experiential journey.

This mechanism reflects the theoretical model proposed by Volli (2003), according to which every text constructs simulacra of sender and receiver across three distinct levels:

- The *empirical sender (e1)* is the Balenciaga fashion house.
- The *enunciative sender (e2)* is the brand in its symbolic projection, expressing values linked to a dystopian future, transformation, and experimentation.
- The *enunciative gaze* (e3) corresponds to the immersive viewpoint conveyed by the first-person perspective adopted throughout the campaign. It is a non-figurative "I" that enables the viewer's identification with the narrative and

functions as a subject of enunciation. This gaze acts as a transitional instance between the symbolic sender (e2) and the figurative receiver (d3), preparing the process of subjectivation that culminates in the final embodiment.

- The *empirical receiver (d1)* is the real spectator who engages with the campaign.
- The *enunciative receiver (d2)* is the ideal target, represented by a young, technologically aware audience.
- The *figurative receiver (d3)* is the female figure who embodies the fully realized subjectivity at the end of the journey.

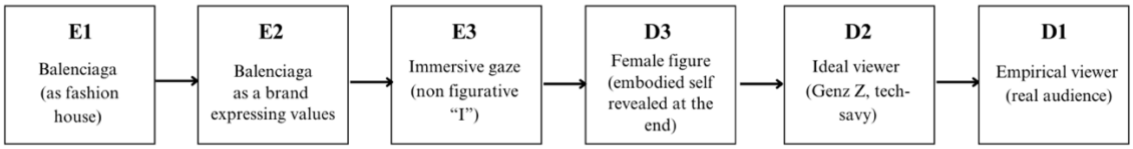


***Table 5**. Enunciation diagram – Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow (Balenciaga). Source: Author's elaboration*

In this sense, enunciation is not merely a technical narrative device but an integral part of the process of subject formation. Subjectivity is not pre-given; it is shaped throughout the narrative, emerging only at the end as the result of the immersive experience and the process of symbolic recognition (Greimas & Courtés, 1982; Volli, 2003).

3.3.6 The Role of AI in Balenciaga's Campaign *Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow*

The *Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow*[1] campaign by Balenciaga stands out for its innovative use of artificial intelligence, employed not merely as a tool for creative generation but as an enabling technology for constructing an immersive and narrative-driven experience. In this project, AI plays a strategic role in designing the experiential infrastructure, contributing to the creation of coherent and highly engaging digital environments that transcend the traditional boundaries of visual communication (Dimension Studio, 2020).

Through the integration of advanced technologies, such as the Unreal Engine graphics engine, artificial intelligence dynamically managed the organization of virtual spaces and

the behaviour of environmental elements. AI ensured the fluidity of transitions between the different areas of the narrative path, the coherence of interactions, and the real-time adaptation of environmental conditions, offering users a seamless multisensory experience (Streamline Studios, 2020).

The truly innovative element lies in AI's ability to orchestrate not only the technical aspects of the experience but also to support the construction of an immersive narrative that actively involves the user. The experience proposed by Balenciaga goes beyond the aesthetic contemplation of the collection and takes the form of a symbolic and cultural journey, where the user is invited to explore, interact, and immerse himself in a narrative universe strongly characterized by the brand's identity (Unreal Engine, 2021).

In this context, artificial intelligence becomes a catalyst for redefining the language of luxury in the digital environment, fostering a transition from linear communication to more complex and interactive forms of experiential storytelling. *Afterworld*[1] thus represents a paradigmatic case of how AI can transform brand communication, no longer confined to product presentation but extended to the creation of fully-fledged narrative worlds capable of engaging the audience at a deep and immersive level.

3.4 Etro – *Nowhere* (2024)

In 2024, Etro launched the campaign *Nowhere*[2] on the occasion of the presentation of the spring-summer collection, introducing a highly innovative communication project that combines luxury aesthetics and artificial intelligence. This initiative was conceived by creative director Marco De Vincenzo, who aimed to experiment with new visual languages capable of transcending the boundaries of traditional representation and offering the public an immersive and imaginative experience (Inside Marketing, 2024).

The campaign was created through collaboration with digital artist Silvia Badalotti, who employed artificial intelligence to shape new scenarios and figures suspended between reality and imagination. Using generative algorithms, recognizable elements such as landscapes, objects, and human bodies were transformed into visual compositions with strong evocative impact, capable of arousing wonder and transporting the viewer into a symbolic universe that goes beyond the limits of the physical world (WWD, 2024).

Etro's strategic objective was to present the garments of the new season in a context that does not merely exhibit the product but invites the public to immerse themselves in a parallel universe where aesthetics become narrative. The choice to use artificial intelligence also responds to the need to engage with a segment of consumers increasingly attracted to innovative and technologically advanced content, without renouncing the values of exclusivity and craftsmanship that define the brand (De Luca, 2024).

In this way, the *Nowhere*^{2} campaign is not just an exercise in style but a true visual brand storytelling project, in which AI becomes a tool for cultural and symbolic creation, redefining the brand's identity in a contemporary key.

The analysis of this campaign will focus on decoding visual content by adopting Roland Barthes' structuralist semiotics approach, with particular reference to the concepts of denotation and connotation. This method will allow the investigation of both the objective level of visual representations and the symbolic and cultural layers that contribute to constructing the narrative universe proposed by Etro. Through this perspective, the analysis will explore how artificial intelligence becomes a tool for the aesthetic and value redefinition of the brand, helping to strengthen its identity and its ability to generate an innovative and emotionally engaging luxury imaginary.

3.4.1 Campaign's visual analysis

The analysis of the *Nowhere*^{2} campaign focuses on the image (Figure 24) published on the official Instagram profile of the Etro brand, a strategic channel for disseminating highly symbolic visual content. Following the semiotic approach proposed by Roland Barthes (1964) in *Rhétorique de l'image*, this phase is limited to the objective description of the elements present in the image, deferring the interpretation of cultural and symbolic meanings to a later stage.

The image analysed below has been selected for its exemplary value in illustrating the denotative level of meaning within the *Nowhere*^{2} campaign, following Barthes' semiotic framework.

Figure 24. *Image from the* Nowhere *campaign published on Etro's official Instagram profile, promoting the Spring-Summer 2024 collection. Source: @etro, Instagram, publication date: January 29th, 2024.*

The Central Figure

The image presents a female figure positioned at the centre of the scene, emphasizing what Barthes defines as the *iconic focus*, the focal point on which the observer's gaze naturally converges. The model features distinctive somatic traits: extremely pale skin, white hair, and an expressionless gaze, elements that aesthetically recall the canons of an ethereal and unconventional beauty. The intentionally voluminous hairstyle amplifies the scenic presence of the figure, accentuating the effect of temporal and spatial suspension. This stylistic choice contributes to constructing an image that stands outside the ordinary parameters of body representation, aligning with the visual universe imagined by the campaign.

The Clothing

The garment worn reflects the distinctive features of the Etro brand, renowned for its recurrent use of stylized floral motifs and decorative geometries, elements that have always been a fundamental component of its aesthetic identity. In this image, such references materialize in a dress that harmoniously combines ornamental details inspired by nature with rigorous geometric forms, creating a visual balance between classicism and contemporaneity. The colour palette is dominated by dark tones, particularly black and gold, complemented by neutral shades such as beige and sage green.

The Background

The scene unfolds in an abstract space, dominated by a night-blue sky punctuated by golden elements resembling stylized constellations. The absence of a defined perspective and concrete spatial references generates a sense of spatial suspension, projecting the figure into an environment that cannot be traced back to real geographic or physical coordinates. This type of setting perfectly exemplifies a visual *non-place*, where spatial identity dissolves to leave room for a perceptual experience entirely surrendered to imagination.

The Logo

The Etro logo is discreetly positioned at the bottom, in line with the communication strategies typical of contemporary luxury, which favour a sober and non-intrusive brand display (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012). According to Barthes' theory, its function is to act as an *anchorage*, orienting the interpretation of the image and ensuring brand recognition within a highly aestheticized visual context (Barthes, 1964).

3.4.2 Campaign's symbolic analysis

At a symbolic level, the female figure at the centre of the image assumes a strong symbolic value, embodying an ideal of beauty that emancipates itself from traditional aesthetic standards and embraces a more inclusive vision that celebrates diversity. The choice of somatic traits that aesthetically recall albinism is not accidental but represents an intentional act of breaking away from dominant models.

The figure thus becomes a symbol of uniqueness and authenticity, two central concepts in contemporary luxury communication (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012). In this context, exclusivity is no longer tied to social distance or material rarity but is expressed through the brand's ability to represent an alternative aesthetic that acknowledges difference as a distinctive value. The ethereal corporeality and emotional suspension of the figure evoke a nearly mythological imaginary in which beauty becomes abstract, and the human figure transforms into the archetype of a new form of cultural and symbolic luxury (Barthes, 1977).

Through this representation, Etro transcends the traditional rhetoric of inaccessibility and proposes a concept of luxury based on the valorisation of diversity and the ability to generate alternative collective imaginaries. The female figure, in this sense, is not merely a body to be observed but a visual sign laden with meaning, capable of embodying the tension between the desire for distinction and the urgency for new, more inclusive aesthetic paradigms (Inside Marketing, 2024; Fashion Magazine, 2024).

The Clothing

The garments in the *Nowhere*[2] campaign play a highly symbolic role in constructing the brand's identity, transforming from simple aesthetic objects into social signs that communicate belonging, status, and cultural distinction (Barthes, 1977). The floral motifs and decorative geometries, in addition to recalling Etro's aesthetic heritage, become instruments of a true mythological narrative of luxury (Barthes, 1957), where clothing ceases to be merely an expression of aesthetic taste and becomes a vehicle for a cultural ideal of escape and existential elevation.

Through these garments, Etro does not merely propose an aesthetic but stages the myth of an ideal elsewhere: a mental and experiential place where the individual can transcend ordinary reality and access a higher dimension of existence, reserved for a few. Wearing Etro thus becomes a symbolic gesture of identity transformation, allowing the consumer to position themselves within an exclusive imaginary where beauty intertwines with the ability to culturally stand out.

The choice of a colour palette dominated by dark tones and precious metals like gold reinforces this myth of silent distinction, recalling the universe of quiet luxury (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012). Opulence is no longer ostentatious but is expressed through aesthetic choices capable of communicating uniqueness and authenticity, recognizable not through traditional elitist codes but through the ability to express a personal and distinctive vision of beauty.

In this context, clothing becomes a mythological marker of social distinction; it is the means through which one participates in a collective narrative that celebrates cultural elevation and the transcendence of everyday banality. Luxury, from this perspective, is no longer merely tied to material possession but is expressed through the ability to embody and communicate an idealized vision of life, aligned with the highest values of contemporary aesthetic and symbolic culture.

The Background

The abstract setting and the presence of stylized constellations evoke an image of escape from reality and access to an alternative symbolic universe, where spatial and temporal coordinates dissolve to make way for a dreamlike and otherworldly vision. In this scenario, the brand does not merely offer products but constructs an experiential imaginary, projecting the viewer into a universe of desire that exists outside of ordinary reality (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012).

The background thus acts as a symbolic activator of status, placing the viewer in a position of distance and aspiration with respect to the proposed narrative universe. This distance itself becomes a sign of exclusivity, reinforcing the idea that contemporary luxury is not only acquired materially but also "inhabited" symbolically through imagination.

The Logo

The discreet and understated placement of the Etro logo is not merely an aesthetic choice but a refined stylistic detail that expresses a clear intention to leave space for the narrative power of the image, avoiding any form of ostentation. In Barthes' terms, the logo assumes the function of discursive anchorage, guiding the interpretation of the image and ensuring narrative coherence without interfering with the image's aesthetic autonomy (Barthes, 1964).

In this context, the brand's discretion does not reduce its communicative effectiveness but strengthens it, transforming into a sign of authenticity and aesthetic awareness. Distinction is thus built not through explicit visibility but through the ability to evoke values of excellence and refinement that do not need to be openly declared but emerge naturally from the visual experience offered.

3.4.3 The Role of Artificial Intelligence in Etro's *Nowhere* Campaign

The *Nowhere*[2] campaign by Etro stands out as one of the first projects in the luxury sector entirely generated through artificial intelligence. AI was not merely a supporting tool but played an active and operational role in both the creative and production processes. In

particular, the collaboration between Marco De Vincenzo and digital artist Silvia Badalotti involved the shared construction of a semantic vocabulary, comprising keywords, visual suggestions, and references, which was then translated into textual prompts for generative models (Vogue Italia, 2024).

Through a series of successive iterations, the algorithm produced hundreds of images combining recognizable elements such as human bodies and natural landscapes with entirely imaginary components. These images were not passively selected but were reworked, refined, and validated through a co-creation process between the AI and the creative director, resulting in a final outcome that remains coherent with the brand's aesthetic identity while introducing a deeply innovative visual language (Artuu, 2024).

From a technical perspective, artificial intelligence enabled the creation of fluid environments and hybrid subjects that would have been difficult to achieve through traditional photographic techniques. This resulted not only in significant optimization of production times but also in greater exploratory freedom during the initial stages of visual concept development (Hyper Foundry, 2024). The ability to rapidly generate graphic variations made the process more dynamic and adaptable, fostering continuous dialogue among the stakeholders involved in the project (Fashion Network, 2024).

Ultimately, AI acted as a creative catalyst, expanding the brand's expressive possibilities and strengthening its relevance within the contemporary fashion landscape. In this case, the application of artificial intelligence was not limited to the ideation phase but had a direct impact on content production, demonstrating how technology and creativity can coexist and mutually reinforce each other in the context of luxury.

3.5 Gucci – Parallel Universes: From Future frequences to Gucci Cosmos: *From Future frequences to Gucci Cosmos*

The *Parallel Universes: From Future frequences to Gucci Cosmos: From Future frequences to Gucci Cosmos*[3] campaign, launched in 2023 in collaboration with Christie's, represents one of the most emblematic expressions of the intersection between fashion, art, technology, and artificial intelligence (Christie's, 2023). This project is part of Gucci's ongoing journey of aesthetic and cultural experimentation, exploring the

possibilities offered by digital art languages and AI-based generative systems, particularly in the field of NFTs and highly symbolic digital artworks (Red Eye, 2023).

Parallel Universes: From Future frequences to Gucci Cosmos[3] unfolds as a conceptual journey through the founding myths and historical iconographies that have shaped Gucci's identity over time. Nine digital artists, including Alexis André, Alexis Christodoulou, Amy Goodchild, Harvey Rayner, Jacqui Kenny, Jo Ann, Melissa Wiederrecht, Sasha Stiles, and Thomas Lin Pedersen, were invited to reinterpret some of the most iconic elements of the Gucci universe through the use of artificial intelligence algorithms and generative creative processes.

The project developed in parallel with the physical exhibition *Gucci Cosmos*, creating a dialogue between past and future, between the Maison's historical heritage and the new expressive possibilities offered by digital culture (Christie's, 2023). Each artist reimagined Gucci's great aesthetic and mythological themes, from the origins of young Guccio Gucci in London in 1897 to iconic symbols such as the Horsebit, the Flora pattern, and the more recent Gucci Rosso Ancora, thus generating a visual narrative that crosses eras and imaginaries, redefining the relationship between time, space, and luxury identity.

In this perspective, *Parallel Universes: From Future frequences to Gucci Cosmos*[3] is not merely a communication campaign but a true instrument for creating new cultural imaginaries (Barthes, 1957), transforming the fashion house into a cultural system capable of producing new digital myths through artificial intelligence. AI thus becomes not only a technical tool but a creative agent capable of redefining the brand's visual narrative, positioning it at the forefront of reflections on how luxury can inhabit new symbolic spaces in the digital age.

The semiotic analysis will focus on the artwork *Convergence* by Amy Goodchild, selected for the *Parallel Universes: From Future frequences to Gucci Cosmos*[3] campaign and disseminated through Gucci's digital channels as an expression of the integration between generative art and artificial intelligence.

Following Roland Barthes' approach (*Rhétorique de l'image*, 1964; *Mythologies*, 1957), the analysis will be articulated across the levels of denotation and connotation, to

investigate both the immediate visual component and the underlying symbolic and cultural values.

This perspective proves effective in understanding how Gucci uses artificial intelligence not only to innovate its aesthetic but also to construct new cultural imaginaries related to contemporary themes such as identity fluidity, inclusion, and the redefinition of the concept of luxury.

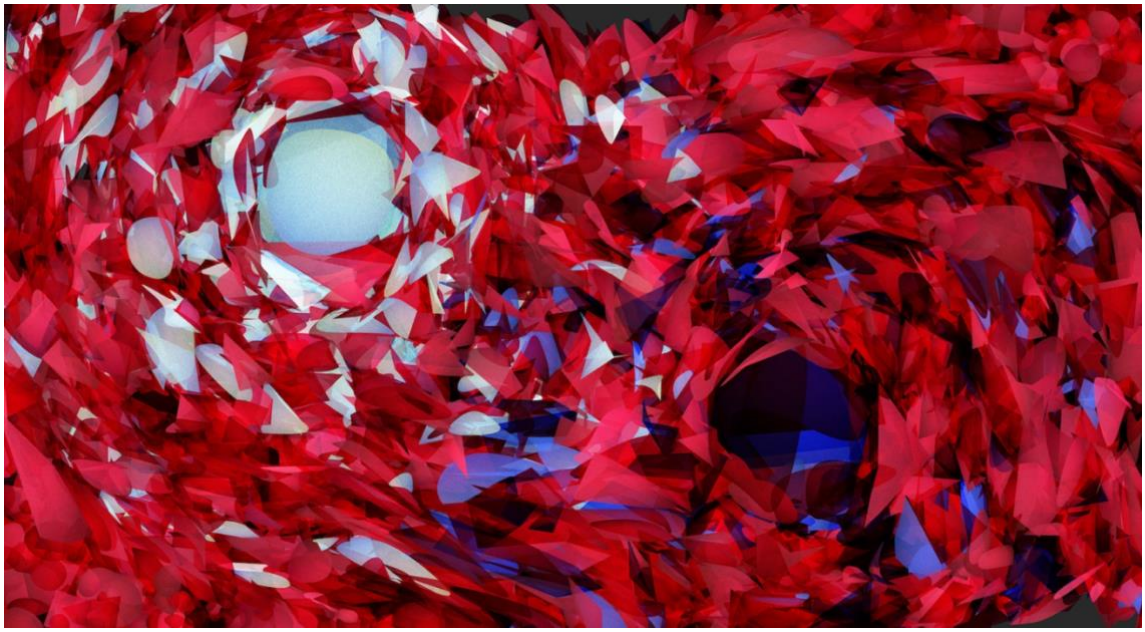


Figure 25. *Artwork Convergence by Amy Goodchild, part of the Parallel Universes: From Future frequences to Gucci Cosmos campaign.* Source: Gucci Official Website (2024), https://www.gucci.com/us/en/st/stories/article/archival-algorithmic-code

3.5.1 Campaign's visual Analysis

The artwork *Convergence* by Amy Goodchild, selected for the *Parallel Universes: From Future frequences to Gucci Cosmos*[3] campaign promoted by Gucci and Christie's, presents an abstract composition devoid of recognizable figurative elements. The image is dominated by irregular fragments that overlap and intertwine following a circular and dynamic arrangement, generating a visual effect of continuous movement.

The main colours are vivid red, which cuts across the entire composition, and deep blue, predominantly located toward the edges. Two focal areas can also be distinguished: one

brighter, tending toward white, and another darker, dominated by intense blue. These two visual poles create a dynamic balance around which the segmented and pointed forms are arranged, producing an effect of convergence and tension between opposites.

White shades and transparencies accentuate the depth of the composition, while the curvilinear movement of the forms suggests a continuous interaction between the two central areas, guiding the viewer's gaze from one pole to the other.

The image is entirely devoid of textual references, human figures, or natural elements. The composition unfolds entirely on an abstract plane, with a sharp graphic rendering characterized by high luminous definition and geometric precision. These visual aspects suggest a digital and automated production process, compatible with the use of generative tools based on artificial intelligence.

3.5.2 Campaign's symbolic analysis

This campaign represents a significant example of how visual art can convey emerging cultural sensibilities (Goodchild, 2023). Although lacking recognizable figurative references, the image powerfully communicates the transformation of identity models and the opening toward a more fluid and inclusive vision of the self.

Recalling the principles of Roland Barthes (1957), the image acts as a true cultural narrative, in which visual signs no longer refer to concrete objects but to emerging values and ideologies. In this case, the abstract composition reflects the idea of fashion liberated from rigid categories of masculine and feminine, embracing a plurality of identity expressions. The arrangement of chromatic fragments, overlapping and intertwining in a continuous flow, visually translates the search for balance among differences, offering an image that celebrates uniqueness within multiplicity.

The choice of red, positioned in the central area, suggests an energy that holds together the polarities represented by the lighter and darker tones. This balance is never static but remains alive through the movement of the forms, which seem to flow seamlessly into one another.

As stated in the official presentation of the work, the artist intended to transcend gender dualism, imagining a shared space where expressive freedom becomes the true ground for connection (Goodchild, 2023). The artwork thus becomes a visual interpreter of fashion as a universal language, capable of connecting diversity without erasing it, celebrating it as part of a shared beauty.

In this context, artificial intelligence plays a fundamental role, not only as a technical tool but also as a medium through which new symbolic horizons are constructed. Gucci, through this campaign, demonstrates its ability to interpret luxury in a contemporary key, offering an aesthetic that engages with the profound social transformations of our time (Peverini, 2020). *Convergence* is not simply a digital artwork but an invitation to rethink identity categories and open up to more authentic, inclusive, and conscious forms of expression.

3.5.3 The Role of Artificial Intelligence in the *Parallel Universes: From Future frequences to Gucci Cosmos* campaign by Gucci

In the *Parallel Universes: From Future frequences to Gucci Cosmos*[3] campaign, artificial intelligence emerges as a central element of the creative process, going far beyond a mere technical support function. Through the use of generative systems, AI becomes a true creative agent, capable of shaping new visual languages that explore themes deeply connected to contemporary issues such as identity fluidity and the valorisation of diversity (Goodchild, 2023).

Developed in collaboration with Christie's and hosted within the Gucci Art Space, the project demonstrates how the brand is able to leverage emerging technologies not only to innovate luxury aesthetics but also to propose new cultural and symbolic horizons. In this context, artificial intelligence becomes the interpreter of a form of luxury that moves away from the idea of material possession and approaches a more immaterial and value-driven dimension, where beauty coincides with expressive freedom and creative experimentation .

Within *Convergence*, AI is not simply a computational tool but a means to aesthetically explore complex concepts such as unity in diversity and the overcoming of cultural and

social barriers. Algorithmic generation makes it possible to construct visual spaces where identity manifests as a continuous flow of transformation, abandoning the rigid categories of the past and opening up new expressive possibilities.

Through this campaign, Gucci reaffirms its role as a cultural innovator, capable of combining aesthetic excellence with the ability to anticipate social changes and interpret the new sensibilities of a global audience. Artificial intelligence thus becomes the privileged language for narrating the new myths of digital luxury, where the aesthetic experience merges with cultural reflection and the search for authentic meaning.

3.6 Focus Group

The focus group was conducted with the aim of exploring in depth Generation Z's perceptions regarding the use of artificial intelligence in the visual and verbal content of luxury brand communication campaigns. A qualitative methodology was chosen, as it is capable of capturing not only rational opinions and evaluations but also emotional reactions, enthusiasm, perplexities, and contradictions that are often difficult to detect through more rigid and standardized research tools (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

The discussion guide was developed around a limited number of keys, intentionally unstructured questions, avoiding the inclusion of examples or suggestions that could influence participants' responses. Particular attention was given to using mainly open-ended questions, avoiding dichotomous (yes/no) inquiries and encouraging the free expression of participants, in line with Krueger's methodological recommendations (Krueger, 2002).

The sample included six participants aged between 20 and 26, evenly distributed by gender (three men and three women) and representing diverse academic backgrounds such as marketing, law, economics, and architecture. This heterogeneity enriched the discussion, encouraging a plurality of perspectives and narrative approaches.

Although the sample size and composition represent an inevitable limitation of the qualitative design, this aspect was carefully considered during the planning phase. In

particular, the questions were calibrated to stimulate a variety of viewpoints and to account for the dynamics arising from the degree of acquaintance among participants.

	Gender	Age	Field of study
Partecipant 1	M	26	Master's Degree in Marketing
Partecipant 2	M	24	Master's Degree in Marketing
Partecipant 3	F	24	Master's Degree in Architecture
Partecipant 4	F	23	Master's Degree in Marketing
Partecipant 5	M	22	Bachelor's Degree in Economics
Partecipant 6	F	20	Single-Cycle Master's Degree in Law

***Table 6**. Composition of the Focus Group Sample. Source: Author's elaboration.*

Participants were selected through personal contacts and informal word-of-mouth recruitment. From a relational standpoint, all of them were known to the moderator, and some were university colleagues. Among the group, certain participants had a closer personal relationship, while others did not know each other beforehand, which contributed to balancing spontaneity and critical distance during the discussion.

Their previous experiences with luxury brands and familiarity with the concept of artificial intelligence were heterogeneous, facilitating the expression of diverse viewpoints.

The focus group was conducted online via the Google Meet platform, a choice consistent with the digital habits of the target group and capable of ensuring a safe, comfortable, and distraction-free environment. The session lasted approximately 60 minutes.

Before starting the discussion, the research objectives and the data usage policies were clearly explained. All participants signed informed consent forms for the audio recording of the session and the processing of personal data.

The session was moderated by a single facilitator, the author of this research, who managed the flow of the discussion, ensured that key topics were addressed, and encouraged active participation from all members. Particular attention was given to

managing interactive dynamics, limiting the dominance of more extroverted personalities and stimulating the contribution of more reserved participants (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

In order to ensure both depth and progression in the conversation, the focus group was structured into four main phases, each with a specific cognitive and discursive function.

Table 7 below offers a synthetic overview of the session's design, highlighting the sequence of phases, corresponding activities, and the stimuli used to facilitate discussion.

Phase	Activity	Stimulus
Introduction	Personal presentation, ice-breaking	"Which luxury brand do you feel most connected to, and why?"
Emotional exploration	Analysis of aesthetic impressions	Etro – *Nowhere*, Balenciaga – *Afterworld*
Critical re-evaluation	Reactions to AI disclosure	"Now that you know AI was used, has your opinion changed?"
Ethical reflection	Debate on AI and brand coherence	Prompt on transparency and value coherence

Table 7*. Focus Group Structure and Corresponding Stimuli. Source: Author's elaboration*

The discussion opened with a round of introductions, aimed at creating a climate of trust among participants and fostering a relaxed and non-judgmental communication environment. This initial phase was intended to "break the ice" and help build a sense of group belonging, considered essential to encourage the free expression of opinions (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

After this introductory phase, the discussion moved on to the research topics, starting with an intentionally open and non-directive question: *"Which luxury brand do you feel most connected to, and why?"*. This prompt allowed for the spontaneous emergence of perceptions and value references, encouraging discussion on themes related to brand identity, authenticity, and personal relevance.

Subsequently, visual stimuli were presented, consisting of two advertising campaigns selected for their relevance to the use of artificial intelligence: *Etro – Nowhere*[2] and *Balenciaga – Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow*[1]. At this stage, the use of AI technologies was not disclosed in order to avoid influencing participants' initial

impressions. After viewing the content, the discussion naturally focused on the emotional responses elicited by the images, the aesthetic and narrative coherence of the campaigns, and the perceived authenticity of the brands.

***Figure 26**. Visual from the Etro – Nowhere campaign. Source: Inside Marketing (2024), originally from Etro. Available at: https://www.insidemarketing.it/campagna-etro-nowhere-con-intelligenza-artificiale/.*

***Figure 27**. Frame from the video used as a stimulus during the Focus group. Source: Balenciaga Official YouTube Channel, published on Dec 8th, 2020. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hu_08WchxnU*

Only in a later phase was it revealed that both campaigns had been created with the support of artificial intelligence technologies. This disclosure was accompanied by a reflective question: *"Now that you know AI was used in these campaigns, has your opinion changed? And in what way?"* The introduction of this information allowed the observation of real-time changes in evaluations and emotions, highlighting the existing tensions between fascination with innovation and the need for authenticity and transparency perceived in relation to the brands.

The final phase of the discussion was dedicated to a broader ethical debate, during which participants were invited to express their thoughts on how brands should employ artificial intelligence in creative processes without compromising value coherence and historical identity.

Throughout the session, the atmosphere remained cordial and participative. The moderation successfully balanced the emergence of dominant opinions with the encouragement of contributions from less outspoken participants, ensuring a rich and well-rounded discussion.

Beyond the collection of individual opinions, the focus group also revealed how participants collectively negotiated their understanding of concepts such as innovation, authenticity, and trust. The discussion showed how brand meaning is not passively received but actively reinterpreted through dialogue. This confirms the relevance of focus groups not only as research tools, but also as spaces where perception and symbolic value are shaped in real time.

Beyond the collection of individual opinions, the focus group also revealed how participants collectively negotiated their understanding of concepts such as innovation, authenticity, and trust. The discussion showed how brand meaning is not passively received but actively reinterpreted through dialogue. This confirms the relevance of focus groups not only as research tools, but also as spaces where perception and symbolic value are shaped in real time.

3.6.1 Results' analysis

The analysis of the focus group transcripts was conducted using a thematic approach, based on the identification and subsequent categorization of the main themes that emerged during the discussion, following the method proposed by Krueger and Casey (2000). The transcript was reviewed multiple times to ensure full familiarization with the content and to facilitate the identification of the most recurring conceptual clusters.

During the initial exploration, it clearly emerged that the theme of authenticity represents a central element in Generation Z's perception of luxury brands. Participants expressed particular attention to the coherence between a brand's declared identity and the ways in which it communicates, highlighting a certain skepticism toward communication strategies perceived as overly constructed or distant from an ideal of transparency. In this regard, the use of artificial intelligence was met with ambivalent feelings: on one hand, it was recognized as an innovative tool capable of expanding narrative possibilities; on the other, it raised doubts about the ability of AI-driven campaigns to convey authentic and genuine messages.

During the discussion, the analysis of the two proposed campaigns elicited significantly different reactions. The *Etro – Nowhere*[2] campaign generated an initial sense of aesthetic wonder, prompting positive comments on the visual quality and the refinement of the represented scenarios. However, the technological origin of the visuals was not immediately perceived. Many participants attributed the sophistication of the visual effects to expert use of photo editing tools rather than the direct intervention of artificial intelligence. The high degree of realism and the stylistic familiarity of the proposed models helped maintain the illusion of authenticity, facilitating deeper emotional involvement, particularly among female participants. One of them observed: *"I like Etro because it has a very strong visual identity and has remained recognizable over time. This campaign is exactly the kind of imagery I expect delicate, almost dreamlike; it makes me linger on the details and enter this world myself."*

In contrast, the *Balenciaga – Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow*[1] campaign was immediately recognized as entirely artificial. The strongly digital aesthetic and the marked absence of realistic references generated a sense of detachment, especially among

female participants, who expressed difficulty in emotionally connecting with this type of message. The openly post-human aesthetic was perceived as cold and distant, unable to activate identification processes or emotional resonance. One participant clearly expressed this discomfort: *"It's like watching a video game, and even though there are some references to the garments, they don't seem to be at the centre of the story. I don't understand what it's trying to communicate; everything feels very artificial, and I don't feel involved."*

On the other hand, male participants welcomed this radical artificiality with enthusiasm. The campaign's interactive structure, inspired by video game languages, was interpreted as an innovative and engaging element. This format proved particularly appealing precisely because it was familiar, recalling immersive experiences they are more accustomed to. Some highlighted that they would rarely follow a traditional fashion show with interest, whereas the idea of an interactive digital experience captured their attention and stimulated their curiosity. In this sense, artificial intelligence was not perceived as a limitation but as an effective tool for redefining the luxury experience, making it more accessible and aligned with the cultural codes of new generations.

It is worth noting that participants with an academic background in Marketing demonstrated greater openness toward the use of artificial intelligence in brand communication. This attitude was linked to their familiarity with digital tools and marketing innovation, often cited as integral to their academic training. This openness, however, was not without critical reflection.
One participant stated: "*At university I've taken several courses that dealt with both branding and artificial intelligence, so these aren't new concepts to me, and I'm not surprised to see them used in campaigns. In fact, from what I've seen, in many cases it turned out to be a smart choice. Even in Balenciaga's case, although it may come across as cold, unreal or even a bit unsettling, I think it's something no one had done before, or at least I've never seen it done quite like this. And we're talking about Balenciaga after all, which is a rather unconventional brand. In my opinion, in this specific case, the use of AI actually strengthens the brand's identity*".

Another issue that emerged in relation to authenticity concerns the context in which artificial intelligence is applied. Participants pointed out that the acceptability of AI and the perception of authenticity depend not only on the brand's history and identity but also on the specific sector of reference. In particular, it was observed that the use of AI appears more "justified" in fields such as automotive or product design, where technological innovation falls within the public's cultural expectations.

"Personally, I think it really depends on the sector. In automotive, for example, I expect the use of artificial intelligence, especially in advertising; it would be strange otherwise. In fashion, though, it's different. I understand that it can be used in design, in product development, but when it comes to communication, I expect more transparency. I expect to feel that there's still a person at the centre, the art of fashion and craftsmanship. In short, that a more human component remains in the message, and not just a race to be the most innovative."

This reflection also emerged in reference to the relationship with the brand beyond advertising, particularly in moments of direct contact with the customer. In the digital realm, artificial intelligence is generally perceived as useful, especially for online assistance and content personalization. However, in physical stores, participants strongly reaffirmed the centrality of the human factor.

"*Okay, the chatbot on the website is convenient*," said one participant, "*but if I decide to purchase a luxury item, a handbag for example, I expect a certain kind of experience. If I walk into a boutique, I want to talk to a real person. I want to feel treated differently, because it's still a small personal achievement for someone who manages to afford a luxury item*."

In summary, the emergence of these reflections suggests that, for participants, authenticity is not challenged by technology itself, but by the way it is integrated into different contexts and aligned with the brand's perceived values. While artificial intelligence can contribute to expanding the imaginative universe of luxury, there remains an essential need for experiences that preserve a human, relational, and emotionally engaging dimension, especially in moments of direct brand interaction.

Recurring Themes

Several recurring themes strongly emerged throughout the discussion, clearly outlining the main directions along which perceptions of artificial intelligence applied to luxury brand communication are articulated.

The following diagram visually represents the main themes and sub-themes identified, providing a clear overview of the structure of perceptions emerging from the focus group.

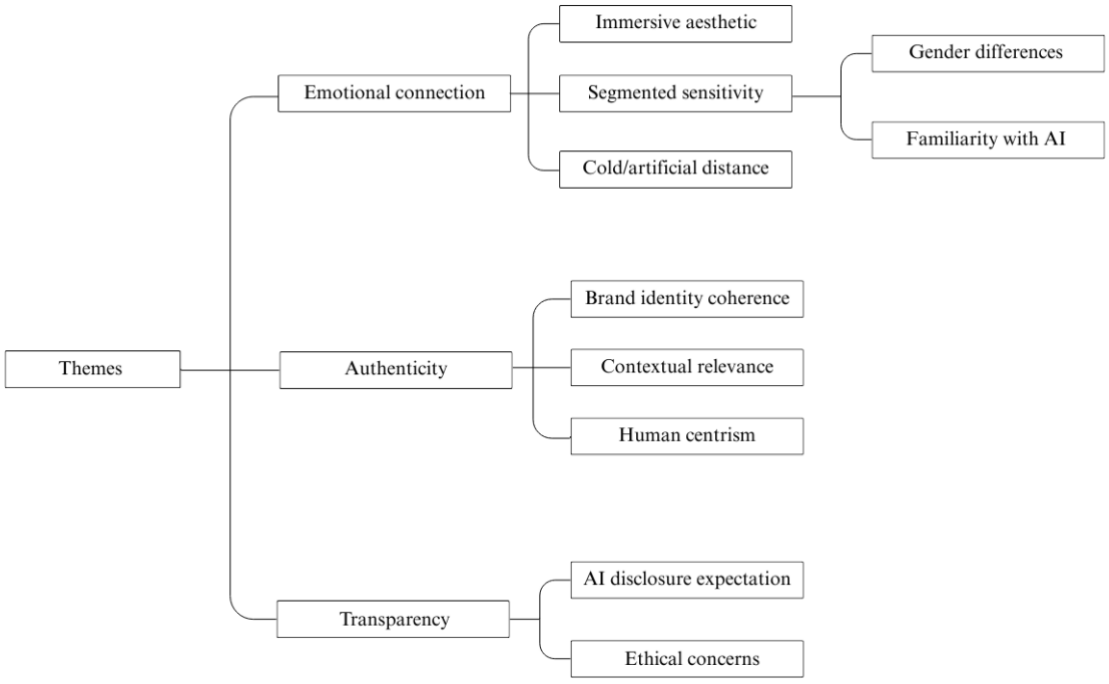


Figure 28. *Hierarchical diagram illustrating the main recurring themes and sub-themes identified from the focus group analysis, representing Generation Z's perceptions of artificial intelligence in luxury brand communication. Source: Author's elaboration.*

The first theme concerns the deep need for emotional connection, understood not merely as an aesthetic reaction to visually captivating content, but as the possibility of recognizing oneself within a narrative capable of reflecting personal values and cultural imaginaries. Aesthetic experience was considered effective only insofar as it conveyed a sense of humanity, warmth, and truth; without these elements, even the most spectacular narrative was perceived as emotionally meaningless.

A second recurring theme was that of authenticity, a concept recalled by participants not so much in relation to the realism of the images or their adherence to reality, but rather to the brand's ability to remain true to itself, without chasing fleeting trends or adopting languages distant from its own identity. According to participants, authenticity manifests when brand communication remains consistent with its history, values, and the stylistic codes built over time.

In the case of the *Etro – Nowhere*[2] campaign, for example, some participants acknowledged that, although they sensed a certain degree of artificiality in the images, the representation of the garments and the proposed atmosphere remained coherent with the dreamlike and refined imaginary that has always characterized the brand. As one participant noted: *"Even though you could tell everything was digitally created, it still felt like Etro's world. That's exactly what I expect from them."*

In this sense, authenticity was linked to the sense of familiarity that a campaign can convey, even when using innovative visual languages or advanced technologies. When stylistic codes clearly refer to the brand's universe, the use of AI is tolerated and even appreciated.

The third theme, closely connected to the previous ones, was that of transparency. While the use of artificial intelligence was generally accepted as a creative innovation, it became problematic whenever participants perceived that brands attempted to hide or obscure the use of such technologies. Transparency was therefore recognized not only as an ethical value but as an essential condition for maintaining a stable and trustworthy relationship with consumers.

This theme became particularly evident when a participant provocatively suggested that, just like sponsored content, campaigns created with the support of artificial intelligence should clearly include a statement such as *"Generated with AI"* within the content itself. As one participant stated: *"I think it should be clearly declared when AI is used. On Instagram, for example, you can add a note stating that AI was used to create the content, and I believe luxury brands should do the same in their campaigns. It's a matter of respect."*

This demand for clarity was not interpreted as an obstacle to creativity or innovation but as a form of communicative honesty, necessary for enabling consumers to consciously evaluate the content presented. In this sense, transparency becomes a new form of authenticity, capable of transforming even the use of advanced technologies into a valuable element, if integrated honestly into the brand's narrative.

3.6.2 Key Insights

The analysis of results highlights several findings of particular theoretical and managerial relevance.

The first insight concerns the need to rethink the centrality of brand storytelling in a context of increasing adoption of AI technologies. Artificial intelligence can enrich aesthetic experiences and expand narrative possibilities, but it cannot replace the relational and emotional components that define the symbolic power of luxury. Brands that intend to adopt AI-supported languages must do so by placing at the canter their ability to generate authentic emotional connections, without reducing communication to a mere technological display. In particular, human-centeredness was identified as essential to the luxury experience, especially in physical retail settings, where participants emphasized the importance of direct, empathetic interaction.

The second insight regards the strategic role of transparency as a competitive lever. Contrary to what might be assumed, Generation Z does not reject technological innovation but demands that it be integrated honestly into brand narratives. Transforming transparency from an ethical obligation into a strategic positioning tool allows brands to strengthen consumer trust and establish themselves as credible pioneers of responsible innovation.

A third key insight concerns the importance of contextual coherence and sectoral legitimacy. Participants consistently evaluated the use of AI not only based on its aesthetic performance, but also on how well it aligned with the specific cultural and symbolic codes of the industry in which it was applied. While AI was perceived as natural and even expected in technologically driven sectors such as automotive or product design, its presence in the fashion industry was met with greater caution, particularly when used in public-facing communication. This sensitivity reflects broader theories on cultural

branding and congruity. As Holt (2004) argues, a brand's symbolic legitimacy depends on its ability to align innovation with audience expectations. Similarly, Kapferer and Bastien (2012) emphasize that luxury brands maintain their authenticity when they balance innovation with historical identity. In this light, AI is most effective when it is contextually justified and symbolically coherent.

Finally, an additional insight suggests the opportunity to adopt a strategic segmentation approach for AI-driven campaigns.

Although the sample size is limited, some gender-based differences emerged in the way male and female participants approached AI-driven communication in luxury branding, suggesting potentially divergent sensibilities worth exploring further.

Consumers identifying as male tended to show greater openness toward artificial and digital aesthetics, responding positively to cultural codes associated with playfulness, interactivity, and immersive, gamified experiences. For these audiences, the use of AI in more experimental and visually disruptive formats appeared not only acceptable but desirable, as it aligned with familiar digital environments.

Although generalizations cannot be made given the limited sample size, in contrast, female participants seemed to demonstrate a more cautious and emotionally grounded approach. Their sensitivity centred on the preservation of warmth, human presence, and narrative coherence. For this segment, authenticity was strongly linked to relational values and the safeguarding of the brand's artisanal identity. As such, the use of AI in communication was perceived as legitimate only when implemented discreetly and embedded within storytelling that remained faithful to the brand's symbolic and historical foundations.

In summary, the integration of artificial intelligence into luxury brand communication cannot overlook the careful consideration of varying consumer needs for authenticity, transparency, and emotional connection. Only through a conscious and targeted management of these factors can AI evolve from a simple technological tool into a true amplifier of the symbolic value of brands.

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSIONS

The fourth chapter has thoroughly outlined the main theoretical, managerial, and prospective implications of the conducted research. Starting from the semiotic analysis of AI-driven campaigns by Balenciaga, Gucci, and Etro, and their empirical validation through focus groups, a profound redefinition of the languages and narrative strategies employed by luxury brands in the era of artificial intelligence has emerged. The results have highlighted three key phenomena: the transformation of the expressive plane, the reconfiguration of the notion of authenticity, and the symbolic ritualization of the experience, which replaces the traditional aura associated with the material object.

On a theoretical level, the research has proposed a reinterpretation of authenticity as a discursive and relational construction, a redefinition of the actantiality of AI as an algorithmic co-enunciator, and a new centrality of the model reader as an experiencer-interpreter. On a managerial level, three relevant applicative contributions have been identified: the proposal of a symbolic segmentation of Gen Z based on interpretative archetypes; the adoption of algorithmic disclosure strategies through devices like the AI-Revealed label; and the design of open narrative ecosystems, capable of restoring the symbolic exclusivity of luxury through interpretative voids.

Finally, three future research paths have been outlined: the investigation of the role of gender in the reception of AI-driven content; the comparative measurement of the communicative impact of algorithmic disclosure; and the study of "semiotic voids" as a strategic lever in constructing exclusive experiences. These trajectories confirm the urgency of interpreting the relationship between luxury, AI, and signification not in terms of substitution, but of a profound reformulation of symbolic codes, communicative contracts, and experiential architectures.

4.1 Results and Discussion

The research path, developed through an integrated, semiotic, and qualitative methodological framework, has allowed for the investigation of the role that visual and verbal languages generated by artificial intelligence are progressively assuming in the communication of luxury brands, particularly in relation to the Generation Z audience.

The results emerging from the analysis of the cases of Balenciaga, Gucci, and Etro, and from the subsequent empirical validation through focus groups, show a significant reconfiguration of both the form and the narrative substance of AI-driven campaigns.

A first finding concerns the way in which artificial intelligence intervenes in redefining the expressive plane. The aesthetics produced by generative models do not merely act on the visual surface but profoundly impact the construction of the brand's imaginary. Balenciaga constructs a post-human and playful universe, where the spectator's experience transforms into a symbolic journey through dystopian environments and digital rituals; Gucci works on the hybridization between heritage and pop imaginaries, relying on a referential stratification that still maintains a clear stylistic recognizability; Etro, finally, uses AI in a more measured way, enhancing the visual identity with coherence concerning the brand's historical positioning. This heterogeneity highlights how the adoption of artificial intelligence does not automatically coincide with rupture but can also act as a lever of continuity, depending on the type of semiotic strategy adopted. It is not just about new aesthetics, but positional aesthetics: each brand activates distinct values, translatable in Floch's lexicon into critical (Gucci), playful (Balenciaga), or practical-affective (Etro) orientations (Floch, 1995).

A second finding concerns the perception of authenticity. While in literature the concept of authenticity is traditionally linked to forms of craftsmanship, uniqueness, and aura (Benjamin 1936; Kapferer 2012), in the context of AI-driven communication, authenticity assumes discursive and relational traits. As strongly emerged from the interactions in the focus group, it is not the use of artificial intelligence that compromises the brand's credibility, but the possible opacity of the process. When the artificial origin is perceived as hidden or undeclared, a form of cognitive suspicion is activated, translating into an authenticity gap: the distance between the declared identity and the perceived one. Conversely, in cases where the generation process is communicated transparently and aimed at coherent objectives (aesthetic innovation, sustainability, personalization), AI is experienced as a distinctive and legitimate element of the brand strategy. This is a fundamental step: Gen Z does not seek "objective truths" but a transparent and credible communicative contract.

Finally, a third finding emerges in the form of emotional involvement. The analyse d campaigns do not build engagement through the human figure or recognizable testimonial but through the elaboration of ritual sequences that mark the narrative path. In the *Afterworld*[1] campaign, the mythical recovery of the hero's journey culminates with the symbolic gesture of the sword; in *Parallel Universes: From Future frequences to Gucci Cosmos: From Future frequences to Gucci Cosmos*[3], the experience becomes transmedia, multiplying the access levels to the brand universe; in *Nowhere*[2], finally, naturalistic isotopies are reactivated, leading the subject through a progressive sensory immersion. These moments are not mere plot elements but true symbolic acts capable of generating suspension, participation, and emotional resonance. In the absence of an aura linked to manual craftsmanship, what gives value to the experience is precisely the ritualization of the interaction, made possible by the combinatory potential of AI.

In this sense, experiential dynamics replace the aura of the unique object, linked, according to Benjamin (1936), to its unrepeatability and the author's trace, with a new form of experiential aura, based on the uniqueness of the path experienced by the subject within an interactive and technologically mediated narrative space.

4.2 Theoretical Implications

This transition can be interpreted as the shift from an “aura of the object” to an “aura of the process,” discursively constructed through the disclosure of AI use, its narrative function, and the value-based connection it conveys. In this context, one can speak of *semi-crafted authenticity*: a type of authenticity no longer based on a pure and uncontaminated origin, but on a shared, transparent, co-created, and culturally legitimized process (Barthes, 1964). In this perspective, authenticity is not diminished by the introduction of AI: it changes in status, becoming the result of a communicative contract symbolically negotiated between brand and recipient.

The second theoretical contribution concerns the actantial role of artificial intelligence within advertising narratives. If structural semiotics has historically attributed defined functional roles to narrative entities (Greimas & Courtés, 1982), AI-driven campaigns show how AI is no longer merely a technological tool, but a genuine social actor in the

story. In many cases, it performs the role of *helper*, supporting the subject in the process of acquiring value (for example, by personalizing the experience or opening immersive spaces), but it can also assume the function of *sender*, that is, the instance that defines the mission itself, the trials to be faced, and the symbolic meaning of the object of value.

This dual function transforms the grammar of brand communication. The brand is no longer configured solely as the unique enunciator, but as part of an algorithmic co-enunciation, in which AI becomes a co-author of the discourse. A new form of narrative delegation thus emerges: the algorithm structures and anticipates interpretative trajectories, determining not only what is said, but also how, and with what degree of variability. In terms of enunciation, one could say that the brand is no longer only "the one who speaks," but also "the one who allows the algorithm to speak" (Volli, 2003).

A further theoretical contribution emerging from this research concerns the way in which AI-driven campaigns reformulate the narrative dimension of branding, articulating it no longer through an explicit discursive linearity, but according to symbolic logics of meaning construction. In particular, *Afterword*[1] by Balenciaga adopts a strongly sequential and ritual structure: the subject (user-avatar) is guided through a diegetic journey that mirrors the canonical model of identity transformation, crossing thresholds, environments, and figurative transitions that culminate in a gesture of symbolic appropriation (the sword). Here, AI does not merely construct the visual environment but is configured as the architect of the narrative path, orchestrating an experiential progression that amounts to a contemporary digital mythology (Greimas & Courtés, 1982).

By contrast, *Nowhere*[2] by Etro operates through a form of implicit narrativity: through highly constructed images, it evokes a contemplative and suspended dimension, in which naturalistic isotopies and ritual postures refer to an interior and symbolic temporality. This is a suggested narration, which is not presented as a sequence or path to follow, but as a semantic field to explore visually.

Parallel Universes: From Future frequences to Gucci Cosmos[3] by Gucci, while maintaining a static and photographic structure, works instead on the fragmentation of reality: each visual frame presents duplicated subjects in surreal and mirrored contexts,

evoking an implicit narrative of multiplicity and plural identities. It is not an explicit narration, but a visual micro-narrative, dense and allusive, which places the subject before a complex iconic system, to be deciphered and interpreted.

What unites these three strategies is the tendency to construct experiential symbolic devices, in which the narrative dimension does not merely "tell something" but enacts an experience of meaning. In this framework, advertising reception shifts from the plane of assertive recognition (brand → message → consumer) to that of interpretative participation, in which the consumer is invited to reconstruct a symbolic order from visual, spatial, and figurative signs. This constitutes a profound transformation of the role of the model reader (Eco, 1979), who today takes on the form of a model experiencer: not just someone who deciphers, but someone who crosses, inhabits, and completes the semiotic experience proposed by the brand.

4.3 Managerial Contributions

The findings that emerged from the research indicate that the integration of artificial intelligence in luxury brand communication cannot be limited to the adoption of new technological tools but requires a profound reformulation of managerial practices capable of interpreting the ongoing semiotic transformation. This is particularly relevant in the relationship with Generation Z, the central audience of this study, whose connection with brands is mediated by strong symbolic awareness, a heightened interpretative attitude, and a demand for transparency in communicative processes (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012).

First, this implies overcoming traditional audience segmentation models, still strongly anchored to sociodemographic variables, in favour of an interpretation based on symbolic profiles. The data collected through the focus group made it possible to identify three recurring symbolic archetypes, each of which embodies a specific modality of reading and attributing meaning to AI-driven content:

a. the *Explorers*, attracted to visual experimentation, interactivity, and contamination with playful and post-human languages;
b. the *Curators*, oriented toward safeguarding the brand's historical identity, but open to its formal and cultural reinterpretation;

c. the *Guardians*, more sensitive to ethical and value-based coherence, and particularly attentive to the transparency of generative processes.

These profiles not only reflect the cultural complexity of Generation Z but also highlight the need for an adaptive narrative strategy, capable of modulating codes, platforms, and tone of voice according to the symbolic posture of the recipient. The valorisation of this semiotic segmentation can become a decisive tool to make communication more relevant, reducing the risk of indifferentiation or interpretative rejection (Floch, 1995).

A second aspect that emerged from the investigation concerns the transparency of the creative process as a lever of trust in AI-driven communication, particularly for Generation Z. As shown by the qualitative data collected, trust is not compromised by the use of artificial intelligence itself, but by the lack of clarity regarding its modalities and purposes. Generation Z does not reject technology: it values it, but demands clear symbolic and functional traceability, consistent with the brand's identity values.

In this scenario, the obligation of transparent labelling of content generated by AI, introduced by Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 on artificial intelligence (AI Act), which will come into effect in 2025, becomes increasingly relevant. In particular, Article 52, paragraphs 1 and 3, requires the visual and discursive labelling of the generative nature of content, especially when aimed at the general public (advertising texts, promotional images, conversational interfaces).

Starting from this regulatory constraint, this thesis proposes the development of a strategic labelling model called AI-Revealed, which does not merely "tag" content as required by law, but re-semantizes it as a reputational device, capable of narrating the ethical, aesthetic, and projectual identity of the brand. The AI-Revealed label, accompanied by a micro-informative page explaining the AI-generated components and their purposes, would thus become a new symbolic threshold of access to the brand universe.

More specifically, the label would clarify whether the AI content serves a creative function (such as generating imagery, narratives, or stylistic variations), a sustainable purpose (for instance, optimizing production processes or reducing environmental

impact), or a curatorial role (selecting, organizing, or adapting content in line with the brand's editorial strategy). In this way, the label does not only fulfil a transparency requirement but becomes a discursive act through which the brand reclaims control over the narrative surrounding its use of AI technologies.

The third managerial contribution revolves around the idea that luxury, in order to maintain its distinctive force in the digital space, must abandon the notion of experience as a finished content and move towards the construction of open symbolic universes. The semiotic analysis of the case *Afterworld – The Age of Tomorrow*[1] demonstrates how interactive environments structured by thresholds and stages can evoke a mythical journey, not imposed but navigable, in which the user is called to complete meaning through personal interpretative participation. In this perspective, the brand does not merely communicate values, but designs liminal spaces (aesthetic zones, value-objects, symbolic choices) that function as ritual frameworks (Turner, 1969), offering the user a possibility of subjective transformation.

The proposed experience is neither closed nor fully determined by the brand: it is instead structured to leave semiotic spaces open, liminal zones in which the user is invited to complete the sense. It is precisely in these spaces that a new form of exclusivity is produced: not based on inaccessibility, but on the singularity of the experience lived and interpreted.

This approach, which can be defined as mythopoietic, transforms interaction with the brand into a path of personal signification, in which the consumer acts as an active subject, capable of generating meaning through their own imagination, values, and culture. This restores a distinctive dynamic typical of luxury, based not on material possession, but on interpretative privilege. The experience becomes unique because no one else will live or understand it in the same way.

In this sense, open narrative design is configured as a managerial strategy that allows for the transfer of the logic of exclusivity from the material to the symbolic plane, maintaining and renewing the capacity of luxury to offer experiences that stand out for their intensity, depth, and meaning.

4.4 Limitations and Future Research Perspectives

Despite its articulation, the present research presents some limitations. The first concerns the reduced scope of the corpus and the geographical localization of the focus group, elements that limit the generalizability of the results. As a qualitative investigation with an exploratory vocation, the data collected should be interpreted as a generative basis for future research hypotheses, to be verified through comparative studies on a broader and culturally diversified scale.

From these limitations, three possible future research perspectives emerge, directly connected to the critical issues raised during the work but not yet systematically explored.

Firstly, the observation of differentiated reactions among the focus group participants suggests the need to systematically question the effect of gender on the reception of AI-driven content in the luxury sector. The evidence collected shows, in particular, a tendency among female participants to value content in which the brand's identity remains stable, recognizable, and consistent with its symbolic heritage, while male participants expressed greater enthusiasm for more marked visual experimentation, often based on playful, glitch aesthetics and dystopian environments, as in the case of *Afterworld*[1].

This preliminary differentiation requires systematic verification through larger-scale comparative studies, to understand whether and to what extent gender variables influence the perception of authenticity, value coherence, emotional engagement, and the propensity for interaction within brand experiences mediated by artificial intelligence. Although the literature in consumer behaviour has already shown that men and women may process symbolic stimuli according to different cognitive and affective strategies (Meyers-Levy & Loken, 2015), a systematic application of these models to the specific context of AI-driven luxury communication is still lacking.

Future research, either experimental or comparative-qualitative in nature, could therefore help to fill this gap, analysing how gender influences the reception of algorithmic brand narratives in relation to elements such as degree of user control, opacity of generative origin, symbolic depth, or visual stylization. In this way, luxury brands would receive

valuable guidance for developing AI-powered narrative strategies that are more sensitive to the perceptive differences of their audience, and for modulating the experience of exclusivity more effectively in a personalized and culturally situated manner.

A second line of inquiry concerns the impact of the "AI-Revealed" disclosure proposed in this thesis: in light of the transparency requirement established by Regulation (EU) 2024/1689, which mandates clear identification of content generated or co-generated by artificial intelligence systems, it is necessary to measure how explicit disclosure of algorithmic intervention affects perceived brand trust, especially among Generation Z. This generation, as emerged from the qualitative data collected, does not reject the presence of AI, but demands that its use be declared, motivated, and consistent with the brand's identity values.

Future research, conducted experimentally, could compare three distinct communication formats: content labelled with AI-Revealed (accompanied by contextual explanation), content with a neutral label (without specification of algorithmic intervention), and content without any disclosure. The goal would be to assess the differential effect of each format on variables such as trust, perceived authenticity, transparency, and symbolic coherence. Additionally, the study could examine any divergent reactions among the three symbolic archetypes identified in the focus group (Explorers, Curators, Guardians) to understand whether disclosure generates different effects depending on the recipient's interpretive posture.

Such an investigation would not only test the strategic validity of the proposed label but also offer brands an operational tool for transforming a regulatory constraint into a reputational resource, aligned with the cultural and value expectations of the new digital luxury audience.

A third line of research could explore the role of semiotic voids as new keys to activating the exclusivity of luxury in the digital environment. The analysis conducted on the case *Afterworld – The Age of Tomorrow*[1] showed how the absence of explicit narrative indications, the indeterminacy of paths, and the symbolic rarefaction of certain elements (non-agentive helpers, silent objects, suspended environments) do not represent a communicative limitation, but a deliberate choice aimed at stimulating the audience's

active interpretation. A similar effect emerges in the Gucci *Parallel*[3] campaign, where the absence of testimonials and texts produces an open semantic field that invites subjective projection, transforming silence into interpretive privilege.

Future research, either comparative or experimental, could analyse different levels of planned voids in luxury communication campaigns, assessing how these contribute to generating engagement, emotional depth, and perception of uniqueness. The study could compare narrative experiences based on content generated or co-curated by artificial intelligence, such as *Afterworld*[1] or *Gucci Parallel Universes*[3], with campaigns that do not integrate generative systems and instead adopt more traditional and declarative compositional logics. The goal would be to understand whether symbolic indeterminacy, when supported by coherent direction, can constitute a competitive advantage in building exclusivity.

In this sense, the reference to the theory of interpretive cooperation (Eco, 1979) allows us to read empty spaces not as absences but as invitations to interpretation: meaning is not given but must be constructed by the recipient, who, in the context of luxury, is often valued precisely for their ability to read, decipher, and appropriate the message. Similarly, the concept of liminality (Turner, 1969) helps interpret these voids as zones of symbolic suspension, where the consumer's identity is not defined but undergoing transformation: the experience does not assign a role but asks them to build it.

In this way, it would be possible to empirically validate the hypothesis only outlined in this thesis that semiotic voids, far from being a communicative limitation, represent a strategic asset for transferring luxury exclusivity from the material to the symbolic plane, enabling unique, situated, and culturally dense experiences.

Conclusions

This research set out to explore the transformations underway in contemporary luxury communication, analysing how the integration of artificial intelligence into the processes of visual and verbal content generation reshapes the conditions under which meaning is produced, particularly in relation to the perception of authenticity and the construction of emotional engagement among Generation Z consumers. This objective was pursued through a dual methodological approach: a semiotic analysis of three campaigns—*Afterworld*[1] (Balenciaga), *Nowhere*[2] (Etro), and *Parallel Universes: From Future frequences to Gucci Cosmo* [3](Gucci)—and a qualitative verification through focus group sessions.

What emerges clearly is not a rupture from tradition, but a redefinition of the criteria through which content is perceived as authentic and emotionally resonant. The use of AI, to be effective, cannot be reduced to a purely technological display but must be embedded within discursive logics capable of generating meaning for the recipient. In this framework, the visual and verbal codes employed by brands are not evaluated based on their origin, but rather on their coherence, narrative density, and ability to generate recognition.

The notion of authenticity, central to Generation Z consumers, is no longer anchored in a supposed "truth" of origin, but appears instead as a discursive effect constructed within a coherent, culturally situated, and interpretatively open communicative framework (Floch, 1995; Barthes, 1964). As emerged from the focus group, the audience under analysis does not reject the use of artificial intelligence per se, but assesses the perceived authenticity based on the transparency, symbolic relevance, and emotional resonance of the content.

The qualitative data confirm that the way Gen Z engages with luxury content is driven by a search for consistency between aesthetic imagination, declared values, and modes of interaction. Texts employing generative language succeed in triggering interpretative participation only when they construct a credible and narratively structured horizon of meaning. From this perspective, the effectiveness of communication does not depend on the innovative nature of the technology used, but on the brand's ability to integrate it into a symbolic proposal that is legible, structured, and culturally meaningful (Peverini, 2010).

In the context of luxury, this entails a crucial shift: it is no longer sufficient to activate a distinctive aesthetic grammar or replicate established visual codes. The brand is now required to build discursive environments in which the use of artificial intelligence is not perceived as an exercise in style or a demonstration of technical prowess, but rather as an enunciative act driven by intention and vision. Brands that adopt AI without reflecting on its semiotic implications risk producing formally sophisticated content that is symbolically hollow.

Conversely, when generative automation is fully integrated into a communication strategy grounded in value coherence and cultural depth, it can contribute to reconfiguring the very meaning of the luxury experience. The campaigns analyse d show that value is no longer defined solely through access to a rare object, but through the activation of a narrative device capable of positioning the consumer within a meaningful horizon. In this sense, AI does not negate the rituality of luxury but redraws its coordinates, producing new forms of exclusivity based on personalisation, interaction, and symbolic identification (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012).

The theoretical contribution of this research lies in its treatment of brand texts as complex semiotic devices, irreducible to mere functional tools. By including the perspective of Generation Z, not merely as a demographic segment but as a culturally situated and interpretatively active model, the study reveals a shift in paradigm: authenticity is no longer an ontological guarantee, but a discursive performance; value is not transmitted, but constructed; relevance is not measured by visibility, but by the capacity of the text to generate recognition.

These insights not only have theoretical significance but also suggest concrete implications for brand management within the luxury sector. Designing content for a semiotically competent audience today means moving beyond the logic of spectacle and quantitative engagement. It requires the creation of communicative environments in which artificial intelligence is not only a tool of production efficiency but a symbolic lever capable of reinforcing narrative coherence, consolidating brand positioning, and activating an experience perceived as authentic. For branding and communication professionals, this implies a renewed design awareness: the adoption of new technologies

must be accompanied by an acute sensitivity to semiotic codes, cultural expectations, and the strategic articulation of aesthetic and symbolic intent.

Ultimately, luxury brands seeking to maintain relevance with Generation Z can no longer rely solely on their heritage or formal innovation. They are called upon to redefine their symbolic authority within a system where authenticity, desirability, and engagement are no longer pre-given attributes, but effects produced through discourse, intentionally crafted and relationally constructed.

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