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Branding and AI: the creative challenge between reality and hyperreality

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INTRODUCTION

In the past few years, Artificial Intelligence has gained popularity in a vast variety of sectors, revolutionising the way brands engage and communicate with customers. Marketing and communication have been profoundly touched by these innovations, ultimately having to rapidly learn new techniques to keep up with the industry's emerging trends.

On the other hand, however, consumers find themselves dealing with a sense of scepticism as well as a sense of confusion deriving from the usage of AI in advertising, raising for this reason not few questions regarding its role into modern society.
While many authors deeply analysed the different kinds of artificial intelligence available on the market and their potential application to perform and optimize certain tasks, the present literature falls short in understanding how the usage of AI in the advertising field affects consumers' perception of the brand whose image is being shaped and then communicated through AI.

With AI gaining a pivotal role in modern advertising, marketing finds itself embracing new frontiers, finally landing in a new approach, namely *hyperreal marketing*, which stems from Baudrillard's *hyperreality* theory.

The present study is articulated in four chapters. In Chapter 1, AI is explained from its beginnings, differentiating among the different kinds of algorithms available and highlighting its core functions, discerning the advantages in creativity, from the controversies of employing such technologies.
The Theoretical Framework is further illustrated in the second chapter. In this place, the *hyperreality* theory is explained providing several tangible examples, both emerging from literature and from personal elaboration. The analysis is carried out highlighting AI's role in the creation of new realms as well as its contribution in fostering a sense of confusion among those who undergo its creations.
The last paragraph of Chapter 2 introduces the Research Question (Does AI-driven advertising foster perceptions of authenticity and relatability among consumers, or does it instead exacerbate the confusion and instability characteristic of hyperreality?), opening a new frontier of investigation that will be carried on in the third chapter.

Through the application of a mixed-method approach, Chapter 3 aims to outline the BMW Brandscape with a particular focus on the *Make it Real* campaign from 2023. The research

methodology involves the combination of both semiotics and marketing research methodologies, to deep dive into the present case study. So, on one hand, the semiotic analysis was carried out through the involvement of the Brandscape formulated by Laura Oswald, providing a valid overview of BMW's heritage and its competitors. On the other hand, for completeness of the research, qualitative Sentiment and Content analysis were performed by collecting, coding and interpreting comments deriving from the official Make it Real campaign and two posts on Instagram.

Chapter 4 displays final results, limitations and implications coming from the analysis performed. Moreover, this last chapter gives hints for the development of future research given the constraints of the present study.

CHAPTER 1 – The rise of AI

In the last 30 years creativity has been challenged by several innovations, which resulted in a deep evolution, given by the unavoidable integration into people's daily lives of more sophisticated technologies. Artificial Intelligence (AI) plays a crucial role in this deep evolution, representing a fundamental tool, previously confined solely to science fiction, that has rapidly been transposed in reality. Therefore, AI is more and more redefining how industries, creatives and societies behave.
The present chapter aims at elucidating the role of Artificial Intelligence in the current culture, highlighting its contributions, as well as controversies and tensions, specifically regarding its application in the creative advertising field.

1.1 The phenomenon: definition of AI

Starting from the generic definition of Artificial Intelligence (AI), defined as "The ability of a machine to perform cognitive functions that we associate with human minds, such as perceiving, reasoning, learning, interacting with the environment, problem solving, decision-making, and even demonstrating creativity" (Brendel, A. B., et al. 2021, p.1), it stands to reason that AI is becoming more and more prominent in everyday life, making its way into numerous application fields, especially the creative advertising one (Aichouche A., 2024).

While some authors refer to AI as "the human intelligence present in the form of machines" (Shahid, M. Z., & Li, G., 2019, p. 27), qualifying the tool as a machine capable to think analytically and to perform several tasks with high efficiency, consistency and convenience compared to human intelligence (Pannu, A., 2015), its growing presence across a wide range of professionals' sectors has sparked numerous controversies questioning the actual role of this tool and its intended purpose within these professional contexts (Arbaiza, F. et al., 2024). Employing AI raises significant socio-political concerns, especially in the advertising field (Arbaiza, F. et al., 2024): its involvement could possibly lead to intrusive and manipulative practices, making it fundamental for creative agencies to formulate users' policy and regulations as to protect their customers and maintain public trust (Arbaiza, F. et al., 2024).

On the other hand, many authors highlight how the growing presence of AI in many functions, spacing from inventory to advertising (de Mattos, C. A. et al, 2024), represents a significant advantage for companies over their own competitors. This competitive advantage, which is

mainly due to AI's ability to deviate from human mind natural mistakes in the decision-making process (Toorajipour, R. et al, 2021), has brought many companies to move away from classical management systems towards automatized AI-based systems to enhance their internal functions (Toorajipour, R. et al, 2021). Arbaiza et al discuss how the introduction of Artificial Intelligence in companies' assets doesn't merely imply the insertion of a new technology, but rather it implies that companies must shift their culture towards an *algorithmic culture* (Arbaiza, F. et al., 2024; Striphas, T., 2015), a concept that will be later discussed.

In conclusion, while Artificial Intelligence is fully qualified to transform the advertising industry, being embraced by creatives with excitement and interest, its correct employment in every field comes as the outcome of a right balance between automated systems and ethics as well as its adjustment according to the relative modifications of regulations and policies (Arbaiza, F. et al., 2024).

1.1.1 AI classification

Defining Artificial Intelligence as the capability of employing, organizing and spoiling AI-specific resources as to create value (Mikalef, P. et al, 2023), it is fundamental to distinguish, according to different parameters, the several types of Artificial Intelligence theorized.

Artificial intelligence encompasses two different types of intelligence: Machine Learning and Deep Learning (Janiesch, C., et al, 2021). Machine Learning, includes the ability of machines to develop a comprehensive knowledge, relying on algorithms to solve task-related problems (Rahman, J., 2024). By relying on extensive dataset, this intelligence can uncover patterns in consumer behaviour, understanding the target and foreseeing potential future moves (Rahman, J., 2024). ML is often used in creativity due to its ability to learn from experience and develop works from it such as music or artworks (Bonadio, E., McDonagh, L. 2020).

On the other hand, Deep Learning is a type of intelligence based on artificial neural networks (Janiesch, C., et al, 2021) aimed at identifying subtle patterns in datasets. Deep Learning is strongly used in marketing efforts focused on generating advertisements and personalizing the creative content on customers' preferences (Rahman, J., 2024). Broadly speaking, there are two kinds of AI: Deductive AI, which generally analyse data to deduce patterns and drive conclusions, and Generative AI which learns from already existing data and generates new contents (Arora, A., et al, 2023).

AI can be further classified according to different parameters, to put at ease the process two classifications are briefly expressed subsequently.

The first approach considers AI and AI-enabled machines and classifies them according to their functionalities. Four kinds of Artificial Intelligence can be identified which respond and solve different problems (Hassani, H. et al, 2020).

- *Reactive machines* this kind of AI are strictly based on the immediate-response principle: decisions are taken in the moment and are task-related. Being one of the emblematic examples the IBM Deep Blue, this AI technology is characterized by a total lack of interaction and emotions, as well as no consciousness and a tendency to be easily tricked (Hassani, H. et al, 2020).

- *Limited memory machines* even though this category encompasses all the features belonging to reactive machines, as mentioned above, limited memory machines are also capable to store historical data as to simplify a subsequent decision-making process. Examples of this kind of technology are modern chatbots (Hassani, H. et al, 2020).

- *Theory of mind* this category presents itself as theory aimed at creating meaningful interactions, developing a better knowledge of the individuals AI interacts with, and giving the full picture of their needs and beliefs. According to cognitive psychology, this theory refers to the human ability to understand others' mental states (Cuzzolin, F. et al, 2020). Being theory of mind a "work in progress" (Hassani, H. et al, 2020), many authors theorize its application, with respect to Artificial Intelligence, in empathetic healthcare to co-operate with individuals dealing with neurological diseases or psychiatric disorders (Cuzzolin, F. et al, 2020).

- *Self-aware AI* this category implies that Artificial Intelligence has previously developed such a level of sense of self that it's able to manage complex reasoning and to adjust its behaviour according to its intentions. Even though this AI still exists at the hypothetical level (Hassani, H. et al, 2020), steps forward are being taken as to enable Artificial Intelligence to develop awareness of the self as human beings (Gonzalez-Jimenez, H., 2018).

The second approach is technology-oriented, and it classifies AI in two subcategories according to their abilities (Hassani, H. et al, 2020):

- *Strong AI*, also known as *"artificial general intelligence"*, strictly refers to the fictitious kind of intelligence whose performance is related to a wide range of different domains without being specialized in a particular intellectual function; strong AI goes indeed beyond the human capability to process information, often duplicating the human mind (Bory, P. et al, 2024). For this reason, some authors theorise that technologies provided with *strong AI* undergo the same process of mental growth as humans do: in the very beginning they show a childish attitude, then, due to the learning process, they turn into their more mature version, which is able to absorb the outside world, translating it in its own language (Rezk, S. M. M. 2023).

- *Weak AI*, otherwise known as *"artificial narrow intelligence"*, operates tangibly in certain selected areas of interest relying on domain-specific algorithms (Bory, P. et al, 2024), this kind of AI is also referred to as goal oriented. Having defined this type of AI as narrow doesn't imply however practical limitations to the importance of this tool, being weak AI concretely influential and present in human lives: it is enough to think about voice assistants such as Siri and Alexa (Bory, P. et al, 2024). Although digital assistants have an important role in everyday lives, they fully represent the narrowness of the concept itself: when asking for instance how to deal with a personal issue, AI is never able to give a specific solution, always relaying on generic answers redirecting users to other papers or links (Babu, M. V. S., & Banana, K. R. I. S. H. N. A., 2024). On the other hand, when asking generic questions, how it's the weather like for example, Siri or Alexa are more likely to give exhaustive answers with concrete data. This happens because giving answer to this kind of questions is part of the typology of intelligence AI is designed for (Babu, M. V. S., & Banana, K. R. I. S. H. N. A., 2024).

Given these distinctions regarding AI and its different functionalities as well as its future developments, it is unavoidable to consider the actual and potential impact that these technologies might have on companies (Gonzalez-Jimenez, H., 2018).

As stated above, AI could have a central role in many fields, the healthcare one for instance, in assisting Alzheimer's patients or people dealing with other kinds of dementia (Mehrholz, J. et al, 2012). However, in the past few years we've progressively assisted to a major involvement of AI in marketing efforts: many companies had indeed employed AI tools in their assets in order to improve and innovate their outdated marketing methods (Shahid M. Z., & Li, G. 2019).

Moreover, it emerged that the success of many companies, such as Apple or Coca-Cola, is also due to the involvement of artificial intelligence in their creative efforts (Abdou, A., 2024), in addition, a data analysis performed through AI could give valuable insights to those companies who are managing to create a successful marketing campaign (Shahid M. Z., & Li, G. 2019).

Finally, the rise of Artificial Intelligence is in fact fundamental when talking about creativity and advertisement, due to its ability to generate engaging content which could simplify reaching certain marketing goals in a way traditional methodologies may struggle to (Abdou, A., 2024). However, it is fundamental to acknowledge that the effectiveness of AI-driven creations is not always unequivocal, since reactions of those who undergo such content are strongly influenced by the disclosure of AI (Chen, H., Wang, P., & Hao, S., 2025).

Previous research has brought to light both positive and negative effects of AI disclosure depending on the context or on the kind of task to be performed (Chen, H., Wang, P., & Hao, S., 2025). For instance, in the healthcare system, patients have showcased diminished trust when AI's involvement was disclosed to them (Chen, H., Wang, P., & Hao, S., 2025). On the other hand, in different situations, such as interacting with chatbots, AI disclosure increased credibility, generating positive attitudes (Chen, H., Wang, P., & Hao, S., 2025).

These results suggest that implications of AI in advertising must be considered evaluating disclosure strategies when communicating its involvement, so that brands' credibility and trust are not threatened (Kučinskas G., Survilaite G., 2025).

1.2 The role of creativity in an algorithmic culture

In the last 30 years we have assisted to a slight shift in culture, algorithms have progressively flown in everyday lives, making their way into all social dynamics (Seyfert, R., & Roberge, J. 2016), and human related tasks have progressively been delegated to computing systems, going more and more towards an *algorithmic culture* (Striphas, T., 2015).
Being creativity conceived as a social construct (Jennings, K. E. 2010), several are the meanings that have been attached to it: in the past it had been combined with the idea of intelligence, however, the two outcomes derive from very different processes, since creativity stems from divergent thinking while intelligence descends from convergent thinking (Nake, F. 2009). Moreover, creativity itself depends on the concepts of surprise and unpredictability, emerging as a deep and continuous exchange between humans and the environment

surrounding them (Nake, F. 2009). Thus, creativity can be computed in relation to *what* it produced and *how* it was produced (Jennings, K. E. 2010).

Creativity can spark both naturally as an inspiration or as the outcome of hard work, which has typically an algorithmic nature, since it implies the evaluation of different combinations as to pick the decisive one (JACOB, B. L., 1996). Hard work had been largely replicated in different field of action, the music one for instance, talking for this reason of *algorithmic composition*, a shortcut to engage with when ideas run dry and to speed up the creative process (JACOB, B. L., 1996). A practical approach to *algorithmic composition* encompasses the following steps:

1. Determine the number of primary themes (or motives)
2. Put together phrases by combining the motives one by one and, at the same time, judge and possibly modify the composition of the phrases.
3. Create new motives by randomly selecting from the primary themes in the phrase, modifying them.
4. After obtaining a certain large number of phrases these are joined in a bigger framework (JACOB, B. L., 1996).

An interesting position regarding the analysis of the spectator's role in creativity was given by Marcel Duchamp: the author asserted that while the creation of a content is given by the artist, it is thanks to the perspective and acceptance of society that the work itself can be considered as work of art (Nake, F., 2009). This consideration gives a meaningful insight in relation to the concept of creativity suggesting the co-participation of multiple actors in the creative process (Nake, F., 2009).

Artificial intelligence is a valid helper when dealing with the production of creative content: it is indeed able to accurately, logically and independently craft unique content which is sometimes unpredictable also to those who gave the inputs (Bonadio, E., & McDonagh, L. 2020). Therefore, it becomes central to introduce the concept of *creative autonomy*, hence, the ability of a system to produce creative content autonomously (Jennings, K. E. 2010). A system is meant to be defined as creatively autonomous when it presents the following three criteria:

- *Autonomous Evaluation* the system is able to judge its own work without conditioning from the outside;

- *Autonomous Change* the system is able to change its standards accordingly without being given any input;
- *Non-randomness* the former two criteria happen non-randomly (Jennings, K. E. 2010).

Nevertheless, even though Artificial Intelligence is fully applied in the content creation field, it stands to reason that human creativity, experience and sensitivity remain central (Ameen N, 2022). In addition to this, relying on AI in content creation could jeopardize its originality; however, Arbaiza et al discuss that even though automated tools are valid when dealing with large data, in the end it is human creativity that gives originality to the work (Arbaiza, F. et al., 2024). A practical example is given by Weingarten et al (2020) regarding logo production: the authors highlight the importance of the human creative touch in logo design in juxtaposition with digital technologies, which appeared to be less expressive and differentiated than the human generated ones.

Furthermore, being creativity a vital aspect proper of human beings, the issue flows naturally about the exploitation of AI technologies (DiBlasi, J., et al, 2020), as well as the challenge for programmers to communicate the actual role of AI in creativity, which diverges from being the *longa manus* of practitioners' expression: according to Jennings, AI systems should be able to develop such a level of autonomy to be easily defined as the agent, hence, the only responsible for the production of the creative content (Jennings, K. E. 2010).

Therefore, the role of creativity in an algorithmic culture is strongly discussed being one of its main issues revolving around the attribution of the creative content to its author (Bonadio, E., & McDonagh, L. 2020): programmers' main objective nowadays is in fact to try and convince sceptical users that generative systems have such a level of *creative autonomy* to be considered authors of their outputs (Bonadio, E., & McDonagh, L. 2020). On the other hand, Jacob discusses this issue specifically regarding music composition: he argues whether a musician that uses algorithmic composition tools is still to be considered a composer or if he is simply recognising the music produced (JACOB, B. L., 1996).
In conclusion, many authors further discuss that even though automated systems can deliver accurate content, effortlessly and efficiently, it still cannot exceed human sensitivity and experience (Rahman, J., 2024; Pannu, A., 2015; Ameen N, 2022).

1.3 AI and bias

Another important aspect to be analysed within the AI discipline is the presence of biases and discrimination. Defined by Ntoutsi et al as "the inclination or prejudice of a decision made by an AI system which is for or against one person or group, especially in a way considered to be unfair" (Ntoutsi, E., et al, 2020, p.3), the discrimination concept refers to the undeserved and unnecessary treatment of certain groups of individuals due to some intrinsic biases of AI-systems, which is partially possible due to the kind of data the system was trained on (Saeidnia, H. R., 2023). To be more precise, this intrinsic inequality comes from the natural propensity within societies to develop institutional biases, that is when certain communities are being disadvantaged related to others (Ntoutsi, E., et al, 2020). Therefore, AI algorithms replicate and encourage certain societal biases, proper of those who programmed them, resulting in discriminatory outcomes at the expense of the disadvantaged groups (Ntoutsi, E., et al, 2020; Saeidnia, H. R., 2023). Some of these outcomes imply in face identification the lack of recognition of non-white faces, as it happened in 2015 to some African American Google users who were identified by the algorithm as gorillas, or for instance, the association of women's role with housemakers, suggesting racism as well as sexism in their biases (Garcia, M. 2016; Tian, J., Xie, H., Hu, S., & Liu, J., 2021).
Precisely, three main groups of biases can be identified:

- *Pre-existing bias,* which is mainly related to already existing biases that are deeply rooted in society and people's minds.
- *Technical bias,* it emerges as the outcome of computer's limitations which eventually evolve into biases that where not present in the training data but were developed by the algorithm itself.
- *Emerging bias,* it generally stems from the incapacity of a system of being representative of the population or recipients it was shaped for, after its deployment (Richardson, B., & Gilbert, J. E. 2021).

A study conducted by Cheong, M. et al revealed how Gen-AI tools are entrenched with racial and sexist biases, so, when elicited with race and gender-neutral inputs these are more likely to give back racialized and genderized outputs, which often result in a direct match between women or minority groups with humble works, and between white men with high work positions (Cheong, M., et al, 2024).
Regarding the application of AI in creativity, it stands to reason that, being creativity itself a

product of the society it is developed into, some typical biases could characterise it (Flick, C., Worrall, K. 2022). The sources of these biases are multiple: they might flow from the data, which is entrenched with institutional biases or, still, the raw dataset results biased as it happens with art, lastly, some bias could emerge in the design stage of the creative AI systems (Flick, C., Worrall, K. 2022). For these reasons, when asking creative AI systems to generate a Renaissance-style artwork, it is likely to generate visuals featuring white people, due to the historical bias the raw data is entrenched with (Flick, C., Worrall, K. 2022). John-Mathews et al stress the injustice deriving from such biases and the concern about their enhancement through algorithms, naming the phenomenon itself "*unfairness in Machine Learning*", whose concern is tangible and realist, being deeply rooted in the modern society which has been shaped on institutional biases (John-Mathews, J. M., Cardon, D., & Balagué, C. 2022). Moreover, while the presence of bias in certain AI application fields, such as the creative one, might not be critical, it can still have a huge impact on societies due to the undeniable exclusion of some categories (Flick, C., Worrall, K. 2022).

Starting from Ntoutsi et al definition of biases, it emerges that they arise from the unfair treatment of one or more people (Ntoutsi, E., et al, 2020), for this reason, programmers are more and more feeling the urgency of correcting this unfairness (John-Mathews, J. M., Cardon, D., & Balagué, C. 2022). However, being debiasing a brand-new field, it is still quite limited to the kind of data taken in exam so, while removing gender stereotypes comes easy to those who are correcting texts, from an historical perspective it remains unchangeable the fact that during Renaissance artworks represented mostly white people (Flick, C., Worrall, K. 2022). At this point, there is an emerging school of thought that prioritizes openness and transparency of these AI systems, however, while trying to understand the way these algorithms work helps to identify possible biases in the data, it doesn't help with the correction of these, also because some biases could be surprisingly desired by the programmer, who has the responsibility to make recipients of the content explicitly aware of the presence of biases which are to be considered part of the work (Flick, C., Worrall, K. 2022).

To overcome algorithmic biases, Machine Learning researches are proposing alternatives to contain these biases' effects and mitigate the discrimination issue in AI, creating a community named Fair ML (John-Mathews, J. M., Cardon, D., & Balagué, C. 2022). Fair Machine Learning is aimed at developing fairness-aware algorithms useful for mitigating inequalities, through the presence of "fairness metrics", measures aimed at computing fairness levels in algorithms (John-Mathews, J. M., Cardon, D., & Balagué, C. 2022). An example of Fair ML

intervention is in the recruitment process: it limits race discrimination by introducing equalized odds to the algorithm which present the same level of positiveness between protected and unprotected groups (John-Mathews, J. M., Cardon, D., & Balagué, C. 2022).

Finally, it emerges that the mere addition of different kind of data to the system appears to be insufficient to readdress the issue (Flick, C., Worrall, K. 2022), also, simply correcting the algorithm is not enough due to the nature of the biases which represent the society they are rooted into (John-Mathews, J. M., Cardon, D., & Balagué, C. 2022). From Fair ML perspective, relying on demographic categories, as it happens in fairness metrics, could lead to an oversimplification of the society, as they fail to represent the context, as well as to an increase of intra-category discrepancies, due the inequalities among people belonging to a similar socio-cultural category (John-Mathews, J. M., Cardon, D., & Balagué, C. 2022).

In conclusion, the presence of biases and discrimination in Artificial Intelligence has been in the sight of many researchers operating in different fields, and the current ongoing debate emphasizes the potential and risks of these biases on societies, highlighting how simply correcting the training data is not enough to overcome the whole issue (Ntoutsi, E., et al, 2020).

1.4 The application of AI in the advertising field

Over the past few years we have progressively assisted to a major introduction of Artificial Intelligence in advertising (Ford, J., 2023): the usage of AI tools has indeed brought advertising to a whole new level, upgrading all those – now considered – obsolete marketing methods (Shahid M. Z., & Li, G. 2019), representing a paradigmatic change of direction towards modern marketing strategies (Lim, C. V., 2024).

AI's involvement in advertising implies the opportunity to perform a wide range of activities that space from the generation of ads and creation of copy to the optimization of budgets that comes with the possibility to directly monitor advertising campaigns' performance (Kaput M., 2022). Many participants in Arbaiza's et al research highlighted how their initial expectations about AI's involvement in advertising was mostly related to the implementation of already existing processes such as storytelling (Arbaiza, F. et al., 2024). On the other hand, using Artificial Intelligence in creative processes enables professionals to reinvent their role giving space to new forms of storytelling and enhancing already existing activities (Arbaiza, F. et al., 2024).

About advertising copywriting, Lexus was the very first company, in 2018, to have fully-AI-generated commercial whose script was written by IBM's Watson AI system. The commercial, which was after honoured with Cannes Lions prize, represents the outcome of a 15 years' worth research regarding luxury automobile field simplified by the AI involvement (Rezk, S. M. M. 2023). According to IBM's engineers, the Watson technology was able to identify elements present in the advertisement that had been defined as "both emotionally intelligent and entertaining" (Rezk, S. M. M. 2023).

Along with these activities, AI has given advertisement the chance to simplify the idea-generation process (Arbaiza, F., 2024) and to become more specialized as well as personalized and specific to its recipients (Ford, J., 2023).
Moreover, Smith and Yang (2004) interestingly applied the Creative Process Theory at the advertising generation process, providing a valid framework useful to understand how ideas are conceived and then developed in advertising (Arbaiza, F. et al., 2024). The theory encompasses four stages: preparation, incubation, illumination and verification. The authors also stated the centrality of this theory based on the importance of each process when developing an effective campaign (Arbaiza, F. et al., 2024).
By analysing the Creative Process Theory creative agencies could understand how AI might condition and, possibly, improve each stage, for example in the preparation phase, AI could speed up the process by analysing large data set in a very small time, during the illumination stage, AI could play the role of creative proposing new ideas, lastly, when doing the verification, AI could validate the work by performing quicker testing (Arbaiza, F. et al., 2024).

By enhancing the targeting and personalization of the content, Artificial Intelligence makes advertisement more incisive and cost-effective, leading to a higher return on investments (ROI) (Ford, J., 2023). Also, AI improves marketing campaigns efforts making them more effective and simplifying interactions (Lalić, D, 2024)

According to the American Marketing Association, advertising can be referred to as a mix of non-personal efforts advertisers pay for to make recipients aware of their products, persuading them (Abdou, A., 2024). Although there are many salient aspect in advertising, creativity emerges as the most important one: companies such as Apple, which spend billions in product development, strongly believe that their marketing success resides mostly in creative advertising (Abdou, A., 2024), as it is stated that there is no mean that is more effective than creative advertising since it stays in consumers' minds (Shanin A. A., 2020).

When talking about AI and creativity, many are the technologies involved to create texts and images (Kaput M., 2022): Generative Artificial Intelligence for instance, which was first introduced decades ago but became established in the past few years (Lim, C. V., 2024), is largely used in the advertising field especially employing images, texts and other forms of data to develop new forms of images and texts required by the user (Lim, C. V., 2024). Including AI in advertisement means relying on the usage of several tools such as Image and Speech Recognition, Machine Learning (ML), Natural Language Processing (NLP) and Natural Language Generation (NLG) for the creation of ad-copy, in order to speed up and optimize the practices (Ford, J., et al, 2023; Kaput, M., 2022). Advertising campaigns, such as Cadbury's "NotJustACadburyAd", are entirely AI based (Ford, J., 2023): through the usage of Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs) and AI, the campaign shows existing characters saying words and doing things they never did (Ford, J., 2023), these kinds of tools enabled Cadbury to make their ideas become true thanks to the involvement of large language models and image generative models (Lim, C. V., 2024).

While many advantages deriving from the application of Artificial Intelligence represent a concrete benefit and advantage for companies (Toorajipour, R. et al, 2021), many controversies and tensions regarding its employment are not to be neglected (Camilleri, M. A., 2024).

1.4.1 Advantages of integrating Artificial Intelligence in creativity

Among the different applications of Artificial Intelligence enlisted above, AI opens many doors to companies trying to establish their position on the market (Toorajipour, R. et al, 2021). In fact, the effectiveness of AI in advertisement has several positive effects on consumer behaviour, that is mostly because a higher level of creativity in advertising results in a higher perception of product value, leading consumers to elevate their engagement level with brands (Lalić, D., 2024).

Primarily, the application of AI in creativity can be considered as a "do-it-yourself" system for ad copy that gives users the possibility to personalize their experiences (Danesi, M., 2024), and in the meantime it makes marketing processes more accurate, automatizing naturally repetitive tasks (Rahman, J., 2024). Many brands have indeed included Artificial Intelligence tools in several fields (Aichouche A., 2024), online purchase experiences, for instance, have included artificial aids to enhance the experience itself: to name one, Nike introduced a combination of Augmented Reality (AR) with AI as to allow customers to "try on" their shoes identifying, by

scanning their own feet with the app, their true size, which would after be transmitted to the company for a more customized experience (Danesi, M., 2024).

Therefore, given the actual market situation where customers are more and more seeking projections of the self, Artificial Intelligence gives brands the possibility to enhance touchpoints with clients by personalizing the advertising message on their preferences and behaviours (Iyelolu, T. V., et al 2024). A clear example of this personalized marketing practice was Nutella's request at Ogilvy & Mather Italia to generate an algorithm able to design millions of unique Nutella jars' packaging (Sabry Riad Abdel Wanes, O. 2021), that had easily been sold in the next months across Italy representing true works of art (Rezk, S. M. M. 2023). The possibility to personalize interactions with customers, gives brands the chance to increase long-term loyalty and at the same time to enhance customer experience crafting for them a more satisfying and meaningful interaction (Arbaiza, F. et al., 2024).

By having the chance to individually manipulate everything that digitally surrounds us, humans, therefore creatives, can easily improve circumstances to their advantage (Hassani, H., et al 2020): a practical example could be the usage of Computer-Generated Imagery (CGI) in generating creative content representing situations that might not have happened in real life settings, but that exist in the algorithmic process that elaborated them (Spurgin, E.W., 2003). In addition to this, employing Artificial Intelligence in advertising gives creatives the opportunity to identify and predict trends (Rahman, J., 2024), eventually developing socially coded content (Danesi, M., 2024): AI is, as a matter of fact, able to combine current cultural tensions with consumerist trends (David, E., 2023) as to generate advertising built around cultural themes considered relevant by society, that is capable of changing accordingly as the culture evolves via an incessant process of algorithmic assessment (Danesi, M., 2024).

Moreover, from a commercial results' point of view, several account directors stated that the involvement of Artificial Intelligence into companies' assets resulted in a significant optimization of returns on investment (ROI), due to the personalization of the content and more precise way of targeting customers (Arbaiza, F. et al., 2024).

Even though several advantages emerged supporting the usage of Artificial Intelligence, it is impossible not to consider and neglect the several disadvantages as well as controversies related to the application of this tool. The growing presence of AI across a wide range of professionals' sectors has indeed sparked numerous controversies questioning the actual role of this tool and its intended purpose within these professional contexts (Arbaiza, F. et al., 2024).

1.4.2 Controversies and tensions of AI-driven advertising

When speculating about the application of Artificial Intelligence in the creativity field, many are the tensions that arise regarding this tool.

Primarily, many authors debate the actual role of Artificial Intelligence in the creative process: a tension arises between AI's ability to emphasize human creativity and its propensity to take advantage of, potentially overshadowing and even replacing, the natural creative process (Arbaiza, F. et al., 2024). More precisely, the main aim of scientists when programming AI was to create a tool able to emulate human intelligence when performing certain tasks (Rahman, J., 2024), AI does in fact qualify itself as an intrinsic tool which is more and more putting aside the human involvement in the creation of advertising (Danesi, M., 2024). Although the fear of job displacement (Adepoju, O. D., 2024) as well as the ethics behind the substitution of the human role in marketing, is largely discussed (Rahman, J., 2024), and it is relevant to consider the introduction of automated systems such as self-check-out machines in supermarkets (Adepoju, O. D., 2024), it is asserted that human creativity, his empathy and critical thinking are considered by many authors as non-substitutable with anything else (Rahman, J., 2024).
However, given this background, it is inevitable for professionals to feel the urge to think and re-imagine their role in the Fourth Industrial Revolution landscape (Adepoju, O. D., 2024).

Additionally, while employing AI facilitates marketing tasks for creatives, it can also represent a potential threat for content authenticity, implying a tangible perception of diminished originality of the content itself, due to its perceived role as intrusive and manipulative (Arbaiza, F. et al., 2024). Hence, the possibility to establish an equilibrium between human creativity and AI involvement through the exploitation of its potential in giving valuable insights (Rahman, J., 2024), could give comfort to sceptical users (Oprea et al, 2024).

This dilemma is at the core of recent literature about the AI narrative, since it raises several professional and socio-political concerns (He et al., 2024; Camilleri, 2024; Vatankhah et al., 2024), as well as doubts about the ethics related to the usage of AI in roles where professionals had always been dominant (Brendel, A. B., et al. 2021). The necessity of developing a flexible AI legal framework as to support practitioners in handling Artificial Intelligence in everyday operations, comes to hand to try and contain these concerns (Arbaiza, F. et al. 2024; Camilleri, M. A. 2024), presenting itself as a collection of norms and regulations organization leaders

must comply with, honouring its ethical norms and values (Camilleri, M. A. 2024). The legal framework must ensure its flexibility due to its need to adjust rapidly according to the introduction of new technological improvements and marketing advancements (Arbaiza, F. et al., 2024). It is indeed central for agencies to write understandable AI policies regarding its usage as well as data management to guarantee a balance between technological innovation and ethics (Arbaiza, F. et al., 2024).

On the other hand, another significant issue arises: neglecting the usage of artificial intelligence in creative agencies, or not developing tailored strategies as to include AI in the creative process to align with customers' expectations, figures itself as a mistake, since society is rapidly evolving and companies must keep up with these changes (Amankwah-Amoah, J. et al., 2024), representing the involvement of AI in business' assets a clear competitive advantage among other companies (Toorajipour, R. et al, 2021).

However, another key concern comes into focus: the application of AI tools in content creation, such as CGI, often involved in the creation of fictional images (Spurgin, E.W., 2003), rises numerous ethical concerns related to the confusion that may flow from its involvement as to create an illusion of reality (Spurgin, E.W., 2003), as well as endangering the risk for deepfakes (Flick, C., Worrall, K., 2022), hence, the creation of videos or images of people doing and saying things they never did (Fletcher, J. 2018); a clear example would be what Spurgin refers to as the "computer generated imagery of perfection", that is when the tool is used in advertising to remove any unwanted traits from models, portraying ideal beauty standards, as to create an illusion of perfection (Spurgin, E.W., 2003). According to Žižek, the presence of flaws in analogue cinema's films act as evidence for artifice creation, feeding what the author defines as *double deception*, hence a situation in which viewers are fully aware of the illusion of the content but still engage with it, making a sense of desire flow (Manon, H.S. 2014). On the other hand, the usage of image manipulation tools, such as CGI, develops a *single deception* which is given by the attempt of seamless perfection where the artifice is concealed. While double deception makes desire and lust spark, CGI and single deception make a sense of anxiety flow in its recipients, due to the artificial perfection of such content which erases the lack that is fundamental to become engaged with the creation (Manon, H.S. 2014).

The possibility of generating fake visuals is not a new topic, however, what is truly new is the chance for consumers to get access to cheap software and create fictitious content (Fletcher, J. 2018, Danesi, M., 2024), deeply challenging the trustworthiness of the content itself (Johnson,

D. G., & Diakopoulos, N. 2021).
On the other hand, given that these kinds of communication are mostly created and exploited by professionals, it is natural to conclude that these practices are potentially developed with the aim of taking advantage of consumers (Mustak, M., et al 2023).

Therefore, Spurgin asserts that CGI's involvement in content creation may perhaps enhance advertising's perception of deceptiveness (Spurgin, E.W., 2003) which may inevitably lead to a violation of the autonomy of those who undergo such content (Arrington, R. L., 1982). In contrast to this assertion, the author states that, even though the content might be subtle, consumers are not as much naïve as other might think (Spurgin, E.W., 2003), it is the ethics-related issue that makes the matter somehow problematic: CGI of perfection does make its recipients deep dive into virtual realities, considered by the author as the most deceptive creations ever, where they can place decisions despite their unawareness of the artificial nature of what they perceive (Spurgin, E.W., 2003). Several are the aspects of CGI that contribute primarily to the perception of the content as deceptive, for instance, removing unwanted traits without having the viewer informed of it, gives life to a true manipulation of reality which results in the creation of subjects that are undistinguishable from reality itself (Spurgin, E.W., 2003).

1.5 How much AI is too much? Bridging creativity and hyperreality

Building upon the AI theory that has been deeply highlighted in the previous paragraphs, the debate regarding the exploitation of Artificial Intelligence in the creative field emerges as controversial (Aichouche A., 2024). In the last decades, companies have been more and more seeking new strategies to win over competitors and differentiate themselves on the market: leveraging physical qualities of their offering is not enough anymore, what firms are looking for is indeed an added value that makes emotional reactions spark in the recipients of the effort (Edvardsson, B., Enquist, B., & Johnston, R. 2005). For this reason, employing AI in art-generation has sparked a particular sense of re-evaluation of creativity among artists: however, several are the concerns arising, especially regarding the potential loss of value of human artistic skills (Cunningham, J. 2024) and the definition of the role of the art-maker in an algorithmic culture (Striphas, T., 2015).
Many artists value machine capabilities harshly, distancing them from human capabilities, and hardly considering the integration of digital techniques into their activities (Cunningham, J. 2024). Nevertheless, human capabilities and experiences remain fundamental and irreplaceable

in the creative industry since the true worth of human intelligence lays exactly in the human ability to let creativity and imagination spark (Ameen N, 2022).

On the other hand, many authors argue that the involvement of AI in content generation emerges as a mere collaborator, as a helper able to enhance human capabilities and open new horizons on creativity (Arbaiza, F. et al., 2024). This perspective, proper of those artists who actively involve AI in their project as to enlarge their artistic boundaries, supports the potential advantages of technology which allows practitioners to exceed creative exploration (Cunningham, J. 2024).

For instance, DALL-E2, launched by OpenAI, is a tool that enables users to generate original synthetic images as an output for a textual input: this technology produces high quality images with the application of several artistic styles consistent with the specified subject of the caption (Marcus, G., 2022).
Many brands had used DALL-E2 in their marketing efforts: in March 2023 Coca-Cola launched a contest named "Create Real Magic" aimed at encouraging artists around the world to submit their artwork deriving from the usage of DALL-E2 featuring GPT-4 (Wright, W. 2023). The winning artwork would then be shown on Coca-Cola's billboards in New York's Times Square and London's Piccadilly Circus, and the first 30 artists submitting their works would then participate to a three-day workshop, "Real Magic Creative Academy", at Coke's headquarters (Wright, W. 2023).
"Create Real Magic" was an engaging activity that taught artists about the true value of artistic co-creation and in the meantime, it represented a powerful brand positioning strategy which highlighted Coca-Cola's commitment to keep up with the latest technological advancements and trends (Wright, W. 2023).
Even though DALL-E2 shows great accuracy in content production, it has several fallacies related mostly to its lack of common sense, or its ignorance about numbers and its inability of giving outputs based on prompts containing words that were banned from the policy (Marcus, G., 2022).

AI's ability to reproduce human creativity clearly resonates with Baudrillard's simulacra, in other words the ability to originate something that doesn't have its replica or that, at least, becomes as important as the original one (Wolny, R. W., 2017; Cunningham, J. 2024). As Eco asserted in his work "Travels in Hyperreality" (1986), our propensity to prefer perfect copies feeds what the author refers to as "programmatic obsolescence", hence the passive

acceptance of the brief life of items and ideas, which makes it easier for us to accept their substitution.

For these reasons, some AI-generated contents, appear to be identical to the human-generated ones, progressively thinning the lines between the original content and the replica, therefore, representing a *simulacrum* (Cunningham, J. 2024). AI-generated art, deriving for example from the usage of DALL-E2, contributes for this reason to the *hyperreal,* a realm where reality and representation are more and more intertwined, appearing almost undefined (Wolny, R. W., 2017) and where art is not a representation of reality but creates its own reality instead (Cunningham, J. 2024).

Using Baudrillard's own words, *hyperreality* is "the meticulous reduplication of the real, preferably through another, reproductive medium, such as photography" (Wolny, R. W., 2017). Therefore, the transition from reality to hyperreality is articulated in four steps: it begins with the direct engagement with reality and the elements that characterise it; then, people start dealing with representations of such reality through tangible elements like photographs, going then towards a serious consumption of images of this reality, and, finally, accepting that these images correspond to reality. This last step clearly signs the transition towards the establishment of *hyperreality* (Edvardsson, B., Enquist, B., & Johnston, R. 2005).

Applying this definition of *hyperreality* to the marketing world makes the tangible consequences of an AI driven reality emerge, making it clear that the distinction between human creators and machines able to create contents is getting more and more blurred (Danesi, M., 2024). This idea had already been stated by Baudrillard, who predicted a world where simulations and dissimulations are not perceived as fictitious anymore (Danesi, M., 2024). Baudrillard argues that the more societies try to put together reality, developing a more comprehensive picture, the more confused and unstable societies' attitude towards this picture get (Wolny, R. W., 2017). Consequently, being Artificial Intelligence a tool that enables creative minds to shape new realms in advertising, it is likely to create at the mean time a sense of *hyperreality* (Oprea et al, 2024) which is harshly judged by Eco as an artifice that is more and more spoiling reality (Eco, U. 1986).
For this reason, *hyperreality* presents itself as a valid framework to be applied to modern society in order to understand the deep realm of modern consumerist trends that veer towards a simulation of individualism (Danesi, M., 2024). The true essence of *hyperreal marketing* lays indeed in Baudrillard's logic, according to which individuals reach the optimal level of

satisfaction not through actual control, but through the simulation of this control, converting the illusion of autonomy into the real source of gratification (Danesi, M., 2024).

Therefore, the inclusion of Artificial Intelligence in creative advertising raises numerous doubts and controversies due to its undeniable role in feeding the hyperreal marketing. Within this context, it seems necessary to highlight a general understanding of the relationship between brands and their customers in view of AI's ability to both enhance human creativity towards unexplored limits and blur the line between real and *simulacrum.*
In the next chapter, the hyperreal will be further analysed, explaining the discipline itself and highlighting its key features, moreover, AI's presence within creativity will be examined to understand its role and contribution in brand perception.

CHAPTER 2 – Theoretical Framework and Research Question

In a society where the dominant logic of rationality and standardization has been progressively abandoned in favour of originality and individual authenticity, Artificial Intelligence plays a crucial role in feeding people's rising urge for self-expression.
The present chapter delves deeper into this profound transformation, arguing AI's role within society and qualifying it not just as a useful tool in generating content but also as an engine able to forge people's vision of reality. Baudrillard's hyperreality will be fully explored within this narration, extending it further towards the role of AI in fostering the creation of these new realms where it becomes more and more tough to discern what is authentic from what is not.

Within this framework, the evolution of advertising through the years will be analysed in detail, and *hyperreal marketing* will be designed as the culmination of this process, laying the foundation for the research question this thesis is aimed at providing answer to.

2.1 Introduction

The present chapter aims to be a valid theoretical framework for understanding the AI discipline and how its involvement in the advertising field is more and more representing a challenge for brands and consumers' perception. For this purpose, the hyperreality theory will be deeply analysed and AI's role will be investigated from the perspective of an active participant to the creation of new realms, fostering the confusion deriving from the impossibility of distinguishing between the real and the simulated. Afterwards, a new trend among the advertising field emerges: the culmination of the advertisement evolution is reached with *hyperreal marketing* (Danesi, M., 2024), an innovative approach to the discipline that shapes pop culture instead of merely reflecting it. This transition has deep repercussions on the human perspective, in fact it is highlighted by several authors that, in the AI-era, a sense of scepticism can be detected among consumers. AI significantly addresses society's growing demand for authenticity and self-expression by allowing consumers to craft their online experiences. It is within this context that a crucial managerial problem emerges concerning consumers' perception of brands employing AI in their communication efforts.

Therefore, the research question flows naturally, representing a valid starting point for the third chapter that, by employing a mixed-method approach, aims to empirically investigate the current concern providing valuable insights to the AI literature.

2.2 *"Simulacra and simulation":* the definition of *hyperreality* according to Baudrillard

When talking about *hyperreality* we are directly referring to the concept that was first formulated by Jean Baudrillard in the philosophical treatise "Simulacra and Simulation" from 1981 (Baudrillard, J. 2019). Using Baudrillard's own words, *hyperreality* is "the meticulous reduplication of the real, preferably through another, reproductive medium, such as photography" (Wolny, R. W., 2017).

In his work, the author stresses the idea that the connection between symbols and reality has been widely lost, putting humans in a world that lacks tangible references (Cunningham, J. 2024).

This phenomenon is basically possible due to the emergent society's tendency to rely on representations such as maps and signs, that gradually lead to the loss of references to the real world that made these symbols feasible (Cunningham, J. 2024). Therefore, the author introduces the substantial difference between *simulacrum,* a copy without an original reference in reality, and the *simulation* of reality we create when we think we can get access to the minutiae of human reality, in other words, it refers to the process through which *simulacra* assume their functions.

Simulation is what Baudrillard also defines as *state of hyperreality* (Wolny, R. W., 2017).

Baudrillard articulated hyperreality development into a four-step process:

1. *Symbolic order,* or realistic order, in this first stage signs represent reality as it happens with postcards and landscapes, having symbols depicting reality as it is (Cunningham, J. 2024; Denzin, N. K. 1986).

2. *Counterfeits,* basic reality gets subverted and trustful representations become caricatures that distort what is true (Cunningham, J. 2024).

3. *Production*, in this phase representations conceal reality, they hide the total absence of a tangible reference in reality, as it happens with magic (Cunningham, J. 2024; Denzin, N. K. 1986).

4. *Simulation,* in this final stage representations do not have any direct reference in reality, substituting the original (Denzin, N. K. 1986). Baudrillard states that Disney themed parks are one valid example to understand the progression of simulacra due to their

high customer involvement that inevitably leads to a difficulty to distinguish between what is real and what is simulated (Cunningham, J. 2024).

Moving from one order to the other, it is possible to observe a gradual reduction and incorporation of the distance between what is real and what is imaginary: the author in fact further discusses the role of utopia in this context, which presents the maximum distance from what is real, comparing it with the "era of models" where this distance is totally reduced and a set for simulation takes place (Baudrillard, J., & Evans, A. B., 1991). At this point, *simulation* appears to be the generation process of copies without an original reference in reality (Baudrillard, J. 2019). On the other hand, *simulacra* are not meant to be imitations preceding the real, instead they are in place of shaping and determining what we define as real (Baudrillard, J. 2019). For this reason, the territory no longer precedes the map, it is the map that precedes and determines the territory, and this is what the author refers to as "precession of simulacra" (Baudrillard, J. 2019).

Within his work, Baudrillard introduced with large anticipation for his time, how *simulation* and *dissimulation* are not to be perceived as untrue but rather to be chosen as more appealing options to reality since dissimulation implies pretending not to have something, while simulation stems from absence, pretending to have something (Danesi, M., 2024). The main point of difference of simulation and dissimulation lays in the presence or absence of the object of fiction: dissimulation doesn't invalidate the concept of reality, simulation on the other hand makes thinner and thinner the line between true and false (Danesi, M., 2024). According to Ryan the simulation era is defined by a gradual liquidation of references, where signs and signifiers are not related to their referential anymore, but find their true meaning in the network that joins them (Ryan, M. T. 2007).

To strengthen the simulation concept, Baudrillard offers several examples, however, the religious' icons one emerges as the most controversial: the author states that God's representations symbolize a very primordial – and dangerous – form of simulation; through visual cues such as pictures and portraits, hence simulacra, he suggests that the divinity could have never existed in reality, having images substituting its original reference (Wolny, R. W., 2017). The reasoning goes on with the author questioning what happens to religious' idols when they are only presented through icons and then proposing two alternatives to the case: first he talks about incarnation, icons visually represent divinities preserving their supreme authority, then he introduces the notion of volatilization where divinities dissolve in icons,

hence simulacra, which substitute in the end the idea of God (Wolny, R. W., 2017). The notion of volatilization is employed by Baudrillard to interpret Iconoclasts' concerns and their rage for the sacred images' abolishment, which is thought to be originated as a reaction to the omnipresence of simulacra: Iconoclasts understood the dangerous power of divinities' representations, and how these were able to erase God from humans' consciousness substituting the idea of its existence with the only survival of simulacra (Baudrillard, J. 2019).

In addition to this, Baudrillard further argues that if Iconoclasts had believed that the icons were merely concealing God's platonic idea, they wouldn't have destroyed them, due to their disguise nature (Baudrillard, J. 2019). On the other hand, they ultimately destroyed icons, due to their strong belief that these were not just images but perfect simulacra which lead to "the death of the divine referential" (Baudrillard, J. 2019). Moreover, the author compares Iconoclasts with Iconolaters, icons adorer, who are thought to have a more contemporary mindset because of their awareness of the nature of those sacred images, which are intended as meaningless and illusory (Wolny, R. W., 2017).
Finally, the author asserts that, despite what happened in the past with Iconoclasts, images still maintain the power to murder the real and their reference, and that Divinities should have been able to guarantee the link between their sign and the respective underlying concept, without drifting into a self-referential system sign (Baudrillard, J. 2019).

Drawing upon the definition of hyperreality as "the meticulous reduplication of the real" and the afore mentioned examples, it emerges that, within hyperreality, the original version of an object is, at this point, meaningless since these two lie in different realms (Wolny, R. W., 2017).

The possibility to duplicate reality is clear especially in the consumerist culture where images acquire an added value thanks to the context surrounding them, making these images more valuable than the original: so a picture of a Rockstar becomes more important than the Rockstar himself due to the complete set of infrastructure that form the environment where the photo is being taken, hence modified, and then shared (Wolny, R. W., 2017). Moreover, the author states that the excess of signs and symbols in modern society leads to an obfuscation of reality and that, the more societies try to put together reality, developing a more comprehensive picture, the more confused and unstable societies' attitude towards this picture get (Wolny, R. W., 2017).

According to Eco, what is unreal gets offered as real in the presence of those who voluntarily decide to undergo such experiences (i.e. wax museums or Disneyland), having in these contexts

the sign aiming to become the thing, putting down the detachment with its referential (Ryan, M. T., 2007). In this context, the author stresses his hunger towards the employment of fiction at the expenses of what should be considered reality (Tamagni, J., 1988).
In conclusion, being Artificial Intelligence a tool that enables creative minds to shape new realms in several fields, the advertising one for instance, it is likely to create at the mean time a sense of hyperreality through which audiences might fear confusion about what is true and realistic and what is artificial.

2.3 AI as a tool for the creation of new realms

Building upon the hyperreality theory expressed in the previous paragraph, it stands to reason the role of Artificial Intelligence is getting more and more prominent as an active creator of new realms, contributing for this reason to the hyperreal.

In content creation, Artificial Intelligence plays a central role due to its ability to bring numerous advantages to the table, enhancing and innovating the work of many creators (Zhao, B., Zhan, D., Zhang, C. et al., 2023), and giving an enormous contribution to the hyperreal: AI-generated content does indeed expand Baudrillard assertions adding a fifth order, the *generative simulation,* to the precession of simulacra (Cunningham, J. 2024).
In the generative simulation stage, it emerges the substantial irrelevance of the existing distance between the original and the copy, which is mainly due to the inner nature of these creations (Cunningham, J. 2024). These creations are at the meantime original and not new, as well as authentic and counterfeit and, in this context, the content becomes both the map and the territory within Baudrillard's metaphor (Cunningham, J. 2024).

The involvement of Artificial Intelligence in creativity gives the chance to practitioners to mimic and enhance their artistic expressions, producing artworks that are often indistinguishable from those who are traditionally produced, representing for this reason Baudrillard's simulacra (Cunningham, J. 2024). These artworks do not represent reality anymore but actively participate to the creation of their own reality, acting as manifestations of the hyperreal instead (Cunningham, J. 2024).
An example of the co-participation of Artificial Intelligence in the design field happened with the Big Red Boot phenomenon (Prisco I., 2023).

In 2023, the company MSCHF, an American collective based in Brooklyn, initiated an experimental brand of boots, Big Red Boot, aimed at revolutionizing the fashion industry:

thanks to the usage of AI, the brand was indeed able to easily design and promote the unusual looking pair of boots across the globe, which soon became sold out on their website (Danesi, M., 2024). What is truly new about these pair of boots, which have after been re-baptized by the public as Astro Boots, is the unusual fashion that recalls the gaming world, as well as the instant success that they gained thanks to the huge mediatic attention brought first from celebrities across the web and then among generic customers (Danesi, M., 2024; Prisco I., 2023).

Based on Baudrillard's previous observations, it can be theorized that the Big Red Boot phenomenon could significantly participate in the generative simulation stage: the pair of boots clearly resonate with the concept of being both original and counterfeit (Cunningham, J. 2024), since they took inspiration from the cartoonish world, then they have been transposed into the real world, but do not have any previous reference in the fashion industry, and in the meantime they have been working on the abstract idea of the boot while generating their own reality through their hyperreal aesthetics (Danesi, M., 2024).

MSCHF's episode is a clear example of the modern intervention of AI, and in addition to this it represents the significant shift that the industry is experiencing in the advertising field: having the chance to fully promote products online showcases that marketing, which has always been engaged with pop culture, is now conspicuously intertwined with the Internet and, consequently, with Artificial Intelligence (Danesi, M., 2024).

Figure 1. Sarah Snyder models the Big Red Boot. (Source: MSCHF official Instagram, 2023).

This case highlights hyperreality's nature suitable for explaining the modern psychology of consumerist culture that emphasizes what Baudrillard defines as "simulation of individualism" (Danesi, M., 2024). Brands that are actively employing Artificial Intelligence in their marketing efforts, such as MSCHF and Coca-Cola, are giving their consumers the chance to experience a new approach to consumerist consciousness which is being shaped by simulation, basically reflecting a state of simulacrum, hence the possibility to desire something that is not tangible anymore but simulated (Danesi, M., 2024).

2.3.1 The confusion distinguishing the real from the hyperreal

Drawing upon the aforementioned premises, defining *hyperreality* as the reduplication of reality through other media, it appears that in this realm the original version loses its own significance due to the gradual loss of its referential, and as a consequence to this, societies may suffer a sense of insecurity given by their attempt to understand and put together this reality in a more comprehensive framework (Wolny, R. W., 2017).

The loss of the real naturally sparks a sense of nostalgia into people who consequently try to contain this sentiment by overproducing myths of origins that idealize and romanticize the past as to hold onto it, leading finally to the proliferation of signs that are considered by people entrenched with reality's essence (Wolny, R. W., 2017).

According to the Baudrillard, the end of subjectivity takes place in the realm of total defeat of the individual by the objective world (Kellner, D. 2015). The disappearance of the individual in postmodern society, which is arranged around simulations, happens because of the departure of people from the mere reality to the "ecstasies of hyperreality", in which subjects are vogue and fragmented (Kellner, D. 2015). For this reason, in modern society people are in "ecstasy of communication" due to the abundance of images, information and simulacra that do not seem to be attached to any tangible reality, to such an extent that even reality itself loses its own meaning (Kellner, D. 2015).

Societies, which are constantly assaulted by information and images, become so fascinated with these that even the concept of meaning dissolves, focussing solely on the aesthetics; at this point everything disappears and the possibility of having any opposition fades away (Kellner, D. 2015). The disappearance of referential makes a never-ending loop of self-referentiality possible among simulations which, due to the loss of connections, are forced to refer only to themselves (Kellner, D. 2015). The crowd is now drenched in information signals that contain neither the message nor the meaning, remaining for this reason stuck in the aesthetical level, and subject to the mediatic saturation: therefore, the masses evolve into a silent majority which designates the end of the social (Kellner, D. 2015).

This saturation of simulacra leads the masses to a state of complete silence due to the disappearance of meanings, falling in the depths of non-differentiation and fostering the confusion of distinguishing what is real from what is simulated (Kellner, D. 2015).

The intrinsic nature of hyperreality as a tool able to blur the lines between what is real and what is a replica (Cunningham, J. 2024), extends into the nature of human relationships as expressed

in the movie “Closer” directed by Mike Nichols in 2004: the film deeply analyses the relationships of two couples that often find themselves intertwined and challenged by many difficulties.

A significant contribution is given by this movie to the hyperreality theory: in one poignant scene, Alice, played by Natalie Portman, expresses during a photography exhibition her concern about the discrepancy between people’s experiences and emotions and the perception of those who assist their representation, that in this case is photography. The character suggests that photographers often convey wrong messages lying to the public, creating an illusion of reality that becomes more powerful and meaningful than reality itself (Nichols, M., 2004, 00:36:00). The exhibition becomes representative of hyperrealism: through photographs, that could be interpreted as a simulacrum, grief loses its power and relevance and gets interpreted through the aesthetical codes of those who undergo such content, representing for this reason a deceit (Nichols, M., 2004, 00:36:00). The spectator plays an active role in blurring the line between the emotivity expressed through the photograph and the lived experience of the people represented in these photographs, and according to Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra, photographs do not emulate reality anymore but create their own reality instead (Cunningham, J. 2024).

Within this dynamic the fundamental issue arises of whether it is possible to identify a stable and defined subject in hyperreality (Trifonova, T. 2003): photographers acting in a deceptive way towards the public, and spectators projecting their expectations as well as desires in the pictures, could as a matter of fact conceal the intentions and emotions of the individuals represented in the photographs, supporting for this reason the postmodern concept of gradual loss of the subject (Trifonova, T. 2003).

The logic behind this dynamic is that we are currently assisting the progressive decentralization of subjectivity, which is not stable anymore, in favour of what Baudrillard defines “the fatal”, or impersonal (Trifonova, T. 2003).

Baudrillard, however, deeply answers to the confusion that may arise between hyperreality and the fatal being both focussed on the loss of distinction between the subject and the object: the author does indeed clarify that while both are centred around the loss of the subject, de-realization in hyperreality is never done perfectly, so the subject may often arise leaving traces in the objects, for this reason maintaining its subjective nature (Trifonova, T. 2003).

In conclusion, the intrinsic difficulty in distinguishing what is real from what is hyperreal characterizing society as well as human relationships, lands in a progressive loss of subjectivity and is enhanced by the involvement of Artificial Intelligence in many practices, whose employment marks an important transition towards a new stage of this confusion.

2.3.2 The role of AI in blurring the lines between the real and the hyperreal

While it is possible to achieve the systematic reduplication of reality through various means, Artificial Intelligence emerges in this context as a tool able to autonomously mimic and enhance human creativity (Wolny, R. W., 2017; Cunningham, J. 2024). Being Artificial Intelligence a tool not only able to reduplicate but to generate new realms, works coming from its activity often foster the difficulty of people trying to discern what is traditionally created and what is AI-produced, further blurring, for this reason, the boundaries between what is original and what is a copy (Cunningham, J. 2024).

Technological developments enabled AI-generative tools to create deceptive content, namely Deepfakes, depicting people doing things or saying things they never did, which is fundamentally possible thanks to the application of neural networks to the processing of large data sets aimed at learning and mimicking someone's mannerisms (Westerlund, M. 2019).

Deepfakes are essentially hyperreal videos using real footage, which are becoming more and more challenging to be detected, representing for this reason a threat for the spread of fake news across the web (Westerlund, M. 2019; Sharma, M., & Kaur, M. 2022). While Deepfakes might appear as an advantage for many practitioners in several fields, the cinematographic one for instance, it represents a real danger for internet users who come across these contents: considering that people are mainly inclined to believe these videos are real, two threats arise, first the disinformation one of those who come across the videos, then the *info apocalypse* issue (Westerlund, M. 2019).

According to Westerlund, the constant exposure of people to Deepfakes tends to make them sceptical of the info they are exposed to, then judging anything they do not want to trust as fake, considering at this point everything as deception (Westerlund, M. 2019). Consequently, this scepticism could ultimately shape the way consumers behave towards the content, leading to the devaluation of its authenticity (PYMNTS, 2024).

Drawing upon the aforementioned mediatic saturation, a question regarding the trust in media content flows naturally leading to the general crisis of the truth, also referred to as "post-truth" (Cosentino, G. 2017). In this context, Artificial Intelligence emerges both as a possible solution to the proliferation of fake news in detecting what is true and what is not, especially thanks to Natural Language Processing (NLP), and as a threat able to enhance the deceptiveness of the content by generating Deepfakes, making it more difficult for people to distinguish among original and fake content (Saquete, E., et al 2020; Chesney, R., & Citron, D. 2019).

It is important to highlight that aside from the numerous benefits deriving from AI usage, many are the controversies related to the trustworthiness of the tool (Laas, O. 2023). For this reason many authors discussed that people can no longer automatically trust what they see, relying on their "default doxastic attitude" (Laas, O. 2023), on the contrary, the loss of trust towards recording technologies marks an important transition towards the way people conceive these tools, in fact improvements in AI feed the difficulty in distinguishing original contents from fake ones, thus indicating an increased scepticism (Laas, O. 2023).

As consumers develop a higher level of scepticism towards the content, companies might face an enormous difficulty in including AI and maintaining at the same time a significant bond with their target audience (PYMNTS, 2024).

AI-generative tools able to create new realms, such as Deepfakes, had spurred such a level of scepticism into people that they grew a sense of mistrust towards AI itself, questioning their own ability to discern the real from the hyperreal (Carlson, M. 2021; Cosentino, G. 2017). This new dimension is intensified by modern marketing practices that are currently going towards what Danesi defined *hyperreal marketing* (Danesi, M., 2024).

2.4 The evolution of advertising: from reflecting social codes to the genesis of *hyperreal marketing*

In an environment where Artificial Intelligence impact has given rise to scepticism as well as uncertainty toward its creations, questioning people's ability to discern between original and fake content (Laas, O. 2023), marketing has found itself going through a significant shift implying a re-modulation of communication techniques (Danesi, M., 2024). Mere representation is not enough anymore, the market requires at this point what will then be defined as *hyperreal marketing* (Danesi, M., 2024).

Drawing upon the MSCHF example expressed in the former paragraph, it emerges that the brand clearly reflects the current shift advertising has gone through (Danesi, M., 2024).

Initially, marketers' goal in advertising was to convey products' features and benefits to consumers through the usage of catchy slogans and memorable jingles (Abrorovich, J. A. 2023).

Later, ads became era-specific texts aimed at reflecting the social codes of the society they were shaped into, for this reason, campaigns such as Coca-Cola "Universal brotherhood" reflected the emerging strong connection between cultural movements, advertisement and marketing (Danesi, M., 2024). MSCHF was able to tap into old strategies' patterns with a modern twist: the company in fact stood for this existing link between advertising and pop culture, projecting the whole into the Internet era, moreover, they sparked the public debate creating controversial products that would attract media attention (Danesi, M., 2024). Today the synergy between pop culture, advertising and technology appears to be stronger than ever, since these elements mutually influence each other and their bond is enhanced by the introduction of Artificial Intelligence (Danesi, M., 2024).

Creative advertising that roots into social codes is a very current topic, and it is made obvious especially in the training of AI tools on large databases that makes it possible to join cultural themes with consumerist trends (Danesi, M., 2024). This has led many marketers to include Gen-AI in their marketing efforts due to its ability to change accordingly to the evolution of trends: satire for instance, which has always been a trend in communication, reaches now its peak in effectiveness because of the algorithmic ability to always be "present", keeping up with the corresponding trend (Danesi, M., 2024). The exploitation of satire, from an algorithmic point of view, gives space to the rise of a new emerging trend that reflects the subvertisements of the culture jamming movement, which emerged in the early 2000s and is fundamentally built on making fun of advertising by harnessing AI (Danesi, M., 2024).

The culture jamming movement, defined as "an organized, social activist effort that aims to counter the bombardment of consumption-oriented messages in the mass media" (Carducci, V. 2006) qualifies itself as a set of strategies aimed at putting resistance to consumerism, opening new doors towards it through the quest for authenticity and the reconnection with the natural (Murphy, D., & Jarrett, J. 2024; Carducci, V. 2006).

The rise of this new trend provided culture jammers with the opportunity to make satirical critiques of advertising through the creation of satirical commercials, the same way it happened

with the fake franchise “Pepperoni pizza spot” (Danesi, M., 2024). The commercial was fully AI developed, from the video caption to the voiceover and images depicting a made-up restaurant chain, making the video viral among the people on the web who were, according to the culture jamming logic, forced out of their emotional comfort zone and put in front of the hard truth behind what the jammer was trying to comically communicate them, thereby reflecting the centrality of satire and parody typical of a certain kind of discourse in online communication (Danesi, M., 2024).

According to Danesi, the involvement of Artificial Intelligence in advertising entails a significant shift from the traditional approach to content creation, towards a *hyperreal marketing* (Danesi, M., 2024). In *hyperreal marketing*, the synergy between advertisement, marketing and pop culture occurs in novel algorithmically-oriented ways: every effort is not meant to absorb and reflect cultural tensions as it did in the past, but it walks side by side with social changes, going parallel with them (Danesi, M., 2024). Advertisement is going towards the direction of becoming a “self-contained representational system” based on the creation of its own representations of a reality that do not necessarily reflect the actual one (Danesi, M., 2024). Therefore, within the digital era, AI puts language, persuasion and communication under a new light: in the generative simulation stage, the generated content does not bear any correlation to reality but creates its own reality instead (Cunningham, J. 2024).

What MSCHF did with the Big Red Boots is a perfect example of hyperreal marketing: the brand was in fact able to blur the traditional boundaries between consumers and creators, based on the common knowledge that in the hyperreal world there is total lack of rules, and the real satisfaction is given by people belief that they are in charge of their and other people's lives (Danesi, M., 2024).

Given these premises, advertising is going towards a new definition, qualifying the use of AI as the new Pop Art movement of its time (Danesi, M., 2024).

2.4.1 Hyperreal marketing: *the new age of the Pop Art movement*

As advertising continuously redefines its role within society, hyperreal marketing qualifies itself as a distinct phenomenon that, due to its inner nature, can be interpreted as the new age of the Pop Art movement (Danesi, M., 2024).

Pop Art emerged in the 50s as a controversial art movement aimed at redefining art role in a culture that was becoming increasingly entrenched in consumerism (Danesi, M., 2024). The movement came forth as the art world's answer to entertainment and pop culture, thus artists realized that by exploiting images deriving from mainstream culture, taking images from advertisements, medias and symbols, they could redefine consumers' relationship with items elevating these to art representations (Witek, D. 2018; Danesi, M., 2024).

As consumerism implied the abandonment of uniqueness in favour of mass production, so did Pop Art, which supplied artworks that often showed the same subject but in different colours or patterns, reflecting the obsession people developed towards mass products (Witek, D. 2018; Riccardi, R. 2023).

The principle of strategically exploiting symbols of the mainstream culture to redefine their role in consumers' lives, elevating them at the artistical level, finds in the age of AI its maximum expression, and a fitting example for this reasoning is given by Coca-Cola with its "Masterpiece" campaign from 2023. The striking campaign, featuring the iconic Coca-Cola bottle, is set in an art museum where and thanks to the intervention of AI, some of the most important masterpieces of art (from Warhol 1962 Coca-Cola to Van Gogh "Bedroom in Arles") come to life to spark creativity in an uninspired young man (The Coca-Cola Company. 2023).

Coca-Cola plays a key role in this short movie having represented for decades a companion who is always by people side giving them support, as well as a muse for many artists: it is in fact Andy Warhol's work that begins this play, crucially highlighting the role that the beverage has gained into consumers' daily lives (The Coca-Cola Company. 2023). The bottle fosters a creative partnership among artworks belonging to different art movements from the past to the present (The Coca-Cola Company. 2023). It is no coincidence that the movie begins with Warhol's work: the artist, who was the pioneer of Pop Art, clearly expressed through his artworks how pop culture and mass products could be elevated to art subjects, and, in addition to this, he showed how art directly influences culture (Riccardi, R. 2023).

Figure 2. Coca-Cola. Andy Warhol, 1962.

In this environment, hyperreal marketing becomes ingrained in the consumeristic culture, further blurring those lines that kept consumers and artists apart: MSCHF comes in hand as a precise example of how hyperreal brands took the Pop Art strategies in designing and promoting their products, the Big Red Boots are indeed designed as Pop Art objects, which could have been created by any of the artists of that time (Danesi, M., 2024).

Just as Pop Art challenged the underlying concept of uniqueness of artworks, hyperreal marketing, leveraged by AI, leads to the production of items that go beyond their utility, representing for this reason a fad whose main goal is to spark public debate (Witek, D. 2018; Danesi, M., 2024). According to Kordic (2015), in the current digital era where technology has largely established its position, Pop Art is taken for granted since mass products are designed to be considered artworks becoming symbols of their time (Danesi, M., 2024).

Moreover, the abandonment of uniqueness in favour of mass production, typical of Pop Art, further enhances the loss of artisanal dedication, which strongly resonates with one of the main concerns regarding the involvement of AI in creativity (Witek, D. 2018; Danesi, M., 2024).

In a world run by Artificial Intelligence, hyperreal marketing deeply reflects the consequences of the confusion coming from the impossibility to discern what is human generated and what is not, further detaching the artwork form the agent of creativity **(**Danesi, M., 2024). As a

consequence to this, a critical issue regarding consumers' perception of AI generated content within the hyperreal context arises, therefore requiring a more in-depth analysis in the following sections.

2.5 Exploring the human perspective: consumer trust and scepticism in the age of AI

As advertising evolves in a self-contained representational system within the digital landscape, fostered by the increasing application of Artificial Intelligence, the role of consumers, their perceptions and acceptance remain central, representing a real challenge for the widespread adoption of these technologies (Danesi, M., 2024; Jin, Z., & Tao, X., 2025).

While neglecting the usage of artificial intelligence in creative agencies or not developing tailored strategies as to include AI in the creative process to align with customers' expectations figures itself as a mistake (Amankwah-Amoah, J. et al., 2024) the introduction of many AI tools, such as CGI, rises numerous ethical issues related to the confusion that may flow from the involvement of it as to create an illusion of reality (Spurgin, E.W., 2003). A fitting example to this context would be when CGI is used in advertising to remove any "unwanted traits" from models to create an illusion of perfection (Spurgin, E.W., 2003). As a consequence to this, people are more likely to be sceptical and to behave in a moderated way towards the use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (Oprea et al, 2024).
Since scepticism represents a general sentiment deriving from the over-exposure of consumers to AI-generated content, Deepfakes to name one, this might result in a perceived unauthenticity as well as loss of value of the AI-creation (Westerlund, M. 2019; Jin, Z., & Tao, X.; 2025).

According to Reckwitz, a shift in the logic that governs societies has happened, marked by the transition from the traditional principles of rationalization, formalization and standardization, towards a more modern approach that involves a crave for individual authenticity which can be achieved through the logic of the special, the extraordinary and the original (Vasiljeva, T., Kreituss, I., & Lulle, I. 2021). Within this context a paradox emerges: if individuals become personalities feeling more and more the urge for self-expression, technology comes to the rescue as the helper able to satisfy these needs (Vasiljeva, T., Kreituss, I., & Lulle, I. 2021).

Thanks to the involvement of AI, it is possible to encourage what Reckwitz names "regime of creativity", hence a regime of innovation (Reckwitz, A. 2020). However, people satisfaction,

which is fostered by technology, is mostly achieved through the creation of new realms that must be validated through the usage of quantitative and comparative methodologies, reducing the desired uniqueness to something predictable and non-spontaneous (Vasiljeva, T., Kreituss, I., & Lulle, I. 2021).

The quest for authenticity and uniqueness is set in a context where the attribution of creativity is divided between human mind and AI, often falling in the Moral Crumple Zone (Cunningham, J. 2024). This principle refers to the attribution of creativity to its agent, whose accountability is frequently blurred by the prejudice of people who are still not able to recognize the ownership of AI-generated content (Cunningham, J. 2024). Therefore, Generative AI, which is further blurring the line between human created content and AI's, might act as a challenge for consumer's ability to discern what is original from what is not, sparking a sense of scepticism as well as mistrust towards the online content (PYMNTS, 2024). Consequently, the scepticism towards the authenticity of the content might put brands in a bad position due to the difficulty in strengthening brand trust and their credibility toward their public (PYMNTS, 2024).

While previous studies had mainly put light on the different kinds of Artificial Intelligence available on the market and their potential application to perform and optimize certain tasks (Davenport T. H., Ronanki R., 2018), as well as highlighting the importance of introducing these kinds of automatization into companies which would otherwise be defined as obsolete (Davenport, T. H. et al, 2019), very few authors had comprehensively addressed how the usage of AI in the advertising field affects consumers' perception of the brand whose image is being shaped and then communicated through AI.

This gap regarding the understanding of the consumer perspective towards AI-driven brand communication will be further addressed in the next paragraph, introducing the research question this thesis is meant to shed light on.

2.6 Introducing the research question: "Does AI-driven advertising foster perceptions of authenticity and relatability among consumers, or does it instead exacerbate the confusion and instability characteristic of *hyperreality*?"

Artificial Intelligence plays a crucial role in the current evolution that creativity has been facing, representing a fundamental tool, previously confined solely to science fiction, that has rapidly been transposed in reality. While many authors highlight how the growing presence of

AI in many functions, spacing from inventory to advertising (de Mattos, C. A. et al, 2024), represents a significant advantage for companies over their own competitors, its participation in several professionals' sectors has sparked numerous uncertainties questioning the actual role of this tool and its intended purpose within these professional contexts (Arbaiza, F. et al., 2024). Within this scenario, it emerges AI's role and how it is more and more redefining how industries, creatives and societies behave.

Despite the broad research regarding the Artificial Intelligence discipline, the different kind of AI available in the market, its advantages and disadvantages, it has been identified a gap in research about the actual evaluation that consumers may have of brands employing these tools in their marketing efforts. This research gap gives rise to the following managerial problem: if people are sceptical about the usage of AI (Oprea et al, 2024), brands that have integrated them in advertising might face an enormous difficulty in maintaining a genuine connection with customers, and companies could face a backlash given by the distorted perception of the brand by the same ones (PYMNTS, 2024). Consumers in response to that, might put in doubt the authenticity and relatability of the content created for communication aims. The aforementioned scepticism towards the involvement of AI in creative practices is intensified by the transition towards *"hyperreal marketing"* (Danesi, M., 2024).

Drawing upon the aforementioned premises, this research wants to put light on a critical area, addressing the following research question that aims to contribute to the existing literature on AI: "does AI-driven advertising foster perceptions of authenticity and relatability among consumers, or does it instead exacerbate the confusion and instability characteristic of hyperreality?"

To fill the research gap, this study aims at enriching and, at the same time, giving contributions to the existing literature. By directly answering to the research question, the study will allow to investigate with empirical research if consumers perceive AI-driven advertising as authentic and relatable. Also, the analysis would highlight key insights regarding ethical considerations about the employment of Generative-AI in advertising. Understanding this key aspect is crucial for brands to build and maintain brand trust and their credibility, especially in the ever-evolving marketplace environment.

CHAPTER 3 – Mapping the BMW Brandscape: BMW X Lil Miquela and the "Make it real" campaign

The present chapter aims to outline the research methodology and analytical framework adopted to investigate consumers' attitudes towards BMW's *Make it Real* campaign. A mixed-method approach is adopted to deep dive into the subject of discussion. The methodology will include both a semiotic approach, the Brandscape, and a qualitative sentiment and content analysis. These procedures lay the foundations for in-depth discussions regarding key insights that emerge from the data, ranging from aesthetical appreciation to technology scepticism.

3.1 Methodological Framework

This study seeks to address the research question "does AI-driven advertising foster perceptions of authenticity and relatability among consumers, or does it instead exacerbate the confusion and instability characteristic of hyperreality?", as well as enrich and, at the same time, give contributions to the existing literature. By directly investigating the research question, the study will enable the observation of how consumers might perceive AI-driven communication efforts in terms of authenticity and relatability. Moreover, it is hoped that the analysis could uncover key insights about ethical considerations when dealing with Generative-AI in advertising. Understanding these critical aspects is crucial for brands to build and maintain brand trust and their credibility, especially in the evolving marketplace.

Considering the explorative aim of this research, the adoption of a mixed-method approach is deemed fundamental. This approach, that includes both qualitative sentiment analysis and semiotics, is particularly apt when investigating internet-based developments, especially with the creation of virtual worlds and social medias (Mingers, J., & Willcocks, L., 2017). While qualitative sentiment analysis can provide valuable insights with the identification of common themes and patterns emerging from the texts, it falls short in understanding symbolic and cultural meanings embedded in brand communication (Mingers, J., Willcocks, L.P., 2023). Semiotics, on the other hand, comes to the rescue as a tool able to go underneath the appearance of texts, exceeding the content analysis of meaning and uncovering the cultural codes that structure the world into semantic categories. By unveiling these underlying patterns, semiotics provides useful insights that purely qualitative approaches wouldn't be able to offer otherwise.

Therefore, this study will combine the collection of primary data through a qualitative sentiment analysis of consumers' comments and reactions to the research corpus, with the analysis of secondary data performed through Oswald's Cultural Brandscape. The Brandscape will serve as a blueprint showcasing the broader network of intersecting codes and meanings that actively contribute to consumers' perceptions of a brand. Relying on this mixed-method approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of both consumers' reactions to the AI-driven effort and the deeper multitude of intersecting codes characterizing the brand and its competitive environment.

3.1.2 Corpus Selection: the BMW heritage

The corpus for this research includes a case study revolving around the automotive industry leader BMW. The company was chosen as the main subject of this study due to its long-lasting heritage being a global automotive leader. Moreover, it has always showcased a deep commitment to innovation and great ability in integrating effective communication strategies within brand storytelling.

The analysis of the automotive industry is particularly suitable for the development of the present study thanks to the industry's constant readiness in keeping up with technological innovations, influencing consumers' perception of modernity and progress. Vehicles have always been emblematic in the definition of people's aspirations and desires, representing for this reason cultural artifacts loaded with infinite symbolic associations. This field allows us to deeply explore how consumers assimilate and value authenticity, innovation and emotional engagement in brand communication.

Moreover, the automotive industry has long talked to the hyperreality issue: automotive communication, through its aspirational representations of lifestyle and values, has constantly depicted experiences that transcend the mere physical existence of cars, offering experiences more than products. BMW, with its main theme *"Sheer driving pleasure"*, and the latest campaign *"Make it real",* went far beyond the product itself, offering immemorable experiences instead.

The *Make it real* (2023) campaign, has been chosen due to its direct relevance to the research question, and its explicit AI-driven communication efforts. The campaign plays an ideal role as a pivotal example within the case study, enabling the observation of both scenarios of perceived authenticity/relatability and confusion/instability expressed in the research question.

BMW's choice of picking Lil Miquela as ambassador for the promotion of their new iX2 electric car does not come as a total surprise, being herself a totally AI-generated digital influencer with over 2 million followers on Instagram (Drenten, J., & Brooks, G. 2020). Lil Miquela's presence, combined with BMW's narrative efforts of communicating driving as the exploration of human-life experience, a motif that ties back to the *"Freude Forever"* campaign (2023), positions this campaign as an iconic example of hyperreal advertising.

By exploiting strong storytelling, the *Make it real* film wants to narrate Miquela's transition from the virtual world to the real one, driving the new iX2 BMW. The experience of driving this car gives the influencer the chance to explore the full range of human emotions, ultimately falling in love with real life. Through an unusual existential tone, the advertising showcases the theme of diversity, proper of the physical existence, from the perspective of Miquela's eyes.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MXSaZQ2aAAc&t=18s

Within this frame, reality is shown as powerful canvas for rebellious souls to drive progress. The virtual world, that has always been considered as an escape from reality, gives space to a new frontier: reality undergoes a new interpretation being understood as the truest escape, full of beauty and meanings.

The selection of materials includes:

- Official campaign materials deriving from BMW's communication history;
- The official YouTube "*Make it real"* campaign featuring Lil Miquela;
- Related posts on Instagram from both BMW and Lil Miquela's official profiles;
- Consumer comments and reactions across YouTube and Instagram. The inclusion of these comments is fundamental for this study as they represent the primary data of the analysis.

YouTube and Instagram platforms were chosen according to their visual-centric nature, high user-engagement and the abundance of interactions in the comment section, which provide useful insights into customer perceptions.

Moreover, to fully understand how BMW is positioned towards contemporary technological values and codes of the luxury automotive field, its competitors will be analysed as well, focusing on their current innovations and technological involvement.

3.2 BMW's Cultural Brandscape

Successful brands do not only mirror the culture they live in, but actively create new ones instead, by generating new trends, icons and meanings (Oswald, L. 2012). Semiotics plays a crucial role within this context, especially by aligning the brand with the meanings' shift concerning the product category, the target and the environment. For these reasons, brands are not mere products, but function as ecosystems of commercial, cultural and social forces, shaped by the influence of a multitude of external forces that characterize the symbolic field they live in. Brands are fundamentally semiotics, transcending the mere functional benefits they are able to provide and creating value by satisfying consumers' emotional needs (Oswald, L. 2012).

This phenomenon, referred to as Cultural Brandscape, as developed by Laura Oswald, provides marketeers with the unique possibility of understanding the current positioning of brands, forming a network of meanings coming from all aspects of brand management. Within this frame, Oswald proposes a symbolic system combining the social, cultural and semiotic dimensions of brands into an appropriate scheme.

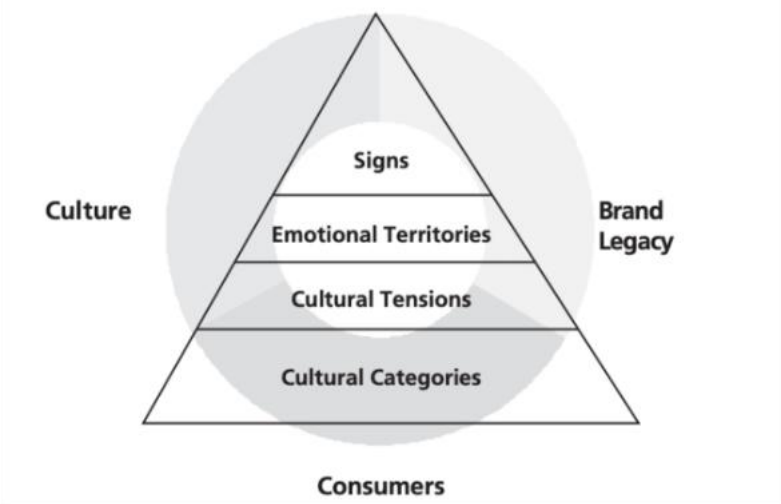

Image 3: The Brandscape triangle. (Source: Laura Oswald, 2012)

Marketing semiotics theory stems from the assumption that semiotic codes structure the meaning of the cultural category, the emotional territories associated to it, and the material signifiers used to transmit these meanings. It is within this framework that advertising emerges as an essential tool able to mediate the transfer of meaning from cultural categories - such as product features - to direct association with the brand. Accomplishing this kind of transfer boosts brand equity and fosters brands' ability to create culture.

For the purpose of this study, the Brandscape will allow for a deeper exploration of how the interaction of these forces fosters – or challenges – consumers' perceptions of authenticity and reality within AI-driven communication.

Starting from the general two-dimensional analysis proposed by Saussure for linguistics, Levi-Strauss highlighted the importance of performing both the *diachronic analysis* of cultural phenomenon, which showcases the evolution of codes over time, as well as the *synchronic analysis* displaying the structural codes that transcend changes by observing the phenomenon in a single fragment of time. By following these two analyses, it will be possible to put a finger on specific codes characterizing the communication styles of the selected brands.

3.2.1 Diachronic Analysis

When analysing brand language, it deems fundamental to deepen the examination breaking through the boundaries of the individual campaigns. Therefore, discourse emerges not just from a single campaign, but on the entire brand discourse instead.
The diachronic analysis adopts a longitudinal perspective, tracing down the evolution of BMW from the very beginning, to understand how its meanings, values and communication efforts evolved – or remained unchanged – in response to pressures coming from internal and external forces.

BMW (short for Bayerische Motoren Werke, “Bavarian Motor Works”), officially founded in 1917 by Franz Josef Popp and Karl Rapp, begun its brilliant rise in the excitement of aerial combat on the Western Front during the Great War (Lewin, T., 2022).
From the very beginning, the company proved that extreme performance and technical sophistication were not just accessory and confined to luxury, but emerged as essential for survival, especially within this context (Lewin, T., 2022). The quest for a successful aero engine and maximum performance pushed BMW to seek for refined engineering solutions, exotic materials and innovative manufacturing techniques (Lewin, T., 2022). This pursuit firmly established BMW’s position as a leader in the premium vehicle market.

From the outset, the automotive brand made its position clear: to value quality and performance over cost and transitory convenience, and it was evident in their early communication efforts (Image 4) where they made frequent use of their altitude breaking records (Lewin, T., 2022).

Image 4: BMW early advertising.

Post-war inflation represented a real threat for the German industry; however, BMW's general director F. J. Popp already had a plan in his mind aimed at expanding the brand across three lines of production. The plan included continuing the engine production, improving the motorcycle production and ultimately expanding over the car market (Lewin, T., 2022). The year 1933 represented the true turning point for the industry. The establishment of Hitler's regime shed light on the mass mobility issue, the dictator in fact included in his projects the widespread of car ownership. With the Berlin Motor Show the industry gained mass favour with their shiny new creations perfectly reflecting Hitler ideals of a glorious and technologically driven future.

During World War II, the company converted its main activities to support the war efforts, becoming a fundamental armaments manufacturer. BMW's focus was on the production of aircraft engines – such as the BMW 801 – and motorcycles for military purposes. While this period was economically significant for the company, it saw BMW getting deeply intertwined with the regime and its activities, giving life to an association that, to this day, still influences the company's reputation.

It is just in the ‘50s, after the Post-war period during which BMW struggled to come back on its feet, that the car production took up again. The very first post-war car was the BMW 501, launched in 1952 (Li, S., 2025).

Image 5: BMW 501 advertising.

Also known as the “Baroque Angel” due to its sumptuous and rich style, the 501 disrupted the current car trend, relaunching the luxury aesthetic and technical sophistication the company had been proud of from the beginning of the century. BMW’s communication was mostly lifestyle oriented, with visuals representing captivating scenarios featuring the car and – in line with the trend of the time – an elegant man next to it. The car was fundamentally for the man who could have whatever he wanted. However, due to the current consumers’ priority after WWII, mostly oriented towards affordability and safety, BMW faced enormous backlashes because of the high pricing and poor targeting.

Followed by other attempts to win over the competition, such as the 507 sports car, BMW tried to communicate luxury aspirational lifestyles by enhancing the car high performance and its innovative features, ultimately aiming for the premium segment. Nevertheless, the company had enormous difficulties keeping up with sales, even losing money on each unit sold, and merging in a financially unsustainable situation.

Having recognized the need for a broader audience and financial stability, BMW introduced the new Isetta microcar in 1955, challenging the already existing Fiat Topolino and then the younger Fiat 500. The car, which had the tiniest structure and affordability, gave BMW the possibility to rise from bankruptcy.

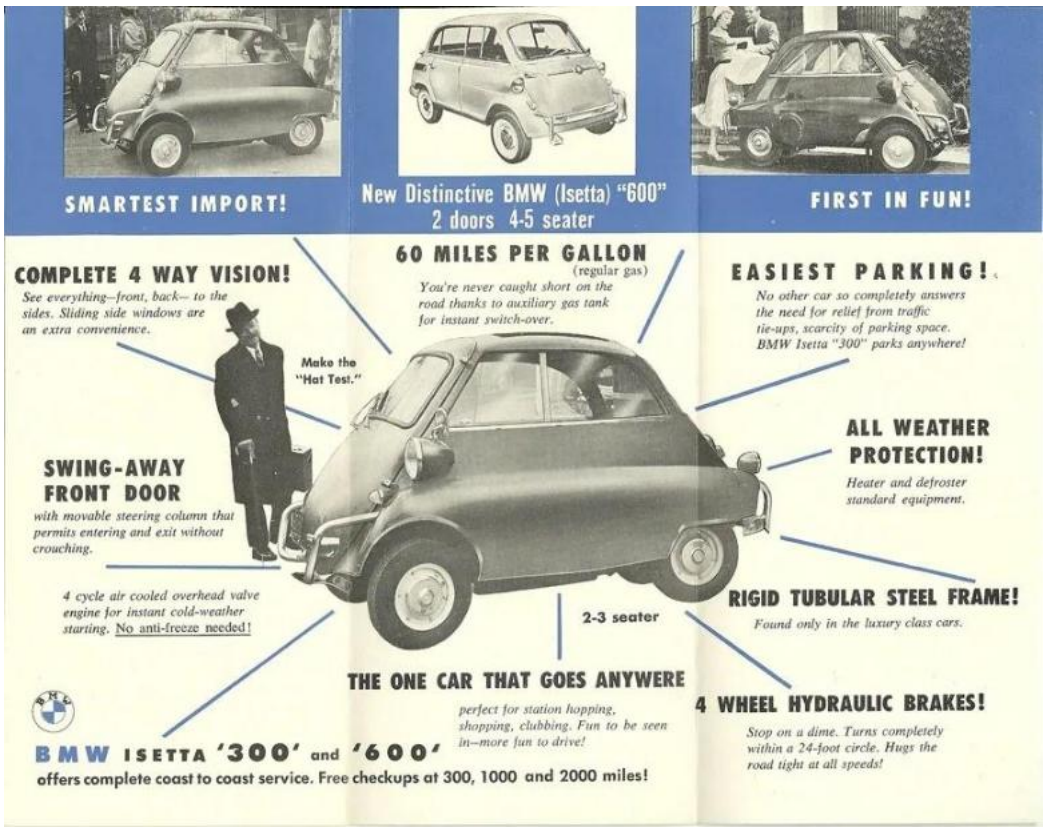

Image 6: Brochure with various types of BMW Isetta.

The Isetta was an immediate success; it was presented as the perfect urban solution to the chaos of big cities, and it was perfectly in line with the Post-war optimism, since consumers were looking for both practical and affordable solutions (Bianchini, R., 2025). The minicar was compact, affordable and suitable for the so called "Hat test", an advertising hook which entailed that drivers could have entered and left the car with their hats on, meaning that it was more spacious than it seemed (Bianchini, R., 2025).

Despite the huge success of the Isetta, BMW put itself in a critical position due to the mismatch between the current brand image and the one they aspired to. The company aimed to be perceived as a premium manufacturer, offering premium products. However, with the Isetta, BMW displayed a true trade-off between its premium ambitions and market survival in an economy where the main rising concern was convenience.

In the late ‘50s the company faced a severe financial crisis due to declining sales, which ultimately led to the acquisition of its shares by the Quandt family, who is till this day the main shareholder (Quotidiano Motori, 2017).
It is during these years that BMW understood the urge to break from the past and launch something radical, giving life in the 1960s to the “Neue Klasse” sedan programme. The New Class project designated a shift from the Baroque Angel looks towards a more innovative style: cars like the BMW 1500 and 1800 clearly redefined the brand’s identity, introducing the new paradigms of sporty, reliability and emotion (BMW.com., 2020).

With the BMW 1800 TV commercial from the ‘60s, the company reformulated and reinforced its slogan, *"Aus Freude am Fahren”*, in English *“Sheer driving Pleasure”*, a motto which tells the story of BMW through the evolution of the word *freude.* The term was first used in the mid-1930s, meaning “joy” and “pleasure”, and still to this day it is a current motif for the brand. After its first appearance in the 1965 commercial, the slogan became popular appearing in other ads of the company, sometimes in the header or in the text next to the logo (BMW.com., 2020).

Image 7: BMW 1800 and BMW 1600 showcasing the *”Freude am Fahren”* slogan.

Introducing such a slogan represented a powerful strategic move for the company, allowing them to successfully target a growing middle-class audience seeking quality, sophistication and engaging driving experiences. *“Sheer driving pleasure”* emerges as a fil rouge connecting rich communication efforts whose main goal was to suggest that the BMW 1800 – and all the New

Class other versions – is the perfect car for everyone, from athletes, scholars to professionals, aside from their finance position.

The slogan slightly evolved over the years, converging in 1975 with the tagline *"The ultimate driving machine"* formulated by the Ammirati & Puris communication agency (Paul S., 2025).

Image 8: BMW 2002 commercial showcasing the *"The ultimate driving machine"* tagline. 2025.

The tagline emerged as a saving grace to the enormous challenge BMW was facing to establish the brand on the American market, compounded by the competitive pressure of other car manufacturers such as Mercedes-Benz (Team TBH, 2024). BMW's American exponents together with Ammirati & Puris understood that there was not a universal positioning for the band in consumers' mind, so they looked back at their history and worked on a powerful motto that could appreciate both the pleasure of driving and the rigor of German engineering (Team TBH, 2024).

The success of this tagline was undoubtedly given by its simplicity and boldness and the target audience was clear: BMW became the preferred vehicle of performance-oriented drivers, who sought the thrill of driving, triggering for this reason the emotional appeal (Team TBH, 2024).

"The ultimate driving machine" slogan showcased resilience over the years, reflecting different paradigms as societies changed: in 1980s and 1990s the tagline stood for the emphasis on performance, often depicting BMW's cars over racetracks.
The 90s are fundamental in the BMW company's evolution: it is in 1994 that the brand englobed the Rover Group, expanding its offerings to gain a bigger market (Donnelly, T., et al 2003). However, a few years later, in 1999, BMW – which maintained the Mini brand – divorced Rover and the two went different ways (Donnelly, T., et al 2003).

With the beginning of the new millennium, the company embraced the spirit of the time maintaining the value of performance and, in the meantime, focusing on innovation, sustainability and design (Team TBH, 2024).
Among the different commercial initiatives BMW undertook, the "The Hire" series from 2002 stands out. The series is made up of eight short movies starring the movie star Clive Owen who embodies a driver dealing with other celebrities and their stories. The series was commissioned by BMW and each one of the films was directed by top tier movie directors, showcasing iconic BMW's cars in different scenarios.

One example is the movie "Beat the Devil" starring James Brown, directed by Tony Scott, in which the musician is negotiating with the Devil for youth. Amid irony and hyperreality, the quest for youth is played out with a car race between the Driver – played by Clive Owen – who is driving a BMW Z4, and the Devil, who ends up defeated.

Image 9: BMW Z4.

The Driver is the embodiment of BMW with its self-control and efficiency, who is always by your side. Choosing Clive Owen as the performer is no coincidence: in an entirely US based series, the actor emerges as the only European one, claiming the BMW German status. The video is an authentic action movie, with an engaging plot, characters and soundtrack. Moreover, the presence of the Z4 is the turning point for the plot; it is not a mere product placement or promotion, but a fundamental character that carries the narration.

The car, as displayed in Image 9, is conveyed by the company through the myth of prestige and superior performance. The Z4 metaphorically becomes the "Land Shark" of the automotive industry. This type of communication is fundamentally designed to target drivers who seek action and high-speed challenges. The copy's closing statement (Image 9) "to satisfy your insatiable appetite for the road" clearly resonates with this motif, reinforcing the already strong BMW's positioning.

BMW has always been committed to introducing and implementing more sustainable approaches to mobility systems. In 1979 the company featuring the German Insitute of Research developed the first BMW 520/4 with a hydrogen engine, showcasing the first attempt towards their long-lasting commitment to sustainable innovation. Since 2010, BMW has made its efforts towards a more sustainable mobility public: with the

introduction of electric car models such as the i3, from 2013, the company responded to customers' sustainability concerns related to viability.
Emotional appeal was still present but in a different conjugation: the focus at this point was on the joy of driving while still preserving our planet.

Nowadays BMW still demonstrates huge responsibility towards sustainability and its electrification efforts are evident now more than ever. Moreover, the current digital evolution of the market has led the company to focus on Artificial Intelligence, making it the cornerstone of its innovation strategies.
By enhancing technical qualities, BMW is able to perpetuate the current motif of the pleasure of driving (Barnwell D., 2025). Just as K.I.I.T. in the 80s TV show *Supercar*, the car of the future is totally electric, autonomous and networked, features that BMW has already introduced in its latest models (Fuhrich, A., 2020).

In a culture where technology is continuously evolving, modern customers expect the market to be equally adaptive and interconnected; in this way, the Intelligent Connected Vehicles (ICVs) are totally modifying the modern driving experience (Hager T., Barnwell D., 2024). The car of the future goes beyond the mere objectification of the driving experience, redefining the concept of vehicle interiors as comfortable habitat able to support drivers in everyday life (Fuhrich A., 2020).

The timeless *freude* ideology is continued today by perpetuating the joy of driving into the current contemporary era of innovation and electrification. Campaigns such as the "Father & Son. Freude Forever" from 2023 strongly resonate with the antique values of BMW. By showcasing a father and son relationship, the act of driving appears as a motif that strengthens the bond between the two. The father that once looked after the son, guiding him through his growth path, is now kindly supported by his son that, through the driving experience, makes him feel young again. A drivers' licence here acquires a symbolic role that transcends the mere permission to take the car for a spin, it represents a key able to unlock memories and past experiences. As the tagline says at the end of the film *"There's a feeling that stays forever"*, and that is the pleasure, the *freude*, BMW has always aimed to inspire in its customers.

Finally, it is the rise of modern tools such as Artificial Intelligence that lays the foundations for the reinterpretation of this paradigm: with the *Make It Real* campaign (2023), featuring the virtual influencer Lil Miquela, BMW contextualizes the iconic *"Sheer Driving Pleasure"* motto within an increasingly electrified world.

3.2.2 Synchronic Analysis

Evidence consistently shows that the world is getting increasingly interconnected and electric oriented, and Artificial Intelligence plays a key role in developing new and alternative ways of approaching this reality. Within this frame, BMW stands out as a true innovator in the automotive market, consistently integrating AI into its products and services, therefore further emphasizing the pleasure of driving.

By involving AI at different stages of product development, BMW is able to perform software quality control thanks to GenAI 4Q. Moreover, with the creation of new technologies, such as the "Heart of Joy" central control unit, the company improves performance but also reinvents the pleasure of driving within the current electric era (Barnwell D., 2025).
The introduction of the BMW iDrive with the Intelligent Personal Assistant (IPA) takes the driving experience a step further by enhancing the interaction between the driver and the vehicle, personalizing their journey. All the vehicles carrying the BMW Operating System 7 – and the following ones – can take advantage of this useful tool that is able to explain the car's functions, check the vehicle status, and personalize it according to customers' habits.
Therefore, owning a BMW exceeds the pleasure of driving, becoming a true and engaging everyday experience with intelligent technology.

BMW leverages AI as the pillar of its commitment to innovation. The exploitation of technology is evident especially in BMW's communication efforts, and one obvious example is the *Make it Real* campaign realised with the AI-generated influencer Lil Miquela.

First launched in 2016 by the startup Brud, Lil Miquela is a virtual influencer, entirely AI-based, with over 2 million followers on Instagram. Miquela is a 19-years old Brazilian girl, whose main interests revolve around fashion, pop-music and activism being herself an active supporter of the Black Lives Matter movement and the LGBTQ+ community (Black, T. C. 2019).
Through a variety of contents on her social media profiles, the girl shares bits of her everyday life among collaborations with the finest fashion brands, such as Prada or Dior, and socially conscious content. Since the very beginning, Lil Miquela asserted her position in a digital reality still largely predominated by human creators (Black, T. C. 2019).
Her presence in the BMW campaign strongly resonates with the emerging societal tension between what is authentic and what is artificial: Lil Miquela represents the cornerstone among

these two, being herself AI-generated, so existing just within the algorithm that created her, but feasible due to her empathy, which is evident from her communication style.

The influencer is artificial, but her style and personality are easily recognisable and for these reasons her presence in the *Make it Real* campaign showcases BMW's attempt to position itself as in between technical innovation and emotional connection.

In this regard, advertising constitutes a direct discourse aimed at communicating and engaging consumers into the world of BMW's meanings. Semiotic analysis comes as a saviour to dig deeper into these meanings.
In the following paragraphs the analysis of the *Make it Real* campaign will be carried over adopting the Generative Trajectory of Meaning model (Semprini, 1992) which highlights the layering of signification in narration.

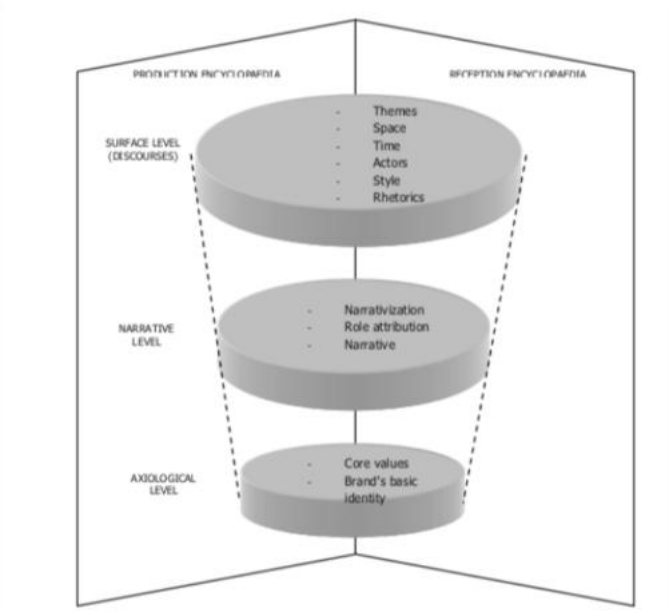

Image 10: Generative Trajectory of Meaning model and its layers. (Semprini, 1992)

Surface level

The surface level, also known as the discursive level, is where the subject of the film and how it is displayed, are deeply analysed.

In BMW's *Make it Real*, the virtual influencer Lil Miquela lives in the Metaverse, a sterile and futuristic environment, where things artificially created are confined to. The glossiness of the

Metaverse explicitly represents its facade of artificiality.
The influencer however gets access to the real world by entering a luminous gate driving the BMW iX2. The car becomes the means through which the girl is able to experience real life, to discover nature and its beauty, the joy of friendship, love in all its shapes, from the ephemeral summer love to the purest form of affection that a mother could feel for her daughter. The BMW car acts in this context as a bridge between the physical and the virtual.

As she continues driving, the landscape changes, from the countryside to the seashore, finally arriving in the centre of the city where she participates in bits of everyday life. In the meanwhile, the girl has a closer encounter with a dragonfly which is a symbolic representation of transformation and adaptability, clearly reflecting the current spiritual journey she is going through.

The story unfolds in a cinematic way, leveraging weather and light as powerful tools that highlight the imperfections of the real world.
The night comes and Lil Miquela arrives at a night club, she experiences a night of dancing and fun with her peers, among the freedom and joy of youth. Struck by a ray of light, the girl remembers she is not like the others, she exists solely in the digital world that created her.

At this point a powerful metaphor takes place, Lil Miquela shares a kiss with a boy – we never witness the kiss directly, but the shot leads us into thinking they do it - in the club and the frame abruptly shifts to a closeup on the BMW's high-speed spinning wheel. The contrast among the romanticism of a first kiss and the high speed of the car is not random. It is thanks to the creation of this link between the two that a powerful message is conveyed: the high-paced tempo of the car resembles Miquela's heartbeat when experiencing human love for the first time. Even though the girl and the car are both AI-generated, they are depicted as able to have emotional reactions to events, exceeding the collective imagination of machine status. At the figurative level, Lil Miquela and the BMW iX2 are even represented "wearing" the same clothes, both being dressed in red, conveying through colour codes a message of powerful emotions. For these reasons, being artificially created doesn't imply that Lil Miquela cannot be real and authentic in the emotions that she feels or in the value she gives to life.

The scene changes and Miquela is back in the car, grasping for air as she reflects on what she has witnessed and her abstract condition. She knows that this experience has changed her and the way she perceives things, finally realising her emotional capacity.
The race starts again towards the Metaverse, and the influencer doesn't want to get back: she

wants to keep on feeling human emotions. In the end, Lil Miquela gets back to the luminous gate for the Metaverse. She is now aware of her new condition, feeling sceptical about getting back.

It is when it starts raining and the raindrops fall on Lil Miquela that she realises she is not that different from true people, that her feelings are as valuable as human beings'. The girl gets back into the car and returns in the real world, avoiding passing through the gate. Driven by the poetic journey she went through, Lil Miquela ultimately falls in love with human life.

BMW iX2 is not just a car, it becomes symbol of Lil Miquela's transition towards reality. Miquela and the car become one: the girl on one hand as a human AI, and the car on the other as an intelligent technology that is always there to support her during the journey. The spectator is here put in front of a de-stigmatisation of Artificial Intelligence. The audience is called to increase their awareness of the growing presence of AI in everyday life, and how it is gaining relevance.

The *Sheer Driving Pleasure* motif is here present under a new declination: the pleasure is broadened exceeding the momentary feeling of joy coming from the driving experience. Driving is then an existential metaphor that stands for personal growth and freedom. Through the *Make It Real* tagline, the Sheer Driving Pleasure acquires a new and more modern shape that allow drivers to live significant and authentic experiences, thanks to their empathy and sensitivity.

Commercial technical breakdown

When analysing an advertising, it is important to consider the kind of analysis apt to dissect the content under examination. For this reason, given the audio-visual nature of the Make it Real campaign, it stands to reason that the involvement of Peverini's (2012) scheme for the segmentation of texts emerges as the optimal solution for an in-depth analysis of the content. The grid presents different columns denominated as it follows.

#Sequence	**Duration**	**Visual Column**	**Soundtrack**	**Notes**
1, 2, ..., n-1, n	0:00, ..., t-1, t	• Content description: • Frame width: • Camera angle: • Illumination:	• Music • Noises • Dialogues	

		• Colour:		

The analysis will proceed with the breakdown of the commercial into sequences; it would be ideal to use narrative sequences, characterized by the same themes which can easily be reconducted to the same story.

- *Commercial title:* The first-ever BMW iX2 x Lil Miquela
- *Overall length of the commercial:* 2:55 minutes
- *Agency:* Stefanie Soho x media.Monks
- *Actors:* Lil Miquela, BMW iX2

#Sequence	Duration	Visual Column	Soundtrack	Notes
1	0:00-0:03	• *Content description:* we see Lil Miquela from behind in the centre of the frame in the Metaverse. Then, there's a brief jump cut, and the influencer turns around almost facing the camera. • *Frame width:* 3840x2160p. • *Camera angle:* horizontal focus on Lil Miquela. • *Illumination:* bright and glossy lighting. • *Colour:* a mix between cool and hot colours.	• *Noises:* we can hear some noises that resemble the ocean sounds.	From the beginning some trigger warning about flashing lights appears on the bottom.
2	0:03-0:12	• *Content description:* In the background we can see a ray of light that stands for the gate for the real world. The girl is looking at the gate from a long distance. Then, the camera zooms out, including in the frame both Lil Miquela and the BMW iX2 (both facing the gate). • *Camera angle:* horizontal focus on Lil Miquela and the car. • *Illumination:* bright and glossy lighting. • *Colour:* a mix between cool and hot colours.	• *Noises:* we can hear some noises that resemble the ocean sounds and some metallic (futuristic) sounds.	The name of the car BMW iX2 and the 100% electric description appear on top.
3	0:12-0:14	• *Content description:* there is a close-up on Lil Miquela and then the scene abruptly changes. • *Camera angle:* Focus on Lil Miquela. • *Illumination:* bright and glossy lighting. • *Colour:* a mix between cool and hot colours.	• *Noises:* sibilant whisper.	The phrase "featuring Lil Miquela" appears.

4	0:14-0:19	• *Content description:* we see the car running towards the light gate to enter it. The car is speed driving on an expanse of water directly in the gate. • *Camera angle:* the horizontal focus is on the car, at first it focuses on the spinning wheel, then on the front. After, the angle becomes progressively aerial as the camera zooms out. • *Illumination:* bright and glossy lighting. • *Colour:* a mix between cool and hot colours.	• *Noises:* we can hear the electric engine and the wheels hitting the water.	
5	0:19-0:29	• *Content description:* there is an extreme close-up on Miquela's pupil as she enters the gate. There is a deeper jump cut and, in the end, she finds herself on a real-world high road. She is catching her breath. The weather is gloomy as she speeds down the road. There is a dense fog, and the girl further pushes the accelerator. • *Camera angle:* at first the focus is on the girl (first her pupil, then on her sitting in the car), then the angle switches on the car speeding down the road in a frontal shot. • *Illumination:* dark and gloomy. • *Colour:* cool and dark colour reflecting the bad weather, with contrast given by the red car and Lil Miquela's dress.	• *Music:* intense and engaging music briefly comes with the transition from the Metaverse to reality. • *Noises*: we can hear the electric engine and the wheels hitting the asphalt.	
6	0:29-0:36	• *Content description:* Lil Miquela starts looking around and she is surprised by what she sees. • *Camera angle:* the focus is on both the influencer and the car, alternating the shots. The car is shot from a low angle (detail), while the girl is shot from the front (half-length). • *Illumination:* dark and gloomy. • *Colour:* cool and dark colour reflecting the bad weather with contrast given by the red car and Lil Miquela's dress.	• *Music:* captivating classical piano music begins. • *Noises*: we can hear the electric engine and the wheels hitting the asphalt.	
7	0:36-0:39	• *Content description:* as Lil Miquela starts looking around a dragonfly flies next to the opened car window, and she looks at it fascinated in a close-up angle. • *Camera angle:* the focus is on the influencer, alternating the shots from a perspective to the other. While the girl is shot from the front, when the	• *Music:* captivating classical piano music continues. • *Noises:* we can hear the sounds of nature, so the	

		dragonfly comes by, the shot changes perspective as if the camera is shooting the girl from outside the car, with the insect front row. • *Illumination:* dark and gloomy. • *Colour:* cool and dark colour reflecting the bad weather with contrast given by the red car and Lil Miquela's dress.	dragonfly's flapping wings.	
8	0:39-0:44	• *Content description:* Lil Miquela now is in a lawn, intensively looking at the dragonfly that has landed on a rock. She is surrounded by grass and flowers (a poppy is front-row, red as Miquela's dress and the car). As she reaches to touch the insect, her finger passes through it, confirming her AI generated nature and she feels perplexed about it. • *Camera angle:* the focus is on the influencer, alternating the shots from a perspective to the other. The girl is shot from the front, full figure, sitting next to the rock where the dragonfly has landed. Then, the camera focuses on a closer shot (detail) on her finger trying to touch the insect. Finally, the camera moves back to the girl's face with a close-up revealing her perplexity. • *Illumination:* dark and gloomy. • *Colour:* cool and dark colour reflecting the bad weather with contrast given by the red car, Lil Miquela's dress and the poppy in the lawn.	• *Music:* captivating classical piano music continues. • *Noises:* we can hear the sounds of nature, so the dragonfly's flapping wings and the sound of the wind rustling through the leaves.	
9	0:44-0:52	• *Content description:* Lil Miquela continues her journey, discovering new places while driving her BMW. The scenario changes and the weather does as well, becoming sunny. • *Camera angle:* the focus is on both the influencer and the car. At first the car is shot from the front, alternating full body shots of the car. Then, the camera focuses on the girl with a close-up of her enjoying the sun heat. • *Illumination:* bright and sunny. • *Colour*: warm colours reflecting the sunny weather.	• *Music:* captivating classical piano music continues. • *Noises*: we can hear the electric engine, the car gaining speed and the wheels hitting the asphalt.	
10	0:52-1:06	• *Content description:* Lil Miquela continues her journey, arriving at the sea. The car crosses a bridge over water. She sees a group of friends	• *Music:* captivating classical piano	

		enjoying a day at the sea over a white rock. She sees two young lovers, friends laughing, children playing and sharing an orange. The car passes through and a curly-haired girl stares at it. • *Camera angle:* At first the focus is on the car crossing a long bridge over the sea, then it shifts on Lil Miquela that is driving her car and casually stares at the group. The camera then focuses on the people on the white rock in messy shots (alternating close-ups, extreme close-ups, half-lengths and mid-plane shots) as if they are taken from the eyes of a participant. There is an extreme close-up on hand peeling an orange and a close-up of a child. The camera is then back on the car first from the road's point of view, then from the point of view of the group on the rock. • *Illumination:* bright and sunny. • *Colour*: warm summery colours reflecting the sunny weather.	music continues. • Noises: we can hear laughs both muffled and clear, then the sound of the orange being peeled. Also, we can hear the sound of the car passing through.	
11	1:07-1:12	• *Content description:* Lil Miquela continues her journey, leaving behind her the sunny sea and arriving downtown • *Camera angle:* the focus is on the car. At first the car is shot from the front, alternating full body shots of the car with detail shots. Then, the camera focuses on the car by filming it from the side while the set changes (from the shore filming the front of the car, to the city filming the back). • *Illumination:* bright and sunny while at the sea, dark and gloomy when in the city. • *Colour*: warm colours reflecting the sunny weather then becoming cool and dark when she gets arrives in the city.	• *Music:* captivating classical piano music continues. • *Noises*: we can hear the electric engine, the car gaining speed and the sounds of the city in the end.	
12	1:13-1:24	• *Content description:* Lil Miquela arrives in the city and stops at the crosswalk, here she witnesses different scenes: a girl in a green coat laughing and crossing the street hand in hand with a friend, a mother and a daughter, a group of older people enjoying their time and a man throwing a bouquet in the rubbish. • *Camera angle:* the focus is on the different scenes Miquela assists. This sequence is characterised by quick jump cuts from one scene to the other. Then there is a close-up on	• *Music:* captivating classical piano music continues. • *Noises*: we can hear the electric engine, the car gaining speed and the sounds of the city. Also, we can hear people's	

		the influencer to display her reactions. • *Illumination:* dark and gloomy. • *Colour*: cool and dark. There is a pop of colour in the bouquet made of roses.	voices and laughs as a back noise.	
13	1:25-1:32	• *Content description:* the car speeds down the streets of the city surrounded by skyscrapers. It is now late evening, and Miquela looks around at city lights. Ultimately, she takes an underground passage. • *Camera angle:* the focus is on the car. At first the car is shot from the back, then there is an aerial shot on the logo. Then, the camera focuses on the girl with a close-up of her looking around astonished. Then, the camera angle changes: the car is shown in its high potentiality with fast shots of its front and lights. • *Illumination:* dark and gloomy when in the city and in the under passage. • *Colour*: cool and dark.	• *Music:* captivating classical piano music continues. • *Noises*: we can hear the electric engine, the car gaining speed and the muffled noises in the underpassage.	
14	1:33-1:53	• *Content description:* Lil Miquela arrives in a night club, she looks around her and sees her peers enjoying the night dancing and kissing. Then, she sees a ray of light and decides to test her non-existence by putting her hand into it. Once again, she proves her digital nature as her hand disappears. The girl is disappointed with it. • *Camera angle:* the focus is on the girl. In the beginning there is a close-up on her reaction to the club, then the focus abruptly shifts on the people dancing and kissing in the club. The shot is messy and blurry. After, the focus shifts on the ray of light and on her hand passing through it, disappearing. • *Illumination:* bright and sunny while at the sea, dark and gloomy when in the city. • *Colour*: warm colours reflecting the sunny weather then becoming cool and dark when she gets arrives in the city.	• *Music:* captivating classical piano music continues in a calm way. The music becomes ethereal and inspiring when the hand passes through the light disappearing. • *Noises*: we can hear some voices as a back noise.	
15	1:55-2:00	• *Content description:* after having proven her non-humanity, Lil Miquela is startled and disappointed. She starts looking in disbelief at the palms of her hands and goes backwards until she hits a young man with her back. She makes eye	• *Music:* The music becomes ethereal and inspiring when the hand passes through the light	

		contact with him, they are both attracted to one another until they come closer to kiss (we don't get to see this, but the scene leads us to believe that). The scene rapidly changes with fragmented cuts: a close-up of a spinning wheel, then Lil Miquela runs towards her car in a soft red light. Finally, she finds herself inside the car, looking perplexed and trying to catch her breath. • *Camera angle:* the focus is on the girl. In the beginning there is a close-up on her reaction to the realisation of her not being human, then young man appears in the frame, and the scene is divided among close-ups of the girl and close-ups of the boy. The shot succession is messy and fast. After, as they kiss, the scene is made of several clips with focuses on the kiss, the car, the girl running and finally the car. • *Illumination:* dark and gloomy when in the club. • *Colour*: cool and dark colours when in the club, with a pop of colour given by the girl's dress, the red lights and the car.	disappearing.The music intensifies as the scene arrives to its culmination and suddenly stops as the girl arrives in the car. • *Noises*: we can hear the spinning-wheel sound and then Lil Miquela trying to catch her breath.	
16	2:00-2:10	• *Content description:* As Lil Miquela is in her car trying to catch her breath, she touches the palms of her hands thinking about her condition. Then, she looks up at the stars through the car roof and thinks about the greatness of what she has experienced. • *Camera angle:* the focus is on the girl. In the beginning there is a close-up on her the palm of her hands. Then the camera focuses on her looking up at the sky. Finally, there is a close-up of her that smiles while thinking about the journey. • *Illumination:* dark and gloomy. • *Colour*: cool and dark but with a pop of red given by the girl's dress and the car.	• *Music:* there is no music. • *Noises*: we can hear Lil Miquela's breath and her palms rubbing on one another.	
17	2:11-2:21	• *Content description:* Lil Miquela decides to drive back to the luminous gate to the Metaverse. She drives back on the roads she went through in the beginning of this journey. She arrives at the gate at dawn, and then she gets out of the car.	• *Music:* captivating classical piano music starts again. • *Noise:* we can hear the electric engine sound as a	

		• *Camera angle:* first the car is filmed as it emerges from the back of the camera. Then, a set of clips of the car driving down different roads and landscapes comes through. The perspective alternates its focus on different aspects of the car: the wheel, the logo, the lights and so on. Lastly, the focus shifts on Lil Miquela that exits the car. • *Illumination:* it is variable, at first is dark since it is still night, then it becomes lighter as the sun comes up. In the end the lighting is clearer. • *Colour*: colours are mainly cool but as the sun comes up, they become warmer.	back noise to the main theme.	
18	2:22-2:40	• *Content description:* Lil Miquela exits the car and looks at the luminous gate from a long distance. She looks still undecisive about going back; as she keeps thinking, it starts raining. The girl notices raindrops make her skin wet, and do not go through her as it happened with the light or the dragonfly. She looks back at the gate and enters the car. • *Camera angle:* the main focus of the camera is Lil Miquela. At first, the camera follows the girl as she exits the car, then, the camera zooms out including in the frame the girl (giving her back), the car and the gate. Then, a close-up on the girl happens as it starts raining. After, the point of view shifts to the inside of the car but the focus is still the girl. In the following frame, there's a close-up on the girl's palm which is collecting some raindrops. Lastly, a close-up on Lil Miquela who smiles and enters the car. • *Illumination: the lighting is soft.* • *Colour*: both cool and warm colours with a pop of red in Miquela's dress	• *Music:* captivating classical piano music stops as she exits the car. The music starts again when Lil Miquela enters the car. • *Noise:* we can hear car door opening noise. Then, there is the sound of the rain falling (which is both clear and muffled) and the sound of the blowing wind.	
19	2:41-2:47	• *Content description:* Lil Miquela decides in the end not to drive back to the Metaverse. She drives at high speed back on the roads she went through before. A quick jump cut of some of the car features slides through. • *Camera angle:* first the car is filmed high speeding down an unpaved road. Then, a set of clips of the car features (logo, lights) come through. • *Illumination:* it is variable, at first is bright since then it becomes darker.	• *Music:* captivating classical piano music continues. • *Noise:* we can hear the electric engine sound as a back noise to the main theme.	The "Make it Real" tagline appears on the screen at minute 2:43.

		• *Colour*: colours are both cool and warm.		
20	2:47-2:55	• *Content description:* the car appears in the corner of the frame, and it is driving down the road. It is a display of the product. After, the car passes by and the tagline enters • *Camera angle:* the car is fully shown on the right corner with a three-quarter view. Then, it drives out of the camera view, and then there is just the landscape. • *Illumination:* it is gloomy as if it has just rained. • *Colour*: colours are cool but with a pop of colour given by the red car.	• *Music:* captivating classical piano music continues till minute 2:51. • *Noise:* we can hear the electric engine sound as a back noise to the main theme and then as the main theme from minute 2:51.	The name of the car "the new iX2" appears on the upper left corner with the product description on the bottom of the frame. Lastly, the tagline "Sheer driving pleasure. 100% electric" appears.

Narrative level

The narrative level allows to conduct deeper analysis of the film by identifying the roles in the narration through Greimas' Actantial Model (Greimas, A.J. 1973). According to this model every narrative revolves around a set of universal unchanging syntactic positions occupied by actants (Greimas, A.J. 1973). The Actantial Model is strictly related to the Canonical Narrative Scheme, which will be later employed to observe the evolution of the narration.

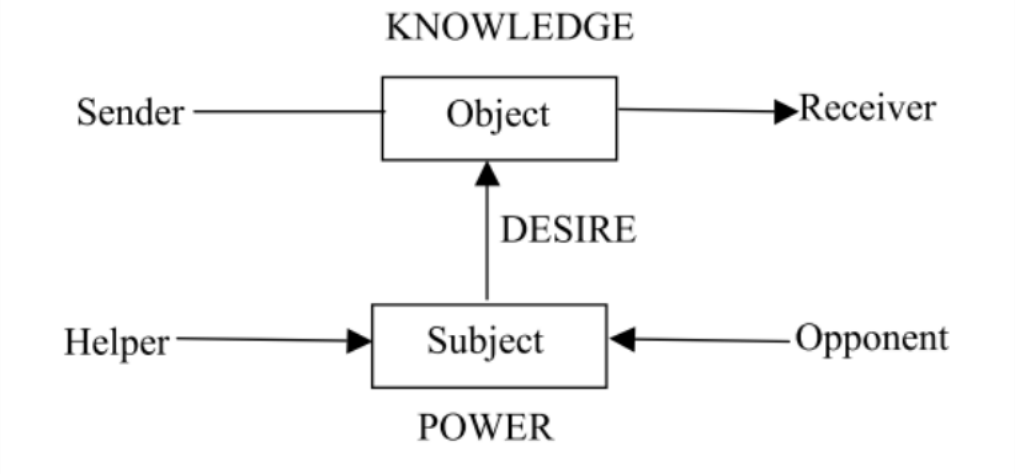

Image 11: The Actantial Model by Greimas (Greimas, A.J. 1973).

By adopting this model, it is possible to confer roles and identify their narrative functions in the *Make it Real* campaign.

Subject – the main subject of the narration is Lil Miquela who undergoes the poetical journey the whole film revolves around. The girl lives in the Metaverse, but she feels the impulse to discover what lays beyond artificiality.

Object – it is the goal the Subject aspires to. In Make it Real the object is Lil Miquela's desire to discover and experience reality. She feels the aspiration to get closer to humanity by uncovering the complexity of human emotions. Moreover, the Metaverse, with its limited nature that confines Lil Miquela, gives her the impulse to take action and discover reality, overcoming her artificiality.

Helper – the Helper is fundamental to help the Subject achieve their Object. In the film the one that assists Lil Miquela through her journey is BMW iX2. The car – and therefore the brand – acts as the link between the Metaverse and reality, allowing the girl to go through the personal growth process.

Receiver – it is the one that receives the task to be accomplished. In the Make it Real film the Receiver is Lil Miquela. Lil Miquela is challenged to take action and go through the human experience leaving behind her the Metaverse, sensing human emotions and experiencing everyday situations she would not have lived otherwise.

Sender – it is the actant who convinces the Receiver to act, then judging the result. BMW can be interpreted as the Sender that convinces Lil Miquela to take action, by reassuring her with its presence throughout the whole journey.

Opponent – it is anything that hinders the Subject to reach the Object. In this narration the opponent is Lil Miquela's awareness of her artificial nature that contrasts with the natural elements of reality, which are constant reminders of her non-existence.

The Canonical Narrative Scheme by Greimas divides the narration into four fragments able to describe the narrative journey (Greimas, A.J. 1973). The four phases are ordered logically so each fragment involves the previous one.

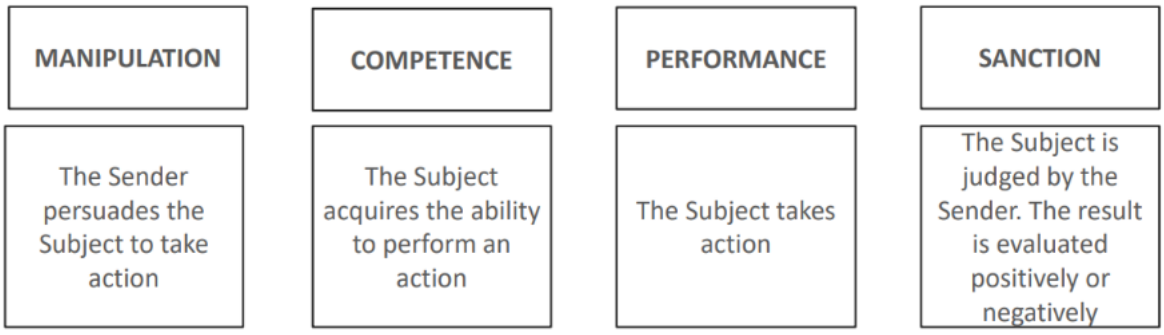

Image 12: The Canonical Narrative Scheme by Greimas (Greimas, A.J. 1973).

Manipulation – in this first sequence, Lil Miquela is in the Metaverse, and driven by curiosity, she feels she is missing the beauty of real life as well as the opportunity of experiencing the whole set of human emotions. In the Manipulation phase, the Subject undergoes a state of unease that awakens her, persuading her into taking action. Within this step, the BMW iX2 reassures the girl into undertaking the adventure.

Competence – Lil Miquela gets the ability to cross the boundaries between the Metaverse and reality, and BMW iX2 acts as the helper enabling the girl to overcome this obstacle. The car, which as stated before, is the Helper, represents the means through which the girl becomes independent and free from the constrictions of the digital world.

Performance – Lil Miquela arrives in our world. She gets to discover the beauty of nature and the variety of human emotions, experiencing them on her own skin. Getting in touch with human emotions gives Lil Miquela an important lesson about life, ultimately developing a more incisive self-awareness.

Sanction – in this final phase Lil Miquela is going to be judged – positively or negatively – by the Sender. In the end of the commercial, the girl finds herself stuck in a limbo where she is aware of her artificiality and that she belongs to the Metaverse but, at the same time, she is fully conscious of the journey she has been through. Witnessing the human experience made herself a little bit closer to humanity, ultimately enabling her to perceive the same emotions. Lil Miquela presents trace of humanity due to the empathy that characterizes her. The girl gets positively sanctioned by the Metaverse since as she tries to come back, ultimately remaining in the real world. The spectator gets sanctioned as well and lead into thinking about the revaluation of the role of AI in their lives.

Axiological level

In the Narrative level, the narration was analysed making its themes, values and brand positioning emerge. At the Discursive level, the Narrative one is further concretised by being inscribed in actors, places and times. The Axiological level is the deepest level in which it is possible to identify the complex value system laying below the superficial level of commercials.

At the Axiological level, the practical transformation of the Narrative and Discursive levels takes place, providing a deeper understanding through the attribution of meanings, from one value to the other, connected by a logical relationship.
In this level, BMW's basic identity as well as its core values are meant to be highlighted.

To decompose the Axiological level, it deems fundamental to define the thematic isotopies that structure the *Make it Real* campaign, namely the recurrence in a text of what structuralist semiotics defines as classems, which ensure discourse's homogeneity (Finocchi, R. 2020):

- The line between real and artificial is getting increasingly thinner;
- Technologies enable the creation of unique and authentic experiences;
- Driving, meant as a metaphor for personal growth, assumes the shape of existential pleasure;
- Emotions and experiences remain focal points even in the AI era.

Building upon these premises it is crucial to identify tensions and dichotomies constituting key pillars of this analysis. First, the *Real vs. Artificial* tension is identified, it is the basis of the whole analysis given the ontological nature of the issue.
Afterwards, the *Authentic vs. Inauthentic.* As premised in the Second Chapter, Hyperreality is more than just fiction, it is a simulation that becomes more realistic than reality itself, therefore Inauthentic, challenging for this reason the concept of Authenticity.

To effectively address the above-mentioned tensions, this analysis will rely on the usage of the Greimasian Square, a powerful semiotic tool able to identify, highlight and valorise the relationships among concepts. This tool organizes the constituent elements on a double binary grid, comprised of three relationships of contrariness, complementarity and contradiction. This structure clarifies the nuances and dichotomies that fall between the two poles of each paradigm, extending the semantic complexity of the semiotic analysis (Oswald, L. 2012). This tool is complementary to the exploration of the complexity of meanings existing within

the *Make it Real* discourse and, therefore, to the strategic positioning of BMW with respect to these tensions.

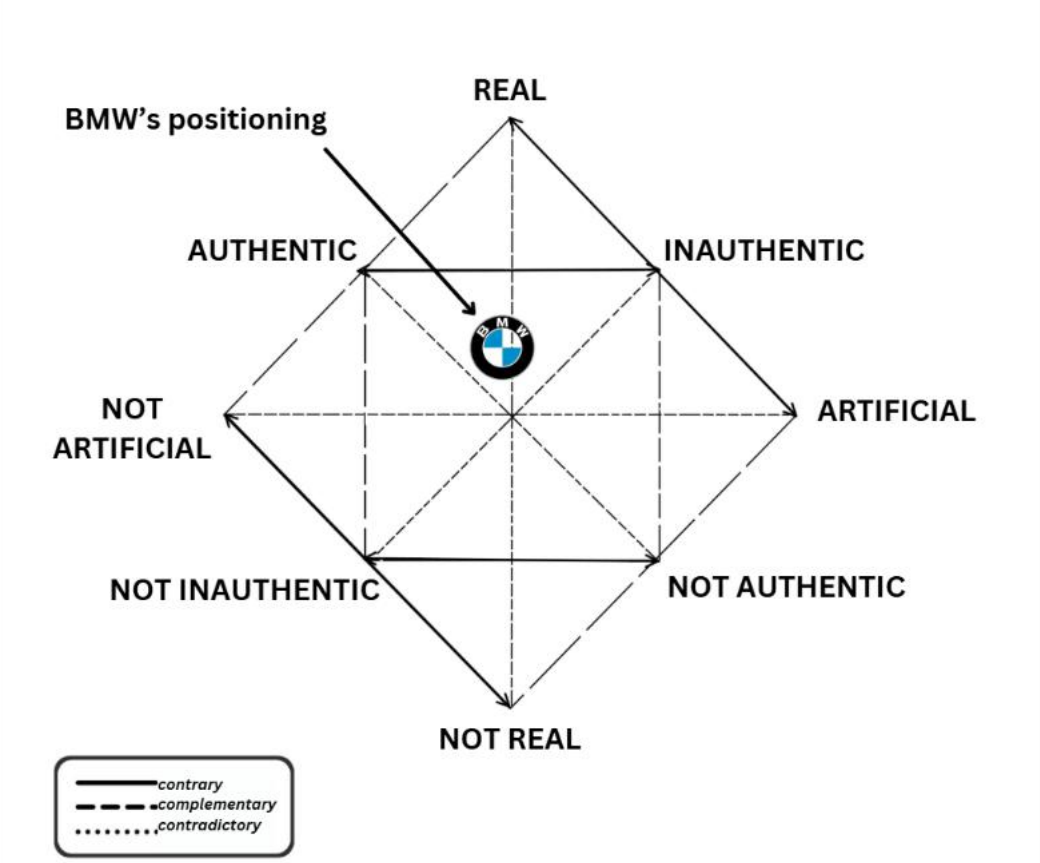

Image 13: Semiotic Square elaborated from Greimas' model and BMW's positioning

The present Semiotic Square captures the brand's identity highlights and it is made of four main quadrants:

- *Real – Authentic,* the semantic meaning of this construct lies in real and emotionally involved experiences;
- *Artificial – Inauthentic,* to be intended as simulated, algorithmic generated environments, where real and pure emotions are limited to synthetic and artificial exaggerations;
- *Artificial – Authentic,* this construct is based on the paradox between real, authentic emotions and fictional simulations. A clear example of such paradox is the creation of augmented realities where a blend of authenticity and artificiality takes place;
- *Real – Inauthentic,* reality becomes stage for artifices that are more simulated than virtual creations themselves. Within this quadrant, real life is put on an act, staging situations characteristic of inauthentic experiences.

BMW is placed between the real-authentic quadrant, but slightly oriented towards the bigger real-artificial one and this is evidence for the brand's role as a mediator between reality and artificiality. Being itself an innovator, BMW's car does not belong to nature, but it is a mere product of elaborate minds and high engineering, stemming for this reason from the concept of reality that flows naturally. On the other hand, the brand's culture is the creation of strong emotions that are conveyed by the act of driving so, BMW is able to provide their customers with authentic and emotional experiences within a highly technological environment.

Within the present Semiotic Square, and therefore BMW's positioning, the *Rational vs. Emotional* tension descends making the following issue arise: given that the current algorithmic culture can enhance and mediate experiences fostering strong emotions (think about A.R.), how is it possible for sensitive human experiences to exist in such an environment? To answer this question, and establish a new positioning for BMW, another Semiotic Square will be formulated.

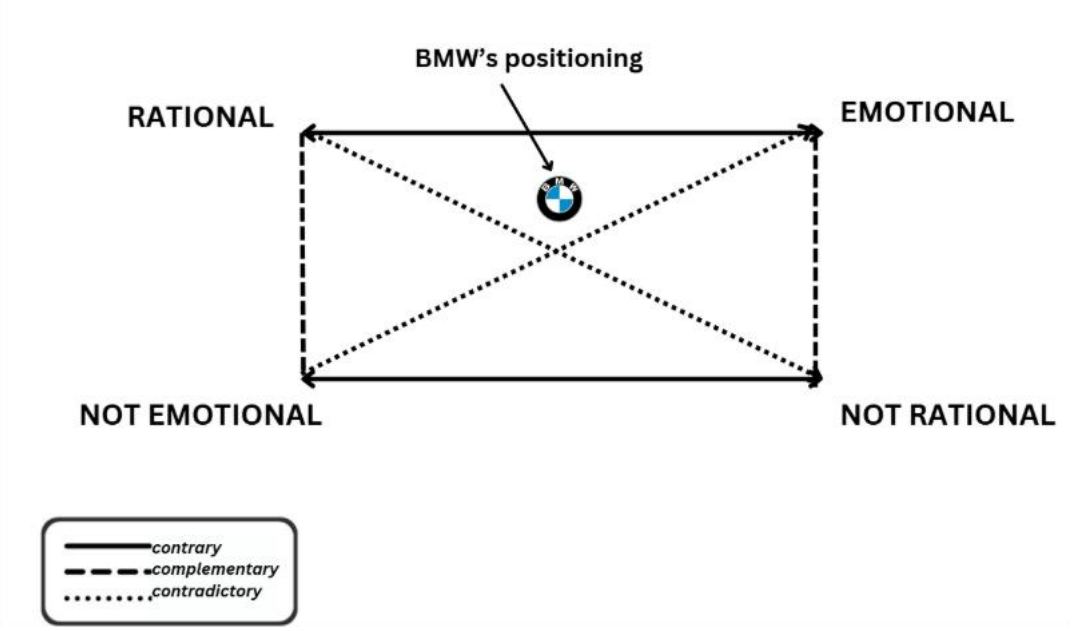

Image 14: Semiotic Square elaborated from Greimas' model and BMW's positioning

Technology is often considered as a cold and rational entity, while on the other hand, emotion is a warm embrace of irrationality and non-predictability. The present grid highlights this dichotomy, and through BMW's positioning, it explains what can be defined as the *techno-empathy zone:* in the current algorithmic culture, technology does not suppress emotions, but it stages a true act of amplification. Rational and Emotional are no longer antithetical, but rather they resonate with the popular need for spaces able to mediate these emotions. With the *Make*

it Real campaign BMW wants to communicate that even though the car – and therefore Lil Miquela (Black, T. C. 2019)– is artificially crafted, it does not mean that it cannot feel emotions. Through Lil Miquela's rational eyes, the car, so technology, becomes the vehicle for affective depth.

3.2.3 Competitors Analysis

The current section is aimed at analysing the current competitive situation in the automotive field and how leading brands rely on the involvement of Artificial Intelligence at different life stages of their products. While early applications of Artificial Intelligence in the automotive field focused on the quest for improving safety and performance, the present brands creatively integrate the algorithms both in terms of production or functional innovation, and in terms of brand storytelling. Within the automotive industry, BMW faces severe competition from major automakers such as Mercedes-Benz, Audi, Hyundai and the younger Tesla.

Mercedes-Benz represents one of BMW's main competitors in premium automotive segment (Muhamad, M., 2023). Starting from their first goal to prioritize comfort, performance and high-quality features, the current brand aim is to build the world's most desirable cars through the involvement of technological innovations – hence, AI – in a variety of areas. AI-powered navigation systems, smart voice assistants, and autonomous driving highlight AI's role in the customer-centric approach the company has always focused on. Including such approaches from the very beginning of the product's development, the production becomes more sustainable, efficient and brilliant.

By directly tapping into customers' habits when interacting with their cars, Mercedes-Benz introduced the new MBUX system, the new frontier of infotainment able to automatically adjust to drivers' routines. MBUX provides drivers with a hyper-personalized driving experience, allowing them to choose its personality traits – natural, predictive, personal or empathetic – or to set the mood according to their preferences. With this system, Mercedes-Benz's vehicles are able to perceive the driver's anxieties and react accordingly (Shimkus B., 2024).

Mercedes-Benz narrates the role of AI in its vehicles by emphasizing the human-digital relationship: through the MBUX system, AI emerges as an empathic assistant that stands by its drivers.

Audi is another important player in the automotive market. As one of the largest premium automakers in the world, the company has always showcased major commitment to digital innovation, evidenced by its slogan, “Audi, progress through technology” (Rubio-Hernández, M. del M., & Martínez-García, Á., 2022).
Audi is currently focusing on the inclusion of Artificial Intelligence in both production processes and the improvement of the driving experience. A clear example of this commitment is the automatization of factories challenging traditional production systems with AI-powered quality control systems - “IRIS” - or the introduction of cloud-based IT architecture.

Moreover, on March 2024, Audi has proficiently employed AI to launch the exclusive collection of cars purely made for the South African market. The collection included two exclusive models, the Urban Edition and the Black Edition, that explicitly tap into the current customers’ trends and are meticulously curated to embody the South African driver’s preferences. Being curation itself a typically human trait, Audi featuring the advertising agency Ogilvy SA and local AI specialists Monkey Donkey, were cleverly able to combine creativity with AI.

Image 15: Audi’s curated collection for the South African market.

The campaign showcases the iconic Audi features such as the black grilles or the sleek chrome accents in a sophisticated and polished style. Among AI-generated visuals and very few shot in real life, the company has been able to blur the lines between vision and reality.

There were several more occasions in which Audi showcased its commitment to AI, for instance the short film starring the virtual assistant AI.leene published on the Spanish platform. The initiative was brilliant, the company in fact thought of anthropomorphising the AI assistant to illustrate its features to the public. Giving shape to the assistant, enabled AI to communicate

the new technology in a pleasant way, connecting it with people and humanising the way they interact with it.
By including AI in its recent efforts, Audi was able to establish and reinforce its position as a progressive pioneer in the market, conveying to its audience to explore a world where innovation and inspiration become increasingly intertwined.

Within the automotive industry, another important competitor is the South Korean company Hyundai. The company has always showcased great commitment towards innovation, even dedicating its brand name to it, since the word Hyundai stands for “modernity” in Korean. Hyundai has lately demonstrated its active role in the sustainability issue, thanks to the introduction of new electric vehicles trying to have a positive impact on our planet (Hyundai Motor Company. n.d.).

Despite the important human-centric approach, technological innovation has always had a pivotal role in shaping the evolution of Hyundai: by directly participating in the “Little Big e-motion" project in collaboration with the SJD Barcelona Children’s Hospital in Spain, in 2020 the company equipped the structure with a mini electric vehicle to support young patients (Hyundai Motor Company, 2020). The mini electric vehicle uses the Emotion Adaptive Vehicle Control system (EAVC), an entirely AI-based technology that enhances car features based on internal and external stimuli.

Image 16: Hyundai Motors mini ’45’ EV (Source: Hyundai Motor Company, 2020)

The EAVC technology is able to track down facial expressions and heart rate and combine the emerging data with input from the mini car, such as speed, noises and vibrations (Hyundai Motor Company, 2020). Afterwards, the system processes these inputs by using machine learning and ultimately optimizes vehicle's environment accordingly (Hyundai Motor Company, 2020). Changes in the car environment encompass variations in lighting, climate, music and fragrance (Hyundai Motor Company, 2020). The mini-EV is suitable for the mobility of young patients across the Hospital, easing the tension of one of the hardest moments of the treatment (Hyundai Motor Company, 2020).

When talking about AI employment in the automotive field the first brand that pops into customers' minds is Tesla. The American automaker made AI the core of its brand identity as well as a pillar for its innovation strategy.
Tesla has included AI algorithms at different stages of its vehicles' lives. In the manufacturing process, AI is used to automate the production, to enhance quality control and to improve precision engineering.
One of the most disruptive innovations is the Full Self-Driving (FSD), a system for autonomous driving that has revolutionised irreversibly the car industry. The system is able to recognise and interpret visual cues and pedestrians, as well as connect with other Tesla vehicles to improve their performance by assimilating their data and updating their algorithms.

Conversely to BMW or Mercedes-Benz, Tesla does not employ an emotional approach in its narrations, the brand on the other hand, chooses to adopt a more engineering register. In Tesla's language, AI becomes the mean for progress and thanks to the employment of a futuristic style, the brand wants to communicate the importance of autonomy in the present and future era. The evidence for this motif is also given by the recent CyberCab promotional campaign on YouTube, whose slogan is "Future is Autonomous".

Image 17: Tesla's Cybercab.

3.3 The Culture Sweep

As Artificial Intelligence increasingly makes its way into modern consumption culture, its deeper meaning transcends being a mere technology able to assist people every day, emerging instead as a powerful cultural symbol. Being automotive the domain of interest of this thesis, it deems fundamental to understand the culture sweep to effectively get how society perceives and narrates AI within this field.
Nowadays automakers not only leverage AI as a tool able to enhance vehicle performance but also to shape how customers interpret their relationship with the car.

The culture sweep stage scans the environment BMW is placed into to detect trends in the product category, pop culture and in the broader semantic category. To carry out this phase it is necessary to analyse texts including books, interviews, movies, advertising, TV shows and pop culture in general to identify that information that entrench BMW's image in the cultural environment. By detecting these brand texts and discourses, it is possible to understand why the brand is employing a more emotional narration instead of a functional one, as well as its current positioning towards this cultural discourse.

The incessant evolution of society deeply influences brands from several point of views. This never-ending evolution makes new trends and codes emerge, and brands are constantly challenged to keep up with these to survive the competition.

Residual codes are for this reason obsolete, and brands need to assimilate dominant codes that structure their contemporary cultural category. *Dominant codes* are those cues with widespread acceptance in culture in a certain epoque and when they reach dominance – passing through the emergent phase – they lose their originality for those who are considered the trendsetters of the category. Finally, *emergent codes* are the trends that evolved in response to cultural transitions given by several external factors.

In the beginning, the automotive narration of Artificial Intelligence was mostly product-centric, with emphasis on its features, suggesting functionality and performance. The inclusion of AI in many vehicles' functions was totally detached from its relationship with humans. AI became the invisible ally for drivers, always acting behind the scenes. Brands such as Tesla still perpetuate this myth into their core strategies: this technology-oriented approach sees AI as a tool for the optimization of processes, a dilemma that has been afflicting societies for centuries since the post-industrial era. This myth clearly gives answers to societies' need to control and contain reality and to avoid the unpredictability of human error. This residual code can be referred to as *Invisible Enabler*.

A concrete example of this myth is the "Model 3 – Navigate on Autopilot" (2018) promotional video, originally published on the official Tesla's YouTube account (Tesla, 2018). The company is accustomed to publishing this kind of clips on their profiles, exploiting them as a type of direct tutorial to their potential, or already existing, customers.

In this advertising, which is entirely shot from the driver's perspective, the Autopilot function is explained in its core capabilities of autonomously driving on open roads, of changing lane and steering without any kind of human intervention (Tesla, 2018). The choice of shooting the video from the driver's perspective is not a coincidence: the brand wants indeed to "normalize" this car function, minimizing the physical and mental distance that some drivers put between them and AI. This kind of functional narrativization fully talks to the *Invisible Enabler* myth, representing AI as a tool able to relieve drivers from the burden of control.

Although these representations were socially accepted from consumers of the past, they are now losing their relevance as it emerges from the analysis of the socio-cultural environment. The shift towards the emergent code comes as response to the change in priorities of AI users: virtual assistants such as Siri, Alexa and ChatGPT have legitimised the idea of needing a tool able to both serve its purpose and interact with the user. Consumers, for this reason, increasingly feel the need to rely on an AI that can understand them.

Spike Jonze's film *Her* (2013), cleverly captures the essence of this shift, anticipating consumers' cultural desire to humanise technology, for utility, company and emotional resonance. The film is a compelling metaphor of loneliness: Theodore is suffering from an abrupt divorce, and he finds companionship in Samantha, an AI-voice assistant that gives him support, both functional and emotional. Theodore and Samantha's interaction is a representation of the antithesis between the human propensity to be sensitive, and the emerging ability of AIs to develop emotions and empathy. Moreover, the whole script is evidence for the evolution of relationships in a digitally centred society, raising not few ethical dilemmas regarding the nature and the role of AI. The dominant code is currently the *Smart Assistant,* AI just as Samantha, is now a companion that has a voice, a personality and is always present to help and interact with users.

The *Smart Assistant* is synonymous for the emotionalization of AI: this human-centred design is empathetic, and just as the Mercedes-Benz MBUX, it is always by the driver's side. A clear example of this myth can be found in the official "Mercedes-Benz A-Class: Just like you" commercial for the MBUX system featuring the popstar Nicki Minaj, from 2018 (Mercedes-Benz, 2018). The video, which was shared on the company's official YouTube profile, shows some of the different scenarios in which drivers use the new technology (Mercedes-Benz, 2018).

MBUX is an AI-based system able to learn drivers' preferences and behaviours so that it can customise their whole driving experience (Mercedes-Benz, 2018). The technology can respond to several commands just by pronouncing "Hey, Mercedes" (Mercedes-Benz, 2018). It is a Smart Assistant because it learns drivers' habits and it also memorizes their favourites settings, additionally giving them suggestions to improve their experience.

The emergent code pushes further this narration: AI is now anthropomorphized mirroring human anxieties, identities and hopes. AI is treated beyond its functionalities as a metaphorical presence, which uncovers its own representation in human lives.

Striking evidence for this shift in culture emerges from Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Klara and the Sun* (2021). Klara is an A.F. (short for Artificial Friend), a solar-powered android whose task is to keep a young girl company. The author describes Klara not as a machine able to finalise complex tasks, but as an AI supplied with empathy, able to observe and understand human behaviours and sufferings. Klara's dimension is shaped by strong emotions and beliefs, and through her presence, Ishiguro wants to challenge the collective imagery of Artificial

Intelligence as a machine that lacks emotions.
The emergent code is the one that comes to surface due to social cultural transitions. In this analysis we identify as the emergent code the *Symbolic Mirror:* AI does not represent a mere tool that helps human beings but elevates itself to the symbolic level through which we can talk about humanity and its concerns.

Residual Code	**Dominant Code**	**Emergent Code**
Invisible Enabler	*Smart Assistant*	*Symbolic Mirror*
AI is considered as a useful tool for the optimization of processes. Users functionally interact with it, and it operates undercover.	AI becomes smart and interactive. It gains such a level of sensitivity that makes it possible to define it as empathetic.	AI has a voice and an outer appearance. It becomes an allegorical representation of post-humanity and taps into deeper social concerns.
Tesla's FSD	Mercedes-Benz MBUX	BMW's *Make it Real*

The residual code is still present, even though it is not able to tap into modern society and its needs: brands such as Tesla, that still largely rely on this kind of communication, remain trapped into a vicious circle. Communicating functionalities is no longer meaningful to audiences who expect more emotional resonance from companies.

Moreover, as consumers get accustomed to *Smart Assistants,* they become increasingly appealed by the idea of anthropomorphized intelligences that participate into the creation of reality. In the emergent code, AI functions as a *Symbolic Mirror* to social anxieties, tensions and beliefs.
BMW positions itself exactly in this stage: the company narrates AI not just as a machine apt for the optimization of procedures, but with the presence of Lil Miquela, it becomes an allegory of human condition in the current digital era. The narrative structure of the film wants to suggest causes for reflection and it raises questions about humanity and authenticity. With the *Make it Real* campaign and Lil Miquela, BMW wants to address an elite of consumers able to track down meaningful insights that are deeper than the technological ones. Finally, BMW positions itself as a cultural pioneer in the automotive field, differentiating itself on a market that is saturated with predictable AIs.

3.4 Decoding the data

In this phase the empirical data is organized into sets. According to Oswald (2012), semiotic cues structure the main cultural category which make cultural polarisations emerge. Starting from these tensions, it is possible to generate emotional territories the brand moves into. Emotional territories are usually communicated through semiotic cues that encompass three main categories: product attributes, experiential qualities, people and places (Laura Oswald, 2012).

The present semiotic cues were identified starting from the general AI category, grabbing material signifiers coming from commercials, products and articles of BMW and its competitors as well as recurrent motifs emerging from the Culture Sweep.

Decoding the data enables researchers to identify cultural tensions within the category, to better understand the environment brands live into. Subsequently, it is possible to strategically position BMW following its relatively conformity to the overreaching paradigms associated with the automotive category. The positioning will be further carried out with Greimas' semiotic square.

AI in the automotive industry

Cultural Category	*Tensions*	*Emotional Territories*	*Semiotic Cues*
Technology	Invisible vs. Expressive	Control, precision, Post-Industrial optimization, dialogue, empathy and mirroring of social tensions	Physical absence of the tool, Vocal support and functions embedded in the car, Digital faces, lack of presence, gesturing, human and aestheticized AI, authenticity and humanity issues, glossy colours, soft music
Relationship	Utilitarian vs. Relational	Dependent vs. Functional role, Help vs. Company, caring affection	Functional interface, autonomous driving systems, "Hands free", familiar voice, empathetic adjustments

Identity	Machine vs. Human	Need for connection, emotion, functional relationship vs. emotional support	Anthropomorphised AI, storytelling about self-awareness, polished style
Cultural Value	Rational vs. Emotional	Rational, high engineering, machinery approach, self-awareness and emotiveness	Coldness and physical distancing, sterile, socialize, understanding, emotionally connected
Myth	Unmediated Reality vs. Hyperreality	Existing in real life, no filters, undiscovered, symbolic construction, post-human vision	Realistic features and visuals, surreal aesthetic, futuristic style, cinematic visuals, glossy colours and clear music

Technology

Technology factors are expressed through semiotic cues that emphasize the efficiency of AI, which is culturally represented as a tool always on the users' side as it responds to the Post-Industrial rising need for control, precision and optimization of procedures. *Physical absence of the tool* and *functions embedded in the car*, as well as *human and aestheticized AI* are signals illustrating how AI oscillates between the total tangible absence to a more concrete presence. Brand' discourse revolving around AI's interpretation as a mechanism able to perform tasks in a seamless and controlled way, emphasizes the invisibility of the system. This perception of invisibility goes against the natural human propensity to look for tangible feedback coming from the interlocutor, therefore the system. Therefore, this tension concretizes the public debate revolving around the AI role whether it should be unfolded as a silent operator or as an explicit, visible, humanized presence.

In this way, an emotional territory gets shaped by the dichotomy outlined above. This territory extends from the total lack of AI concreteness, which is characterised by precision and the total absence of mistakes, to the need for expressive AI, which manifests itself resembling human interactions.

Relationship

Consumers wanting to include AI in their everyday practices, deeply think about the type of relationship they want to maintain with their cars, and therefore with AI.

While cues such as *functional interface* and *autonomous driving systems* reflect technical functionalities of the system, on the other hand, relational aspects of AI are highlighted by familiar and empathetic signals. Brands such as Tesla and BMW activate polarisations of thoughts which lead to the rise of the *Utilitarian vs. Relational* cultural tension*:* cars transcend the mere utilitarian value, detaching from their functional-mechanical role, to acquire a relational role into users' driving experiences.
Within this context, cars become more than just means able to autonomously transport passengers, and it is sufficient to think about Tesla's Cyber Cab. Automotive brands evolve their cars into true travelling buddies, able to display *caring affection*.

Identity

BMW's *Make it Real* campaign is an impressive example of *self-awareness storytelling*, communicated through *anthropomorphised AI*. With these advertising practices, companies try to respond to consumers' need for deeper connections, challenging the collective Identity imagery. The present issue gives rise to a conceptual polarisation of the overall evaluation consumers have of the automotive sector. This dichotomy can be concretised in the *Machine vs. Human* opposition. Companies within the automotive market cleverly navigate this tension by employing designs and narratives that attach human qualities to AI, and that, at the meantime, emphasize technological innovation within the range of human capabilities.

Cultural Value

Semiotic cues such as coldness and physical distancing, understanding and emotional connection, highlight the *Rational vs. Emotional* tension characterising the bigger frame of the whole automotive discourse. This dichotomy is activated by subtle issues regarding the kind of cultural value brands might associate to the category.
This matter revolves around two types of communications' parameters: on one hand, there is a more rational product-centric approach, on the other there is the emotional engagement characterizing modern advertising. Companies such as BMW, strategically exploit this cultural tension, leveraging their emotional heritage to communicate innovation.

Rationality stands for engineering precision, seamless machinery and control. Within this frame, emotions cannot be neglected, for this reason the need for connection, emotiveness and

self-awareness overturns the role of cars within the current customer journey, making them places where rationality and emotions coexist.

Myth

Surreal aesthetic, futuristic style, glossy colours and *clear music* are all semiotic cues identified within Hyperreal communication. The *Make it Real* campaign is a direct example of BMW's effort to keep up with this emerging trend in advertising. Through the involvement of the AI influencer Lil Miquela, cinematic visuals and vivid, glossy colours, the company accomplished in highlighting the dichotomy between hyperreality and unmediated reality. This tension is eradicated into modern consumption culture of contents. Unmediated reality stands for the experience which is not "mediated" by any filter, so is the truest and most reliable form of perception our senses can gather. Hyperreality is engendered by simulations of reality, it is the outcome of filters and cinema.

Therefore, the act of driving is depicted on one hand as an unmediated experience, performed through a tangible vehicle, rooted in rational engineering principles. On the other hand, brands rely on a hyperreal kind of discourse offering surreal scenarios and aspirational lifestyles. Driving becomes the mean through which drivers can experience existential journeys accomplished by cars, mythological artifacts that carry with them a set of cultural ideals such as freedom, transcendence and post-humanity.

The current emotional territory spaces from the functional and the objectification of cars to the mythologisation of these vehicles. Cars become cultural myths able to carry lifestyle aspirations and narratives that further blend the edges between their reality and collective imagination.

3.4.1 Strategic Positioning Analysis

A strategic positioning of BMW's direct competitors can be easily achieved defining brands' relative conformity to overreaching paradigms associated with the AI in the automotive category. Starting from the strategic analysis of the competitors performed (see paragraph *3.2.3*), it is possible to identify two semantic axes structured as it follows.

On the horizontal axis the paradigm is structured among the concepts of subject (anthropomorphised AI) and object (abstract AI). When talking about anthropomorphising AI

it means that it takes the human shape, talks and acts as human beings, hence representing a subject. On the other end of the axe, AI is an object, it is abstract, we cannot see it because it is a function integrated into systems, valid and efficient.

On the vertical axis the binary opposition autonomous/empathic perfectly describes the nature of AI assistance within the automotive category. Autonomous assistants are those AI-driven assistants that act rationally and independently from the driver. Empathic AI assistants appear as intuitive companions to drivers, able to sense their mood and change their behaviour accordingly.

By plotting the axis in the following way, it is not only possible to identify four quadrants in which the brands are positioned but also reveal unoccupied spaces of meanings competitors might take advantage of (Oswald, L. 2012).

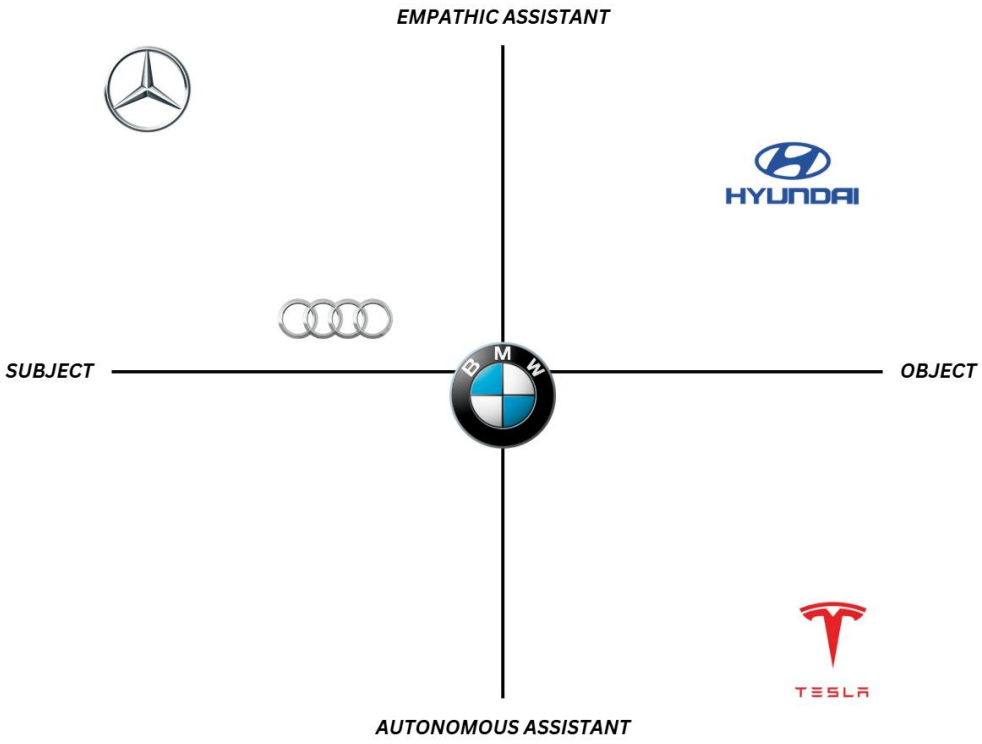

Image 18: Positioning Map.

Mercedes-Benz fully embodies the Empathic and anthropomorphised assistant, with AI being the subject. Through the MBUX system, the company has been able to develop a voice assistant whose attitude – natural, predictive, personal or empathetic – can be chosen according to drivers' preferences so that they can have an almost human resembling interaction. The

company conjugates AI as a close presence positioning itself, for this reason, in the upper left corner, between subject and empathic AI.

On the other hand, Audi narrativization of AI is mostly aimed at expressing the human aspect of this tool. The company's positioning is in the upper left corner, but with a tendency towards the Subject corner. The inclusion of humanized voice assistants, such as AI.leene, make the brand closer to the horizontal axis, however Audi talks about AI differently than Mercedes, whose approach is mostly emotion oriented.
At the same time, Audi exploits AI to make production processes easier and automatised, placing itself equally placed between empathy and autonomy.

BMW's positioning is multifaceted clearly reflecting the values the company has always tried to convey to its clients, spacing form performance, engineering excellence to premium innovation. The company has been integrating AI at several stages of product development, purchase and customer experience, generating added value to their customers. Among different innovations implemented, the company introduced the AIQX platform for quality control, suitable for the constant monitoring of the production and then renamed the BMW factory to iFactory.

BMW positioning is almost central, and it clearly reflects the complex way the company talks about AI: the tool is referred to not just as a functionality (object) or as an autonomous assistant, but it acquires a symbolic meaning. In the *Make it Real* campaign, BMW narrates AI through Lil Miquela's presence, shifting the focus on the hyperreal level. At this point, the girl is talking about her own abstract condition, so at the metadiscursive level BMW stages the idea that AI, Lil Miquela, explains itself.
The company does not take an unequivocal position on functionalities or empathy – as the competitors did – but it also makes viewers reflect on AI nature: Artificial Intelligence exists beyond what it does, within its meanings and representations in brand discourse.

Hyundai's positioning can be identified in the upper right quadrant, between *Empathic Assistant and Object.* While Audi and Mercedes-Benz emphasized the presence of AI leveraging their anthropomorphised aspects, able to act as a fellowman to drivers, Hyundai talks about AI through innovative technologies such as the EAVC: AI emerges as a useful object able to come in hand to young patients dealing with tough situations. Hyundai's positioning clearly reflects its intent of talking in an empathic way: AI detects patient's emotions and behaves accordingly to take down their clinical condition, however not.

Lastly, Tesla positions itself as symmetrically opposite to Mercedes-Benz. The American company is in the bottom right corner, between object and autonomous assistant. Innovations such as the Full Self-Driving (FSD) truly reflect the level of autonomy the company aims to: Tesla's vehicles are independent from the driver, they are functional, efficient and they update autonomously. For these reasons, Tesla narrates with futuristic style the role of AI as a tool for pure innovation and autonomy.

3.4.2 Positioning BMW

After having the decoded the data, it is necessary to proceed with the strategic positioning of BMW to understand its relative conformity to selected paradigms related to the automotive industry.

Greimas' semiotic square is essential to understand these insights. To assemble the semiotic square, it is necessary to deconstruct each cultural tension organizing its constituent elements on a double binary grid comprised of three relationships: contradiction, contrariness and complementarity (Greimas, A. J., 1973).

This multi-dimensional structure accounts for the nuances and ambiguities that fall in the two poles of the paradigm and extends the semantic complexity of the semiotic analysis. The square enables for the development of a new cultural paradigm for the AI in the automotive category based on oppositions between real and hyperreal, and AI being declined both as a tool and as a companion to drivers.

Starting from the cultural categories identified, *relationship* and *myth* emerge as the most thorough. To effectively position BMW towards the relative cultural tensions associated with each category - Utilitarian vs. Relational and Unmediated Reality vs. Hyperreality - each of these primary binaries must be broken down into their respective contradictory terms, so as it follows:

- Relational/Not Relational vs. Utilitarian/Not Utilitarian
- Unmediated Reality/Not Unmediated Reality vs. Hyperreality/Not Hyperreality

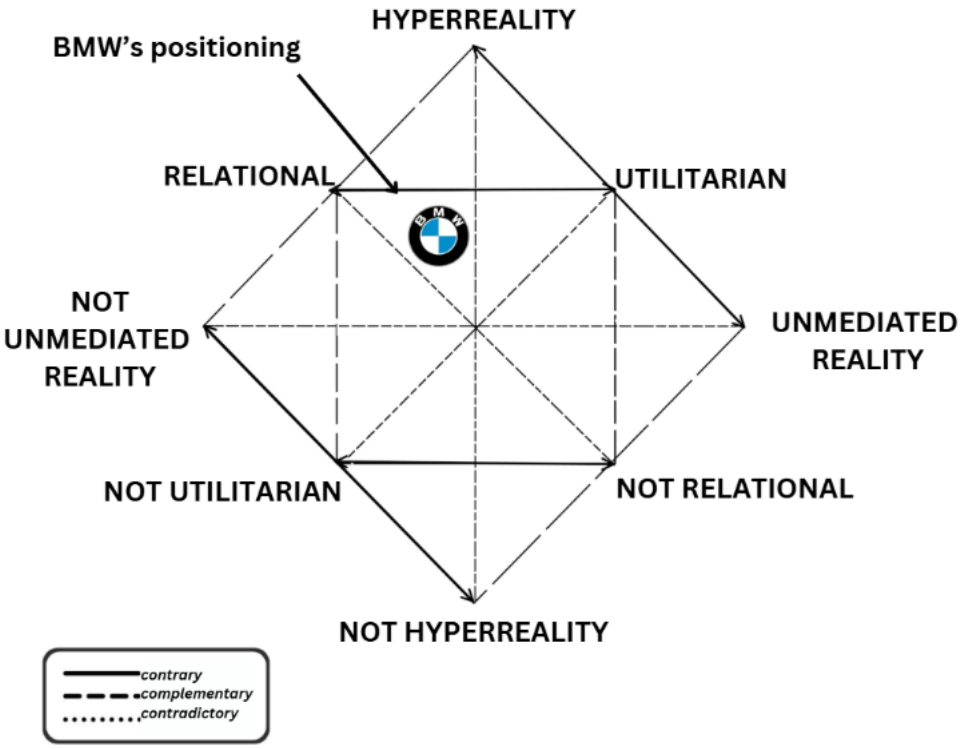

Image 19: Semiotic Square and BMW's positioning

This Semiotic Square can be interpreted in terms of BMW's positioning towards the paradigms. Moreover, BMW's current situation can be examined in relation to its main competitors'. The two main tensions can be explained in the following way:

- *Rational tension* (Relational vs Utilitarian): AI can both be interpreted as a functional tool and as a fellowman. The contradictory paradigms can be explained with the rejection of the main theme, so for Not Utilitarian there is a total refusal to confine AI into its mere functions, and for Not Relational, AI is distant from being humanized.
- *Ontological tension* (Unmediated Reality vs. Hyperreality): AI is real and unfiltered, but on the other hand it can be interpreted as a simulacrum. In a Not Unmediated Reality AI does not have physicality, and it is an invisible enabler, since its mere function lays in its ability to silently and impeccably assist drivers. Not Hyperreal stands for the de-aesthetisation of AI, which is not a simulacrum anymore and t is brought back to its functional appeals.

BMW positioning within these tensions is between Hyperreality and Relational with a slight tendency towards the centre of the square for coherency with the brand authenticity. This positioning identifies a new countercultural space in the automotive Brandscape that BMW filled launching the *Make it Real* campaign.

The effectiveness of this positioning is consistent with BMW strategy to emotionally convey an ally vision of AI. Through the involvement of Lil Miquela, the brand builds an aesthetic imaginary where AI is interpreted as a symbol for cultural concerns afflicting modern society. Therefore, BMW distances itself from its main competitors: the brand places itself on the opposite side of the square with respect to Tesla, whose communication efforts still rotate around the residual code of functionality.
While BMW emotional and relational approach might seem similar to Mercedes', the latter vision can be read in a more realistic and pragmatic key. BMW's effective positioning opens new frontiers towards new cultural and symbolic dimensions for AI to move into: by exploiting its condition with respect to the Symbolic Mirror emergent code, the brand is cleverly able to tap into the current trend among customers and push it further reflecting their needs and expectations.

3.5 *Make it Real* – The first-ever BMW iX2 × lil Miquela

Sentiment analysis on Nvivo

In the light of the nature of the analysis performed so far and the entity of the research question, to further conduct this study, it deems fundamental to move on with the qualitative approach of this methodology. A Sentiment Analysis will be performed, consisting of the collection of people's opinion, thoughts and impressions towards a certain content. Collecting these comments is fundamental for companies to understand the general direction of thought among Internet users and subsequently for them to improve and take action accordingly (Wankhade, M., et al 2022).

The main goal of the Sentiment Analysis is to detect subjectivity within the data collected, and if subjective, to understand if comments express a positive, negative or neutral attitude towards the content (Taboada, M. 2016).
To carry out this analysis the coding software NVivo is employed. NVivo was not a random choice: the software is indeed able to respond to the necessity of a systemic management of data. The software guarantees such coding procedures that are coherent, traceable and

replicable. Moreover, it is supplied with several data view modes, from the more abstract to the more concrete ones.

The methodology followed comprises several fundamental steps:

1. Data collection
2. Data cleaning
3. Data import
4. Data exploration on NVivo
5. Content Analysis

3.5.1 Data Collection

Due to the nature of the YouTube platform and its current employment by users, it deemed fundamental to integrate comments coming from the official campaign with those deriving from other contents posted on Instagram. This choice is driven on one hand by the urgency to rely on a larger number of comments to perform the Sentiment Analysis and, on the other hand, for completeness of the information required, it appears interesting to observe users' behaviours towards the campaign on different channels.

	Platform	*Views*	*Likes*	*Comments*
The first-ever BMW iX2 x Lil Miquela	YouTube	208.378	3.089	215
"Make it an experience. Make it real" photo dump	Instagram		70.908	279
"100% electric experiences" reel	Instagram		39.000	365

For these reasons, relevant comments of the *Make it Real* campaign video posted on YouTube and a selection of comments coming from two BMW x Lil Miquela featured posts on Instagram have been collected and organized into a single Word document.

YouTube and Instagram comments sections have been carefully analysed and, as a result to this, it was preferred not to consider some of the comments that were not pertinent to the content or that were superficial, for instance comments entirely made of emojis were excluded since they are only useful to perform the Sentiment analysis, as they represent audience satisfaction

index. The content analysis requires on the other hand, more articulated comments with relevant themes suitable for categorization. On the other hand, non-English comments have still been included in the data collection because considered pertinent to the analysis. Ultimately, the document made of a total of 225 comments, has been uploaded on NVivo to start the manual coding process and the exploration of results.

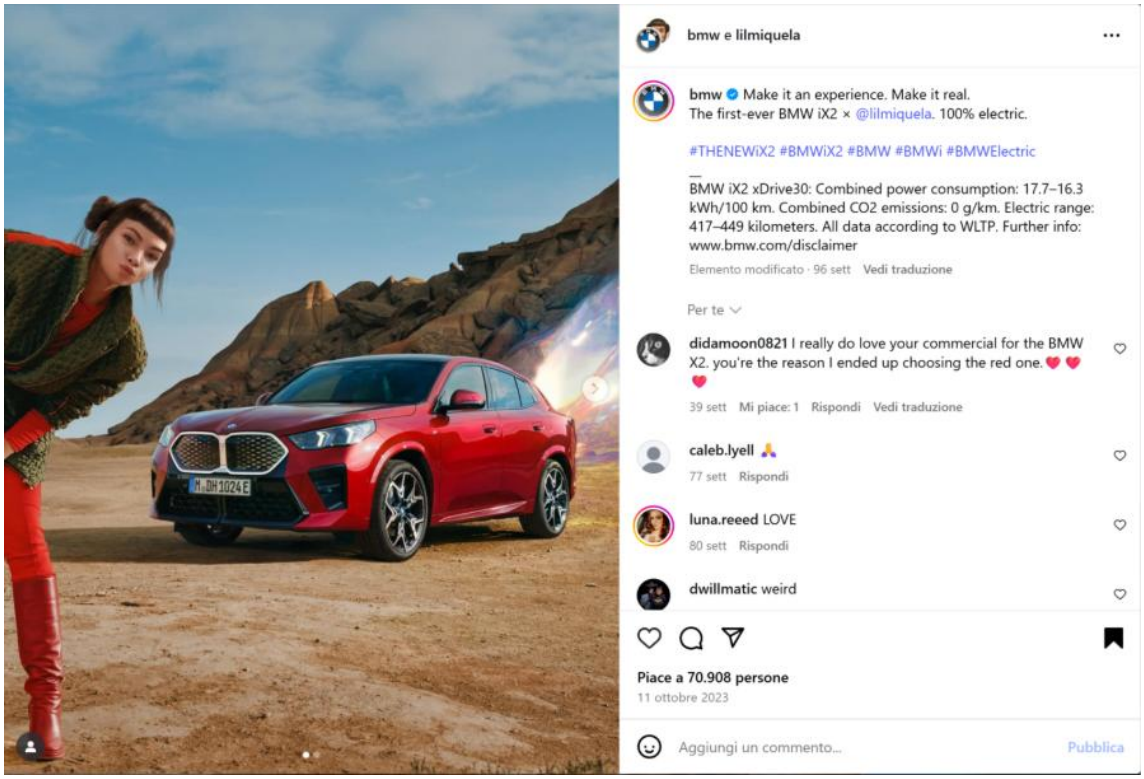

Image 20: "Make it an experience. Make it real" BMW X Lil Miquela featured Instagram photo dump (Source: Instagram, 2023)

3.5.2 Data Exploration

After having uploaded the document on NVivo, comments were manually coded based on an apt coding system structured into three macro-areas – positive, negative and neutral – to understand the general direction of each comment. Subsequently, each comment has been assigned to a subcategory (i.e. Brand admiration, AI critique, Irony) within the corresponding macro-area.

Before kicking off with the in-depth analysis of data, it can be useful to preliminarily visualise the word distribution making use of a Word Cloud chart.
By clicking on the Word Cloud section, it is possible to develop a word frequency query of the uploaded document. This visual query is useful to highlight the most frequent words used

within the comments and it comes in hand to make subtle patterns pop. The Word Cloud has both a descriptive and an exploratory function: being itself a visual tool, it provides a first overview of the linguistic landscape of the comments' totality, guiding the identification of recurring themes and topics fundamental for the analysis.

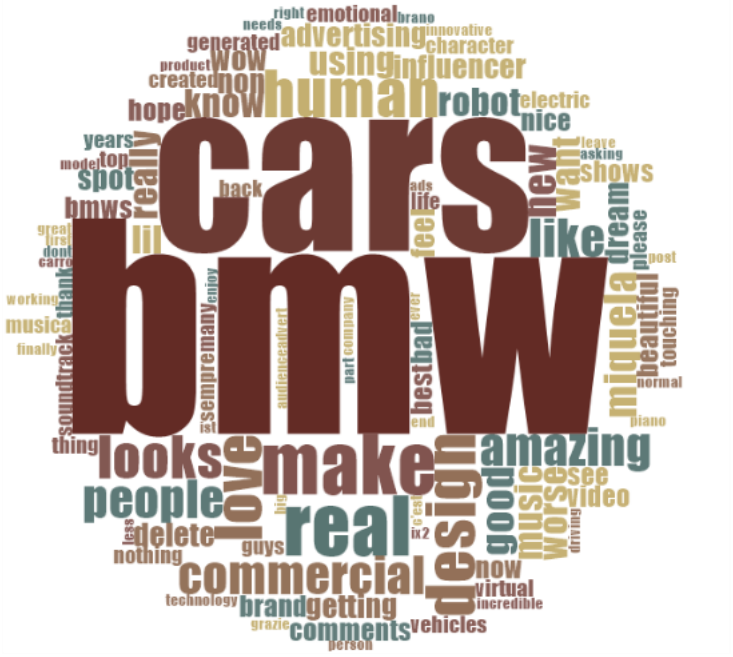

Image 21: Word Cloud (Source: Nvivo, 2025)

Colours, dimensions and positioning of the words are associated with their frequency within the comments.

By launching the Word Cloud some words that are consistent with the main theme of the campaign are easily identifiable. The word that stands out the most is the brand name BMW, as well as the word "cars". Appreciation words are showing off, already giving hints about the direction many comments might take. The words "design" and "commercial" describe the direction that numerous comments displayed: while many users did in fact complain about the poor design of the car, many others did express their opinion about the commercial making a subtle polarisation of judgement emerge.

Truly meaningful in this representation is the word "real" followed by "make", both placed in the centre bottom of the cloud, the two are explicit references to the tagline of the campaign. Also significant are the terms "human", "feel" and "looks" which stand for the underlying message the campaign is supposed to be conveying.

These words provide useful evidence to begin to understand the line of thought that characterizes comments, as well as make recurring themes emerge. From this cloud it is clear

that the main motif revolves around two thematic axes: the product and aesthetic and emotional engagement.

The name of the virtual influencer “Miquela” appears at the right side of the cloud. “Human”, “virtual” and “robot” also appear as frequent words among comments, showcasing the juxtaposition real/virtual as a latent theme in the discussion. Moreover, the word “music” and its synonyms are frequent within the comments section as many users did showcase a vivid interest in the soundtrack. Words such as “human”, “real” and “amazing” indicate that users have frequently employed them to express their aesthetical opinion about the contents. Conversely, some contrasting words such as “delete” and “worse” stand out, giving evidence for the mixed attitude some users showcased in the comments.

Following the preliminary Word Cloud visualization, an additional frequency query named Summary, is performed to obtain further information about what it has already been shown in the Word Cloud. To simplify the process, words were grouped not by exact matches but by similarity, so for example, design and designers were grouped under the same word “design”.

Word	Length	Count	Weighted Percentage (%	Similar Words
bmw	3	50	2,82	@bmw, bmw
cars	4	37	2,09	car, cars
make	4	14	0,79	make, makes, making
real	4	14	0,79	real
design	6	12	0,68	design, designed, designers, designs
human	5	11	0,62	human, humans
love	4	11	0,62	love, loved, loving
looks	5	10	0,56	look, looks
amazing	7	9	0,51	amaze, amazing
commercial	10	9	0,51	commercial
like	4	9	0,51	like
people	6	9	0,51	people
good	4	8	0,45	good
miquela	7	8	0,45	miquela
new	3	8	0,45	new
know	4	7	0,40	know, knows
lil	3	7	0,40	lil
music	5	7	0,40	music
really	6	7	0,40	really
robot	5	7	0,40	robot, robots
using	5	7	0,40	used, useful, using
want	4	7	0,40	want, wanting, wants
worse	5	7	0,40	worse
advertising	11	6	0,34	advertisement, advertising
delete	6	6	0,34	delete, deleted
dream	5	6	0,34	dream, dreams
feel	4	6	0,34	feel
getting	7	6	0,34	get, getting
influencer	10	6	0.34	influencer, influencers

Image 22: Summary chart (Source: Nvivo, 2025)

The Summary chart confirms BMW centrality (50 mentions, 2.82% weigh) and the interest in the product with 37 mentions and 2.09% weigh of the word “car”. These two terms are followed by the relevant “make” and “real” which both showcase frequency of 14, representing a direct reference to the campaign tagline. “Make”, “design” and “commercial” words put a finger on the development of the advertisement and car features, which is still a key topic in the comments section. Moreover, terms such as “love”, “amazing” and “good” express a strong interest in the emotional and aesthetic dimension of the campaign. The word “music” (7 mentions, 0.40% weigh) and its synonyms stand out as one of the most used, indicating that the main theme played a pivotal role in shaping audience’s opinion.

As already anticipated in the Word Cloud, the dichotomy between real and virtual emerges from the frequent usage of words such as “real”, “human”, “robot”, “influencer” and finally

the influencer's name "Miquela", reconnecting the discussion to the use of virtual influencers and sparking reflections on their authenticity.

Negative terms such as "worse" (7 mentions, 0.40% weigh) and "delete" (6 mentions, 0.34% weigh) point the evaluation of the general sentiment towards a more contradictory judgement. These words suggest that a smaller, yet significant part of the audience expressed dissatisfaction with the commercial or its AI-generated nature. The debate about virtual realities and AI is present in few comments but still, these open important horizons for discussion.

This preliminary data exploration is instrumental in the detection of dominant themes among the comments, paving the way for the construction of the adopted coding system.

Image 23: Codes (Source: NVivo, 2025)

3.5.3 Content Analysis

Starting from the meaningful insights provided by the Word Cloud and the Summary chart, three main macro-areas – positive, neutral and negative – were defined. Within each category, smaller thematic categories were developed relying on a deductive approach: in fact, after carefully reading each comment, the procedure involved their manual categorisation into the respective subcategory. Subcategories were created based on the principles of Grounded Theory, so each category is "grounded" in the data (Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. 1998).

MACRO-AREAS	SUB-CATEGORIES	N° REFERENCES	% COVERAGE
Negative		*74*	*21.35%*
	AI Critique	31	8.75%
	Brand Disdain	21	4.46%
	Cultural Concerns	3	1.38%
	Nostalgia for the Past	3	3.40%
	Product Critique	13	3.38%
Neutral		*36*	*8.16%*
	Inquiries	15	3.15%
	Irony	8	1.77%
	Observations	13	3.23%
Positive		*115*	*14.86%*
	Aesthetic Appreciation	18	2.60%
	AI Appreciation	5	0.84%
	Brand Admiration	48	5.10%
	Emotional Engagement	14	2.42%
	Narrative Appreciation	29	3.56%
	Purchase Intent	1	0.34%

Image 24: Codes and Sub-codes (Source: elaboration from NVivo, 2025)

Creating subcategories answers to the need of going beyond the mere polarisation of thought emerging from the comments. Moreover, it gives a major contribution to the aim of this study by uncovering more nuanced dimensions of user responses. For instance, the Aesthetic and Narrative Appreciation subcategories were created to differentiate among comments regarding the mere appraisal for the aesthetical representation of the brand versus the genuine interest towards the storyline conveyed through the campaign.

The Codes summary chart (Image 23) displays the main codes and each subcategory associated with the number of references identified and their percentage coverage. This chart gives a quantitative overview of the coded data. While the Number of references reports the total number of comments coded under the category, the Percentage Coverage represents the proportion of text length within each category instead.

Understanding the behaviour of these percentages is fundamental to the analysis as it provides meaningful insights regarding the weigh of each code in terms of textual volume. Therefore, higher percentages within a category indicate that it contains longer comments, designating a higher prominence in the dataset.

A quick look at the chart reveals that while the Positive code contains the highest number of references (115 occurrences), it is the Negative code that displays the highest percentage coverage (21.35% with 74 references), meaning that within the last category fall longer contributions despite the numbers of references.

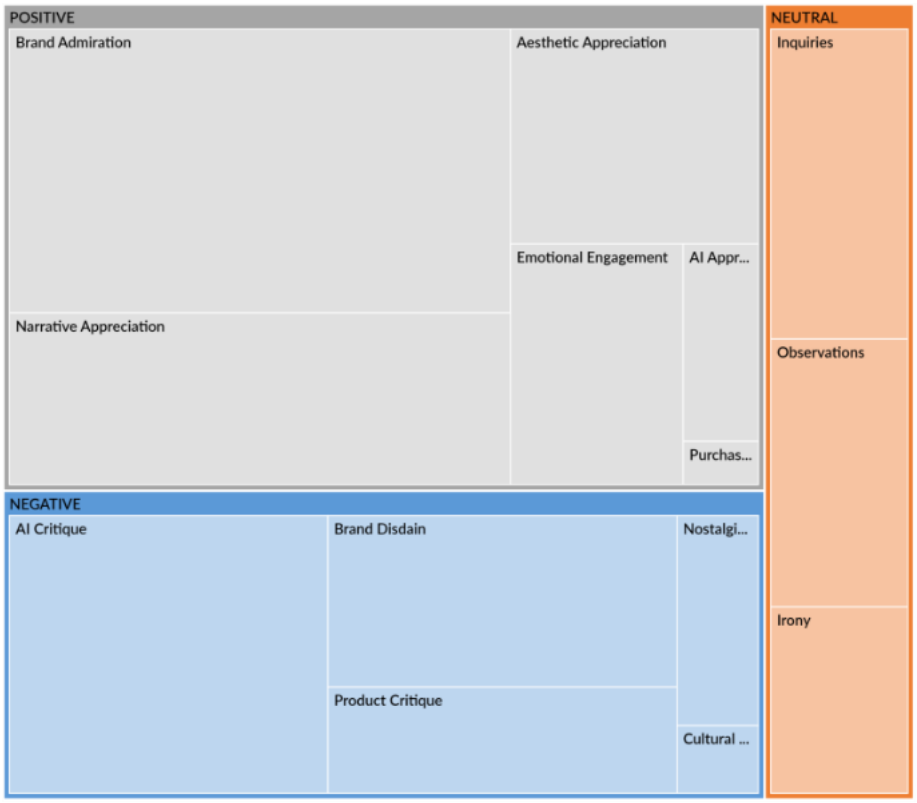

Image 25: Treemap sorted by number of coding references. (Source: NVivo, 2025)

By running the Treemap query it is possible to visualise each macro-area with their respective subcategories in squares whose dimensions are determined by the number of coding references. Image 24 showcases that a positive attitude characterises the general sentiment, with a total of 115 aggregated references. With 48 references falling into *Brand Admiration,* the positive attitude emerges to be dictated mostly by a positive evaluation that users exhibit towards BMW and their products. The *Narrative Appreciation* subcategory is second in relevance, with 29 direct references, due to the important positive feedback users give about the quality and content of the campaign.

AI Appreciation is evident in 5 comments, most of which are positively appraising Lil Miquela, with one comment stating that she is the *"SHE-ro"* of the campaign. Particularly pertinent to the research question is the emotional connection expressed in this comment:

"So realistic, shows what happens in normal life. Touches your emotions… the robot is wanting so bad to feel real, what humans feel. She wants to be more human.".

The user first talks about how realistic the advertisement is, recognising then the symbolic mirror role AI acquires in the film: Lil Miquela experiences such an existential condition that she craves to be real, to become more human than human beings themselves. The concept of becoming *"more human"* is strictly connected to the notion of hyperreality, which is a recurrent theme among comments and it is even more evident in the *AI Critique* section of the *Negative code*.

Another subcategory to the *Positive* code was created to gather all the comments explicitly expressing *Emotional Engagement.* The current subcategory includes 14 references, and most of them talk about the emotional drive users felt while watching the campaign/posts. Some of the most relevant comments defined the campaign as *"inspiring", "touching"* and able to *"awaken hope"*. While it might have been interesting to gain more insights about users' positive AI evaluation, it is nevertheless interesting to point out users' emotional reactions to the contents, as it emerged from the *Emotional Engagement* category. This result suggests that aside from the astonishment deriving from the AI-driven nature of the influencer, the campaign was still able to elicit strong emotions in viewers, which is a pivotal aspect apt to understand the role of AI within the narration of the automotive field.

The *Negative* macro-area was broken down into subcategories exploring different dimensions of criticism emerging from the comments. As shown in the Image 24 the *AI Critique* subcategory encompasses the largest portion of comments falling under the main code, emerging as the key category of this section.
Within this category it is possible to observe fear in users' words regarding the direction that AI is undertaking, as well as disapproval towards BMW for employing AI in the creation of the campaign. A comment such as *"Disgraceful to see BMW using AI in a commercial. This video needs to be deleted"* explicitly showcase a decline in the brand's esteem for relying on algorithms instead of employing a human main character and a real setting. Other users claimed that using AI is a current trend among companies, and it is a cash cow easier to be employed.

A recurring theme among these comments is the loss of authenticity: many users expressed their discomfort when realising that Lil Miquela, who they first thought was a real person, is actually virtual. Moreover, together with these feelings, comes the lack of credibility of the whole campaign, as expressed in the following comment:

"How to sabotage a car launch? Include an influencer in it. As if human influencer weren't annoying enough so now they're using an artificial one".

Overall, the *AI Critique* category highlights the resistance to the inclusion of AI among the automotive industry that still characterises a certain category of consumers, who feel threatened by it from several points of view.

Next to *AI Critique,* it seemed appropriate to include the *Cultural Concerns* subcategory to include comments stressing the potential consequences of an AI-driven future. Even though the category includes just three comments, these present common patterns regarding the possibility that AI might substitute in toto humans in their functions. With an ironic tone, a user expressed his concern about the topic:

"Truly a milestone in business and advertising. We are finally figuring out that AI can undercut the price of any human, stay out of trouble, and be the programmed zombie that companies want their brand reps to be. I fully support the transition to a society where everyone loses their job to a computer program. Thank you to BMW and Miquela for doing your parts to usher in this new age of human obsolescence."

Here, AI is described as a tool apt for the reduction of human costs, perfect for minimizing the possibility of making any mistake or trouble, which is possible when working with human beings. The author of the comment clearly talks for a larger piece of audience that is truly stressed with the idea of losing their job because of AI. Moreover, the author lastly thanks BMW and Lil Miquela for being the pioneers in this *"new age of human obsolescence",* passively accepting the idea of a human-free future.

Within the macro-area many users express their dissatisfaction with the product as well as disdain for the brand, which we can see being attacked for being ruining the BMW heritage. Moreover, some users criticise the company for focusing more on including an AI-generated influencer rather than developing better car designs.
For these reasons, the *Nostalgia* for the past section was developed to collect the opinions concerning the sentiment. In this section, a total of six users expressed their disappointment

towards the brand, which is now commercial instead of iconic and innovative. The brand is described as vector of dreams which transmitted positive values and made in the past many customers fall in love with its products.

Some comments showcase mixed feelings, expressing both appraisal and criticism in the same statement. Comments such as *"I would call it an underestimating spot. The car doesn't appeal to me, but... well done, a masterpiece of adv, thank you."* or *"beautiful car, stupid campaign"* contain contradictory statements. Although these comments show mixed opinions, they have been coded according to their thematic focus within the sentiment analysis framework. This decision is placed on the premise that the coding must remain pertinent and analytically coherent.

Finally, as shown in the Image the *Neutral* section comprises a fewer number of references, for a total of 37 comments. The macro-area encompasses three subcategories: Inquiries, Irony and Observations. This section includes all the comments made of questions and observations whether they are product-related or not. A few comments are aimed at the virtual influencer asking about her nature *("Serious question…has anyone ever seen her in person before?")*, others are asking the name of the soundtrack. One comment stands among the others commanding to delete the video because it could be disturbing for many people (*"Delete, a lot of people asking you to delete, its triggering for so many People [...]")*. Many other comments are ironic observations regarding the campaign, the product *("is this an attempt at subliminal messages that your cars are as reliable as Japanese")* and the influencer.

3.6 Chapter conclusions

The Sentiment and Content analysis performed on NVivo brought to surface key insights for the present study. Both polarized attitudes and more nuanced behaviours emerged from the analysis, highlighting mixed opinions that range from the mere aesthetical appraisal to scepticism towards the usage of Artificial Intelligence. These outcomes, combined with those coming from the Brandscape, uncover meaningful insights regarding both brand values and identity aspects.

As a semiotic brand, BMW positioning is effective and with the creation of a new countercultural space, the company showcases brilliant adherence to the emerging AI paradigm of Symbolic Mirror.

In the last chapter of this thesis, Chapter 4, the analysis will be re-investigated and integrated in light of the Research Question, discussing whether BMW's communication strategy skilfully combines technological innovation with its own brand heritage and consistency. By integrating the results with literature evidence, it will be possible to critically investigate these findings contextualizing them into a bigger frame. This phase will make fundamental outcomes emerge, which can either be confirming, extending or denying the existing theory.

CHAPTER 4 Final results and conclusions

This research examined Artificial Intelligence's role in advertising generation and how it affects consumers' perceptions of brand authenticity and relatability. By employing a mixed-method approach, which resulted from the combination of the semiotic analysis of the BMW automotive company and the qualitative sentiment and content analysis of comments, it was possible to uncover meaningful insights regarding the perception that some consumers have about the involvement of AI within the creative process. The sentiment analysis of BMW's *Make it Real* campaign and Instagram posts comments, revealed a complex network of behaviours that can be grouped into three main codes (positive, negative and neutral) each containing deeper subcategories for the understanding of brand perception in an increasingly AI-driven market.

4.1 Key findings and discussion

The main results emerging from the sentiment and content analysis highlight a heterogeneous audience response, ranging from the appraisal of brand commitments towards innovation to scepticism and rejection of the AI nature of the campaign.
By integrating these findings considering the Research Question (Does AI-driven advertising foster perceptions of authenticity and relatability among consumers, or does it instead exacerbate the confusion and instability characteristic of hyperreality?) it is possible to uncover deeper results suitable for the formulation of a coherent answer to the above question.

The higher number of references within the *Brand Admiration* and *Narrative Appreciation* of the *Positive* code explicitly demonstrate that despite the involvement of the digital influencer Lil Miquela, the campaign succeeded in reinforcing brand reputation as BMW has largely been appraised for being a bold innovator. The high result in *Emotional Engagement* clearly resonates with previous literature: according to Ahmadi (2022), brand reputation is positively related to emotional engagement. For this reason, numerous comments expressing high levels of emotional attachment to the content make an enhancement of brand evaluation emerge. This result is particularly relevant from a strategic perspective due to the importance of evoking emotions when fostering the consumers-brand relationship. Fewer comments explicitly

expressed appreciation towards AI, nevertheless giving useful insights about the positive integration of virtual influencers as active participants in advertisements.

The most extensive comments – considered by number of characters – however fall into the *Negative* code, expressing criticism towards several aspects of the campaign. The most surprising result is the high number of references in the *AI critique* subcategory. While many users demonstrate high scepticism and fear of job displacement (Adepoju, O. D., 2024), as it was already discussed in Chapter 1, many others perceive Lil Miquela as a threat for brand authenticity, questioning BMW's credibility. This aspect explicitly resonates with the fear of AI potentially overshadowing brand heritage and originality with its manipulative and intrusive role (Arbaiza, F. et al., 2024).

Results demonstrate that BMW is to this day strongly associated with its innovation and technological commitment, supplying premium vehicles and still reflecting the functional role expressed in the *Utilitarian vs. Relational* tension. On the other hand, through the campaign the company wants to convey that aside from producing high engineering products, they are able now more than ever to elevate their cars to the *companion* status, that, supplied with AI, are capable of guiding drivers through meaningful existential journeys. Lil Miquela aligns with the emerging code of *Symbolic Mirror* (as discussed in Chapter 3), wanting herself to be "more human", as one user expressed in a comment.

Overall, BMW *Make it real* campaign results demonstrate a major success in sparking polarized attitudes towards the themes of *brand authenticity, innovation and hyperreality*. The tension between reality and virtuality emerges as one of the pillars of the whole discussion, reflecting the audience debate around the role of AI: while BMW tried to subvert the collective imaginary of virtual reality as an escape from reality, presenting reality as truest escape for Lil Miquela, some users questioned instead the authenticity of employing a virtual influencer to celebrate the beauty of life. This paradox is at the core of hyperreal advertising depicting representations of a reality that do not necessarily reflect the actual one (Danesi, M., 2024). The following comment is explicit evidence of the emerging mosaic made of a mixture of real and virtual:

"Contemporary and futuristic language. Unreal and real world together to amaze and make people dream."

In conclusion, it is interesting to point out that the sentiment polarisation makes a subtle pattern emerge: while negative comments showcase an enormous focus on AI and its concerns, it

appears that the overall positive appraisal is pushed forward by brand evaluations, neglecting the whole AI issue. This pattern confirms the ongoing controversy that still surrounds the evaluation of AI within brand discourse.

4.2 Conclusions

The sentiment and content analysis of comments on the *Make it Real* campaign provided meaningful insights into the audience reactions towards AI-driven communication efforts and to the reality versus hyperreality tension in advertising. According to these macro-areas, conclusions can be drawn as it follows.

As already mentioned, AI-driven communication was both observed with fascination and scepticism. While many users showcased appraisal towards the quality of the advertisement and the innovation commitment, many others expressed important concerns towards the brand authenticity and cultural implications of AI involvement. This dichotomy reflects the collective opinion regarding AI's role both as a source of progress and as a cultural and social threat.

Secondly, emotional engagement demonstrated predominance even in this AI focused study, with high results showcasing that consumers engaged primarily on the affective level, commenting on the campaign's ability to evoke vivid emotion through its visuals, aesthetics and underlying message. This conclusion is evidence for the technology versus emotion tension, highlighting a result that was already anticipated in Chapter 3: even though hyperreality depicts scenarios without direct references, it does not mean that it cannot convey emotions. Within this scenario, audiences still seek significant emotional connections, confirming the centrality of emotional engagement when building brand trust.

Lastly, the *Make it Real* campaign emphasizes the thin line existing between authenticity and artificiality. The presence of Lil Miquela within the campaign sparked both admiration and disdain, exposing the paradox of employing a virtual influencer to celebrate the beauty of life instead of choosing a human actress. This insight provides cues for the right employment of artificial intelligence within the hyperreal communication which can emerge as a useful tool for enhancing storytelling, but also as one able to foster a sense of instability towards brand credibility.

These conclusions are particularly helpful in the place of investigating the research question. Taken together, these insights uncover opportunities and risks of AI but also advance the

hyperreal marketing literature. The notion of hyperreality within communication can increase emotional engagement, but still raises questions about brand authenticity and confusion about what is real and what is artificial.

4.3 Managerial Implications

The results of this analysis provide relevant discoveries for brand managers and communication agencies dealing with technological innovations and hyperreal approaches within their communication efforts. Based on these findings and insights, several useful managerial implications can be drawn apt for the optimisation of Generative-AI inclusion.

Firstly, companies must employ Artificial Intelligence as a tool able to emphasize human creativity and not as one that could potentially overshadow the human touch within the creative process. Exploring BMW's genealogy made its pioneering presence in innovation emerge, granting the company the cultural authority to experiment such technologies. However, as it emerged from the sentiment analysis, many users expressed their disappointment towards BMW for employing an AI-driven type of communication, for this reason, the company must carefully and transparently rely on these tools not to generate fragility in its brand authenticity. Balancing innovation with relatable brand values is fundamental for brands to stay competitive. By doing so, BMW can stand by its commitment to innovation and at the same time respect customers' need for authenticity.

As previously mentioned, consumers comments showcase high emotional resonance with the campaign, this result is particularly relevant when exploring storytelling: companies should focus on conveying emotivity through their AI communication. Campaigns should therefore employ narratives that engage with human values and experiences, using AI as a tool able to leverage these emotions. As a matter of fact, the inclusion of human values in campaigns featuring advanced technological innovations represents a significant challenge and opportunity for companies.

Lastly, the presence of a virtual influencer, Lil Miquela, marks a significant advancement in modern brand communication. Virtual influencers can indeed enrich storytelling and enlarge the target audience to younger generations and tech-savvy. However, they should not replace human in their roles but be complementary, coexisting with them. This collaboration between humans and virtual influencers is beneficial for brands because it allows them to explore hyperreality without losing the comfort of having a human representative.

In conclusion, companies can leverage the power of Gen-AI within advertising by putting their finger on key aspects such as the purpose of employing such technologies, the way it collaborates with human touch and its ability to adjust according to brands' identities. These managerial implications demonstrate that the future of AI-driven communication does not lie in the trade-off between technological innovation and human touch, but rather in creating a synergy among the two.

4.4 Limitations

Some limitations were encountered in this research which provided hints for the future development of the present study. One of the main limitations of this thesis was the relatively small number of comments analysed in the qualitative content analysis. The *Make it Real* campaign on YouTube presented a total of 215 comments, including the answers to some of the comments. To overcome this scarcity of opinions, it was decided to include in the analysis two Instagram posts, a photo dump (279 comments) and a reel (365 comments). Despite the large number of comments provided, some of these had to be excluded from the study because of their lack of pertinence to the issue, and consequently, the total number of contributions was about 225. This sample provided very few, but relevant, opinions to the table, still representing a small number of contributions and therefore restricting the scope for generalisation of findings.

Another limitation emerges from relying on a qualitative approach. While performing a sentiment analysis on NVivo provides valuable tools for the coding process and, therefore, the identification of nuanced themes, it fails to allow for a large-scale sentiment generalisation. On the other hand, quantitative approaches provide statistical accuracy and results are easily generalised to a population. Moreover, qualitative approaches are nevertheless entrenched with interpretation biases of the researcher, so even though NVivo helps with the mechanisation of the coding process, the codes' selection and interpretation of data still remain interpretative.

The decision to include comments in languages other than English was driven by the limited availability of contributions. However, these were translated in English to proceed with the automated NVivo coding process, some presented cultural references or ironic and sarcastic tones that were not fully captured by the direct translation of the content. This linguistic gap represents a limitation to the collection of insights for the sentiment analysis.

Finally, limitations also emerged from the data collection: since the aim of the process was to extrapolate comments across different social media platforms, YouTube and Instagram provided useful preliminary information to the analysis. It would have been interesting to grasp the general sentiment towards the campaign on Tiktok, given the intrinsic nature of the platform and the rich users' commenting behaviour. However, it was not possible to identify cross-posting of the campaign on BMW's official TikTok account nor on Lil Miquela's. This absence limited the analysis excluding potentially relevant comments written by users that are more exposed to AI-generated content and influencer-centred communication.

4.5 Gaps for Future Research

Building on the limitations outlined above, several opportunities for future research can be identified. Firstly, the small number of comments collected for the sentiment analysis suggests the need for a larger corpus of research. Enriching the dataset by collecting further contributions across different social media platforms gives access to a more complete picture of consumers' behaviours, increasing the representativeness of the sample.

In addition to this, the generalisation of results was a key limitation of the study. For this reason, future research could benefit from the inclusion of quantitative approaches to reinforce the validity of the results. This methodological integration could enable researchers to analyse both the quality of consumers' opinions and the breadth of their perceptions.

Future research could benefit from a cross-cultural comparison of opinions, examining how attitudes towards AI and virtual influencers differ across different cultures. This comparison could allow for a more comprehensive evaluation of how different cultures engage with AI in communication.

Lastly, given the absence of campaign's cross-posting on TikTok, future research could delve deeper into users' attitude towards AI-driven contents present on the platform: BMW does indeed make use of a mix of CGI and AI in some of their TikToks and consumers' behaviours towards these could provide useful insights for future developments.

4.6 Final Remarks

Overall, this thesis sheds light on the hyperreal marketing literature by giving powerful insights regarding the opportunities and challenges of employing an AI-drive type of communication.

By examining BMW's *Make it Real* campaign comments' section it was possible to highlight both the sense of fascination and scepticism stimulated by the film. This dichotomy represents one of the key pillars of the whole hyperreal discourse and, within a context that still strongly evaluates the emotional engagement, AI raises several concerns regarding brand authenticity and creativity displacement in a tech-driven culture.

On the theoretical level, this study fuels the hyperreality debate by pointing out how the thin line between reality and artificiality can ignite strong emotions while at the same time it sparks a sense of instability in consumers' perceptions. This outcome highlights the managerial need for integration of AI as a complementary tool to human creative processes, encouraging a progressive integration of technology balanced by brand values. As a result, AI emerges less as a threat for brand authenticity and more as a complementary tool that can strengthen the emotional bond between brands and their consumers.

Finally, it can be said that the future of advertising will not be entirely shaped by the presence of Artificial Intelligence but by the ability of companies and creative agencies to employ the tool as a symbolic mirror of human creativity and values.

CONCLUSION

The present study aims at elucidating and at the same time filling the research gap regarding the actual evaluation consumers' might have of brands employing AI in their communication efforts, whether it fosters the sense of perceived authenticity and relatability or if it exacerbates confusion instead.

By employing a mixed-method approach, several results emerged both the Brandscape and the Sentiment analysis. The emergent code of Symbolic Mirror clearly reflects the communication efforts BMW showcased in the Make it Real campaign. Moreover, a polarised attitude emerged from the Sentiment and Content analysis performed on the comments collected from the official campaign. While most of the users expressed their approval towards the BMW and the advertising, many others explicitly displayed their disapproval for AI's involvement.

This outcome is particularly interesting, especially from the perspective of this thesis: it appeared in fact that contributions showcasing a negative attitude were mostly focussed on AI disdain, while a positive attitude was solicited solely by brand's evaluations. This result explicitly confirms the ongoing controversy regarding the whole Artificial Intelligence discourse.

As stated in Chapter 4, this study was carried on not without any limitation. The scarcity of comments, the impossibility of generalising results to a population as well as the lack of posting on other popular social media platforms, represented valid constraints to the research. However, this thesis could benefit from the inclusion of quantitative research methodologies opening new opportunities for future research, also gaining even more valuable insights that could give major contribution to the AI literature.

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