

GENERATIVE AI AND ADVERTISING MEANING: A BARTHESIAN READING OF ETRO'S CAMPAIGN

ÜRETKEN YAPAY ZEKÂ VE REKLAMDA ANLAM: ETRO'NUN KAMPANYASINA BARTHESÇİ BİR OKUMA

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Abstract

The emergence of Generative Artificial Intelligence in advertising challenges established assumptions about representation and meaning-making, particularly within luxury and fashion branding. While existing research has largely focused on Generative AI in terms of efficiency, innovation and ethical concerns, its ideological and semiotic implications for advertising imagery remain underexplored. This article addresses this gap by revisiting Roland Barthes' semiotic framework to examine how Generative AI reshapes the meaning-making processes of luxury fashion advertising. Using Etro's Spring/Summer 2024 campaign as a case, the article applies a Barthesian analysis of denotation, connotation, and myth to AI-generated visuals. The findings suggest that Generative AI does not disrupt advertising myth but intensifies it by producing visually coherent yet materially unanchored representations of luxury. Conceptualizing Generative AI as a semiotic agent, the article underscores the continued relevance of classical semiotic theory for understanding algorithmically generated fashion imagery.


Öz

Reklamcılık alanında Üretken Yapay Zekânın ortaya çıkışı, özellikle lüks ve moda markalaşması bağlamında temsil ve anlam üretimine ilişkin yerleşik varsayımları sorgulamaya açmaktadır. Mevcut araştırmalar, Üretken Yapay Zekâyı büyük ölçüde verimlilik, yenilik ve etik kaygılar çerçevesinde ele alırken, reklam imgeleri açısından ideolojik ve göstergebilimsel sonuçları yeterince incelenmemiştir. Bu makale, bu boşluğu gidermeyi amaçlayarak Roland Barthes'in göstergebilimsel çerçevesini yeniden ele almakta ve Üretken Yapay Zekânın lüks moda reklamlarında anlam üretim süreçlerini nasıl dönüştürdüğünü incelemektedir. Etro'nun İlkbahar/Yaz 2024 kampanyası örnek olay olarak seçilmiş olup yapay zekâ tarafından üretilmiş görseller, Barthesçi düz anlam (denotasyon), yan anlam (konotasyon) ve mit kavramları üzerinden analiz edilmiştir. Bulgular, Üretken Yapay Zekânın reklam mitini bozmak yerine, maddi bir referansa dayanmayan ancak görsel olarak tutarlı lüks temsiller üretmek bu miti yoğunlaştırdığını göstermektedir. Üretken Yapay Zekânın göstergebilimsel bir özne olarak kavramsallaştırılması, algoritmik olarak üretilmiş moda imgelerinin anlaşılmasında klasik göstergebilim kuramının güncelliğini koruduğunu ortaya koymaktadır.

Keywords: Culture industry, science fiction cinema, genre cinema, genre criticism, *Interstellar*

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kültür endüstrisi, bilimkurgu sineması, tür sineması, tür eleştirisi, *Yıldızlararası*

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Introduction

In the traditional sense, advertising aims at the promotion and sale of a product or service (Bıçakçı, 2004). Today, with the changing communication technologies eliminating the concepts of time and space, enabling instant and interactive, fast, global communication, and the expectations of the younger generations, understanding of advertising is also changing. Advertising now functions as more than a commercial instrument designed to promote products, it operates as a cultural system through which meanings, identities, and ideologies are produced and circulated (Leiss et al., 2005).

As Judith Williamson (1978) argued, advertising does not only sell goods but constructs symbolic distinctions that position products within broader structures of desire and consumption. In this sense, advertising participates in the organization of social meaning, shaping how objects, bodies, and lifestyles are perceived and valued.

According to Kawamura (2005), advertising encourages individuals to overcome inertia and take action by bringing together consumer products and representations of a culturally constructed world within a specific advertising frame. By visualizing belief in fashion, advertisements must be attractive and desirable in order to stimulate the desire to be fashionable (Kawamura, 2005). On the other hand, Berger conceptualizes advertising as a process that produces attractiveness itself. Advertisements present people whose appearance has changed and who are therefore rendered enviable, equating attractiveness with social desirability. Rather than focusing on objects, advertising addresses social relations and promises a form of happiness seen through the eyes of others (Berger, 2008).

As technological change reshapes modes of meaning production, the symbolic role of advertising in contemporary media environments has become increasingly complex. The integration of Generative AI into advertising marks a significant shift as these systems now actively participate in the creation of advertising images, narratives, and visual worlds rather than merely supporting tasks such as data analysis or personalization.

Recent studies also suggest that AI-generated advertising content can influence consumer responses by shaping perceptions of trust, creativity, and perceived humanness associated with algorithmically generated imagery (Jung et al., 2025).

Fashion companies like Revolve, Coach, and Anthropologie have already adopted AI tools for various marketing functions such as product discovery, digital twin creation, and SEO (Crawford, 2025).

This development raises critical theoretical questions for advertising scholarship such as:

What happens to meaning when advertising images are no longer photographed representations of reality but algorithmically generated simulations?

How are authorship, creativity, and ideology reconfigured when machines participate in the production of commercial imagery?

Despite the growing presence of Generative AI in advertising practice, its implications for theories of meaning, representation, and myth remain insufficiently examined. While existing research has largely focused on consumer perception and marketing effectiveness of AI-generated advertising (Jung et al., 2025; Kim, 2025), less attention has been given to the symbolic and ideological dimensions through which such images produce meaning. Understanding these symbolic dimensions is particularly important in the context of luxury fashion advertising, where visual communication plays a central role in constructing brand mythology and cultural meanings.

This article addresses this gap by adopting a semiotic perspective to examine how AI-generated imagery participates in the construction of myth and meaning within contemporary luxury fashion advertising.

Recent research has begun to examine the implications of AI-generated imagery in luxury advertising from the perspective of consumer perception and marketing communication. Studies indicate that AI-generated advertising can influence how audiences evaluate creativity, realism, and emotional engagement with luxury brands (Kim, 2025). At the same time, consumer responses to algorithmically generated advertising may be shaped by

perceptions of trust and perceived humanness associated with AI-generated content (Jung et al., 2025). However, the use of Generative AI may also generate tensions with traditional expectations of authenticity and craftsmanship that historically define luxury brands (To et al., 2025).

These discussions highlight the need for deeper theoretical approaches explaining how meaning, symbolism, and ideology are produced within AI-generated advertising imagery.

Luxury fashion advertising provides a particularly revealing context in which to explore these questions. Luxury fashion relies less on functional attributes and more on symbolic value, myth, and affective appeal. Luxury brands construct narratives of exclusivity, authenticity, cultural heritage, and timelessness that position consumption as a form of symbolic distinction. Historically, luxury fashion advertising has therefore functioned as a privileged site of myth-making, where social and cultural meanings are naturalized through highly aestheticized visual forms (Solomon & Rabolt, 2004).

The integration of Generative AI into this domain intensifies existing tensions between reality and representation, originality and reproduction, and craftsmanship and simulation. To address these tensions, this study revisits Roland Barthes' semiotic framework as a critical lens for examining Generative AI-driven advertising.

While developed in relation to twentieth-century mass media, this article argues that Barthes' insights remain highly relevant for understanding contemporary AI-generated advertising imagery. In the context of Generative AI, myth does not disappear, but is reconfigured through algorithmic processes that render ideological constructions increasingly seamless and opaque.

Focusing on the Italian luxury fashion house Etro's Spring/Summer 2024 advertising campaign, produced using Generative AI, this article examines how AI functions not only as a technological tool, but as a semiotic mechanism that reorganizes meaning production in fashion advertising. Through a Barthesian analysis of selected campaign visuals, the study explores how Generative AI contributes to the construction of luxury myths by synthesizing fantastical environments, idealized bodies, and culturally coded symbols into hyperreal visual narratives.

This article first outlines the theoretical framework of luxury advertising and Barthesian semiotics, then presents the methodological approach and finally analyzes the Etro campaign to explore how Generative AI participates in the myth-making processes of contemporary fashion advertising.

1. Theoretical Background

1.1. Luxury Fashion Advertising as a Site of Meaning Production

Luxury has frequently been conceptualized not as a purely material category, but as an experiential and symbolic phenomenon. Kapferer (1997) and Shukla (2011) define luxury as a domain that activates individual desires, confers prestige, and provides psychological rather than functional benefits. From this perspective, luxury consumption operates primarily at the level of meaning rather than utility.

This emphasis on symbolic value finds a parallel in theoretical reflections on fashion and uniqueness. Drawing on Enis Batur's discussion of Beau Brummell, fashion can be understood as a cultural narrative that promises distinction while simultaneously rendering it unstable (Batur, 1987). Batur characterizes fashion as a "tale of uniqueness" that seeks to differentiate the individual from others, yet is inevitably undermined by processes of diffusion and mass consumption. The anecdote of Brummell commissioning each glove finger from a different tailor "five fingers: five differences" illustrates fashion's persistent tension between singularity and repetition (Batur, 1987).

Thorstein Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption provides an early framework for understanding fashion as a site of status display. According to Veblen (2016), clothing functions as a visible marker of social position, with its value residing less in practical use than in its capacity to signal prestige. Pierre Bourdieu further deepens this perspective by situating fashion consumption within broader systems of social differentiation. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1996) demonstrates how tastes in clothing operate as markers of class-based lifestyles, through which symbolic boundaries are enacted and naturalized.

Contemporary luxury branding increasingly emphasizes emotional engagement and narrative depth rather than material superiority alone. Luxury brands are expected to reconcile historical continuity and craftsmanship with innovation and creative experimentation. Advertising plays a central role in negotiating these tensions by

deploying symbolic and affective imagery to construct coherent brand myths (Torlak & Uzkurt, 1999; Zeybek, 2013).

In this sense, advertising functions as a semiotic system that produces and stabilizes meanings associated with luxury. Luxury fashion advertising therefore privileges visual, affective, and symbolic modes of communication over explicit verbal persuasion. Brand identities are articulated through recurring visual elements such as motifs, color palettes, materials, and stylistic signatures that together form a recognizable aesthetic language. Luxury brands have traditionally been associated with specific chromatic repertoires, most notably black, gold, purple, silver-gray, and red, which function as visual signifiers of prestige, exclusivity, and power (Ceylan, 2015; Kapferer & Bastien, 2009; Zeybek, 2013). In recent years, however, these established codes have been rearticulated within the framework of a “new luxury,” in which classical symbols are reconfigured through more experimental and hybrid visual narratives (Deniz & Yaman, 2018).

Luxury advertising has long relied on mythic structures and narrative strategies to construct enduring brand meanings. Building on Holt's cultural branding approach, Vincent defines brand myth as a narrative form that translates abstract cultural tensions into accessible stories that address issues of identity and belonging (Vincent, 2002). In fashion advertising, such narratives are primarily communicated through visual aesthetics rather than verbal explanation. Spectacle, atmosphere, and visual composition function as narrative devices that invite viewers to project their own desires and aspirations onto the brand image (Hancock, 2016).

Recent research on AI-generated luxury advertising also suggests that algorithmic image production increasingly incorporates surreal and futuristic visual aesthetics. Lee et al. (2025) argue that AI-driven luxury advertising frequently employs speculative and surrealist visual narratives that expand the imaginative dimensions of fashion imagery while distancing advertising visuals from traditional photographic realism. Such developments demonstrate how contemporary luxury advertising operates within highly constructed symbolic worlds in which abstraction, fantasy, and technological mediation become central aesthetic strategies.

This reliance on visual storytelling is evident in luxury brands that construct coherent symbolic worlds populated by idealized bodies and stylized environments. Rather than imposing fixed narratives, these images offer open-ended frameworks through which consumers imagine lifestyles and forms of belonging (Hancock, 2016). Within this context, animal symbolism frequently operates as a condensed mythic signifier. Animals are widely used in fashion branding because they easily communicate qualities such as power, elegance, and uniqueness (Solomon & Rabolt, 2004).

Etro exemplifies this symbolic strategy through its long-standing use of the figure of Pegasus. Since the brand's inception, Pegasus has functioned as Etro's core mythological emblem, embodying ideals of freedom, creativity, and exploration. Drawing on ancient legend, the symbol transcends its decorative function to reinforce the brand's narrative universe. Through its repeated appearance on garments and accessories, Pegasus contributes to the construction of a symbolic brand identity in which myth connects heritage with contemporary fashion discourse (Etro, n.d.).



Figure 1. Pegasus Symbol on Etro's paisley Patterned Fabric

From this perspective, myth production in luxury fashion advertising is inseparable from visual storytelling practices that render brand meanings emotionally resonant and culturally naturalized. These narratives do not simply persuade consumers to purchase products; they invite them to inhabit symbolic worlds in which luxury appears timeless, meaningful, and socially embedded. This narrative logic provides a critical foundation for examining how Generative AI, as a new image-producing system intervenes in the myth-making processes of

contemporary luxury advertising.

At the same time, the integration of generative AI into luxury advertising has generated debates concerning authenticity and brand identity. Luxury brands traditionally emphasize craftsmanship, human creativity, and artisanal heritage as key components of their symbolic value. Consequently, the use of AI-generated imagery may challenge these expectations. Research shows that when consumers become aware that advertising visuals are generated by AI, they may perceive the advertisement as requiring less creative effort which can reduce perceived authenticity for luxury brands (To et al., 2025).

These findings reveal an important symbolic tension between technological innovation and the cultural narratives that historically sustain luxury brand mythology. This tension becomes particularly significant for luxury brands whose value is historically grounded in notions of craftsmanship, heritage, and human creativity.

1.2. Roland Barthes and the Semiotics of Advertising

Building on Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic theory, Roland Barthes approaches semiology as a response to the conditions of the modern world. Saussure's view of language as part of a broader system of signs provides the foundation for Barthes's work (Saussure, 1996). In *The Elements of Semiology*, Barthes expands this perspective, defining semiology as the study of all sign systems, not only language, but also images, gestures, sounds, and objects that structure cultural meaning (Barthes, 1973).

At the core of semiology lies the idea that every sign consists of two inseparable elements: The signifier and the signified. The signifier refers to the material or sensory form of a sign, such as sounds, fabrics, images, or written words, while the signified denotes the cultural or conventional meaning associated with it (Smelik et al., 2025).

Because these two elements function together, any change in the signifier also alters the signified, and thus the sign itself. In fashion, for example, the plain T-shirt worn by figures like James Dean or Marlon Brando came to signify youthful rebellion and sexual nonconformity (Smelik et al., 2025).

Semiology suggests that everything can be read as a text and interpreted as a sign, whose meaning often extends beyond simple description (Barthes, 1994). Barthes distinguishes between denotation, the literal act of describing what is seen, and connotation, the broader cultural and associative meanings that emerge through interpretation. While denotation appears stable, connotation is open-ended and polysemous, requiring the active participation of the reader and allowing meaning to remain a matter of probability rather than fixed truth (Barthes, 1990).

As Barthes argues, advertising never presents a product only, it also communicates a second, symbolic message (Barthes, 1994). In this process, use value is transformed into meaning, often through the operation of myth as a form of metalanguage.

Barthes describes myth as "speech stolen and restored," a mode of signification that naturalizes cultural meanings and renders them persuasive (Barthes, 1973). Because myth operates through ambiguity, it is experienced by the reader as both real and imaginary at once, making its meanings powerful yet difficult to fully disentangle (Barthes, 1973). Barthes defines myth as a cultural way of thinking about or understanding something through a chain of interrelated concepts (Fiske, 2003). Accordingly, myths derive their meanings from the culture in which they operate and are therefore not universal. Within a given culture, dominant myths as well as counter-myths may coexist (Öztürk, 2025).

Although developed in relation to twentieth century mass media, Barthes's framework remains highly relevant for contemporary advertising shaped by digital and algorithmic technologies. In the context of Generative AI, the mythic function of advertising does not disappear but becomes increasingly opaque. AI-generated images intensify the illusion of naturalness by erasing traces of production, labor, and mediation, allowing ideological constructions to appear seamless and unquestionable.

Revisiting Barthesian semiotics in the age of Generative AI therefore enables a critical examination of how meaning is reorganized when visual realism is no longer anchored in photographic indexicality but in algorithmic synthesis. In this context, Generative AI functions as a new condition of signification, one that reshapes how myths of luxury, authenticity, creativity, and nature are visually produced and consumed in contemporary fashion advertising.

Building on these theoretical discussions, this study adopts a qualitative semiotic approach in order to

examine how Generative AI-produced images participate in the myth-making processes of luxury advertising.

2. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in semiotic analysis to examine how meaning is constructed in Generative AI-driven luxury fashion advertising. Given the study's focus on symbolism, visual representation, and myth-making, a Barthesian semiotic framework is employed as the primary analytical approach.

Drawing on Roland Barthes' theory of semiology, the analysis conceptualizes advertising images not merely as representational devices but as ideological texts. Barthes' model of denotation, connotation, and myth provides a systematic means of examining how culturally and historically produced meanings are transformed into naturalized and self-evident narratives. This framework is particularly suited to luxury fashion advertising, where brand value is communicated predominantly through symbolic and affective registers rather than functional attributes.

The empirical focus of the study is the Spring/Summer 2024 advertising campaign of the Italian luxury fashion house Etro, produced using Generative Artificial Intelligence. Etro brand was selected due to its strong visual identity, long-standing engagement with ornamental and mythic aesthetics, and its early adoption of AI-generated imagery within the context of high-fashion advertising. The campaign thus offers a timely case for exploring how Generative AI reconfigures established modes of visual storytelling in luxury branding.

Three campaign visuals were selected through purposive sampling. Selection was guided by the images' representational diversity and their capacity to articulate recurring thematic elements within the campaign including nature, the human body, gender, and abstraction. Rather than pursuing statistical representativeness, the study prioritizes analytical depth through close semiotic reading.

Each image was analyzed in three interrelated stages. The denotative level identifies the literal visual elements such as figures, settings, colors, and compositional structures. The connotative level examines the cultural and symbolic meanings activated by these elements, informed by existing literature on luxury, fashion, and consumption. Finally, the mythic level interrogates how these meanings are naturalized, producing broader ideological narratives concerning luxury, identity, and technology.

Beyond visual symbolism, particular attention is paid to Generative AI as a semiotic agent. Rather than treating AI as a neutral production tool, the analysis considers how algorithmic image generation shapes realism, abstraction, and the visibility of mediation, thereby participating in the organization of meaning itself.

As a qualitative and interpretive study, this research does not aim for generalizable conclusions. Instead, it contributes to theoretical discussions on luxury advertising and Artificial Intelligence by demonstrating how Barthesian semiotics can be productively reactivated to analyze emerging forms of algorithmic image production and contemporary myth-making.

2.1. Contextualizing Etro's AI-Generated Campaign Nowhere

Founded in 1968, the Italian luxury fashion house Etro has developed a distinctive brand identity grounded in ornamental excess, eclecticism, and cultural hybridity. Renowned for its signature paisley motifs and rich textile heritage, Etro's visual language consistently blends historical ornamentation with contemporary fashion sensibilities (Etro, n.d.) The brand's founder, Gimmo Etro, introduced paisley motifs in his first ready-to-wear collection in 1994, inspired by a trip to India (Fogg, 2014).

Rather than adopting the minimalist or functionalist aesthetics often associated with modern luxury, Etro has cultivated an expressive, narrative-driven approach in which pattern, color, and symbolism play a central role. This ornamental and referential visual identity makes Etro a particularly compelling case for examining the use of Generative AI in luxury advertising. The brand's turn to AI-generated imagery does not constitute a rupture from its established visual codes. Instead, it amplifies its long-standing mythic and imaginative tendencies through new technological means.

Etro's Spring/Summer 2024 collection, titled *Nowhere*, draws inspiration from Creative Director Marco De Vincenzo's travels and his intuitive engagement with the brand's archive. Framed as a journey shaped by memory and association rather than linear logic (Cardini, 2023), this concept provides the narrative foundation for the advertising campaign, which visualizes *Nowhere* through a series of dreamlike, constructed environments.

The Spring/Summer 2024 advertising campaign marks Etro's explicit engagement with Generative AI as a

creative tool. Developed in collaboration with digital artist Silvia Badalotti, the campaign visuals consist of fantastical scenarios ranging from pastel-toned architectures to lush natural landscapes and astral maps (Salibian, 2024). The models were also AI-generated, intended to evoke “a humanity that is both familiar and alien,” according to an Etro statement. Visually, the campaign foregrounds garments characterized by bold patterns, graphic details, and flocked velvet pieces with tapestry-inspired motifs (Salibian, 2024).

From a semiotic perspective, the campaign offers a productive site for examining how Generative AI reorganizes meaning production in advertising. By blurring boundaries between the natural and the artificial, the human and the non-human, and the real and the imaginary, the visuals closely align with Barthes’ understanding of myth as a system that naturalizes culturally constructed meanings. In this context, Generative AI functions not merely as a production technology but as a semiotic agent that facilitates the seamless integration of fantasy, luxury, and ideology.

Positioned within broader debates on luxury fashion advertising and technological experimentation, Etro’s Spring/Summer 2024 campaign serves as an illustrative case through which to explore how classical semiotic theory can illuminate emerging forms of algorithmic visual culture. The campaign thus provides a critical foundation for the analytical framework and visual analysis that follow.

2.2. Visual Analysis: Analytical Framework

The following section presents a Barthesian semiotic analysis of three selected visuals from Etro’s Spring/Summer 2024 advertising campaign produced with Generative AI. Each image is approached as a semiotic text in which meaning is generated through layered processes of signification rather than direct representation.

Following Barthes’ framework, the analysis proceeds through three interconnected levels: denotation, connotation, and myth. The denotative level identifies the visible elements of the image such as figures, settings, colors, and compositional structures. The connotative level examines how these elements activate culturally embedded associations related to luxury, nature, gender, and identity. At the mythic level, the analysis interrogates how such meanings are naturalized, producing ideological narratives that render luxury, artificiality, and technological mediation as self-evident and desirable.

Special attention is given to the role of Generative AI within these processes of signification. Rather than being treated as a neutral production tool, AI is considered as an active semiotic mechanism that reshapes visual realism, obscures material production, and contributes to the construction of seamless and hyperreal luxury worlds.

Each visual is analyzed individually to allow for close reading, followed by a brief comparative discussion that identifies recurring themes and ideological patterns across the campaign.



Figure 2. The Male Figure within a Fantastical Natural Tableau

Table 1. Signifiers and Signifieds in Figure 2

Signifier	Signified
Male model	Idealized masculine subject
Fantastical landscape	Non-human nature
Surreal animals	Otherworldliness, abundance
Saturated natural colors	Vitality, harmony and plenitude

2.2.1. Denotation

The image presents a male model shown in profile, facing towards the right side of the frame. He is positioned against a densely layered, painterly background composed of oversized flowers, lush vegetation, and imaginary animal figures. The environment does not correspond to a recognizable real-world landscape; instead, it resembles a fantastical garden or an enchanted natural tableau. Among the visible elements are blooming flowers in warm tones, elongated plant forms, and animal figures that appear stylized or unreal, blurring the boundary between flora and fauna.

The model wears a richly patterned jacket featuring intricate ornamental motifs, visually echoing the decorative complexity of the surrounding environment. His hairstyle is sharply sculpted and artificial in appearance, reinforcing the image's stylized aesthetic. The lighting isolates the model from the background while simultaneously integrating him into the scene, creating a suspended, almost theatrical atmosphere rather than a documentary representation of reality.

2.2.2. Connotation

At the connotative level, the image constructs a dreamlike and mythic space in which nature is not represented realistically but aestheticized and reimagined as a symbolic environment. The exaggerated scale of the flowers and the presence of imaginary animals evoke associations with fantasy, fairy tales, and pre-modern myths of paradise. Nature here is not wild or chaotic; it is carefully composed, visually harmonious, and emotionally soothing.

The male model's calm and introspective posture suggests contemplation rather than action. His downward gaze and restrained bodily expression contribute to an atmosphere of serenity and detachment from everyday life.

Within the context of luxury fashion advertising, this positioning implies an elevated subjectivity: the wearer of the luxury garment appears withdrawn from ordinary social space and embedded instead in a rarefied, imaginative realm.

The visual harmony between the model's patterned garment and the ornamental richness of the background reinforces the idea that luxury fashion is not imposed upon nature but organically belongs within it. The clothing appears as an extension of the surrounding aesthetic order. This visual strategy connotes a seamless unity between luxury, culture, and an idealized vision of nature.

Color plays a central role in activating these meanings. The saturated greens and organic tones evoke vitality and renewal, while simultaneously reinforcing Etro's long-standing visual association with ornamental richness and sensory excess. Through these visual cues, luxury is connoted not as material scarcity but as immersive experience and aesthetic plenitude.

2.2.3. Myth

At the level of myth, the image naturalizes the association between luxury consumption and access to an enchanted, timeless world. The fantastical garden functions as a mythic space in which social realities such as labor, production, and economic inequality are entirely absent. The male figure's presence within this space suggests that luxury is not something acquired through material conditions but an inherent state of being.

This myth operates by presenting luxury fashion as a mediator between humanity and an idealized nature, implying that the brand enables a return to a harmonious, almost Edenic condition. The artificial animals and exaggerated botanical forms contribute to a vision of nature that is purified of danger, decay, or conflict. As Barthes suggests (1973), myth works by transforming historically and culturally constructed meanings into naturalized truths; here, luxury is framed as naturally aligned with beauty, balance, and transcendence.

The absence of any trace of technological mediation within the image further reinforces this mythic effect. Although the image is produced through Generative AI, this process remains invisible. AI thus enables a paradoxical operation: the most technologically mediated image produces the illusion of an untouched, timeless, and natural world.

2.3. Generative AI as a Semiotic Mechanism

From a Barthesian perspective, Generative AI functions in this image not just as a production tool but as an active semiotic agent. At the denotative level, AI constructs an environment that exceeds physical possibility. At the connotative level, it recombines familiar cultural symbols (nature, paradise, ornamentation, and the

contemplative male subject) into a coherent aesthetic narrative. At the level of myth, AI erases its own presence, allowing ideological meanings to appear seamless and self-evident.

By eliminating photographic indexicality, Generative AI intensifies the myth-making capacity of luxury advertising. The image no longer refers to a specific place, time, or reality, but it produces a hyperreal visual space in which luxury functions as a gateway to fantasy and distinction. In this sense, the Etro campaign exemplifies how Generative AI reconfigures meaning production in contemporary advertising by extending the mythological power of images beyond the limits of representation.



Figure 3. The Female Figure, Stillness, and the Artificial Garden

Table 2. Signifiers and Signifieds in Figure 3

Signifier	Signified
Solitary fashion figure	Detachment, individualism
Abstract spatial setting	Timelessness, placelessness
Controlled posture	Distance, composure
Minimal visual cues	Purity, aesthetic reduction

2.3.1. Denotation

The image depicts a female model seated frontally on a set of steps, positioned symmetrically at the center of the frame. She is surrounded by a dense, enclosed environment composed of abundant vegetation, moss-like textures, elongated stems, and soft, spherical floral forms in muted pink and green tones. The setting resembles a corridor or passageway carved out of organic material, yet its highly ordered symmetry and repetition signal artificial construction rather than natural growth.

The model wears a form-fitting, elaborately patterned outfit featuring ornate, swirling motifs that echo the vegetal forms surrounding her. She holds a small handbag placed deliberately between her legs, reinforcing compositional balance. Her vivid orange hair contrasts sharply with the subdued color palette of the environment, drawing immediate attention to her face and upper body. Her posture is rigid and frontal, and her facial expression is neutral, almost statuesque.

2.3.2. Connotation

At the connotative level, the image constructs a highly controlled and ritualized visual space. Unlike the expansive, dreamlike openness of the first image, this environment feels enclosed, cultivated, and domesticated. Nature here is not imagined as an open paradise but as a carefully designed garden corridor, an aestheticized, curated version of the natural world.

The female model's frontal pose, direct gaze, and immobility evoke associations with classical portraiture and iconography. She appears less as an active subject and more as an object of contemplation, positioned to be viewed rather than to act. Her stillness suggests discipline, control, and self-containment, qualities historically associated with ideals of refinement and elegance in luxury culture.

The handbag, centrally placed and visually isolated, functions as a focal object within the composition. It signals ownership, possession, and commodity value, anchoring the otherwise fantastical environment to the logic of consumption. The visual harmony between the garment's ornamental patterns and the surrounding vegetal

textures reinforces the idea that luxury fashion is seamlessly integrated into this artificial natural order.

In contrast to the first visual, which constructs an open and expansive mythic landscape, this image presents a more enclosed, disciplined, and controlled environment. While both visuals mobilize fantasy and artificial nature, they differ in how luxury is spatialized: One through openness and immersion, the other through symmetry, containment, and order. This contrast prepares the ground for understanding how luxury myths operate through different configurations of nature and subjectivity.

2.3.3. Myth

At the level of myth, the image naturalizes luxury as a form of cultivated harmony and controlled beauty. The garden no longer represents untamed nature but a domesticated, stylized environment in which everything appears carefully arranged and timeless. This myth aligns luxury consumption with ideas of mastery over nature, aesthetic discipline, and refined control.

The female figure functions as a symbolic guardian of this artificial Eden. Her immobility and frontal positioning transform her into a living emblem of luxury itself: stable, enduring, and immune to temporal change. Social realities such as labor, production, and technological mediation are once again erased, replaced by an image of effortless elegance and permanence.

In Barthesian terms, the myth operates by presenting luxury not as a social construct dependent on economic power but as an almost ontological condition. The environment suggests that luxury naturally produces order, beauty, and balance, thereby masking the historical and material conditions that enable such consumption.

2.4. Generative AI as a Semiotic Mechanism

Generative AI plays a crucial role in constructing the image's mythic coherence. At the denotative level, AI enables the creation of an environment that mimics organic growth while remaining structurally impossible in the physical world. At the connotative level, it recombines visual codes of gardens, portraiture, and ornamentation into a unified aesthetic language.

At the level of myth, AI performs an act of erasure similar to that identified by Barthes: It conceals its own technological presence. The garden appears naturalized despite being entirely synthetic, reinforcing the illusion of authenticity and timelessness. By eliminating indexical reference to a real location or moment, AI intensifies the mythological function of the image, allowing luxury to appear detached from reality and grounded instead in an eternal, self-sustaining aesthetic order.

In comparison to the first visual, where AI constructs an open, paradisiacal fantasy, this image demonstrates how Generative AI can also produce enclosed, highly disciplined mythic spaces. Together, the two visuals illustrate the flexibility of AI as a semiotic mechanism capable of generating multiple, complementary luxury myths within a single campaign.

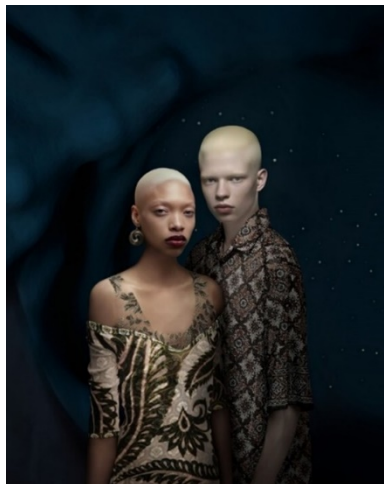


Figure 4. Dual Figures, Stillness, and the Suspension of Identity

Table 3. Signifiers and Signifieds of Figure 4

Signifier	Signified
Human figure	Hybrid subjectivity
Organic elements	Nature, growth
Artificial structures	Technology, ddesign
Visual fusion of elements	Harmony between opposites

2.4.1. Denotation

The image depicts a female and a male model standing closely together against a dark, abstract background. Both figures are shown frontally and positioned centrally within the frame. Their shaved or nearly shaved hairstyles create a striking visual similarity, emphasizing symmetry and uniformity. The models wear patterned garments consistent with Etro's ornamental aesthetic, featuring intricate motifs and rich textures.

The background is minimal and non-representational, composed of deep, dark tones with subtle, floating specks that evoke a cosmic or nocturnal atmosphere. There is no discernible setting, spatial depth, or environmental context. The lighting softly illuminates the figures' faces and upper bodies, isolating them from the surrounding darkness and producing a sculptural, almost ethereal effect.

2.4.2. Connotation

At the connotative level, the image conveys a sense of suspension—of time, space, and identity. The absence of a recognizable environment removes the figures from any social or geographical context, placing them in an abstract, liminal space. Their stillness, frontal positioning, and direct gaze produce an encounter with the viewer that is intimate yet emotionally restrained.

The visual similarity between the two figures, reinforced by their hairstyles and neutral expressions, blurs conventional distinctions of gender and individuality. Rather than emphasizing difference, the image foregrounds equivalence and mirroring. This aesthetic choice aligns with contemporary discourses on fluid identity while simultaneously elevating the figures into stylized, almost archetypal forms.

Luxury is connoted not through abundance or nature, as in the previous images, but through minimalism, restraint, and purity. The ornate garments stand out sharply against the dark void, transforming clothing into the primary bearer of meaning. The figures appear as vessels through which the brand's visual language is displayed, rather than as narratively situated subjects.

2.4.3. Myth

At the level of myth, the image constructs luxury as a transcendent and universal condition, detached from both nature and social reality. Unlike the fantastical garden settings of the first two visuals, this image abandons environmental mythology altogether. Instead, it proposes a myth of timelessness and ontological neutrality, where luxury exists beyond gender, space, and history.

The dual figures function as mythic embodiments of an idealized human form—purified of difference, conflict, and temporality. By erasing contextual markers, the image presents luxury as an eternal aesthetic state rather than a culturally and economically produced phenomenon. This myth aligns with Barthes' notion of depoliticized speech, in which historical and social meanings are stripped away and replaced by an appearance of natural universality.

The technological conditions of the image's production are once again rendered invisible. Despite being generated through artificial intelligence, the image offers no visual cues of its synthetic origin, reinforcing the myth that luxury transcends mediation itself. In Barthes' terms, this erasure of context enables myth to function most effectively, presenting luxury as timeless, universal, and self-evident.

2.5. Generative AI as a Semiotic Mechanism

In this image, Generative AI operates through subtraction rather than accumulation. Instead of constructing elaborate environments, AI generates an abstract void that isolates the human figure and the garment. At the denotative level, AI enables the creation of hyper-smooth skin textures, symmetrical features, and controlled lighting. At the connotative level, it supports the blurring of individuality and gender through visual standardization.

At the mythic level, AI facilitates the production of a universalized luxury subject, one that appears detached from material reality and historical specificity. By eliminating photographic indexicality and contextual reference, Generative AI intensifies the illusion of timelessness and transcendence. Luxury is thus presented not as a social distinction but as an essential, almost metaphysical quality.

2.5.1. Comparative Analysis of the Three Visuals

Taken together, the three visuals demonstrate how Generative AI functions as a flexible semiotic mechanism capable of producing distinct yet complementary luxury myths.

The first visual constructs luxury through fantastical immersion. Nature is imagined as an open, Edenic space in which the male subject moves contemplatively, suggesting freedom, harmony, and transcendence. AI enables the creation of an expansive mythic environment that dissolves the boundaries between culture and nature.

The second visual shifts toward control and domestication. The female subject is positioned within a symmetrical, enclosed garden that emphasizes order, discipline, and cultivated beauty. Here, luxury is associated with mastery over nature and aesthetic regulation. AI operates by organizing organic forms into a coherent, controlled visual system.

The third visual abandons nature altogether, presenting luxury as pure abstraction and universality. Gender distinctions are softened, spatial context is erased, and identity is suspended. In this final image, AI works through reduction, producing a myth of timeless, depoliticized luxury that appears detached from both environment and society.

Across all three visuals, Generative AI does not disrupt the myth-making function of luxury advertising but it amplifies it. In Barthesian terms, AI intensifies the transformation of historically constructed meanings into naturalized representations. By producing hyperreal environments, idealized bodies, and context-free subjects, Generative AI extends the ideological power of advertising images while concealing its own technological mediation.

This interpretation also resonates with recent research examining consumer responses to AI-generated luxury advertising. While some studies suggest that AI-generated visuals can enhance perceptions of creativity and novelty in luxury brand communication (Kim, 2025), others highlight potential risks associated with algorithmic image production, particularly when AI usage appears to undermine authenticity or craftsmanship traditionally associated with luxury brands (To et al., 2025). From a semiotic perspective, these tensions illustrate how AI-generated imagery simultaneously expands the imaginative possibilities of luxury advertising while reshaping the symbolic foundations through which luxury meanings are constructed.

Table 4. The Denotative, Connotative, and Mythic Structures Identified Across the Three Campaign Visuals

Visual	Denotation	Connotation	Myth	Role of AI
Figure 2	A male model placed in an imaginary landscape with fantastical natural elements.	Harmony, idealized nature. Luxury as immersive sensory plenitude.	Luxury framed as a natural, pre-social condition.	Constructs hyperreal environments that conceal material production.
Figure 3	A solitary fashion figure in an abstract, spatial setting.	Detachment, timelessness. Luxury as separation from social and material necessity.	Luxury mythologized as a pure state beyond social relations.	Removes spatial and temporal anchoring, reinforcing depoliticized consumption.
Figure 4	Two fashion figures situated within a hybrid space where artificial elements merge.	Hybridity, post-human coexistence. Adaptive and transformative luxury.	Technological innovation naturalized as harmonious and inevitable.	Seamlessly synthesizes heterogeneous elements, rendering technological mediation invisible.

These recurring patterns illustrate how Generative AI consistently operates as a myth-producing mechanism in contemporary luxury fashion advertising.

Conclusion

By moving beyond dominant discussions of efficiency and ethics, this study foregrounds the ideological and semiotic implications of generative AI in advertising imagery.

This study examined how Generative AI reshapes meaning production in luxury fashion advertising through a Barthesian semiotic lens. By analyzing three AI-generated visuals from Etro's Spring/Summer 2024 campaign, it demonstrated that Generative AI functions not only as a technical tool but as a semiotic mechanism that intensifies the myth-making capacity of advertising.

Drawing on Barthes' concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth, the analysis revealed how AI-generated imagery rearticulates long-standing luxury narratives while rendering their constructed nature increasingly opaque. Rather than disrupting the symbolic foundations of luxury advertising, Generative AI extends and intensifies them by erasing traces of labor, production, and technological mediation, thereby naturalizing consumption as timeless and effortless.

A central theoretical contribution of this article lies in demonstrating the continued relevance of Barthesian semiotics in the age of algorithmic image production. By examining AI-generated fashion imagery through the lens of myth and semiotics, the study highlights how algorithmic image systems do not merely produce visuals but actively participate in the cultural construction of luxury meanings. While Barthes developed his framework in relation to photographic media, this study shows that the shift from photographic indexicality to algorithmic synthesis intensifies the mythic operation of advertising. AI-generated images no longer reference an external reality but instead construct self-contained visual worlds that appear natural and inevitable.

The Etro case further illustrates how luxury brands strategically mobilize Generative AI to reconcile innovation with heritage. By embedding algorithmic imagery within an established ornamental and mythic aesthetic, technological transformation is framed as harmonious rather than disruptive. This strategy allows luxury advertising to absorb contemporary anxieties surrounding artificial intelligence such as concerns over authenticity, creativity, and labor, while preserving symbolic coherence and desirability.



More broadly, the findings suggest that Generative AI introduces a new condition of signification in advertising, one in which distinctions between reality and simulation, nature and technology, and human and non-human creativity are increasingly blurred. By reactivating Barthesian semiotics in dialogue with Generative AI, this article contributes to ongoing debates on how advertising theory can address emerging forms of algorithmic visual culture.

Overall, this article argues that Generative AI should be understood as a semiotic and ideological force within contemporary advertising, particularly in luxury contexts where myth, affect, and symbolism are central to brand meaning. Reimagining advertising theory in the age of Generative AI therefore requires not abandoning established critical frameworks but mobilizing them to interrogate how new technologies continue to shape the cultural politics of consumption.

Future research may further explore how audiences interpret AI-generated advertising imagery across different cultural and brand contexts. Integrating semiotic perspectives with emerging marketing research on AI-generated advertising (Jung et al., 2025; Kim, 2025) may provide valuable insights into how algorithmic creativity reshapes the cultural meanings of authenticity, luxury, and visual representation in contemporary advertising.

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