

## Visualising Hybrid Creativity: A Semiotic Analysis of Influencers' Use of Generative AI on Tik Tok

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### Abstract

The growing visibility of generative artificial intelligence (AI) on social media is beginning to influence how influencers imagine, plan and shape their content. Tasks such as drafting visuals, refining aesthetics and experimenting with new creative directions are increasingly supported by AI tools that work alongside human decision-making. This study examines how this form of hybrid creativity is expressed through influencer content and how meaning is constructed through the interplay between machine-generated output and human refinement. A qualitative semiotic content analysis was conducted using thirty content units from three Malaysian influencers who actively incorporate AI into their creative workflow. Barthes' semiology framework, which progresses from denotation to connotation and then to myth, was applied to interpret the layers of meaning embedded in their AI-assisted visuals. The findings indicate that AI is commonly used for early visual drafting, aesthetic enhancement and exploratory experimentation, while the final identity and narrative of the content remain shaped by human judgement. The meanings produced through these practices often centre on idealised digital beauty, a blended human-machine identity and a growing cultural acceptance of AI as part of contemporary creative work. Overall, the study suggests that AI does not reduce human agency but instead reframes how meaning is produced within digital environments. These insights contribute to discussions on the future of media production and the cultural implications of AI-driven creativity in the evolving communication landscape.

**Keywords:** Hybrid creativity, generative AI, influencers, semiotic analysis, digital content production

### INTRODUCTION

The increasing presence of generative artificial intelligence (AI) in social media environments has begun to reshape contemporary practices of digital content creation. Rather than functioning solely as an automated technical aid, AI tools are now actively involved in generating visual ideas, refining aesthetic

elements, and supporting creative experimentation. Advances in large-scale data analysis through AI have enabled more efficient and accurate creative processes, reducing errors while enhancing outcomes across multiple industries. The digital media sector, in particular, has benefited from this transformation, as AI-driven systems increasingly shape how content is produced, optimised, and visually communicated on social media platforms (Özdem 2022; Takyaci et al., 2025).

Artificial intelligence has become an increasingly influential force within new media ecosystems. Broadly understood as a technology that models and simulates aspects of human cognitive processes and behavioural patterns within computational systems, AI has expanded its role across multiple stages of new media content production. From content creation and aesthetic design to distribution and optimisation, AI now operates as an integral component of digital media workflows. As the digital media sector continues to evolve, AI is no longer limited to task automation but increasingly supports and augments human creative capabilities, giving rise to new forms of interaction and collaborative creativity between humans and machines (Varan, 2025).

From a new media communication perspective, these developments raise important questions about authorship, creativity, and meaning-making in digitally mediated environments. Influencers occupy a strategic position within this ecosystem, as their content both reflects and actively shapes platform norms, audience expectations, and visual culture. On TikTok, where short-form video, aesthetic performance, and algorithmic visibility intersect, influencers frequently turn to AI to enhance visual appeal and streamline creative production. TikTok is widely recognised as a visually driven platform characterised by short-form video, algorithmic content distribution, and influencer centred creative practices, making it a critical site for examining AI-assisted visual communication in contemporary new media environments (Kaye et al., 2022). This growing reliance points to the emergence of *hybrid creativity*, a mode of practice in which machine-generated outputs are selectively adapted, refined, and contextualised by human creators. While scholarly interest in AI and media has expanded in recent years, existing research has largely prioritised issues of efficiency, scalability, and marketing performance. Far less attention has been paid to how AI-assisted visuals function as communicative signs or how meaning is constructed when generative AI becomes embedded in influencer-driven content. Addressing this gap, the present study examines how Malaysian influencers use generative AI on TikTok and explores how hybrid creativity is visually articulated and culturally normalised through semiotic processes.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent scholarship has highlighted the increasingly significant role of generative AI in advancing technological integration, innovation, and

performance within the digital creative industry. Empirical studies suggest that AI adoption strengthens industry competitiveness while supporting higher levels of personalisation and creative quality in digital products (Wagan & Sidra, 2024). Rather than being limited to efficiency gains, AI is increasingly positioned as a structural driver of creative development across contemporary media industries.

Within platform-based digital environments, generative AI tools have been shown to reshape everyday content production practices, particularly in digital marketing and social media communication. Research indicates that tools such as ChatGPT, Canva, and social media management platforms enable individual creators and small-scale practitioners to produce, manage, and optimise digital content with fewer technical and resource constraints. This process has often been described as a form of technological democratisation, allowing creators to access capabilities previously associated with larger production teams (Smith & Hutson, 2024).

Despite growing attention to AI-driven production, much of the existing literature continues to emphasise operational outcomes rather than communicative meaning. Limited empirical research has examined how generative AI contributes to the construction of visual identity, symbolic representation, and cultural narratives within influencer-driven platforms. Semiotic analysis offers a particularly useful framework for addressing this gap, as it allows researchers to examine how visual signs operate across literal, cultural, and ideological levels (Barthes, 1972). Accordingly, this study shifts analytical attention from technological performance to the semiotic processes through which hybrid creativity is visually communicated on TikTok.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study is informed by Barthes' semiotic theory, which conceptualises meaning as a layered process constructed through visual signs and cultural interpretation. The framework is used to examine how generative AI is incorporated into influencer content on TikTok and how meaning is produced through the interaction between machine-generated visuals and human creative judgement.

Barthes' model of denotation, connotation, and myth provides a structured analytical lens for interpreting AI-assisted visuals. At the denotative level, the framework enables the identification of observable visual elements such as AI-enhanced facial features, stylised lighting, and digitally generated environments. These elements form the surface structure of influencer content and serve as the foundation for further interpretation.

At the connotative level, the framework facilitates the analysis of symbolic meanings associated with aspiration, technological fluency, and creative control. These meanings are shaped by platform-based aesthetic conventions

and influencer self-presentation practices. At the level of myth, semiotic analysis allows the study to examine how repeated exposure to AI-assisted visuals normalises human-machine collaboration, framing AI-supported creativity as an ordinary and legitimate aspect of contemporary digital culture.

By applying Barthes' semiotic framework, this study positions hybrid creativity as a communicative process in which meaning remains guided by human judgement, even within AI-mediated environments. The framework supports a focused and consistent analysis of how visual form, identity, and cultural narratives intersect in influencer practices on TikTok.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative semiotic content analysis to explore how hybrid creativity is visually represented in AI-assisted influencer content on TikTok. Thirty content units were purposively selected from three Malaysian influencers who publicly acknowledge the use of generative AI in their creative workflows. The analysis applies Barthes' (1972) semiotic framework, examining visual content at the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth in order to identify recurring patterns of meaning.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings derived from a qualitative semiotic analysis of thirty AI-assisted TikTok videos produced by three Malaysian influencers. Rather than offering an exhaustive account of each individual video, the analysis focuses on recurring visual patterns and dominant semiotic themes observed across the dataset. The visual examples presented in this section therefore function as representative illustrations that exemplify broader meaning-making processes identified through thematic saturation. The findings are organised according to Barthes' semiotic framework, progressing from denotative description to connotative interpretation and mythic meaning.

### Denotative Level: AI-Assisted Visual Refinement



**Figure 1**

*AI-assisted aesthetic refinement in TikTok influencer content*

At the denotative level, AI-assisted influencer content consistently exhibits refined aesthetic qualities, including enhanced facial symmetry, smooth skin textures, controlled lighting, and digitally generated or augmented backgrounds. These visual elements contribute to content that appears polished, deliberate, and professionally composed, often resembling studio-quality imagery rather than spontaneous user-generated video. As illustrated in Figure 1, AI is primarily deployed to optimise visual clarity and compositional balance while preserving the recognisability of the human subject.

Across the dataset, AI is most visibly integrated during the early stages of visual construction, supporting background generation, facial enhancement, and overall image stabilisation. Importantly, these denotative enhancements do not replace the influencer's physical presence but instead amplify visual legibility and platform visibility within TikTok's competitive attention economy.

### **Connotative Level: Aspirational Identity and Creative Control**



**Figure 2**

*AI-generated environments and the construction of aspirational digital identity*

#### **i. Denotation**

Figure 2 depicts influencers situated within digitally generated or AI-enhanced environments, such as stylised interiors, futuristic cityscapes, or curated lifestyle settings. These spaces are characterised by heightened colour saturation, artificial depth, and constructed spatial elements that distinguish them from everyday physical environments.

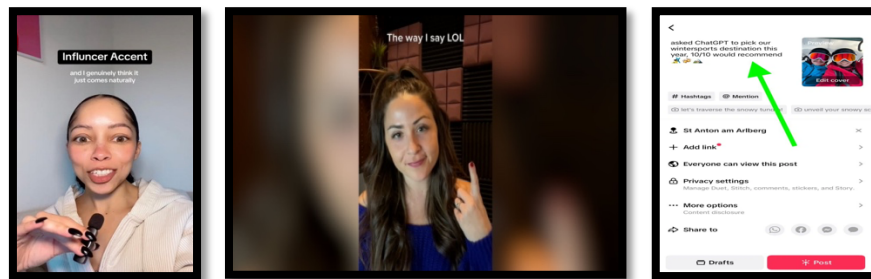
#### **ii. Connotation**

Connotatively, these environments signify aspiration, technological fluency, and elevated lifestyle identity. The visual grammar of futurity and polish communicates creative competence and control, aligning influencer self-presentation with platform norms that privilege novelty and distinction. As shown in **Figure 2**, AI functions as a symbolic resource through which influencers project authority over both aesthetic form and digital identity.

### iii. Myth

At the mythic level, repeated exposure to AI-generated environments normalises technologically mediated aspiration. Creativity is reframed as expandable beyond physical constraints through collaboration with intelligent systems, constructing a cultural narrative in which aspirational identity is co-produced by human intention and machine-generated possibility.

### Mythic Level: Human Anchoring of Meaning



**Figure 3**

*Human narration and embodied performance anchoring meaning*

#### i. Denotation

Figure 3 depicts influencers addressing the camera directly through voiceovers, facial expressions, gestures, and personalised captions. The human body and voice remain visually prominent and are typically positioned in the foreground, while AI-assisted elements function as background enhancements or aesthetic support

#### ii. Connotation

Connotatively, these visual and auditory cues signify authenticity, intentionality, and relational presence. Direct address and embodied performance communicate sincerity and emotional accessibility, reinforcing the influencer's credibility. Within AI-assisted visuals, these human performances signal that creative decisions are guided by personal judgement rather than automated generation, positioning AI as supportive rather than directive

### iii. Myth

The repeated anchoring of meaning through human narration constructs a cultural narrative in which humans remain the primary authors of meaning within AI-mediated creativity. This myth reassures audiences that technological assistance does not displace human agency but operates under human control. Hybrid creativity is thus normalised as a collaborative process in which machines enhance expression while humans retain interpretive authority and emotional connection.

Taken together, Figures 1–3 demonstrate how hybrid creativity on TikTok is constructed through layered semiotic processes in which AI enhances visual form while human creators anchor meaning and narrative control. At the denotative level (Figure 1), AI operates as an aesthetic optimiser, refining visibility and compositional clarity. At the connotative level (Figure 2), AI-generated environments function symbolically to construct aspirational digital identity and technological fluency. At the mythic level (Figure 3), human narration and embodied performance reaffirm authorship, ensuring that meaning making remains shaped by human interpretation.

These patterns support views of generative AI as a communicative co-actor rather than an autonomous creator, where meaning emerges relationally through human machine interaction (Gunkel, 2020). Semiotically, the normalisation of AI-assisted aesthetics reflects an ideological shift in which technologically mediated creativity is framed as culturally legitimate and desirable (Barthes, 1972). Within platformed visual culture, influencers actively negotiate algorithmic visibility and aesthetic norms while retaining interpretive authority (Kaye et al., 2022).

By aligning empirical analysis with Figures 1–3, this study extends existing work that has emphasised efficiency or automation by foregrounding semiotic meaning making as the core contribution of AI-assisted creativity. Hybrid creativity, therefore, is best understood not as a technical outcome but as a cultural and communicative process shaped by human judgement, platform affordances, and algorithmic mediation

## CONCLUSION

This study examined how generative artificial intelligence is integrated into influencer content on TikTok and how hybrid creativity is visually and semiotically constructed within platform-based environments. Through a qualitative semiotic analysis of thirty AI-assisted videos, the findings demonstrate that AI is primarily utilised as a supportive creative resource, enhancing visual refinement, expanding aesthetic possibilities, and enabling exploratory experimentation. However, the production of meaning remains guided by human judgement, with influencers retaining control over narrative direction, identity construction, and audience interpretation.

By applying Barthes' semiotic framework, the study reveals that hybrid creativity operates across layered levels of meaning. At the denotative level, AI contributes to polished and visually optimised content. At the connotative level, AI-assisted environments and aesthetics signify aspiration, technological fluency, and creative competence. At the mythic level, the repeated circulation of such visuals normalises human-machine collaboration, framing technologically assisted creativity as an ordinary and legitimate feature of contemporary digital culture rather than an exception or threat to authenticity.

Importantly, the analysis highlights the continued centrality of human presence in AI-mediated creativity. Human narration, embodied performance, and personalised framing function as anchoring mechanisms that stabilise meaning and reaffirm authorship. These practices ensure that, even within AI-enhanced visual environments, creativity and communication remain grounded in human interpretation and intention.

The study contributes to new media and visual communication scholarship by shifting analytical focus away from technological efficiency and toward meaning-making processes. It demonstrates that hybrid creativity should be understood not merely as a technical arrangement between humans and machines, but as a cultural and communicative process shaped by platform norms, algorithmic mediation, and human agency. Future research may extend this approach by examining audience interpretations of AI-assisted content or by exploring how hybrid creativity operates across different platforms and cultural contexts.

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