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CONSTRUCTING MYTH THROUGH METAPHOR: INTERFACING BARTHES' SEMIOTIC LEVELS WITH BRAND DISCOURSE IN YVES SAINT LAURENT PERFUME ADVERTISING

Construindo o mito por meio da metáfora: interlocuções entre os níveis semióticos de Barthes e o discurso de marca na publicidade de perfumes da Yves Saint Laurent

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ABSTRACT: This article offers a generative framework for understanding how commercial metaphors construct culturally resonant brand mythologemes in Yves Saint Laurent perfume advertising, with a particular focus on the role of emergent meaning (the signified of the metaphor) as a signifier for connotations that embody brand values. The study also examines the mechanisms by which these connotations are naturalized as brand mythologemes. Drawing on Roland Barthes's model of semiotic levels and the theory of conceptual integration by Fauconnier and Turner, it explores how visual-verbal metaphors contribute to brand mythology through the fascination they evoke. The analysis begins with identifying input spaces – heterogeneous mental domains such as physical actions, emotional states, symbolic values, and cultural constructs – which are selectively projected into a blended space. This space gives rise to emergent meanings (freedom, ambivalence, aesthetic paradox) that function as first-order signifiers and activate second-order connotative values. These connotations are shaped through metonymic transfer, whereby the metaphorically constructed qualities are reassigned to the product itself. The transition from metaphor to myth is examined through a set of semiotic mechanisms: (a) primary metonymic transfer, which reframes emergent meanings as intrinsic product attributes; (b) iconization, which materializes abstract qualities in visual form (e.g., the bottle, color palette, or composition); (c) a secondary metonymic transfer that involves the viewer identifying with the metaphorical message (e.g., 'be free in your complexity'), acquiring desired qualities as part of their identity through the use of the brand / its product – completing the transition from connotation to myth", and (d) fascination – the affective, symbolic, and aesthetic captivation that deepens emotional alignment with the brand and supports consumer identification with

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metaphorically constructed values. Ultimately, the product and brand are mythologized as agents of identity transformation.

KEYWORDS: brand mythology; metaphor, conceptual integration; Yves Saint Laurent advertising.

RESUMO: Este artigo oferece uma estrutura generativa para compreender como as metáforas comerciais constroem mitologemas de marca culturalmente ressonantes na publicidade de perfumes da Yves Saint Laurent, com foco especial no papel do significado emergente (o significado da metáfora) como significante de conotações que incorporam os valores da marca. O estudo também examina os mecanismos pelos quais essas conotações são naturalizadas como mitologemas da marca. Com base no modelo de níveis semióticos de Roland Barthes e na teoria da integração conceitual de Fauconnier e Turner, a análise explora como as metáforas verbo-visuais contribuem para a mitologia da marca por meio da fascinação que evocam. A análise começa com a identificação de espaços de entrada – domínios mentais heterogêneos como ações físicas, estados emocionais, valores simbólicos e construções culturais – que são projetados seletivamente em um espaço mesclado. Este espaço dá origem a significados emergentes (liberdade, ambivalência, paradoxo estético) que funcionam como significantes de primeira ordem e ativam valores conotativos de segunda ordem. Essas conotações são moldadas por meio de uma transferência metonímica, pela qual as qualidades metaforicamente construídas são atribuídas ao próprio produto. A transição da metáfora para o mito é examinada por meio de um conjunto de mecanismos semióticos: (a) a transferência metonímica primária, que reformula os significados emergentes como atributos intrínsecos do produto; (b) a iconização, que materializa qualidades abstratas em forma visual (por exemplo, o frasco, a paleta de cores ou a composição); (c) uma transferência metonímica secundária que envolve o espectador se identificando com a mensagem metafórica (por exemplo, 'seja livre em sua complexidade'), adquirindo qualidades desejadas como parte de sua identidade por meio do uso da marca / de seu produto – completando a transição da conotação ao mito; e (d) fascinação – o encantamento afetivo, simbólico e estético que aprofunda o alinhamento emocional com a marca e sustenta a identificação do consumidor com os valores construídos metaforicamente. Em última instância, o produto e a marca são mitologizados como agentes de transformação identitária.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: mitologia da marca; metáfora; integração conceitual; publicidade da Yves Saint Laurent.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary society, consumption increasingly functions not as a utilitarian act but as a symbolic practice, in which individuals acquire not merely a product but a meaning that contributes to the formation and expression of personal identity (cf. Baudrillard 2005).

The aim of this article is to analyze the mechanisms through which connotative and mythological meanings are generated in the advertising discourse of the Yves Saint Laurent brand (hereafter YSL) by integrating Barthes's semiotic theory with the cognitive theory of conceptual integration. The innovative contribution of this article is precisely this integration, which provides a unified semiocognitive framework for

tracing how metaphor-based blends in slogans shape connotation and, ultimately, brand myth.

A central mechanism enabling such symbolic appropriation is fascination – the emotionally charged, aesthetic, or symbolic captivation that draws the consumer into a world of imagined selfhoods and desired values. Fascination plays a key role in naturalizing connotative meanings and embedding them within the consumer's sense of self. YSL offers a particularly relevant case, occupying an ambivalent position within the fashion industry by balancing street culture, pop culture, and classicism while striving to be both avant-garde and timeless (Li 2022). The choice of YSL is not incidental: among luxury brands, it is one of the most explicit in using provocative and metaphor-driven verbal strategies that foreground ambiguity, paradox, and mythic self-construction. Its slogans often blur the boundaries between rebellion and elegance, individuality and universality, which makes YSL a productive site for analyzing how metaphor-based blends evolve into broader mythological structures.

Unlike much of the existing research in multimodal or visual semiotics – often grounded in Roland Barthes's semiological analysis, particularly his classical interpretation of the Panzani advertisement (Barthes 1964) – this study focuses primarily on the verbal component, with special attention to metaphorical structures in advertising slogans. Metaphorical blends are treated as the initial interpretative level upon which connotative and mythological meanings, in the Barthesian sense, are layered.

Through the integration of Barthes' semiotic theory and conceptual integration, the article seeks to identify: (a) how the meanings that emerge in metaphorical blends (the signified of the metaphor) subsequently function as signifiers for connotative meanings that embody the values of the brand; and (b) what processes are involved in the naturalization of values as “natural” properties of brand products, metonymically transmitted to consumer identity in the construction of YSL mythologemes.

The emergent meaning generated by these metaphors gives rise to connotations of paradoxical identity, contributing to brand mythologemes that embody and legitimize the pursuit of a unique, ambivalent self. Within this mythology, the brand and its products become agents of symbolic transformation – objects of fascination through which identity can be aestheticized, performed, and mythologized. By explicitly linking Barthes's semiotic theory and conceptual integration, the article

offers a multi-level description of brand myth-making and a replicable analytical procedure for advertising discourse.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The theoretical foundation of this study is Roland Barthes's semiological approach, which is applied here to metaphorical slogans with certain reinterpretative adjustments. These adjustments concern the primary semiotic unit upon which connotative meaning is layered, as well as the mechanisms of naturalization through which this meaning becomes associated with the product and the brand as its "natural" attribute of value.

To justify these reinterpretations, it is necessary to briefly return to Barthes's semiological theory (1957, 1964, 1967a, 1967b, 1983). Building on Ferdinand de Saussure's triadic sign structure (signifier – signified – sign), Barthes distinguishes two levels of meaning: denotation and connotation. The primary level of denotation realizes the nominative function of the sign, reducing its meaning to the "literal" referential identification (Barthes 1964: 44) of the signified. The signified of this first level then becomes the signifier for the second, connotative level, where the signified contains implicit cultural, ideological, or mythological values. At this level, identification is replaced by interpretation (Barthes 1964: 44). Connotations, in turn, serve as the building blocks of myth, which Barthes conceptualizes as a secondary semiological system (Barthes 1957: 114).

Barthes illustrates this process most famously in his analysis of the Panzani advertisement (1964), where the denotative level involves perceiving the image as a simple display of food products. Yet even this "literal" reading is culturally interpreted, providing the ground for connotative associations of freshness, naturalness, and Italianicity. Myth arises when such connotations are naturalized and presented as inherent qualities of the product.

This logic, however, poses a challenge when applied to metaphor. In Barthes's framework, the denotatum is the literal meaning, but metaphor lacks literal reference. Where, then, does denotation "reside" in a metaphor? In this study, metaphorical blends are treated as the functional equivalent of denotation. The emergent meaning of the blend constitutes the first interpretative level upon which

connotative and mythological meanings are subsequently constructed. Thus, metaphor generates a structure that first acquires connotative richness and, through naturalization and metonymic transfer, is elevated to the status of myth.

In terms of Barthesian semiology, the metaphor’s denotative, connotative, and mythological levels may be schematically presented in Table 1.

Level	Element	Metaphor
Denotation	Signifier	Metaphorical utterance
Denotation	Signified	Metaphorical meaning in the blend
Connotation	Signifier (i.e., denotative signified)	Emergent meaning in the blend, associated with a motivational value (e.g., freedom, strength, self- realization, etc.)
Connotation	Connotative signified	The conceptualization of the value as an attribute of the product
Myth (second-order sign)	Mithological signified	Value, naturalized as part of the brand identity, extends to its consumer identity in an associative connection: product/brand as a way of authentic self-expression/transformation of the client: brand → consumer identity ≈ freedom, ≈ self- realization, ≈ uniqueness, etc.

Table 1: Semiotic Levels of Metaphor in Advertising (Barthesian Framework).

This position is supported by prior research. A number of studies in advertising analysis apply Conceptual Integration Theory (Coulson; Cánovas 2009; Sweetser 2017; Kravchenko et al. 2021, 2024; Yemets 2024), but very few explicitly connect metaphorical blending to Barthes’s semiological model (Kravchenko; Zhykharieva; Letunovska 2024). The present article advances this line of inquiry by identifying the mechanism through which the signified of a blend transitions into a second-order signified, embodying motivational values.

Additional insights are drawn from studies of myth naturalization in branding and marketing (Czeremski 2020; Holt 2004; Manning; Cullum-Swan 1994; Vincent 2002). These works emphasize the role of narratives, archetypes, and cultural symbols (Kravchenko; Shanaieva-Tsymbal 2024; Moraru 2015; Randazzo 1993) in shaping consumer identities. While useful, they do not explain the associative

processes through which first-order signifieds become second-order signifiers. Nor do they clarify how connotative meanings transform into brand mythologemes.

Some progress toward a semiological account of these mechanisms has been made by Yan and Ming, who interpret mythology as a two-layered system: metaphor forms connotation, and metonymy generates metalanguage (Yan; Ming 2015: 65). However, their analysis remains confined to visual semiotics of advertising – in particular, metaphor is understood as a symbolic connection between a person featured in the advertisement and a particular concept such as status, success, or beauty. Such metaphorical associations are treated by the authors as connotation.

In contrast, this article focuses on the verbal level of advertising slogans, where metaphor is treated as the initial interpretative unit, and connotation emerges within the blend as an emergent structure, revealing new and unexpected meanings through the metonymic transfer of value to the product. The associative mechanisms involved in the formation of second-order signifieds associated with metaphorical blends have not previously been the focus of scholarly inquiry, and this gap is what the present article aims to address.

The innovative contribution of this article is the integration of Barthes's semiotic theory with Conceptual Integration Theory (Fauconnier; Turner 2002). This unified framework allows us to map the transition from metaphor to connotation and myth, tracing how the emerging meanings are naturalized into brand values and translated into consumer identity.

In methodological terms, this theoretical perspective supports a stepwise analysis: first identifying metaphorical blends in YSL slogans, then examining how their emergent meanings function as signifiers of connotation, and finally showing how these connotations are naturalized into brand mythologemes. In this way, the theoretical discussion directly informs the interpretative procedure that follows.

2. METHOD AND PROCEDURE

This study employs a multimodal semiotic analysis that integrates Conceptual Integration Theory (Fauconnier; Turner 2002), Barthes's two-order signification model (1957), and principles of brand myth-making in advertising discourse. The combination of cognitive and semiotic approaches provides the tools to investigate

how metaphorical blends in advertising slogans generate connotative meanings that become naturalized as brand mythologies.

Corpus and Selection Criteria

The corpus consists of advertising slogans and visuals from Yves Saint Laurent (YSL) perfume campaigns. YSL was selected because the brand consistently foregrounds paradox and ambivalence – oscillating between street culture and classicism, pop influence and timeless elegance. This duality makes it a particularly suitable case for examining how metaphor serves as a vehicle for myth construction. To ensure the reliability of interpretation, the analysis focuses on campaigns from different product lines and time periods, cross-checks recurrent motifs across slogan-visual pairings, and considers intertextual consistency with broader YSL brand narratives.

The research proceeds in five steps:

1. *Selection of Metaphorical Advertising Samples:* Identification of slogan-visual pairs where metaphor plays a central role in conveying brand values.

2. *Construction of Conceptual Blends:* Using the conceptual integration model (Fauconnier; Turner 2002, 2008; Oakley; Pascual 2017), input spaces are identified (e.g., movement, fire, strength, freedom, paradox). These are mapped into a blended space where new emergent meanings arise. The analysis follows four sub-steps:

- (a) mapping input spaces,
- (b) constructing the generic space,

- (c) creating the blended space, and

- (d) elaborating emergent properties: during this step the cognitive subject infers additional implicatures that intensify the metaphor's emotional and value-laden impact (Coulson; Oakley 2000).

This stage highlights how metaphors give rise to connotations of paradoxical strength, authentic ambivalence, and an aesthetic of inner conflict, which, when metonymically transferred to the product, contribute to its mythologization within advertising discourse.

3. *Application of Barthes's Semiotic Levels:*

At this stage the metaphorical slogan and its visual representation are analyzed through several levels of signification:

(a) First-order signification: the metaphorical blend functions as the denotative structure.

(b) Second-order signification: emergent traits from the blend are projected metonymically onto the product, creating connotative values (e.g., authenticity, empowerment, contradiction).

(c) Mythologization: at this stage, the product is no longer perceived merely as possessing desirable traits but as a means of identity transformation. The brand myth takes shape: the product (and the brand at large) is naturalized as a symbolic tool of becoming – an instrument that enables the consumer to actualize a paradoxical, powerful, and emotionally complex identity. In line with Barthes (1957), myth is seen as the naturalization of ideology, in this case – of the ideology of empowered, authentic, and self-defining femininity or multifaceted masculinity.

4. *Identification of Mechanisms of Transition to Myth*: At this stage the study focuses on the semiotic and cognitive mechanisms mediating the transition from metaphorical blend to brand myth. Four key mechanisms are traced:

(a) primary metonymic transfer (blend → product): the emergent meanings from the blend space (strength, ambivalence, freedom) are reframed as intrinsic properties of the product. This constitutes the core mechanism of connotation,

(b) iconization (visual embodiment of abstract qualities): visual elements – such as the perfume bottle, color scheme, or composition – make abstract metaphoric qualities visible and affectively salient. The product's design becomes a stylized embodiment of the metaphorical scenario (e.g., contradiction captured in shape or color).

(c) secondary metonymic transfer (viewer's alignment with brand identity), facilitating the mythology about the acquisition of desirable qualities through a product / brand, and

(d) fascination: emotional resonance and affective involvement (Kozyarevych-Zozula 2023) that naturalizes ideology.

5. *Interpretive Synthesis*: Findings are systematized in a matrix linking blend structure, denotative level, connotative level, and corresponding mythologeme. This synthesis demonstrates how metaphor-based meanings crystallize into symbolic narratives of paradoxical identity within YSL advertising.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. METAPHORS OF AMBIVALENT FEMININITY IN BRAND MYTH-MAKING: A SEMIOTIC-COGNITIVE ANALYSIS OF LIBRE AND BLACK OPIUM

The aesthetic philosophy of the Yves Saint Laurent brand is largely built on contrasts, ambivalences, and paradoxes – on a tension between opposing poles of identity. This tension manifests in oxymoronic meanings such as *strong femininity*, *the freedom of minimalism*, *restrained extravagance*, *complex simplicity*, and others. These value-laden meanings target consumers seeking uniqueness through the aesthetics of contradiction. In the campaigns, they often surface as secondary connotations of metaphorical blends, which we term connotations of paradoxical identity. By fulfilling an identificational function, these connotations crystallize into brand mythologemes, which model a desirable “YSL identity” for consumers.

The harmonization of contrasts is implicitly conveyed by the metaphor “*Feel free to blaze through your paradoxes*” (from the LIBRE perfume campaign), which expresses the idea that a woman’s true freedom lies not in eliminating inner contradictions or “resolving” dualities, but in moving through them like fire – transforming paradox into aesthetic and emotional strength. One of the visualizations associated with the metaphorical slogan is shown in Fig. 1.



Fig. 1. LIBRE: Visual advertising (<https://www.yslbeauty.com/int/fragrance/feminine-fragrance/libre/libre-le-parfum/WW-51020YSL.html>).

The conceptual integration involves four input spaces:

Freedom – autonomy, psychological liberation, boundary-breaking.

Blaze/Fire – passion, relentlessness, transformative energy.

Personal paradoxes – inner contradictions, especially within female identity (tenderness vs. strength, logic vs. passion).

Obstacles – paradoxes framed as barriers to be traversed.

The generic space activates agency, movement, and overcoming.

Mappings in the composition stage of the blend include:

Freedom → Blaze: Freedom as a personal power and psychological emancipation is mapped onto a flame that spreads freely, overcomes obstacles and visually embodies the idea of rapid movement and transformation;

Freedom → Motion Through Paradoxes; trajectory through inner contradiction;

Freedom → Overcoming Obstacles;

Paradoxes → Obstacles, resistances and medium for transformation;

Paradoxes → Fuel for personal blaze (energetic resource for charisma, emotional strength).

Cross-space mappings (e.g., Freedom → Blaze, Paradoxes → Obstacles, Paradoxes → Fuel for fire) produce emergent meanings absent in the inputs: ambivalence as strength, duality as charisma, freedom as self-authenticity beyond univocal identity.

Emergent meanings in the blend function as first-order signifiers for connotative meanings that, through naturalization mechanisms, form the brand mythologem. The semiotic analysis, illustrating these processes, is schematically presented in Table 2.

First / Denotative Level of Signification: Blend Meaning		Second Level: Connotation → mythological signified	
First level signifier	First level signified	Connotations	Connotative signified
A metaphorical expression implicitly equating freedom with flame, personality paradoxes with barriers, combined with the visual imagery	Meaning derived via conceptual integration → Freedom = breakthrough through ambivalence = inner fire as personal strength; personality paradoxes / contradictions as a resource, not a disadvantage	unstoppable feminine power, nonconformism, energy, provocative femininity, charisma, passion, inner freedom	LIBRE = feminine power revealed through embracing one's complexity – a naturalized, physical attribute of the product → a perfume that reveals the authentic complexity of female nature
First-order sign: complexity and ambivalence as sources of feminine strength and freedom; paradoxes as style		Mythological signified: the myth of female identity as a paradoxical force obtained through LIBRE and the YSL brand	
Mechanisms of transition to the second level: <i>Metonymies 1 and 2</i> : The feminine paradoxical power and freedom to be herself is transferred to the fragrance as its essential property → the consumer acquires the property by possessing the perfume. <i>Iconization</i> : visual image iconically reproduces the sensation of freedom, flame, and strength, reinforcing the naturalization of meaning.			
<i>Fascination</i> : The means underlying the rhetoric of emotional consent, internalizing the paradoxical power of female identity as a property transmitted to the consumer through the brand's products.			

Table 2: Metaphorical slogan “Feel Free to Blaze Through Your Paradoxes”: connotative and mythological projections.

As the table shows, in addition to primary and secondary metonymic transfer, the mechanisms of naturalization of advertised values are facilitated by iconization and fascination techniques, which we will examine in more detail.

Iconization. The visual design materializes the metaphor. Flames engulf the word LIBRE; the open space conveys absence of boundaries; the protagonist strides

in a masculine suit with bare chest, embodying freedom and emancipation. Here, visual embodiment anchors the transfer of values to the product and subject: freedom is not abstract but perceptually enacted. Thus, the metonymic transfer is iconically anchored: from the value to the object, and then from the object to the subject. The visual image iconically reproduces the sensation of freedom, flame, and strength, reinforcing the naturalization of meaning.

Fascination. Strong visual imagery is paired with a verbal series that amplifies resonance:

Unleash your inner fire. Freedom doesn't wait, and neither should you. Feel free to explore everything unconstrained. Feel free to blaze through your paradoxes. Feel free to feel amplified. Feel free to live LIBRE, now.

The first slogan metaphorically presents inner freedom through the fire-as-life-force schema (“Unleash your inner fire”), which is visually reinforced by the image of the blazing letters LIBRE, and verbally by the analyzed metaphor “Feel free to blaze through your paradoxes.”

Next, a pseudo-axiomatic premise is introduced: “Freedom doesn’t wait, and neither should you.” This creates an illusion of self-evidence, functioning illocutionarily as a call to immediate action (to purchase the fragrance that evokes a sense of freedom), thereby reinforcing the imperative of consumption. Thus, the naturalization of the concept is intensified through a rhetoric of obviousness and an implicit directive appeal. The anaphoric repetition in the subsequent slogans (“feel free to...”), forming syntactic parallelism, strengthens the link between the product and the concept of freedom on an emotional-expressive level.

Further naturalization of the concept is advanced by the slogan “Feel free to feel amplified,” which transforms freedom into a sensory and bodily experience (“feel amplified”), enhancing the effect of subjectivity and supporting naturalization through the emotional “appropriation” of the concept.

Through the final slogan – “Feel free to live LIBRE, now” – the brand shifts into the modality of a lifestyle realized “here and now.” The wordplay – between “feel free to live freely” and “feel free to live through the fragrance LIBRE” – achieves a mythological synthesis: LIBRE is not merely a brand, but a way of life as freedom.

Thus, the LIBRE campaign exemplifies how metaphorical blends generate connotative values which are naturalized into brand myth through dual metonymic transfer, iconization, and strategies of fascination. Connotation emerges within the

blend and is elevated to myth according to Barthes' model – a passage from connotation to mythologization that renders freedom and ambivalence as essential, transmissible qualities of both product and consumer.

An example of connotative semiotics that underlies female paradoxicality and ambivalence as the “natural” essence of the advertised perfume is the metaphorical slogan “*BLACK OPIUM is a black diamond in the rough,*” which transforms the image of BLACK OPIUM into a mythological representation of ambivalent feminine power situated between wildness and value. One of the visualizations associated with the metaphorical slogan is shown in Fig. 2.



Fig. 2. BLACK OPIUM: Visual advertising (<https://www.yslbeauty.com.au/fragrance/womens-perfume/black-opium-eau-de-parfum/WW-40701YSL.html>)

The first-order signified is constructed in a conceptual blend of the metaphorical expression “*BLACK OPIUM is a black diamond in the rough*”, which draws on two input spaces:

Scent – BLACK OPIUM as nocturnal, intense, seductive, and sharp.

Precious stone – a black diamond in the rough, rare, untamed, and unpolished, yet of high worth.

The generic space invokes value hidden in ambiguity — energy awaiting revelation. In the blend, the perfume itself becomes a dark, untamed resource of feminine power. The emergent meaning positions femininity as captivating precisely through paradox: irresistible not in polished perfection but in raw authenticity. Wearing the fragrance is thus an initiation — the subject herself becomes the “black diamond.”

The semiotic analysis in Table 3 traces how this metaphor is translated into brand myth.

First / Denotative Level of Signification: Blend Meaning		Second Level: Connotation → mythological signified	
First level signifier	First level signified	Connotations	Connotative signified
Metaphorical expression “ <i>black diamond in the rough</i> ” + visual image of a black flacon with a glowing center hinting at the preciousness within	Blend Meaning: feminine power as ambivalent energy hidden beneath a “dark” or “wild” surface. Femininity = passion, danger, depth, allure, unpolished yet precious	passion, danger, depth, allure, unpolished yet precious	BLACK OPIUM = a fragrance embodying feminine allure in its “unrefined” yet luminous form: The perfume = woman as paradox: passion and darkness, value in imperfection, elegance and wildness
First-order sign: Female attractiveness as a paradoxical feminine essence (dark, untamed, radiant)		Mythological signified: The consumer acquires paradoxical power through possessing the perfume. Identifying with the fragrance becomes an initiation into this value – the wearer herself becomes a “black diamond in the rough.”	
Mechanisms of transition to the second level: <i>Metonymies 1 and 2</i> : The paradoxical power is transferred to the fragrance as its essential property → the consumer acquires the property through possessing the perfume. <i>Iconization</i> : The ambivalent power of femininity is represented through the visual image of the perfume bottle. <i>Fascination</i> : a sophisticated image embodied in a verbal metaphor; a visual image that evokes emotional associations with a scent.			

Table 3: Metaphorical slogan “*BLACK OPIUM is a black diamond in the rough*”: connotative and mythological projections.

Visual embodiment. The black flacon with its gleaming center iconically mirrors the diamond-in-the-dark metaphor, turning abstract value into perceptible form: within the darkness (black flacon), a precious core gleams (the bottle’s shiny center), visually reinforcing the idea of hidden value. Surrounding elements — jasmine and orchid, vanilla pods, coffee beans — stage a union of opposites: tenderness, grace (jasmine/orchid), and relaxation (vanilla pods) alongside intensity and vitality (coffee

beans, five filled squares). The composition fuses natural with stylized, soft with sharp, reinforcing ambivalence as the perfume's essence.

3.2. AMBIVALENT MASCULINITY IN MYSLF ADVERTISING: FROM METAPHOR TO MYTH

YSL's brand discourse extends the logic of paradox not only to women but also to men, addressing motivational needs tied to modern masculinity. A striking example is the oxymoronic slogan "*Unapologetically nuanced*" (Myslf). The phrase reframes male identity as both uncompromising and subtle, powerful yet complex — a model that departs from reductive "brutal" masculinity. One of the visualizations associated with the metaphorical slogan is shown in Fig. 3



Fig. 3: Myslf: Visual advertising (<https://www.heinemann-shop.com/en/global/yves-saint-laurent-myslf>)

Metaphorical structure: The oxymoron rests on a reinterpretation of the metaphor Apologies are Nuances.

Input Space 1: Apologies – actions aimed at softening, apologizing, retreating, diffusing sharpness; moving away from categorical assertion; expressing social and discursive accommodation.

Input Space 2: Nuances – fine shades, intricacies, understatements, soft expressions; implying multilayeredness and flexibility; contrasted with directness and binarity.

Generic Space: Forms of interpersonal interaction.

In the blend, apologies become metonyms for flexibility and subtlety. The explicit negation ("unapologetically") then collides with the idea of nuance, producing

a tension-filled oxymoron. The emergent meaning is that strength does not exclude complexity: being nuanced does not mean apologizing, and being unapologetic does not preclude depth.

From connotation to myth. On the secondary level, the metaphor projects these blended qualities onto the subject (the man wearing the fragrance). He is both categorical and multifaceted, direct yet refined. This supports the mythologeme of “the fragrance as a symbol of complex strength and unapologetic authenticity.”

The semantic multilayeredness of the metaphorical oxymoron lies in the fact that, on a secondary level, the blend incorporates an image of male identity (as the perfume’s bearer), along with cultural expectations of decisiveness and categorical strength, embodied in “unapologetic” – expectations that contrast with nuance. This creates a secondary blend: The subject (man/fragrance) is both direct, uncompromising, unapologetic – and at the same time, complex, multifaceted, subtle, irreducible to simple “brutality.” A new type of masculine power emerges, with the reconstruction of masculinity as a departure from toxic brutality. Thus, the oxymoronic metaphor introduces a model of integrated identity in which there is no contradiction between strength and nuance. The fragrance becomes a symbol of complex strength and the freedom to be oneself – “unapologetically”.

The creation of the mythologeme “The fragrance as a symbol of complex strength and unapologetic authenticity” can be schematized in Table 4.

First / Denotative Level of Signification: Blend Meaning		Second Level: Connotation → mythological signified	
First level signifier	First level signified	Connotations	Connotative signified
The metaphorical oxymoron <i>Unapologetically nuanced</i> + the advertising visuals representing masculinity, sensuality, and multilayeredness	Blend Meaning: strength through complexity/nuance	emotional depth, complexity, contradiction, rejection of binary clichés (strong/weak, rational/emotional), unpredictability, individuality, provocative sophistication	<i>Myslf</i> perfume symbolizes a new cultural myth of masculinity: Myslf = Man as a unity of opposites = strength through nuance = a scent of inner, multifaceted masculinity
First-order sign: A new image of masculinity: to be oneself means to embrace one’s complexity without apologizing for it; masculine strength as the ability to be complex while remaining uncompromising		Mythological signified: Consumer as wearer of the fragrance acquires inner, multifaceted masculinity, strength through nuance	
Mechanisms of transition to the second level: <i>Metonymies 1 and 2</i> : The emergent property of the blend – “strength through complexity/nuance” – is transferred from the concept to the product: Nuance = strength → a quality attributed to the fragrance (and more broadly, to the brand) → consumer/wearer of the fragrance = embodiment of this value. <i>Iconization</i> : The imagery iconically reproduces the blend of multifacetedness and strength implied in the metaphor “Unapologetically nuanced”. <i>Fascination</i> : a captivating and attention-grabbing oxymoronic metaphor; an intense and contrasting visual image of sensuality, softness and masculinity.			

Table 4: Metaphore “*Unapologetically nuanced*”: connotative and mythological projections.

On the iconological level, visual details and their composition iconically express the complex synthesis of masculinity, sensuality, and multifaceted yet self-assured identity. The matte black bottle with a raised YSL logo, minimalist and austere, iconically expresses unwavering strength, categorical presence, and the “monolithic” quality of masculinity. The background is a glossy black surface with reflections, where the mirror-like effect hints at self-reflection and inner multilayeredness. The

bottle entwined with natural elements – chunks of wood, vanilla pods, soft white flowers with yellow stamens – iconically embodies nuance, sensuality, and softness. The tree can symbolize here durability, root energy, masculine base; vanilla – warmth, sweetness, gentleness; flowers – vulnerability, beauty, subtlety – yet they “grow” from the strong base of wood.

Affective resonance

By combining stark minimalism with sensuous detail, the campaign fascinates the viewer and naturalizes ambivalence as the “new normal” of masculinity. The fragrance appears not as a product that merely carries values but as the tangible embodiment of integrated strength and nuance. In this way, complex masculinity is mythologized as both natural and desirable, accessible through the YSL identity.

Taken together, the three campaigns illustrate how YSL constructs identity through paradox, ambivalence, and nuanced value-laden meanings. In *Libre*, the focus is on rethinking feminine ambivalence and paradox as a source of strength and freedom, presenting a model in which dualities are transformed into personal empowerment. In *Black Opium*, this logic is extended and intensified, deepening the myth of the enigmatic feminine paradox as a source of irresistible attraction. In *Myslf*, the focus shifts to masculinity, where the oxymoronic metaphor “Unapologetically nuanced” reconciles strength with complexity, redefining male identity beyond reductive or coercive stereotypes.

These contrasts highlight the unique contribution of each campaign to the overall argument: while each metaphor operates within a distinct gendered and thematic framework, all exemplify the semiocognitive mechanisms – emergent metaphorical meanings, connotation, iconization, and fascination – through which YSL naturalizes complex identities and constructs brand mythologemes. By juxtaposing these cases, the analysis demonstrates that YSL’s advertising philosophy systematically transforms ambivalence and paradox into a source of identity, desire, and empowerment, making tension and contradiction central to the brand’s semiotic strategy.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated how metaphorical structures in YSL perfume advertising serve as generative sites for connotative and mythological meaning-making, enabling the brand to position itself as a mediator of identity transformation. By integrating Roland Barthes's theory of semiotic levels with the cognitive framework of conceptual integration, we have shown how metaphorical blends act as primary meaning-constructing spaces. Within these blends, emergent meanings such as freedom, ambivalence, and aesthetic paradox operate as first-order signifiers, which are naturalized as intrinsic attributes of the product / brand.

Ultimately, the mythologization of the YSL brand and its products is achieved through a layered process in which metaphor, metonymy, iconization, and fascination converge. The connotative values generated in this process – ambivalence, freedom, transgression – are no longer perceived as rhetorical or symbolic strategies, but as “natural” characteristics of both the product and the aspirational identity of its consumer.

The primary metonymic transfer reframes metaphorically emergent meanings (e.g., aesthetic ambivalence or liberated selfhood) as attributes of the product and brand. These qualities then function as connotative signs of brand value. The secondary metonymic transfer, by contrast, completes the transition from connotation to myth: it occurs when the consumer comes to believe that by using the product – or aligning with the brand – they acquire these desirable qualities as part of their own identity. The brand and its products thus function as transformational agents of identity, mediating a symbolic process in which targeted consumer selves can be affirmed, and mythologized.

In this way, connotation serves as an intermediate stage – mapping product to value – while mythologization entails the appropriation of this value by the consumer through symbolic participation in the brand. This layered semiocognitive model offers a productive framework for analyzing how advertising discourse transforms abstract brand values into culturally resonant identity myths through metaphor, metonymy, iconization, and fascination.

Beyond the specific case of Yves Saint Laurent, the framework developed here provides a model for analyzing how advertising across luxury and lifestyle sectors constructs identity through metaphorical and semiocognitive mechanisms. It

highlights the role of emergent metaphorical meanings and affective resonance in shaping perceptions of products as carriers of culturally valued traits. This approach could be extended to other contexts, including fashion, cosmetics, and experiential marketing, where brand mythologization and identity transformation are central to consumer engagement. The study offers a systematic account of how abstract brand values are transformed into culturally resonant identity myths, providing both theoretical and practical insights for semiotics, cognitive linguistics, and marketing studies. At the same time, the scope of this research entails certain limitations. The analysis has been restricted to the verbal and visual components of YSL advertising, leaving aside other multimodal features such as music, and design, which may substantially contribute to the construction of brand mythology. Moreover, the study is focused on a single brand and product line, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Finally, the discussion has been carried out on a theoretical level without empirical testing of consumer perception, which could further validate or nuance the proposed framework. Addressing these limitations in future research will allow for a more comprehensive understanding of how advertising discourse naturalizes values and constructs myths across different media, brands, and cultural contexts. Future research might incorporate broader multimodal features, cross-cultural reception studies, or measures of consumer perception to validate and extend the findings.

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