

Analysing Mythological Constructions in Ring Advertisements Using Barthes' Framework

Esamada Rose Nursaputri¹ and Ni Komang Arie Suwastini²

^{1,2}Universitas Pendidikan Ganesha, Bali, Indonesia
✉Jl. Udayana No.11, Banjar Tegal, Singaraja, Kabupaten Buleleng, Bali
E-mail: esamadarose@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Instagram advertisements reconstruct the cultural meaning of rings through mythological signification. Traditionally associated with interpersonal bonds, romantic commitment, and marital status, rings are increasingly being redefined through digital advertising as symbols of broader ideological values. Using Roland Barthes' theory of mythology, this qualitative study analyses two Instagram advertisements: UNICEF India's Promise Ring campaign and the Gabit Smart Ring advertisement. The analysis focuses on verbal text, visual imagery, colour schemes, typography, product presentation, and compositional design to identify how denotative signs are transformed into connotative meanings and ideological myths. The findings show that UNICEF resignifies the ring as a symbol of humanitarian commitment and social responsibility, while Gabit constructs the ring as a symbol of self-care, discipline, and personal optimization. Although the two advertisements promote different values—collective moral duty and individual self-improvement—they both demonstrate how advertising naturalizes culturally constructed meanings through carefully selected semiotic elements. This study contributes to advertising semiotics by extending Barthes' mythological framework to Instagram-based visual marketing and by showing how a familiar material object can be reinterpreted through digital advertising to support competing ideological narratives.

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INTRODUCTION

Rings have existed since ancient Greece, ancient Rome, and ancient Egypt (Zhang, 2021). Archaeological evidence indicates that early rings were crafted from gold, bronze, and silver in various shapes, ranging from archaic to classical designs (Spier, 1992). In ancient Egypt, rings served as symbols of royal authority and success on the throne. By the 13th century, however, their meaning had shifted considerably; rings came to represent a knight's devotion to a noblewoman. Throughout history, rings have carried an extraordinarily diverse range of meanings (Yokoi et al., 2017). In English and Uzbek fairy tales, for instance, rings are not associated with unity or love. Instead, they function as sources of supernatural power; whoever possesses a magic ring is considered invincible, fearless, and destined for success (Djurabayevna, 2021).

In contemporary society, rings are commonly understood as accessories that signify commitment, engagement rings, wedding bands, or friendship rings. Beyond these functions, rings also serve as fashion statements. Many individuals, regardless of gender, collect and wear rings based primarily on aesthetic appeal.

This understanding of rings, however, is not natural or timeless. Rather, it has been shaped by historical forces and commercial interests. In 1926, for example, the jewellery industry launched advertisements promoting men's engagement rings, not because such a tradition existed, but to create one and thereby increase sales (Howard, 2003). This campaign continued into the 1940s, when jewellers promoted the double-ring ceremony for weddings. The trend proved successful and has since become a widely accepted practice.

Nevertheless, the meaning and function of rings continue to vary considerably across geographic, social, religious, and gender contexts. In Australia, an engagement ring is essentially a conditional gift from a man to a woman (Duffy et al., 2020). In China, rings—particularly diamond rings—carry strong romantic connotations. For women, they symbolise desire and love; for men, they signify success and masculinity. This symbolism, however, is largely confined to upper social classes. Among lower-income groups, diamond rings are sometimes perceived as fetishistic objects rather than meaningful symbols (Sun, 2017). The Chinese brand Darry Ring has capitalised on this dynamic by combining emotional appeal with exclusivity, making their diamond rings feel both timeless and scarce (Feng, 2023).

In Malaysia, the position of rings is more flexible. Rings may function as gifts or as sacred symbols in traditional weddings, depending on the material. Ethnic Malays tend to prefer yellow gold rings with floral or geometric engravings, whereas Chinese Malaysians generally opt for plain white or yellow gold bands (Hakim & Hashim, 2016).

Religious differences also influence ring usage. In Maluku, Indonesia, for instance, Christians and Muslims employ rings differently. For Christians, the wedding ring is a mandatory item—a lifelong symbol of marital love that must be worn until death. For Muslims in the region, the ring is more closely associated with custom and social identity, accepted within religious teachings but not strictly obligatory (Tutkey et al., 2025).

Furthermore, rings can carry deeply personal meanings that have little to do with romance or marriage. Woodward (2015) found that for many individuals, rings are treasured because of emotional connections to family members or close friends. One participant in her study valued a ring simply because it had been given by her cousin (Woodward, 2015).

In recent years, rings have acquired entirely new functions. With advances in technology, smart rings that track sleep, exercise, and other health metrics have entered the market. These devices are gaining popularity in the healthcare sector (Ramchandani, 2023). In this context, rings have come to symbolise self-care and personal improvement.

This shift has not occurred spontaneously. It has been actively facilitated by advertising on social media. In semiotic terms, advertising functions as a medium for transmitting messages between brands and consumers (Heriwati, 2018; Irawan, 2012). It possesses a natural capacity to influence consumer behaviour and encourage engagement with products (Siahaan, 2025; Syakur et al., 2018). Given the massive and diverse volume of advertisements encountered daily, they are remarkably effective at instilling new ideologies (Belch & Belch, 2021).

According to Parvathy (2014), advertising can be understood as myth—and myth, in this context, carries a dual meaning: it may function as a symbolic narrative about the human condition, or it may serve as a form of mystification (Parvathy, 2014). Within Barthes's semiotic framework, myth is an ideological process deeply embedded in culture and history. It presents culturally manufactured meanings as though they were timeless and natural. Chandler (2017) observes that images in advertising are particularly effective at naturalising these constructions. Advertising, therefore, operates as a modern form of myth-making, capable of reshaping the cultural meanings attached to ordinary objects such as rings.

Despite the rich history and cultural diversity surrounding rings, as well as the growing presence of ring-related advertisements on social media, very little research has systematically examined how advertising influences the changing meaning of rings. Studies that investigate how Instagram advertisements construct new mythologies around rings, detaching them from traditional associations with romantic or marital commitment remain scarce. Most existing research focuses either on historical or cultural meanings of rings (e.g., Howard, 2003; Sun, 2017; Tutkey et al., 2025) or on the semiotics of advertising more broadly (e.g., Siahaan, 2025; Taqdir et al., 2025), without explicitly connecting the two domains. Moreover, while Barthes's mythological analysis has been applied to various advertising contexts, its application to the specific object of rings in digital advertising remains underexplored.

This research addresses that gap. The study aims to determine how social media advertisements are shifting the meaning of rings, from symbols of interpersonal commitment to something else entirely. The following research questions guide

the investigation: (1) How do Instagram advertisements construct new mythological meanings for rings? and (2) What ideological messages are being naturalised through these advertisements?

Several theoretical contributions are offered. This study extends Barthes's mythological analysis beyond traditional media such as television and print into the context of Instagram-based digital advertising, where visual and textual signs are strategically combined to construct new cultural meanings. It also demonstrates that the same material object, a ring, can be mobilised to support opposing ideological narratives depending on the advertiser's semiotic strategy, thereby enriching the understanding of how material culture is continuously resignified through commercial discourse. Additionally, the study highlights the importance of chromatic signs and repetitive textual structures in myth construction, aspects often underexplored in classical Barthesian analysis. By addressing the gap in the literature regarding advertising-induced meaning shifts in material objects, this research offers a refined analytical model for decoding ideological transformations in contemporary consumer culture.

METHODS

This qualitative study employs Roland Barthes's theory of mythology as its analytical framework. Barthes's semiotic approach is particularly suited for examining how advertisements construct and naturalise new meanings for cultural objects. According to Barthes (1972), myth operates through a two-order semiological system. In the first-order system (denotation), a sign consists of a signifier (the physical form) and a signified (the literal concept). In the second-order system (connotation), the sign from the first level becomes a new signifier, which is then combined with a new signified to produce a myth—an ideological message that presents culturally manufactured meanings as natural and universal (Barthes, 1972; Chandler, 2017). This framework enables the researcher to uncover how advertisements transform the meaning of objects by embedding them within broader cultural narratives.

Data were collected through purposive sampling of Instagram advertisements featuring rings as the central object. Two advertisements were selected for in-depth analysis due to their contrasting semiotic strategies: one from UNICEF India promoting a "Promise Ring" for clean water access, and another from Gabit Smart Ring promoting a health-tracking wearable. Both advertisements were captured as screenshots, and the analysis focused on verbal text, visual imagery, colour schemes, typography, and compositional design. The selection of only two advertisements allows for a detailed, qualitative examination of the semiotic mechanisms at work, consistent with the exploratory nature of this study.

The analysis followed a systematic procedure based on Barthes's mythological framework. First, each advertisement was examined at the denotative level, where all observable elements, such as colours, objects, human figures, textual captions, and layout, were identified and described. Second, the analysis moved to the connotative level, where the cultural associations and symbolic meanings attached to those denotative elements were interpreted. Third, the myth constructed by each advertisement was identified by analysing how the combination of denotative and connotative meanings produced a new ideological message about the meaning of rings. To ensure the validity of the interpretation, the researcher conducted repeated readings of the advertisements and cross-checked the identified signs with established references on colour psychology and cultural symbolism. Additionally, peer debriefing was conducted with a colleague familiar with semiotic analysis to verify the consistency of the interpretations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of the Advertisements

Advertisements are created using a combination of images, text, and colour schemes. This approach is intended to ensure that the advertisement effectively reaches its target consumers. According to Aqeel & Ali (2024), this combination conveys a message and is designed to influence target consumers to interact with the advertisement by shaping their social values and identity. This section presents the semiotic analysis of two Instagram advertisements featuring rings as the central object: (1) UNICEF India's "Promise Ring" and (2) Gabit Smart Ring. Each advertisement is analysed using Barthes's three-stage framework: denotation, connotation, and myth.



Picture 1: The Promise Ring Advertisement by UNICEF India
<https://www.instagram.com/unicefindia/> [source]



Picture 2: Gabit Smart Ring Advertisement on Instagram
<https://www.instagram.com/p/DM7uN-yv6mm/?igsh=YXE5a2ZhYmY0emNw> [source]

UNICEF India's "Promise Ring"

Denotative Level

Picture 1 presents a ring advertisement by UNICEF India titled The Promise Ring. The dominant colour is blue. The advertisement features a boy wearing a blue jacket, holding a glass under a faucet to collect water. His face is smiling and directed toward the camera. The advertisement includes several captions, most notably "This Promise Ring carries your promise of clean water for children." The UNICEF logo is displayed alongside the tagline 'for every child'.

Connotative Level

At the connotative level, the blue colour evokes associations with purity, tranquillity, and the natural colour of water. It also functions as the institutional colour of UNICEF, creating an immediate visual connection to the organisation's identity. Labrecque & Milne (2012) found that blue is the most preferred colour among both women and men, and that it significantly influences purchase decisions and brand recall. The smiling boy connotes happiness, well-being, and childhood innocence, suggesting that access to clean water leads to positive outcomes for children. The word "promise," repeated throughout the caption, carries connotations of commitment, reliability, and moral obligation. The UNICEF tagline "for every child" connotes universality, inclusivity, and the organisation's global mission.

Myth Constructed

Through the combination of these denotative and connotative elements, UNICEF constructs a new myth: that by wearing the Promise Ring, consumers are committing to ensuring fair human rights, specifically access to clean water. Unlike earlier eras, in which rings symbolised bonds of love, friendship, or brotherhood, this ring symbolises a commitment to providing basic human rights. The smiling face visually reinforces the message that access to clean water produces positive outcomes. The advertisers convey that by donating and receiving this commitment ring, consumers indirectly contribute to that child's well-being. The repeated use of the word "promise" activates emotional branding, connecting with target consumers by appealing to sensitive emotional points. This approach encourages consumers to interact with the advertiser and make a purchase. Emotional bonding enables consumers to associate their personal life experiences

with the advertised product. Heriwati (2018) similarly observes that emotional messages are designed to touch consumers' hearts and trigger actions based on feelings.

The dominant blue colour is consistent with both the colour of water and the base colour of the UNICEF logo. This serves a dual purpose: reminding consumers of water while also facilitating rapid recognition of the organising organisation. Aqeel & Ali (2024) state that colour is one of the semiotic tools used to convey ideological signals that influence consumers' social values and identity (Aqeel & Ali, 2024). Additionally, the tagline below the UNICEF logo emphasises that the organisation's work is dedicated to fulfilling the rights of all children.

The advertisers construct the myth that by donating and receiving this commitment ring, consumers have helped children in water-scarce areas. A further myth is that by wearing the ring, consumers have fulfilled their social responsibility toward these children. In Barthes's terms, the ring has been resignified: it is no longer a symbol of romantic love but a material manifestation of humanitarian citizenship.

Practical Implications for UNICEF and Non-Profit Organisations

From a practical standpoint, this UNICEF advertisement offers valuable lessons for non-profit organisations. It demonstrates that symbolic objects can serve as powerful tools for mobilising public participation when tied to emotionally resonant causes. The "Promise Ring" functions as a tangible reminder of an intangible commitment, thereby increasing donor engagement and brand loyalty. For social marketers, this case illustrates how emotional branding can transform a product into a vehicle for social identity construction, encouraging consumers to associate their personal values with the advertised object.

Gabit Smart Ring

Denotative Level

Picture 2 presents an advertisement for the Gabit Smart Ring. The dominant colours are grey, black, and green. The text repeats the phrases "for my mind," "for my body," "for my energy," "for my strength," and "for my focus" in black. The final text displays "for myself" in green. The bottom section lists the product's features. The product photo focuses on the interior of the ring, showcasing its modern design with a green sensor light. The features listed include 'water resistant', 'highly accurate', 'weighs only 3.1 grams', and '7+ days battery life'.

Connotative Level

At the connotative level, the green colour evokes associations with health, vitality, and wellness. Black connotes modernity, sophistication, and technology. The combination of grey, black, and green creates a visual impression of a sleek, contemporary product designed for health-conscious consumers. The repetitive text, such as "for my mind," "for my body," "for my energy," "for my strength," "for my focus," and "for myself", connotes individualism, self-care, and personal empowerment. The illuminated sensor inside the ring connotes advanced technology, precision, and innovation. The listed features, namely water resistance, accuracy, light weight, and long battery life, connote convenience, reliability, and practicality. Labrecque & Milne (2012) observe that colour influences consumer emotions; green symbolises health and vitality, while black symbolises modernity (Labrecque & Milne, 2012). Colour psychology, they argue, is particularly powerful in advertising because it can influence emotions and subsequent consumer actions.

Myth Constructed

Through the combination of these elements, the Gabit Smart Ring advertisement constructs a distinct myth: that the ring is no longer a symbol of a bond or commitment between individuals, but rather a form of proof of self-improvement and a willingness to live a healthier and more disciplined life. The repetitive first-person phrasing emphasises that the product is exclusively for the wearer's personal development. The illuminated sensor light symbolises the integration of technology into daily life, suggesting that self-monitoring is the path to optimal living. The dark colour palette, which contrasts with conventional gold or silver rings used in engagements and weddings, reinforces the break from tradition.

In Barthes's terms, the smart ring has been resignified: it is no longer a token of relational commitment but a tool for self-optimisation. This myth aligns with contemporary wellness culture, which emphasises individual responsibility for

health and personal growth. The advertisement positions the wearer as someone who values efficiency, discipline, and technological sophistication, values presented as natural and desirable in modern life.

Practical Implications for Technology Marketers and Product Designers

Practically, the Gabit Smart Ring advertisement offers insights for product designers and technology marketers. It shows that functional features alone are insufficient to drive consumer adoption; the advertising narrative must also reframe the product's cultural identity to appeal to consumers' aspirations for self-improvement. The strategic use of first-person repetition ("for my mind," "for my body") constructs an individualised narrative that positions the ring as a tool for personal optimisation, a strategy that can be adopted by brands seeking to enter the wellness technology market. For designers, this suggests that the visual and textual presentation of a product is as important as its technical specifications in shaping consumer perception.

Comparative Discussion: Two Myths, One Object

The two advertisements analysed above demonstrate that rings can be mobilised to support opposing ideological narratives depending on the advertiser's semiotic strategy. UNICEF constructs a myth of collective moral duty, wherein the ring symbolises the wearer's commitment to humanitarian values and social responsibility. Gabit constructs a myth of individual self-optimisation, wherein the ring symbolises the wearer's commitment to personal health, discipline, and self-care.

These two myths are not contradictory in a logical sense; rather, they reflect different cultural logics. One draws on discourses of global citizenship and human rights, whereas the other draws on discourses of wellness, technology, and neoliberal individualism. What unites them is the semiotic process through which they are constructed; both rely on careful selection of colours, images, textual repetition, and emotional appeals to naturalise their respective ideologies.

Myths in advertising function to shape consumers' views of the world through the process of semiotics, wherein signs in advertising act as amplifiers of certain values. These myths reinforce dominant cultural values and make consumers feel that they are part of a larger social narrative (Taqdir et al., 2025). The advertisements above are inseparable from semiotic elements, both verbal and nonverbal, such as images, and thus they can construct new myths for targeted consumers. According to Chandler (2017), these elements are of critical importance in semiotics for shaping the perspective and ideology of target consumers. In other words, advertising is a highly effective tool for achieving this objective.

Theoretical Contributions Revisited

The findings of this study make several contributions to semiotic theory and advertising studies. First, by applying Barthes's mythological framework to Instagram advertisements, this study demonstrates that digital advertising functions as a powerful site of contemporary myth-making. The two cases show that myth is not a relic of pre-modern cultures but an active ideological process that operates through the everyday media consumed by the public.

Second, this study shows that the ring can be resignified to serve opposing ideological narratives. This finding extends Barthes's observation that myths are historically and culturally contingent by demonstrating that even within the same historical moment, competing myths can coexist around the same object, depending on the semiotic strategies employed by different advertisers.

Third, the study highlights the importance of chromatic signs and repetitive textual structures in the construction of myths, aspects that are often underexplored in classical Barthesian analysis, which tends to focus more on linguistic and photographic signs. By drawing attention to the role of colour psychology and repetition in advertising, this research offers a refined analytical model for decoding ideological shifts in consumer culture.

Finally, the study confirms Barthes's assertion that myth presents culturally manufactured meanings as natural and timeless. Both advertisements present their respective myths, humanitarian citizenship and personal optimisation, as

natural and inevitable, obscuring the commercial and ideological interests that drive them. This critical insight is essential for understanding how advertising shapes consumer identity and cultural values in the digital age.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged to provide a balanced assessment of this study's contributions. First, the analysis is based on only two Instagram advertisements, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other platforms or cultural contexts. The semiotic strategies employed on Instagram may differ significantly from those on TikTok, YouTube, or Facebook, where different affordances and audience expectations shape advertising content. Second, the analysis is confined to the semiotic content of the advertisements and does not incorporate audience reception data, such as interviews or surveys with consumers. Without such data, it is difficult to ascertain whether the myths identified in the advertisements are actually internalised by target consumers or whether alternative interpretations exist. Third, the study focuses exclusively on English-language advertisements from UNICEF India and Gabit Smart Ring, which may reflect Western or globalised advertising norms rather than local cultural logics.

Based on these limitations, several directions for future research are suggested. Comparative studies across multiple social media platforms could examine how platform-specific features, such as video versus static images, algorithm-driven distribution, or interactive features, influence mythological construction. Empirical research incorporating consumer interviews, focus groups, or surveys would be valuable to understand how audiences interpret and internalise the new meanings constructed by advertisements, and whether demographic factors such as age, gender, or cultural background mediate these interpretations. Longitudinal studies could track whether the new myths surrounding rings, such as self-care or humanitarianism, persist or fade over time, and how they interact with broader cultural shifts. Cross-cultural comparative research would be beneficial to investigate how local traditions, religious values, and social norms mediate global advertising narratives, particularly in non-Western contexts where the meaning of rings may differ significantly. Finally, future studies could expand the object of analysis beyond rings to other material objects, such as clothing, jewellery, or technology, that are undergoing similar semiotic transformations through digital advertising.

CONCLUSION

Advertising is a powerful tool with persuasive qualities. Advertisements contain important semiotic elements such as text and images that can change ideologies and create new mythologies. Based on the discussion above, advertisements for rings play with colours, images, models, and products to personally appeal to target consumers. Advertisers attempt to shift the concept of rings from being a symbol or sign of marital commitment, as it has been traditionally, to a symbol of commitment to humanity by UNICEF and a symbol of self-control and improvement by the GABIT smart ring.

By applying Roland Barthes' mythological analysis to the realm of Instagram-based visual marketing in the digital world, this study theoretically advances the field of advertising semiotics research. The results showed that myth formation in social media advertising relies on colour selection, product design, and repetitive textual patterns, in addition to the use of language and visual cues. The study enriches the treasury of knowledge on cultural reinterpretation of material objects by highlighting the ideological transformation of the ring, a cultural artefact that has deep historical roots, into a symbol of social obligation and personal growth. The research also broadens our understanding of how myths play a role as drivers of Consumer Action in modern digital advertising through an in-depth analysis of the semiotic strategies used by commercial as well as non-profit advertisers.

Practically, the findings offer actionable insights for commercial advertisers, product designers, and non-profit organisations. Understanding the semiotic mechanisms of myth-making enables the strategic deployment of visual and textual elements, such as colour psychology, repetition, and emotional branding, to effectively reposition products within consumer consciousness. For non-profit organisations such as UNICEF, this research underscores the effectiveness of emotional branding through symbolic objects, as visual elements including images and logos significantly influence consumer attitude toward the advertisement and donation behaviour. Practitioners are therefore advised to consider the semiotic dimensions of their advertising strategies, as colours, images, and textual narratives collectively shape consumer perceptions and behavioural intentions.

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