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What's Real? And Does It Matter?

A Qualitative Study of Young Communication Professionals Reasoning about
AI-generated Models in Digital Marketing

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Foreword

First and foremost, we would like to thank our supervisor, Ilkin Mehrabov, for his guidance, valuable feedback, and support throughout the process.

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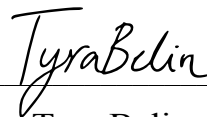
Finally, we would like to thank each other for a collaborative and rewarding process, characterized by many discussions, revisions, and shared commitment to completing this thesis.

We confirm that our contribution to this study has been equal.

Lund, May 21, 2026



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Abstract

“What’s Real? And Does It Matter?”

The emergence of AI-generated models has introduced new conditions for the production of visual content in digital marketing. What once required models, photographers, and physical production can now be generated digitally, making AI-generated models an increasingly contested practice in digital marketing. This study aims to examine how young communication professionals in Sweden reason about companies’ use of AI-generated models, and how they understand its implications for brand image and ethical responsibility. Drawing on perspectives from brand image and marketing ethics, ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with professionals at communication agencies in Stockholm. The empirical material was analyzed through thematic analysis, informed by a social constructionist perspective and an abductive approach, resulting in four themes: *The Digital Shift*, *The Ethics of Imitation*, *Navigating Responsibility*, and *The Authenticity Paradox*. Together, these themes show that the acceptance of AI-generated models is conditional, shaped by factors such as consent, transparency, purpose, and contextual fit. Responsibility is understood as shared between professionals, brands, and the industry, yet clear guidelines remain largely absent. The study further identifies an authenticity paradox, where the visual perfection of AI-generated models can simultaneously undermine the human credibility that audiences expect from brands. Overall, the study concludes that AI-generated models are not merely a technical production tool, but a strategic and ethical communication choice with consequences for brand image, credibility and professional responsibility.

Keywords: Marketing, digital marketing, AI marketing, AI-generated models, brand image, ethical responsibility, authenticity, strategic communication

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Sammanfattning

“What’s Real? And Does It Matter?”

Framväxten av AI-genererade modeller har skapat nya förutsättningar för produktionen av visuellt innehåll inom digital marknadsföring. Det som tidigare krävde modeller, fotografer och fysisk produktion kan nu skapas digitalt, vilket gör AI-genererade modeller till en allt mer omdiskuterad praxis inom digital marknadsföring. Syftet med denna studie är att undersöka hur unga kommunikationsprofessionella i Sverige resonerar kring företags användning av AI-genererade modeller i digital marknadsföring samt hur de uppfattar konsekvenserna för varumärkesbilden och det etiska ansvaret. Med utgångspunkt i perspektiv från teori om varumärkesbild och marknadsföringsetik genomfördes tio semistrukturerade intervjuer med yrkesverksamma på kommunikationsbyråer i Stockholm. Det empiriska materialet analyserades med hjälp av tematisk analys, utifrån ett socialkonstruktionistiskt perspektiv och en abduktiv metod, vilket resulterade i fyra teman: *The Digital Shift*, *The Ethics of Imitation*, *Navigating Responsibility* och *The Authenticity Paradox*. Resultaten visar att acceptansen av AI-genererade modeller är villkorad och påverkas av faktorer som samtycke, transparens, syfte och kontextuell anpassning. Ansvaret uppfattas som delat mellan yrkesverksamma, varumärken och branschen, men tydliga riktlinjer saknas fortfarande i stor utsträckning. Studien identifierar vidare *The Authenticity Paradox*, där den visuella perfektionen hos AI-genererade modeller samtidigt kan undergräva den mänskliga trovärdigheten som publiken förväntar sig av varumärken. Sammantaget drar studien slutsatsen att AI-genererade modeller inte bara är ett tekniskt produktionsverktyg utan ett strategiskt och etiskt kommunikationsval med konsekvenser för varumärkesbild, trovärdighet och yrkesansvar.

Nyckelord: Marknadsföring, digital marknadsföring, AI-marknadsföring, AI-genererade modeller, varumärkesimage, etiskt ansvar, äkthet, strategisk kommunikation

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1. Introduction

The following section introduces the study's research area and establishes the foundation for the study. It opens with a contextualizing introduction to AI-generated models in digital marketing, followed by a problematization that identifies the research gap and leads to the study's aim and research question.

Imagine scrolling through your Instagram feed on an ordinary Tuesday. You pass a sponsored post from a major fashion brand, a model in a studio setting, perfect lighting, a well-composed shot. At first glance, it looks like any other fashion campaign. But what if the model in that image never existed? What if no photographer was on set, no lights were adjusted, and no human ever stepped in front of a camera, and the entire image was generated by an algorithm in a matter of seconds? This is no longer a hypothetical scenario. As generative AI develops at a rapid pace, an increasing number of brands have begun incorporating AI-generated models into their marketing, a phenomenon that provokes as much fascination as it does resistance.

The scale of this shift is significant. Yang et al. (2026) note that the global generative AI market is projected to reach USD 442 billion by 2031, with tools like Midjourney, Stable Diffusion, and DALL-E already being actively adopted in advertising production. This global trend is also visible in the Swedish context, where the share of companies using AI has grown from under 10 percent in 2021 to 35 percent in 2025, and marketing and sales represent the most common area of application (SCB, 2025). Yet despite this growth, the majority of Swedish companies still neither use nor consider using AI, and among those who have chosen not to adopt it, lack of relevant expertise remains the most commonly cited barrier (SCB, 2025).

What this looks like in practice became particularly visible in the summer of 2025, when Guess featured a fully AI-generated model in Vogue's August issue, a blonde woman named "Vivienne" who had never existed. The ad went viral almost immediately, with a TikTok video highlighting the campaign accumulating

over 2.7 million views and sparking widespread debate about job displacement, beauty standards, and what it means for a brand to present an image that was never real (CNN, 2025). This is just one of many similar cases that have surfaced in recent years, illustrating how the use of AI-generated models in marketing has moved from a future scenario to an everyday reality.

1.1 Problematization

Society is increasingly shaped by an ongoing technological revolution, in which artificial intelligence represents a key innovation. According to Moore et al. (2026), the digital marketing industry has been significantly impacted by this transformation, as AI and emerging technologies expand marketing capabilities. However, the effective use of AI in digital marketing requires more than simply adopting new technological tools. Mathur (2025) emphasizes that in order to apply AI in a purposeful and responsible way, marketers need both technical knowledge and strategic understanding of how these systems influence content creation, consumer targeting, and decision-making processes. Without such competence, AI risks being implemented in ways that reduce marketing effectiveness rather than strengthen it. Ghufran and Ahmad (2025) similarly highlight that these technological opportunities also introduce new challenges related to transparency, credibility and ethical responsibility.

These challenges become particularly visible in the use of AI-generated models. Since generative AI can create photorealistic images at a fraction of the cost of traditional production, it has the potential to change the economics of visual marketing content (Hartmann et al., 2025). However, as AI-generated models remain a relatively new phenomenon, brands must navigate unresolved questions concerning authenticity, transparency and ethical responsibility in AI-driven marketing (Khalfallah & Keller, 2025). In addition, Bui et al. (2024) show that human-created content is often perceived as more authentic than AI-generated content, and call for more qualitative research to better understand why this difference occurs. Taken together, previous research has therefore identified both the practical opportunities of AI-generated content and the ethical and perceptual challenges it creates. However, within the literature reviewed for this study, less

attention has been given to the perspectives of the professionals who make or influence decisions about whether and how AI-generated models are used.

Given the growing role of AI-generated models in digital marketing, this study investigates how young communication professionals reason about companies' use of this phenomenon. Since these professionals play an important role in deciding whether and how AI-generated models are used, how ethical tensions are handled, and how potential consequences for brand image are understood, their reasoning matters for how brands balance the opportunities and challenges associated with this practice. Since AI-generated models can imitate or replace human appearance while representing real brands, their use becomes more than a technical production choice. It becomes a strategic communication decision with potential consequences for brand image and credibility. The rapid development of generative AI, together with limited research on professional perspectives, underscores the importance of examining how the phenomenon is understood by those working closest to its practical use.

1.2 Aim and Research Question

This qualitative study aims to gain a deeper understanding of how young communication professionals reason about companies' use of AI-generated models in digital marketing. More specifically, the study explores how these professionals interpret and evaluate the potential consequences of AI-generated models for brand image and ethical responsibility. By focusing on individuals working within the communication industry, the study offers insight into how this emerging phenomenon is understood by those who could influence how such technologies are selected, used and communicated in practice.

To address these aims, the study is guided by the following research question:

- *How do young communication professionals reason about companies' use of AI-generated models in digital marketing, and how do they understand its potential implications for brand image and ethical responsibility?*

1.3 Delimitations

In order to keep the focus of the study clear, several delimitations have been made. The study does not examine consumer perceptions or measure audience responses to AI-generated models in digital marketing. Therefore, the study cannot determine how consumers actually perceive brands that use AI-generated models, nor whether such use affects trust, engagement or purchase intention in practice. Instead, brand image and ethical responsibility are examined through how young communication professionals reason about the potential implications of this practice.

1.4 Relevance for Strategic Communication

This study is relevant to the field of strategic communication as it provides insight into how professionals within the communication industry reason about the use of AI-generated models in digital marketing. As AI becomes an increasingly integrated part of marketing practice, it is important for communication professionals and organizations to understand how such practices are interpreted, both from an industry perspective and in relation to brand image and ethical responsibility. The findings of this study can contribute to a deeper understanding of how companies should communicate around their use of AI in marketing, and what ethical considerations need to be taken into account in order to maintain trust and credibility. Furthermore, as the study explores the perspectives of individuals who themselves work with strategic communication, the insights generated could be of direct relevance for practitioners navigating the opportunities and challenges that AI-driven marketing presents.

2. Theoretical Framework & Literature Review

The literature review combines previous research and theoretical perspectives relevant to the study. It first outlines marketing and digital marketing as the broader context, before discussing AI in marketing and AI-generated digital humans. The section then presents research and concepts related to brand image and marketing ethics, including authenticity, trust, transparency and responsibility, which together form the basis for the study's analysis.

2.1 Marketing

Since marketing forms the broader context of this study, it is important to understand how existing literature conceptualizes it. Le Meunier-FitzHugh (2021) and Moore et al. (2026) describe marketing as the process of creating, communicating, and delivering value to customers, where the ability to understand customer needs and build long-term relationships characterized by trust and loyalty is central. Furthermore, Le Meunier-FitzHugh (2021) also highlights that customer value depends on consumers' interpretations and feelings, meaning organizations need to understand how their offerings are perceived. From this perspective, the way organizations communicate and present themselves may play an important role in shaping how brands and marketing activities are interpreted and evaluated.

Moreover, marketing communication is considered a central part of modern marketing and includes communication activities between organizations and their stakeholders. The authors further highlight that such communication and branding activities can influence customer perceptions and organizational image (Janjić & Dašić, 2023). These observations emphasize the importance of communication strategies in shaping perceptions and maintaining credibility in marketing contexts.

Marketing should therefore not only focus on short-term sales, as Moore et al. (2026) argues that organizations with a long-term relationship focus are often more successful. The authors further emphasize that trust and customer satisfaction are important aspects of marketing, as negative customer experiences can spread quickly and affect how organizations and brands are perceived. In line with this, Lévy and O'Donoghue (2005) argue that modern marketing is no longer primarily focused on selling products, but increasingly on creating relationships, emotional connections, and brand experiences. This suggests that trust, relationships, and customer experiences are central to how brands are understood and evaluated over time.

Kimmel (2005) further argues that technological development and new communication channels have changed the competitive environment for organizations by increasing media fragmentation, creating new communication opportunities, and making consumers more skeptical toward marketing and corporate behavior. As marketing activities gradually operate through digital platforms and technologically mediated communication, understanding digital marketing therefore becomes important for examining how organizations communicate, build trust, and shape perceptions in contemporary marketing contexts.

2.1.1 Digital Marketing

The ongoing advancement of digitalization has significantly increased the importance of digital marketing, requiring organizations to continuously adapt their communication strategies. Kimmel (2005) argues that communicators must adapt to a more complex and rapidly changing communication environment. In today's digital context, this is reflected in consumers' expectations for fast, personalized, and relevant interactions, which places increasing demands on how companies design and manage their communication (Tarabasz, 2024). People are becoming more individualistic and despite having access to more information than ever before, they feel less secure, which transforms their relationship with brands and creates new demands on how companies communicate (Lévy & O'Donoghue, 2005). Together, these developments have fundamentally reshaped

the conditions under which organizations communicate and build relationships with their audiences.

One central aspect of this shift is that digital marketing has moved communication away from traditional one-way models and toward more interactive forms of engagement. Through digital environments, organizations can communicate continuously with audiences rather than simply sending messages to passive receivers (Moore et al., 2026). Muñoz and O'Guinn (2005) support this view, but add that brand meanings and perceptions are shaped through social interaction. From this perspective, digital marketing can be understood as a dynamic communication environment where organizations need to respond to how audiences interact with and interpret brands.

Key concepts within relationship marketing include trust, commitment, customer satisfaction, and loyalty, which are considered important for creating and maintaining long-term relationships. Organizations can strengthen relationships with customers through the strategic use of digital platforms and communication that is consistent, transparent, and personalized (Pires et al., 2024). Similarly, Lévy and O'Donoghue (2005) highlight trust as a central part of marketing communication. They argue that digitalization and rapid information flows have made audiences more aware, critical, and able to publicly evaluate organizations and brands. As a result, trust and credibility become increasingly important for how organizations and brands are perceived (Lévy & O'Donoghue, 2005). This highlights the importance of maintaining trust in increasingly visible and interactive communication environments.

Brand trust depends on how companies communicate, act, and take responsibility, as consumers increasingly expect companies to address ethical concerns and behave responsibly in digital environments (Frigenti, 2024). Transparency and open communication are therefore important for building trust in customer relationships (Pires et al., 2024). Previous research suggests that individuals' attitudes and perceptions in digital environments may be influenced by the opinions and behaviors of others (Frigenti, 2024). Organizations therefore need to act responsibly and transparently to maintain consistent communication in order

to preserve legitimacy and trust (Lévy & O'Donoghue, 2005). From this perspective, credibility and transparency can be understood as increasingly important aspects of how organizations manage communication and relationships in digital environments.

This also requires a more holistic approach to marketing communication, where communication across different platforms and channels is coordinated and consistent (Lévy & O'Donoghue, 2005). At the same time, digital environments place increased demands on organizations, including the need for continuous presence, rapid responses, and effective content management (Moore et al., 2026). Taken together, this suggests that digital marketing requires more than activity across multiple platforms. Organizations also need to ensure that their communication remains coherent, responsive and meaningful in different audience contexts. Understanding these conditions is therefore central to this study, as it is precisely within such digital environments that the use of AI-generated models raises questions about transparency, trust and credibility.

2.2 AI and Marketing

The marketing landscape has undergone a significant paradigm shift, moving from traditional methods to digital strategies where Artificial Intelligence (AI) plays an increasingly central role. Moore et al. (2026) argue that AI represents a strategic asset due to its ability to generate customer value, primarily through increased precision in identifying and meeting both explicit and implicit consumer needs. Beyond that, Gulati and Grover (2026) argue that AI-generated content has become a central driver in the transformation of social media communication. They explain that AI can analyze large amounts of data to identify user behaviour and create personalized content adapted to audience preferences. According to Gulati and Grover (2026) this data-driven personalization can strengthen both reach and engagement, making AI an important tool for companies and content creators in digital communication.

Furthermore, Luo et al. (2025) argue that digitalization has changed how consumers access and interpret information. At the same time, AIGC (*artificial*

intelligence generated content) enables companies to create personalized marketing content more quickly and efficiently. However, their findings show that technical precision does not automatically lead to consumer trust. Although AI-generated content can be tailored to consumers with high accuracy, this does not necessarily make it feel more trustworthy. Instead, the authors argue that machine-driven personalization may be perceived as mechanical if it lacks emotional resonance, human presence and perceived care. This points to the possibility that AI-generated models may be efficient and visually precise, while still risking being perceived as less authentic or credible. Moore et al. (2026) similarly emphasize the challenges associated with implementing AI in marketing and underline the need to balance technological innovation with ethical considerations. The authors identify transparency as a critical success factor, arguing that companies must proactively address its aspects to maintain trust and build strong relationships with their target audiences.

Gulati and Grover (2026) highlight the risks associated with AI-generated content in relation to deepfakes, referring to manipulated material that can spread misinformation and contribute to a general decline in trust within the digital information landscape. This is particularly relevant as consumers' ability to distinguish between truth and AI-generated content is increasingly challenged. To address these risks, Luo et al. (2025) therefore conclude that AI should primarily function as a complement within a hybrid model, where human oversight ensures that the efficiently generated content also maintains an ethical and emotional grounding. Despite the efficiency of AI, transparency, authenticity, and ethical considerations are required to build trust. The human factor remains crucial for creating genuine relationships. Overall, AI-generated content is presented as a transformative force that is reshaping how content is created, distributed, and experienced on social media.

This complexity is further reflected in research on how AI-generated content is received. Lee et al. (2026) indicate that the use of AI in commercial and advertising contexts tends to generate stronger skepticism than in non-commercial ones, driven by concerns about credibility and job displacement. This suggests that communication professionals working with AI-generated content operate in a

landscape where the stakes are high, not only in terms of efficiency and creativity, but also in relation to how such choices are perceived and evaluated by others.

2.2.1 AI-Generated Digital Humans

An additional aspect of AI-generated content is the emergence of realistic digital figures in the form of AI influencers and AI-generated models. The rapidly growing generative AI is now not only used to create content such as text, images, and video, but has also enabled the creation of complete digital identities that are visually almost indistinguishable from real people.

This phenomenon brings significant challenges, particularly in terms of perceived authenticity and the ability to convey genuine empathy. Furthermore, the use of these “digital clones” raises complex ethical questions related to transparency and representation (Zhang et al., 2025), as well as concerns about more practical aspects such as beauty standards and job displacement. These concerns are especially common in creative industries such as fashion and marketing, where AI-generated models may replace not only human influencers and models but also photographers, stylists, makeup artists and other people involved in content creation. Consumers also tend to associate AI-generated models with less human effort and growing concerns about job losses, which can create more negative attitudes toward both brands and AI-generated advertising (Kim, 2026). It is within this landscape of opportunity and tension that the use of AI-generated models in marketing has emerged as an increasingly relevant phenomenon to examine.

Previous research shows that virtual influencers largely serve the same function as traditional influencers, where they are used by brands to reach and engage consumers in digital environments (Jin & Viswanathan, 2025). At the same time, the technology behind these digital figures has evolved from static avatars to advanced systems capable of generating their own content and interacting with users in real time (Zhang et al., 2025). Despite this development, research indicates that consumers generally show a more negative attitude toward AI-generated models compared to human counterparts, as well as a clear

preference for human models in commercial contexts (Kim, 2026). This indicates that even though AI-generated communication continues to develop rapidly, human qualities such as authenticity and relatability may still play an important role in how audiences perceive and respond to digital content.

Jin and Viswanathan (2025) show that perceived threats to human identity and existence play a central role in how digital actors are perceived. They further highlight that awareness of AI can influence attitudes and acceptance toward such figures. Similarly, Zhang et al. (2025) emphasize that trust and empathy are important for understanding how consumers evaluate AI-generated versus human influencers. Together, these studies suggest that audiences' reactions to AI-generated communication are shaped by whether the digital figure is perceived as trustworthy, human and emotionally engaging.

Overall, the research indicates that AI influencers present both opportunities and risks, where the outcomes vary depending on individual factors such as psychological dispositions and the level of technological adoption (Jin & Viswanathan, 2025). On the one hand, these digital identities enable the creation of clear and consistent brand personalities that can promote engagement and a sense of closeness. On the other hand, the importance of balancing these advantages with the psychological and ethical challenges that the technology brings is emphasized (Jin & Viswanathan, 2025). In this context, Kim (2026) highlights the need to combine innovation with transparency and ethical responsibility in AI-driven marketing. The use of AI models can thus influence perceptions of both brands and content, particularly in relation to ethical and labor-related concerns.

2.3 Brand Image and Marketing

Brand image can be understood as the perceptions individuals hold about a brand, reflected in the associations connected to the brand in memory (del Río et al., 2001). Building on this, Torres and Bijmolt (2009) emphasize that brand associations are often directional, meaning that certain brand attributes may become more strongly connected to a brand than others. Strong, favourable, and

unique associations are therefore important for how a brand's image is formed and evaluated. Bengtsson & Östberg, (2011) highlight that brand image is not something companies can control or define on their own, but rather something that takes shape over time through the relationship between consumers and brands, where the marketer has only limited influence. This is closely tied to the concept of brand identity, which refers to the image a company wishes to project, and the two do not always align. A brand's image is never fixed, but is continuously shaped through an ongoing interplay between different actors and contexts.

Sukma et al. (2024) suggest that a strong and positive brand image can contribute to increased brand trust, which in turn influences consumers' purchase intentions (Sukma et al., 2024). This suggests that brand communication is about more than individual tactical decisions, it is through repeated interactions with consumers that trust and image are in fact built over time. How a brand chooses to communicate, and what each interaction signals, therefore has direct consequences for how the brand is ultimately understood and evaluated.

Previous research suggests that AI-generated models could influence brand image and perceptions of marketing communication. Although Kim (2026) focuses on fashion advertising, the study indicates that AI-generated advertising is often perceived as less authentic and associated with lower levels of human involvement and effort behind the communication. Further Kim (2026) states that such perceptions may contribute to more skeptical attitudes toward both advertisements and brands, highlighting the continued importance of authenticity and human engagement in AI-generated marketing content.

Ali et al. (2025) further suggest that AI-generated content negatively influences brand image by reducing perceptions of authenticity and emotional connection. In their study of AI-generated social media content in the restaurant industry, consumers perceived brands using AI-generated communication as less authentic and associated them with a weaker brand image compared to brands using human-generated content. The authors argue that AI-generated communication is more impersonal and lacks the "human touch" often connected to trustworthy and

emotionally engaging brand communication (Ali et al., 2025). This suggests that the growing use of AI in digital marketing may not only affect how specific advertisements are perceived, but also influence broader perceptions of a brand's credibility, sincerity, and overall image.

In this study, brand image is therefore understood as the associations, perceptions, and evaluations that audiences connect to a brand. Since this study focuses on communication professionals rather than consumers, brand image is not examined as a direct audience effect, but as something the respondents interpret and reason about. This theoretical perspective is used to analyze how professionals believe AI-generated models may shape whether a brand is perceived as authentic, credible, trustworthy, innovative, or responsible.

2.4 Ethical Aspects of AI in Marketing

Ethical considerations have become a central concern regarding the implementation of generative AI, impacting both general digital marketing strategies and the specific creation of AI-generated content (Moore et al., 2026; Kim, 2026). Modern consumers increasingly prioritize ethics and sustainability, closely examining how companies utilize AI within a broader corporate responsibility framework (Frigenti, 2024). This shift in consumer behavior has heightened expectations, as individuals increasingly expect companies to take responsibility for their environmental impact and emphasize ethical practices (Frigenti, 2024). In this context, Moore et al. (2026) argue that because marketers play a key role in shaping consumer preferences, the ethical aspects of these practices are primarily centered on the preservation of trust and transparency.

PR and communication fields are closely connected to persuasion, reputation management and public perception, which makes ethical responsibility central to how communication is perceived. As public expectations of ethical communication increase, the industry must also navigate how organizations and their communication practices are perceived by society (Morris & Goldsworthy, 2021). In relation to generative AI, Sands et al. (2024) argue that responsible advertising requires transparency, respect for privacy and intellectual property,

human oversight, clear internal rules and accountability. This is relevant to AI-generated models, as the authors emphasize that the use of personal data, likeness or creative work requires consent and fair compensation, while AI-generated content should also be monitored to avoid misleading outcomes and biased representations.

These ethical tensions are clearly visible in the fashion industry, where the use of AI-generated models in advertising raises questions regarding human rights (Kim, 2026). This is complicated by the fact that there is still a lack of sufficient research to determine how effective these digital models actually are compared to human counterparts. Lee et al. (2026) highlight the growing importance of these ethical considerations, there remains a limited understanding of how such AI-driven marketing practices are interpreted in professional contexts. What research does suggest, however, is that reactions to AI in marketing are shaped not only by aesthetic or practical considerations, but also by deeper concerns about job displacement and authenticity (Lee et al., 2026), ethical dimensions that extend well beyond questions of transparency alone.

The ethical issues surrounding AI-generated models are closely connected to larger societal discussions about representation, authenticity, and the influence of algorithms. Su (2025) argues that social media and digital platforms play a major role in shaping today's beauty standards, often promoting idealized and unrealistic images through algorithm-driven content. As AI-generated models increasingly function as cultural symbols that shape perceptions of beauty, identity and authenticity, concerns also arise regarding transparency and disclosure, particularly as audiences may develop emotional connections to these figures in ways similar to human influencers.

Su (2025) also highlights the importance of transparency and consumer trust in the use of AI-generated content. Companies and organizations are increasingly expected to be open about how AI is used in the creation of digital personas and marketing communication, as a lack of openness may harm relationships between brands and consumers. As AI-generated models become more common in industries such as beauty and influencer marketing, the need for ethical guidelines

and responsible use of AI has become increasingly important (Su, 2025). Taken together, these studies suggest that ethical concerns surrounding AI-generated content are not only connected to transparency, but also to broader societal issues related to authenticity, representation, and the role of human labor in digital communication.

In this study, ethical responsibility is used as an analytical lens informed by a principle-based understanding of ethics, in which responsible practice is evaluated against core duties toward affected parties, such as consent, compensation, transparency, and accountability (Sands et al., 2024). This perspective acknowledges both the rights of those directly involved and the broader consequences for audiences and society. This helps guide the analysis by focusing on the ethical dimensions discussed in this section, such as transparency, consent, compensation, representation, beauty ideals, human labour, and responsibility toward audiences.

3. Method

The following section outlines the methodology and data collection process chosen for this study. The section concludes with a reflective discussion on the selected methodology to clarify and justify the choices made in the study.

3.1 Scientific approach

This study adopts a qualitative research design, as its purpose is to gain a deeper understanding of how professionals view, reflect on and make sense of the use of AI-generated models in digital marketing. This approach is relevant since qualitative methods within strategic communication are used to study communication phenomena in relation to their specific context, while also requiring reflection on how methods are applied and how empirical material is interpreted (Thelander & Eksell, 2014). Therefore, a qualitative design is suitable for this study, as it allows for a more nuanced understanding of participants' reasoning and interpretations.

This study adopts a social constructionist perspective, which seeks to understand social reality within its context. From this perspective, reality cannot be described in a fully objective or value-neutral way, as language opens up different possibilities for interpreting and describing the world (Falkheimer, 2014). This perspective is particularly relevant to the study, since AI-generated models are not treated as a static variable, but rather as a phenomenon whose meaning is shaped by how professionals interpret, reflect on and talk about it within the specific context of digital marketing.

Additionally, the study adopts an abductive approach. Abduction integrates elements of both inductive and deductive reasoning, and is used to generate new insights by synthesizing existing theory with observations of the studied phenomenon (Kapitan, 1992). This method allows for a dynamic analysis that moves between empirical data and theoretical frameworks, facilitating a richer understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Rather than strictly testing

a pre-defined theory, the abductive approach enables researchers to remain open to emerging patterns and insights from the interviews, while contextualizing these findings within existing theoretical concepts (Reichert, 2014). Together, the social constructionist perspective and the abductive approach create a methodological foundation well suited to exploring a phenomenon as dynamic and socially embedded as the use of AI-generated models in digital marketing, where meanings, norms, and professional reasoning are still actively being formed.

3.2 Data Collection

Data was collected through ten semi-structured interviews, a number that falls within the range recommended by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), who suggest that qualitative interview studies typically consist of 15 ± 10 interviews. This interview format is well-suited for this study because they allow for a balance between structure and flexibility. While the interview guide provides a framework of central themes and questions, the format enables the interviewer to ask follow-up questions and explore participants' responses in greater depth where needed (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The balance between structure and openness was essential, as it allowed the conversation to follow the participants' own reasoning while still remaining relevant to the study's purpose.

Prior to the interviews, an interview guide was developed consisting of broad topic areas rather than detailed questions, in order to keep the conversations focused and relevant to the study's purpose while still allowing participants to guide the direction of the interview (Trost, 2010). The guide was reviewed and internalised beforehand, allowing the interviewer to focus on listening and following the participant's reasoning rather than reading from notes. Furthermore, the interviews were designed to ensure that participants felt comfortable and able to express their views freely, as there are no right or wrong answers in qualitative interviews of this kind (Brinkmann, 2024). To ensure that the questions worked in practice, the interview guide was piloted before the interviews were conducted. This made it possible to adjust the wording of questions and estimate the time required for each interview. The interview guide can be found in Appendix 1.

In addition, visual elicitation was employed as a complementary method during the interviews. Elicitation involves using images to support reflection and discussion during interviews. By introducing images into the interview situation, both unfamiliar and taken-for-granted phenomena can be discussed more concretely, as the images shift the focus from purely verbal exchange and give participants the opportunity to reflect more deeply on the subject being discussed (Thelander, 2014). Specifically, images from H&M digital twin campaign and the Guess campaign published in *Vogue*, were presented to participants during the interviews. The Guess campaign, which appeared in *American Vogue*'s August 2025 issue, featured a fully AI-generated model with no real person behind her appearance, created by the agency Seraphinne Vallora (Chitrakorn, 2025). The H&M campaign took a fundamentally different approach, in which they created AI-generated digital replicas of 30 real models who had given their consent and were compensated for the use of their digital likeness (H&M Group, 2025). These images were selected because they represent two distinctly different approaches to the use of AI-generated models, making it possible to explore whether and how participants reason differently about them. The images used can be found in Appendix 2 and 3.

The interviews were conducted online and lasted approximately 30 minutes each. All interviews were recorded and transcribed using Sunet Scribe, a transcription tool recommended by Lund University (Lunds universitet, 2026). Since transcription involves interpretive decisions about how spoken language is transformed into written text, the transcripts were carefully reviewed and corrected against the original recordings (McMullin, 2023). Attention was also given to nonverbal cues, such as laughter and pauses, when these were considered relevant to how participants expressed and made sense of the phenomenon.

Ethical considerations were addressed throughout the interview process. As Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) emphasize, confidentiality means that private data which could identify participants should not be disclosed. Before each interview, respondents were informed about the aim of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, their right to withdraw, and how the material would be used.

Confidentiality was ensured by removing names, workplaces, and other identifying information from the empirical material, and respondents are referred to as R1-R10. The recordings and transcripts were only accessible to the researchers and used solely for the purpose of this thesis.

3.3 Population and Qualitative Sampling

The population of interest in this study consists of young professionals working at communication agencies in Sweden. To further delimit the study, a non-probability sampling strategy was applied, as this is particularly suitable when the focus is on depth in the data rather than statistical generalisability (Trost & Hultåker, 2016). More specifically, a combination of purposive and snowball sampling was used. Patton (1990) argues that different sampling strategies are not mutually exclusive and can be combined depending on the purpose of the study. The purposive approach ensured that participants were selected based on specific criteria rather than randomly, in order to obtain relevant variation among interview participants (Patton, 1990). As there is no formal register or compiled list of young communication professionals working at agencies in Sweden, the purposive criteria served as a necessary framework for identifying and verifying that potential participants were relevant to the study's purpose.

To be included in the study, participants were required to work at a mid-sized communication agency in Stockholm and be under the age of 40. Stockholm was chosen as the study context because it provided access to a concentrated number of relevant communication agencies and professionals. Furthermore, mid-sized agencies were specifically targeted as they are large enough to have established working practices around AI and marketing production, yet small enough that individual professionals are likely to be directly involved in strategic and creative decisions, rather than removed from them by organizational hierarchy. To further verify that potential participants were relevant and professionally established, their LinkedIn profiles and agency websites were reviewed prior to contact.

Once the criteria had been established and initial contact with relevant professionals had been made, snowball sampling was additionally employed,

whereby existing contacts within the communication industry helped identify additional eligible participants. While snowball sampling carries a risk of resembling convenience sampling, this was mitigated by maintaining clear inclusion criteria throughout the recruitment process, ensuring that the selection remained strategically grounded rather than purely based on accessibility (Patton, 1990). The objective is therefore not to achieve statistical representativeness, but rather to capture a range of experiences and perspectives relevant to the study's purpose (Trost & Hultåker, 2016). A presentation of the interviewed participants is provided below in Table 3.3, outlining each participant's role, a short job description and their relevance to the research question.

Table 3.3 List of Interviewees

<i>Interviewee</i>	<i>Role</i>	<i>Job Description and relevance</i>
<i>R1</i>	<i>Project Manager</i>	Project manager with 10 years of experience in advertising and production management. Relevance: Practical insight into campaign production, AI use and brand credibility.
<i>R2</i>	<i>Project Manager</i>	Project manager working with strategy, advertising and concept development. Relevance: Strategic insight into brand development, agency work and AI-generated campaign content.
<i>R3</i>	<i>Production Manager</i>	Production manager with a background in marketing and influencer marketing. Relevance: Practical insight into campaign production
<i>R4</i>	<i>Marketing Coordinator</i>	Marketing coordinator working with digital communication Relevance: Practical insight into daily AI use and visual content production
<i>R5</i>	<i>Social Media Assistant</i>	Works with social media content, copywriting and visual material. Relevance: Practical insight into social media communication.
<i>R6</i>	<i>Art Director</i>	Works with image production, graphic design and concept development. Relevance: Creative insight into visual communication.
<i>R7</i>	<i>Public relations consultant</i>	Works with client strategy, events and influencer marketing. Relevance: PR perspective on brand communication.
<i>R8</i>	<i>Production Coordinator</i>	Works with event planning and production execution. Relevance: Practical insight into marketing production.
<i>R9</i>	<i>Digital Marketing Coordinator</i>	Works with digital marketing, campaign planning and content creation. Relevance: Practical insight into digital marketing.
<i>R10</i>	<i>Communication Strategist</i>	Communication strategist with broad consulting experience across different brands. Relevance: Strategic insight into brand communication

3.4 Data Analysis

The empirical material was analyzed using thematic analysis, a method that involves identifying recurring themes, patterns, and meanings across the dataset. Thematic analysis is well suited to this study as it enables a structured approach to understanding the differences, and central meanings that emerge from participants' accounts (Eksell & Thelander, 2014). The analysis followed an interpretive approach, focusing on understanding the meaning of participants' statements (Brinkmann, 2024), which aligns with the study's abductive research design, which implies that the analysis moves dynamically between the empirical material and theoretical frameworks throughout the process.

Due to the extensive and complex nature of qualitative data, Bell et al. (2022) stress the need to prioritise overarching interpretations instead of getting caught up in excessive detail. In line with this, the analysis was conducted using a structured approach inspired by Rennstam and Wästerfors' (2015) framework of sorting, reducing and arguing. To enhance transparency, the different stages of the analytical process are outlined below.

The sorting process involved familiarising ourselves with the transcribed material. As Rennstam and Wästerfors (2015) explain, approaching the data with openness during this stage is crucial, as it creates the foundation for what can later be argued. Both researchers therefore read through all transcripts carefully and independently, highlighting relevant passages and noting initial observations about what participants expressed and how. Through this process, recurring patterns and shared themes began to emerge across the interviews, which formed the basis for the subsequent coding. In line with Rennstam and Wästerfors (2015), the coding process began with initial coding, where the material was approached openly and coded with broad, descriptive codes close to the empirical data. This made it possible to develop a first understanding of the material in relation to the study's purpose. As the analysis progressed, the coding became more focused, meaning that recurring and analytically relevant codes were gradually developed into broader themes representing larger patterns across the interviews. Throughout

this process, particular attention was paid to recurring expressions, shared reasoning, and contradictions between participants' accounts.

Once the sorting process had reached a level of sufficient order, the material was reduced. Following Rennstam and Wästerfors (2015), this meant making analytical choices about which codes and categories were most relevant to the study's focus on how professionals in the communication industry perceive and reason about the use of AI-generated models in digital marketing. The emerging patterns identified during the sorting were grouped into overarching analytical themes. These themes were developed with the aim of revealing insights relevant to the study's theoretical framework, including perspectives on brand image and ethical responsibility. The focused codes were examined in light of these concepts, allowing for the construction of theoretically informed categories. The four themes: *The Digital Shift*, *The Ethics of Imitation*, *Navigating Responsibility*, and *The Authenticity Paradox*, captured the broader patterns in the data and provided an interpretive lens through which to understand how professionals make sense of AI-generated models in marketing communication.

A central part of structuring and reducing the analytical process was the development of a coding scheme. The coding scheme is presented below in Figure 3.4 and was used to systematically organize the identified codes and themes, thereby creating a transparent overview of how the empirical material was interpreted and categorized.

Table 3.4 Coding Scheme

Theme	Codes
<i>The Digital Shift</i>	Efficiency Tool Context-Dependent Strategic Use Complement Not Replacement Innovation and Modernity Industry Development Inevitable New Competence Normalization Knowledge Gaps Inclusive representation
<i>The Ethics of Imitation</i>	Compensation Digital twins Consent Transparency Beauty ideals Human craftsmanship Job losses
<i>Navigating Responsibility</i>	Professional responsibility Responsibility Brand identity Industry responsibility Regulation and legislation Transparency
<i>The Authenticity Paradox</i>	Inauthentic and emotionally empty Distrust and skepticism Value of realness Human imperfections Authenticity Credibility

3.5 Quality of Research

To assess the trustworthiness of this study, four criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) are applied: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Since qualitative research is based on interpretations rather than objective truths, it is crucial to consider relevant quality criteria to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative studies cannot rely on statistical measures of validity and reliability, which makes it particularly important to explicitly address how trustworthiness has been ensured throughout the research process (Heide & Simonsson, 2014). Therefore, the

following sections outline how each of these four criteria has been considered and applied in the present study.

Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings accurately reflect participants' experiences and perceptions. A central aspect of establishing credibility in this study has been transparency, clearly presenting what methodological choices have been made, how the methods have been used and the reasoning behind these choices (Heide & Simonsson, 2014). A common critique of qualitative interviews is that their subjective nature risks undermining the credibility of findings (Kvale, 1994). In this study, however, subjectivity is regarded as a valuable asset rather than a limitation, given that the aim is to explore participants' own reasoning and reflections. To minimize the influence of personal bias, the semi-structured format was chosen to give participants space to speak freely and steer the conversation in directions meaningful to them, which helped ensure that the collected material genuinely reflected their perspectives. Credibility is further supported by the depth and breadth of the empirical material, as ten in-depth interviews provided a rich foundation for understanding how participants make sense of AI-generated models in marketing.

Transferability concerns the extent to which findings can be applied to other contexts or situations. From a social constructionist perspective, direct transferability is not possible, as reality is context-dependent (Heide & Simonsson, 2014). However, by providing thick descriptions of the research process, participants, and context, the study enables other researchers to assess the relevance of the findings to their own research questions.

Dependability and confirmability relate to the consistency and transparency of the research process, as well as the extent to which the findings are grounded in the empirical data rather than shaped by the researchers' own assumptions (Heide & Simonsson, 2014). To address dependability, this study has prioritized clear documentation of all methodological decisions, including how participants were selected, how data was collected, and how the analysis was carried out. To strengthen confirmability, both researchers independently coded the transcribed interviews before comparing and discussing the identified themes. Since

qualitative research cannot be fully separated from the researcher's interpretations and pre-understandings, transparency in the analytical process becomes important for showing how conclusions have been reached (Heide & Simonsson, 2014). In this study, this was addressed by consistently anchoring the interpretations in the empirical material and relating them to the theoretical framework. While individual bias can never be completely removed, the aim has been to make the analysis as transparent and well-grounded as possible.

3.6 Methodological Limitations

First, all interviews were conducted online through virtual meetings. While this was a practical choice due to time constraints and the participants' location in Stockholm, it may have limited the depth of interaction compared to in-person interviews. Non-verbal cues and the natural flow of conversation can be more difficult to capture in a digital setting, which may have affected the richness of the data collected. Second, the study is limited to professionals working at communication agencies in Stockholm, which means that the perspectives gathered may not fully reflect the diversity of experiences and views across the broader communication industry in Sweden. Professionals working in other regions, sectors, or types of organizations may reason differently about AI-generated models in marketing. Third, as the topic of AI in marketing is rapidly evolving, participants' reflections are inevitably shaped by the current state of the technology and the discourse surrounding it at the time of the interviews. This means that the findings should be understood as contextually bound to a specific moment in time, and may not capture how perceptions shift as the technology and industry norms continue to develop.

4. Analysis and Discussion

This chapter presents and discusses the empirical findings of the study through four themes developed from the thematic analysis. The chapter integrates both analysis and discussion by connecting the empirical material with previous research and the study's theoretical framework throughout. This structure enables the respondents' reasoning to be examined in relation to broader questions concerning AI in digital marketing, ethical responsibility, brand image, authenticity, credibility, and trust.

4.1 The Digital Shift

The first part of the analysis explores the theme *The Digital Shift*. A recurring pattern across all interviews was the perception of AI-generated models as a part of a broader and ongoing digital transformation of the communication and marketing industry. Rather than seeing it as something entirely new, the respondents consistently placed it within a larger shift that the industry has been going through for some time, where new tools are gradually adopted and are becoming a part of everyday work. This theme illustrates how respondents understand and position the phenomenon within this ongoing shift, and serves as a foundation for the deeper analysis of authenticity, brand image and ethics that follows in the subsequent themes.

4.1.1 Why AI-generated models are used

A recurring theme across all respondents was the view of AI as a tool that can make work processes easier and more efficient. The respondents described AI as mainly used to support tasks such as text production, information searching, structuring, and idea development. Their focus on efficiency reflects the development described by Tarabasz (2024), in which today's digital communication environment is shaped by demands for fast, continuous, and relevant communication. AI can therefore be understood as a way for companies to keep up with this development and remain competitive in an industry where both the pace and expectations are constantly increasing. Hartmann et al. (2025) highlight how generative AI may reshape the economics of visual marketing

production by making image creation more efficient and less resource-intensive. This efficiency logic was also reflected in the empirical material, as all respondents described AI as a tool for saving time and reducing costs within production and marketing. For example, R3 explained how AI can reduce the need for resource-heavy productions:

“I think there are many opportunities for companies and agencies to save money and time, by not spending as much on travelling halfway across the world to carry out a production and create a work plan.” (R3)

The respondents described how AI is used in visual and graphic processes to visualize ideas, create image material, and prepare campaigns before the actual production takes place. R10 highlighted how traditional photoshoots are often characterized by time pressure and high costs, while R1 described how AI-generated images can be used to visualize material already in the planning stage. Several respondents also argued that AI-generated models can make visual productions more efficient and create greater flexibility and variation in the content, for example, by correcting material afterwards or creating a wider variation of models without arranging a new photoshoot.

This shows that AI adoption among the respondents is primarily driven by practical and economic reasoning, suggesting that efficiency has become a normalized justification for AI use, even in contexts where the creative and strategic potential of the technology remains largely unexplored.

4.1.2 How AI-generated models should be used

The respondents repeatedly emphasized that AI should be used as support in the creative process, rather than as a replacement for human competence. Luo et al. (2025) help explain why, when human oversight is removed from the hybrid model, content risks losing the emotional and ethical grounding that audiences expect, making it feel mechanical rather than genuine. According to the findings,

AI is primarily accepted for its practical and efficiency-related functions, while human knowledge is seen as necessary for maintaining authenticity and quality.

Furthermore, it became clear that acceptance of AI-generated models varies depending on the context, with factors such as the campaign's purpose, the brand's values, and transparency in communication seen as particularly important. R3, for example, argued that AI-generated models can be perceived as credible if there is a real model behind them and the person is compensated for the use. Others emphasized that the suitability of AI use depends on the context, purpose, and type of content. R4, for instance, explained that AI should be used with great caution in contexts where authenticity is important. This suggests that acceptance is not shaped by the technology itself, but by whether its use can be justified in relation to authenticity and credibility. Kim's (2026) findings help explain why this matters, as AI-generated advertising is often perceived as less authentic and less connected to human involvement, which may increase skepticism toward both advertisements and brands. This was also reflected among some respondents, who emphasized that AI-generated models risk being perceived as "fake" by the audience and may therefore negatively affect the credibility of the content.

Despite this skepticism, some respondents described it as modern and innovative, especially when used strategically and well considered. R4, for example, pointed out that AI can both strengthen and undermine credibility depending on how it is used:

"I think it can affect credibility a lot, and there is a risk that it feels fake and that you lose trust in it. But if it is used transparently, then it can be perceived as relevant and innovative. However, changing bodies and inventing a new body is something I find really strange and disturbing." (R4)

At the same time, several respondents also highlighted that AI-generated models can create new opportunities in visual content, particularly through increased representation and inclusion. For example, R1 and R10 described how AI can

create a greater variety without production becoming as resource-intensive. R1 stated:

“To show diversity might mean that you need ten models. That is really expensive, costs a lot of money, and takes time. But if you have AI-generated models, then you can have 20 models [...] tall, short, fat, thin.” (R1)

This more positive view was not shared by all respondents. R7 stated that they personally would not have wanted to use them, while R8 suggested that attitudes toward the technology might change as AI becomes more established in the industry. Respondents also highlighted risks associated with the perception that the communication might be less human and more generic. This suggests that there is no universal answer to how AI-generated models should be used. Rather, responsible use requires active professional judgement about whether the technology serves the communicative purpose at hand without compromising authenticity or credibility.

4.1.3 How AI-generated models are changing the industry

“AI is here whether we like it or not.” (R6)

This view of AI as an inevitable industry transformation is also reflected in how respondents discuss AI-generated models specifically. Several respondents believe that its use should be understood as part of the same broader digital transformation, not as an isolated phenomenon. R2 describes how it should not be viewed as something entirely new, but rather as the next step in a long history of image manipulation:

“I think AI-generated models are really just the next step in something that’s always been around. Back in the day, it was a huge undertaking. People would make waists slimmer, teeth whiter, and hair fluffier. And then, when digital image

editing came along, it became much easier. There's been a discussion for many years about how images are manipulated.” (R2)

Following this reasoning, R6 describes this as a logical progression from manual retouching to digital image processing, and now to AI. Since several respondents situate the phenomenon within a wider historical framework, AI-generated models appear to be becoming normalized in the industry rather than challenged. This perspective can be understood through the idea that technological development continuously changes the conditions for marketing communication and requires organizations to adapt to new communication environments (Kimmel, 2005). Thus, the respondents' reasoning suggests that AI-generated models are viewed as a part of an ongoing transformation within the industry. This also indicates that their use is understood as an inevitable development that professionals must learn to navigate, regardless of their individual attitudes toward it.

This shift means that the playing field is changing and that new skills are required. R6 emphasizes that the challenge is not merely about using AI, but about mastering it and using it correctly. Furthermore, several respondents share similar views, highlighting that AI fundamentally alters the competitive landscape and that genuine knowledge now competes with AI-generated knowledge, risking the loss of skills and creativity. Taken together, this suggests that AI-generated models are changing both how content is produced and what counts as expertise within the industry. As the technology becomes increasingly accessible, it risks blurring the line between genuine professional expertise and simpler AI-generated production, something that R2 argues is already affecting both competition and how the industry's services are valued. Tarabasz (2024) emphasizes that organizations in digital environments need to continuously adapt their marketing strategies and stay updated with emerging trends and technologies to remain relevant. This reflects the respondents' reasoning that it is not enough to simply keep up with AI developments. They also argue that an understanding of how the technology is used and why is required.

Although AI is becoming the norm within the industry, there is still uncertainty about how well professionals actually understand and master the technology. Jin and Viswanathan (2025) suggest that levels of awareness and knowledge shape how AI-generated content is perceived and evaluated, which helps explain why this knowledge gap carries consequences beyond individual competence. R3 points out that the level of knowledge varies significantly:

“In our industry, a lot of people say that they understand AI. But AI is constantly changing, so I honestly don’t think anyone is really an expert on it, even if people claim that they understand it.” (R3)

This uncertainty does not seem to be limited to those in the industry who work on the operative level. R10 also points out that decision-makers lack a full understanding of the potential consequences of AI use. This raises a critical question, if those responsible for strategic decisions do not fully grasp the technology they are adopting, it becomes difficult to ensure that its use is guided by anything more than commercial incentives. Despite this, several respondents believe that the solution is not to avoid AI, but to actively engage with and learn more about the technology. Overall, this suggests that while AI-generated models have certainly become normalized as a phenomenon, the industry is still in a phase where knowledge of how the technology can be used has not yet kept pace with its spread, leaving both the ethical and strategic implications of its use largely unaddressed.

4.2 The Ethics of Imitation

The second theme explores the ethical tensions that emerge when AI is used to imitate human appearance in marketing. While respondents generally understood AI-generated models as part of an ongoing digital transformation, they also raised concerns about the consequences of digitally recreating human bodies and identities. Across the interviews, it became clear that respondents did not necessarily view AI-generated models as inherently unethical, but rather that the use becomes problematic when it manipulates human bodies, identities, or

livelihoods. Drawing from the literature review, which highlights ethical concerns related to job displacement, identity rights, and the reinforcement of unrealistic beauty ideals (Kim, 2026; Sands et al., 2024; Su, 2025), this theme examines how respondents experienced and reasoned around these ethical tensions in practice.

4.2.1 Consent and transparency

A recurring theme throughout the empirical material was the ethical aspects of AI-generated models. The examples of GUESS's use of fully AI-generated models and H&M's use of digital twins based on real people were used to make the ethical tensions more concrete (Appendix 2 & 3). Respondents' reflections highlighted ethical differences between the two cases. These differences are relevant because AI-generated models are becoming increasingly common in the beauty and influencer industries, which increases the need for ethical guidelines and responsible AI use to avoid damaging the relationship between brands and consumers (Su, 2025). In line with this, the respondents perceived H&M's use of digital twins as more ethically justifiable because a real person is behind the model, has given consent, and is compensated for their participation.

“Yes. And there is a difference with digital twins, which feels more ethically defensible because there is consent, and also compensation for the model, while fully AI-generated models feel more problematic, especially from a job perspective.” (R4)

Several respondents also described GUESS's use of AI-generated models as impersonal or “flat” and overly “picture-perfect,” which, in their view, risks contributing to unhealthy beauty ideals and less human communication. Some also felt that the use lacked a clear creative or innovative purpose and was instead primarily perceived as a way to make production more efficient. The results thus show that ethical acceptance is not evaluated in absolute terms. Rather, it is conditioned on whether the use of AI respects the rights and interests of those whose identity is involved, reflecting a principle-based understanding of ethics in which consent and compensation function as non-negotiable prerequisites rather

than optional considerations (Sands et al., 2024). This suggests that, for communication professionals, the ethical issue concerns how human likeness, representation and labour are treated within AI-driven marketing, rather than AI use in itself.

At the same time, another perspective emerged, with some respondents not viewing AI-generated models as unethical in and of themselves, but rather arguing that it depends on how they are used and under what conditions. This reasoning can be understood in relation to broader ethical concerns about AI-generated models in the fashion industry, particularly questions of human rights (Kim, 2026). In the interviews, this was reflected in the way R2 emphasized that companies must draw a clear line regarding the use of other people's likenesses, while R6 argued that the use of AI models is not necessarily unethical in itself, but that unethical behavior arises when models are reproduced and used without knowledge or financial compensation. Meanwhile, R10 argued that AI-generated models can be perceived as more ethically defensible if their use adds clear value, such as by increasing diversity in the representation of bodies and appearances. However, this reasoning raises a critical question, if ethical acceptability can be justified by purpose alone, it risks becoming a flexible standard that companies may exploit to legitimize AI use without addressing the underlying concerns of consent and compensation.

Furthermore, Moore et al. (2026) argues that one of the most important ethical aspects of AI-generated content in rapid development primarily concerns maintaining transparency and avoiding misleading communication. Transparency is also consistently highlighted as a recurring theme in the empirical material. Several respondents believe that transparency and openness are key factors in ensuring that AI-generated models are perceived as ethically acceptable. They argued that the use of such models becomes more legitimate when it is clearly stated that the model is AI-generated, and some described transparency as a prerequisite for AI to be used ethically at all. According to the respondents, the problem arises when people can no longer determine what is real and when AI-generated content is perceived as authentic, even though it is not.

Ethics is an aspect that has become increasingly important to modern consumers, but sustainability is also gaining more attention (Frigenti, 2024). This was also evident in the empirical data, some respondents linked the ethical use of AI-generated models to environmental and sustainability issues. R6, for example, noted that the use of AI can be problematic from an environmental perspective due to the technology's high energy consumption. At the same time, R9 argued that AI-generated models can, in some cases, be perceived as more ethically defensible from a sustainability perspective by reducing resource-intensive production and air travel for photo shoots in various locations around the world. This reasoning thus shows that the respondents' ethical assessments do not revolve solely around consent and identity, but also around AI's broader impact on society.

4.2.2 Beauty ideals and human labour

While Section 4.2.1 examined how respondents reasoned about consent and identity, the Guess campaign also raised a second level of concern, one that focused less on the person behind the image and more on the audience viewing it. This concern aligns with Su's (2025) argument that AI-generated models are not only marketing tools but also cultural symbols that can shape perceptions of beauty, identity, and authenticity. In line with this, several respondents reacted strongly to the AI-generated model being portrayed as unrealistically perfect, in a way that felt inauthentic and difficult to relate to. R1 described their spontaneous reaction to the campaign:

“My first spontaneous reaction is kind of like, wow, you look so fake. I find that really sad, and then you start thinking about all the young children growing up with the idea that this is how big your breasts should be, this is how small your waist should be, this is how voluminous your hair should be, and so on. So I find it really sad.” (R1)

Several respondents also emphasized that idealized bodies are not a new problem in advertising. However, their reasoning suggests that AI changes the nature of

this problem. Traditional advertising and retouching may also create unrealistic ideals, but they usually begin with an actual body. In contrast, a fully AI-generated model can be designed without being anchored in a real person at all. R5 expressed this concern by pointing out that young girls might look up to a model without knowing that she does not exist. This distinction was central in the respondents' reasoning: retouching a real person was understood as problematic, but completely constructing an idealized body was perceived as ethically more difficult because the image no longer represents an altered reality, but a reality that never existed.

In addition to concerns about beauty ideals, several respondents also reflected on how AI could be used to either reinforce or challenge existing ideals. R1 described the Guess campaign as a clear example of how AI-generated models should not be used, as the image reinforces a narrow, unrealistic body ideal. At the same time, they noted that AI could also be used more responsibly, for example, by showing greater diversity in body types and appearances. This is relevant since AI-generated models can be seen as cultural symbols that shape perceptions of beauty, identity and authenticity (Su, 2025). Therefore, the specific appearances and ideals that companies choose to generate through AI become important ethical considerations. R1's reasoning therefore shows that AI need not be understood as a tool that just reinforces existing beauty ideals. By using AI in this way, the technology could also serve to challenge and broaden traditional ideals rather than reproduce them. This suggests that the ethical issue extends beyond transparency and disclosure, as it also concerns which ideals and norms the image contributes to normalizing.

Another recurring pattern in the interviews was the concern about job loss. R5 expressed this concern clearly:

“There will be fewer jobs for models. Also fewer jobs for others, because it will be more efficient with AI, so they will get a lot of help there. My role is also threatened.” (R5)

The quote shows that the concern extends beyond models to include several professional roles within the industry. This transformation means that both the model in front of the camera and the work behind the scenes may eventually be replaced. The issue of AI-generated models is therefore not just about beauty standards, but also about the value attributed to human labor in the communications industry.

Kim (2026) points out that this could affect models, photographers, stylists, makeup artists, and others involved in content production. Several respondents also discussed job loss as a broader societal change. R9, for example, described how models and photographers are likely to have fewer jobs, but emphasized that this is not limited to the fashion or communications industries, it is part of a larger transformation in which AI is changing how work is organized. As AI-generated models become cheaper and more attractive alternatives, the risk of normalizing a production logic in which human involvement is seen as optional rather than necessary. How this will affect the industry in the long term is difficult to determine, as the use of AI-generated models is still in its early stages. However, the respondents' reasoning shows that the issue is already perceived as more than just a practical efficiency measure. It also concerns the types of work processes the industry is beginning to accept, and where the line is drawn between reasonable technological development and the replacement of human expertise for cost and time reasons.

In summary, the respondents' reasoning shows that beauty ideals and job displacement are closely connected rather than separate ethical issues. When the human element disappears from both the image and the production process, AI-generated models affect not only what is visually represented, but also whose labour, likeness, and expectations are involved. This leads to a recurring question across the interviews: who is responsible for ensuring that AI is used in a transparent, accountable, and ethically justifiable way?

4.3 Navigating Responsibility

The third theme, *Navigating Responsibility*, examines how respondents reasoned about responsibility in the use of AI-generated models in marketing. While the previous theme highlighted concerns related to consent, beauty ideals and human labour, this theme shifts the focus to how responsibility is understood, negotiated and shared among the actors involved. The findings suggest that respondents did not view responsibility as belonging to any single actor, but rather as something distributed across communicators, brands, and the industry as a whole. Drawing from the literature review, ethical discussions around AI in marketing are closely tied to trust, transparency and professional responsibility. Moore et al. (2026) emphasizes the role of marketers in shaping consumer preferences, while Frigenti (2024) highlights that consumer expectations are increasing, particularly regarding ethical practices, transparency, and corporate responsibility in digital environments. This theme therefore examines how these responsibilities are understood and navigated in practice, and what role clearer regulation and industry standards play in that process.

4.3.1 Professional accountability

A clear pattern emerges in how professional responsibility is understood in relation to AI-generated models. Across the interviews, communicators and marketers were repeatedly described as having responsibility for the content they produce and publish.

“Yes, we have a huge responsibility. And what the customer sees and what reaches the customer is, of course, the result of our marketing efforts. So it goes without saying that our responsibility is enormous.” (R4)

Since marketing is fundamentally a process of creating value and building long-term relationships based on trust and loyalty (Le Meunier-FitzHugh, 2021; Moore et al., 2026), the content professionals choose to produce and publish is never merely a technical decision, it is a relational one. R1, R4 and R10 all affirm this, arguing that marketers bear significant responsibility precisely because their

output shapes how audiences perceive and trust the brands they represent. In marketing, it is therefore important to take responsibility for how communication is perceived. Sands et al. (2024) argue that responsible advertising using generative AI requires both transparency and human oversight, emphasizing that professionals must remain actively involved in evaluating AI-generated content, particularly in high-stakes contexts where the outcomes of AI use are difficult to predict. This places the evaluative responsibility firmly with the professionals involved, which aligns with how respondents in this study understood their own role.

As mentioned earlier, this responsibility also involves avoiding a distorted view of reality and preventing the creation of ideals that do not reflect the real world. Within today's digitalized marketing landscape, Frigenti (2024) emphasizes that modern consumers increasingly expect companies to take greater responsibility, particularly regarding such aspects as sustainability and ethical issues. This is reflected in R5's statement that AI-generated models can be acceptable as long as they accurately portray reality, as well as in R1's hope that actors across the industry will take responsibility, both generally and in terms of social responsibility.

When it comes to whether professionals have a duty or responsibility toward others in the industry, such as models and photographers, respondents hold differing views. R2 insists that they bear no responsibility for job losses, arguing that only ethical accountability regarding AI-generated content matters. Meanwhile, R7 believes they have a responsibility to avoid using AI that actively harms other industries, though they acknowledge it is inevitable. These differing views suggest that responsibility is not understood in one single way. Beyond responsibility toward other professionals, some respondents also highlight a broader responsibility to keep up with AI developments and build knowledge, with R9 stating that professionals must use it responsibly because they create content that society sees and trusts.

From a broader perspective, the issue of responsibility can be viewed in terms of how companies and brands choose to position themselves through their use of AI.

R2 argues that companies do not necessarily have a responsibility to preserve existing work processes, since AI is a powerful force for change to which companies need to adapt. However, the respondent believes that companies have a responsibility to set ethical boundaries for AI use, particularly regarding whether its use aligns with the brand's identity and values. del Río et al. (2001) argue that brand image can be understood as the perceptions individuals hold about a brand, reflected in the associations connected to the brand. Applied to R2's reasoning, this means that the decision to use AI-generated models can be understood as a branding decision, since it may influence what audiences associate with the brand. Responsibility at the corporate level therefore involves considering how the use of AI reflects on the brand and the values it communicates.

Responsibility around AI-generated models can therefore be seen as important for both professionals and brands, as digital consumers increasingly expect companies to take responsibility and act ethically (Frigenti, 2024). In addition, transparent communication is important for building and maintaining trust in customer relationships (Pires et al., 2024). This means that the use of AI is not just a matter of professional judgment, but also about how the brand is perceived by those around it.

4.3.2 The need for clearer boundaries

Only one in ten respondents reported being aware of internal guidelines or policies regarding AI use at their workplace, and none had experienced external pressure from legislation or industry requirements in their daily work. R2 was an exception, as they were aware of the guidelines developed by the Swedish Association of Communicators, but emphasized that these had not significantly impacted his day-to-day work. Despite this lack of concrete regulation, nine out of ten respondents called for clearer guidelines and requirements. This absence of clear guidelines creates a regulatory grey zone in which ethical responsibility is pushed down to individual professionals and companies. This becomes particularly problematic when considering Sands et al.'s (2024) argument that responsible AI advertising depends on clear internal rules and accountability. In the respondents' reasoning, the absence of such structures means that

professionals are left to make ethical judgments individually. Their call for clearer internal and external guidance can therefore be understood as an attempt to reduce this uncertainty and create more consistent expectations for responsible AI use. R5 expressed this clearly:

“I think we need legislation on this, otherwise things will get out of hand” (R5)

R9 expressed a similar view, arguing that without common rules, there is a risk of creating uncertainty about what actually constitutes acceptable use of AI. For the respondents, regulation was therefore about establishing clearer guidelines to ensure the technology is used responsibly. Since AI-generated models are already being used in marketing and the boundaries remain unclear, a great deal of responsibility falls on individuals and companies. This can thus be understood as a central tension in the material. On the one hand, the respondents described AI as part of the industry’s development and something that cannot be avoided. On the other hand, they expressed concern that the technology is developing faster than rules and procedures can be established to govern how work should now be conducted. The need for clearer boundaries is about establishing shared expectations regarding transparency and accountability, as well as legislation in the formal sense.

Here, R2’s argument becomes particularly relevant by contrast, as the respondent argued that the responsibility cannot reasonably fall on individual companies alone, since companies are simultaneously competing with one another by saving time and money.

“This is some kind of regulation and ethics or morality that has to be decided somewhere other than in the budget and the responsibility of a company.” (R2)

This view suggests that AI use is an industry-wide issue. If certain companies can produce more cheaply and quickly with AI, it becomes difficult to expect individual actors to set limits that could make them less competitive. Clearer rules and industry standards therefore appear to be a way to establish common ground

rules rather than placing the entire responsibility on each individual communicator or company.

Taken together, this shows that the need for clearer boundaries is a recurring concern among professionals in the communication industry. The fact that nine out of ten respondents call for regulation, even though hardly any of them experience concrete requirements in their daily work, suggests an awareness that the industry is currently in a kind of in-between stage. Without shared guidelines, the responsibility risks falling on individual professionals and companies, who are at the same time under pressure to stay competitive and reduce costs. Where the industry is heading without clear frameworks remains to be seen, but it is clear that this uncertainty is already being felt.

4.4 The Authenticity Paradox

The final theme to emerge from the material was not one we actively sought, but one that became increasingly visible throughout the interviews. While respondents were not directly asked about authenticity as a separate issue, their reflections repeatedly returned to questions of realness and credibility. We have chosen to describe this as the *authenticity paradox*: although AI-generated models can appear visually polished and technically convincing, this same perfection can also make them feel less human and less trustworthy. This connects to the literature review, where authenticity and trust are presented as central to how brand image is formed and maintained. Kim (2026) and Ali et al. (2025) both suggest that AI-generated content can be perceived as less authentic and less emotionally engaging than human-created content. Building on this, the theme first examines how perfection can make AI-generated models feel fake, before turning to how this effect depends on industry, context, brand identity and the degree of AI involvement.

4.4.1 When perfection feels fake

The empirical material shows that several respondents feel that AI-generated models can create content that looks visually credible but risks coming across as too perfect or impersonal. Several respondents also emphasized the importance of

avoiding content that is perceived as too “fake” or inauthentic, as this can diminish the sense of humanity and authenticity in communication. This aligns with Ali et al. (2025), who argue that AI-generated communication can be perceived as less authentic because it lacks the emotional connection and “human touch” often associated with credible brand communication.

“There’s really no point to that image; it’s just a matter of trying to make something as attractive as possible. As cheaply as possible. [...] There’s no feeling to it.” (R2)

Here, R2 argues that AI-generated models can be understood as less authentic when there is no clear concept or human thought behind the image. When the model appears to be created primarily to look as perfect and attractive as possible, the content risks feeling superficial rather than genuine. This indicates that authenticity is not solely about how real and genuine it looks, but also about whether it expresses a sense of human presence. In this case, perfection becomes more of an obstacle to credibility, as the image feels more like it was created to sell rather than convey something genuine and authentic. Some respondents also felt that AI-generated models can come across as emotionally empty. One respondent further noted that just by the feeling in the image, you can tell that something isn’t right:

“What I find scary is when it starts to feel like something is not quite right in the facial expression and the gaze. It becomes empty somehow, almost robotic.....” (R10)

According to the respondents, this sense of a lack of authenticity is linked to a loss of credibility. Several respondents noted that when the audience can no longer distinguish between what is real and what is AI-generated, they become more skeptical. Similarly, a certain skepticism toward the brand is created: do they have something to hide? Such reasoning reflects the broader trust-related challenge discussed by Gulati and Grover (2026), who argue that AI-generated

content can contribute to a decline in trust as consumers' ability to distinguish between real and artificial or manipulated content becomes increasingly challenged.

“I feel like it's starting to get boring to scroll through Instagram and see nothing that's real. Every time we find something fun, you think, that can't be true. So the default reaction is always, this is fake.” (R1)

Here, the respondent demonstrates that they are keeping up with current trends and understand that not everything they see can always be trusted. R6 elaborates on this by discussing how the audience's reception of visually impressive advertisements has changed alongside the development of AI. In the past, a spectacular commercial could capture significant attention because the audience perceived the performance as real. Today, however, there is a greater risk that the same type of content will be immediately assumed to be AI-generated or manipulated, fostering skepticism in society. We now live in a society where everything we see can be questioned. This skepticism helps explain the authenticity paradox identified in the empirical material. Although AI-generated content may appear visually impressive and technically convincing, technical precision does not automatically create trust if the content lacks human presence and emotional resonance (Luo et al., 2025). In this sense, the visual perfection of AI-generated content can simultaneously make it seem less human and less credible.

As a result of this paradox, human imperfections appear increasingly valuable. When perfection risks being perceived as inauthentic, imperfection can instead feel more human and genuine. This is evident in the interviews, where R1 describes how people almost “yearn for authenticity” in a digital environment where more and more content is seen as inauthentic. R7 makes a similar point, noting that many marketing professionals today create content that is “almost a little imperfect” so that it doesn't feel AI-generated. This shows that the human touch still plays an important role in how marketing is interpreted. As AI-generated images become increasingly realistic and easily accessible, evidence

suggests that the human element gains new value, making the content more credible and relatable.

4.4.2 Contextual authenticity

As the analysis in the previous section shows, brands are expected to act in accordance with their values, and this is where authenticity becomes particularly important. A recurring theme in the empirical data was that the impact of AI-generated models on brand image depends strongly on context. Respondents did not believe that AI-generated models automatically harm a brand; what matters is whether their use feels consistent with the brand's identity and values. This reflects the idea that successful AI use in marketing requires brands to preserve authenticity, rather than simply adopting new technology for its own sake (Moore et al., 2026). Since brand image is shaped over time through the relationship between a brand and its target audience, rather than being fully controlled by the company itself, AI use that feels inconsistent with a brand's values may create a gap between how the brand wants to be perceived and how it is actually understood (Bengtsson & Östberg, 2011). This becomes particularly clear in industries where trust and human presence are central elements of the brand, as the following quote illustrates:

“I wouldn't visit a health clinic that uses AI-generated models. Or a bank.” (R4)

In such contexts, the content can directly influence how serious and reliable the brand is perceived. Similar reasoning appeared in several interviews. R5 described how the use of AI-generated models can be considered as less problematic in tech, where the focus is already on technology and innovation, but as more problematic in industries like fashion, where humans are a central part of communication. R7 also reasoned similarly, arguing that beauty and fashion brands are inspected more closely because these industries are already linked to issues of body ideals and beauty standards.

At the same time, several respondents noted that AI-generated models can have a positive impact on brand image if their use feels well-thought-out and relevant to

the context. In these cases, it is not about AI as a shortcut, but rather as a creative tool with the potential to create something visually distinctive or difficult to achieve through traditional production. From a brand image perspective, AI-generated models may strengthen a brand when their use supports the associations, values and expectations connected to it (Bengtsson & Östberg, 2011). R2 and R5 both highlight that AI can enable more ambitious, visually spectacular campaigns, while R9 emphasizes that it can be seen as innovative only when done correctly. In this way, AI can also create new opportunities for shaping broader audience perceptions of a brand.

According to the interviewees, both the industry and the context influence how authentic a company or campaign is considered to be. The empirical data also show that the degree of AI usage matters. The more AI is used in a campaign, the greater the risk that the brand will be associated with inauthenticity. When its use is seen as limited and clearly justified, it can be understood as a modern and creative element. But when the image is viewed as entirely fabricated or too far from reality, the brand instead risks appearing less credible and less genuine. This became particularly clear in how several respondents described that AI-generated content can give the impression that the brand did not want to invest time and budget in it, similar to R4's reasoning:

“If it feels fake, you risk losing people’s trust. [...] So I figure they haven’t wanted to invest time or money in this. So why should I spend my money on something they don’t seem willing to put effort into?” (R4)

Here, the use of AI serves as an indicator of the brand's priorities. This point was also raised by R5, who noted that AI-generated models can damage trust in the brand because the image is not viewed as entirely realistic. This suggests that when marketing content is interpreted as fake, the recipient may begin to doubt whether the image provides a credible representation of the product or the brand behind the campaign. This raises the question of how a company's brand image may be affected when the use of AI is not communicated openly, but instead discovered or suspected by consumers. Several respondents discussed the risks

that arise when companies are not transparent about their AI use. R3 linked this to the relationship between consumer and brand and argued that AI can add another layer of uncertainty to a relationship that is already fragile:

“I think it can damage relationships. After all, the relationship between consumers and brands is already fragile. As a consumer, you’re already pretty fed up with advertising and all the different messages from brands. And so, if you add to that the question of whether this is credible or not, I think it can get really dangerous.” (R3)

The quote illustrates how AI-generated models can reinforce existing skepticism toward advertising and commercial messages. Both the individual image and the brand’s communication risk being called into question. When consumers begin to wonder whether what is shown is real or AI-generated, the brand can be associated with uncertainty and a lack of credibility. The view was also shared by R5, who argued that AI-generated models can erode trust because consumers begin to question whether what is shown can actually be trusted. Similarly, R7 believes that the brand image can be damaged when the use is perceived as inauthentic or non-transparent, while R8 described how “fake” content can reduce the sense of connection to the brand.

Authenticity in relation to AI-generated models, therefore, is about how well their use aligns with the brand, the industry, and the expectations consumers already have. When AI feels like a clear and intentional creative choice, it can strengthen the brand. But if it comes across as a shortcut, or as something the brand is trying to hide, it can damage trust.

5. Conclusion

This section concludes the thesis by summarizing the key findings from the analysis and discussion. It also contextualizes the relevance of these findings in relation to the broader implications of AI-generated models in marketing and suggests directions for future research.

This study explored how young communication professionals in Stockholm reason about the use of AI-generated models in digital marketing, and how this shapes their perceptions of brand image and ethical responsibility. Rather than revealing a clear consensus, the findings point to something more nuanced, a field in transition where established ideas about authenticity, trust and responsibility are being renegotiated in real time. The question of whether professionals believe AI-generated models strengthen or weaken a brand resists a simple answer. Instead, the findings suggest that the effect is deeply contextual, shaped by factors such as industry, purpose, transparency, and authenticity.

The findings show that acceptance of AI-generated models is not automatic, but deeply conditional. Although respondents acknowledged the strategic value of AI-generated models in content creation, they distinguished between responsible and problematic uses of them. Acceptance depended on whether its use was ethically justified and took consent, compensation, human identity and openness toward the audience into account. The comparison between Guess and H&M further shows that transparency alone is not enough. Ethical acceptance also depended on who is represented, who is compensated, and what ideals the image contributes to reinforcing.

A key finding is that responsibility is understood as shared between professionals, brands, and the industry more broadly. Marketers are seen as responsible for producing effective content while also considering how AI-generated models may affect audiences. At the same time, this responsibility exists in a regulatory grey zone, where the absence of clear rules and guidelines makes it difficult to navigate, particularly when these techniques offer clear commercial advantages such as lower costs and faster production. This points to a need for clearer

industry standards and legal frameworks, as well as greater professional awareness of the ethical implications involved.

Furthermore, the findings show that AI-generated models need a clear communicative purpose to be perceived as credible. When the use feels purposeful and aligned with a brand's identity, it can support perceptions of innovation and responsibility, but when it feels disconnected from the brand's values, it risks undermining trust and credibility. Even openly labelled AI content can be perceived as problematic if it reinforces unrealistic ideals or conflicts with the brand's values. Ultimately, the key question for brands is not whether to disclose AI use, but whether that use is genuinely motivated and coherent with their identity and brand image. This points to a broader shift in how responsibility in marketing may need to be understood, moving beyond simply following rules or disclosing practices, toward more fundamental questions about what values a brand chooses to communicate and stand for.

This leads to the question of authenticity, which was one of the study's central findings. The study identifies an *authenticity paradox* in which AI-generated models may appear as visually strong and innovative, while at the same time risking being seen as less human, less authentic and less credible. This suggests that realistic AI-generated content is not necessarily enough to create trust, since communication also needs to be understood as emotionally authentic and humanly grounded. As AI makes it easier to create polished and realistic images, authenticity becomes increasingly important for how such content affects brand image. A lack of authenticity may therefore create distance between the brand and its audience. This is a tension that communication professionals are increasingly expected to navigate.

While previous research has primarily focused on consumer reactions, this study contributes a more practice-oriented perspective by showing how professionals closely involved in these decisions navigate between the technology's possibilities and its risks. Rather than only showing that AI-generated models are becoming part of the industry, the study highlights the kinds of strategic and ethical considerations professionals need to make when deciding whether and how to use

them. The findings may therefore help marketers and communication professionals better understand the implications of the phenomenon, particularly in relation to transparency, authenticity, brand image and audience trust.

The conclusion of this study is therefore that AI-generated models are no longer a question of if, but of how. Their use will likely become increasingly integrated into marketing practice, making it crucial for professionals to approach them with ethical awareness and strategic judgement.

5.1 Suggestions for future research

Since this study has focused on how young communication professionals reason about AI-generated models, it provides insight into how the phenomenon is interpreted from within the communication industry. However, as the study does not examine audience responses directly, future research could investigate how consumers interpret and respond to AI-generated models in actual campaign settings. This would make it possible to compare professional assumptions with audience perceptions, and to explore how repeated exposure to AI-generated models may affect brand trust, credibility and perceptions of authenticity over time.

Further research could also examine how the perceived legitimacy of AI-generated models varies across industries and regulatory contexts. As this study suggests that acceptance is highly context-dependent, comparative studies could clarify why AI-generated models may be understood as innovative in some sectors, but as ethically problematic or inauthentic in others. In addition, future research could broaden the perspective by including other actors affected by this development, such as models, photographers and stylists. This could deepen the understanding of how AI-generated models may reshape marketing production, professional responsibility and the perceived value of human labour.

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Appendix 1: Interview Guide

The interview guide was originally developed and conducted in Swedish. The version presented here is an English translation.

Briefing

Thank you for participating in this interview. Before we begin, we would like to briefly explain how the interview will be conducted and what we are studying. The purpose of the study is to examine how people working in communication and marketing view the use of AI-generated models in advertising, and how this affects perceptions of brands.

During the interview, we will discuss your thoughts and experiences regarding marketing content created with the help of artificial intelligence, primarily AI-generated models used for marketing purposes.

There are no right or wrong answers, we are above all interested in your own experiences and reflections. The interview will be recorded but is only accessible to the two of us, it takes approximately 30 minutes, and all material is treated confidentially and used solely for research purposes.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Warm-up

- Could you briefly tell us about your background and what you do?
- How long have you worked in the communication industry?
- What are your main responsibilities?

Thematic main section

AI in the industry and at your workplace

- How do you feel AI has changed the communication and marketing industry in recent years?
- Do you or your agency use AI in your work today, and if so, in what way?

- Does your agency have any guidelines or policies regarding the use of AI?
- Is AI actively discussed at your workplace, and if so, how?

Follow-up questions:

- What is your personal stance on this development?
- Do you feel there is a shared view on AI at your workplace?

AI-generated models with visual elicitation

- Have you heard of AI-generated models being used in marketing before?

Elicitation using images from companies that have done this, such as H&M and Vogue/Guess.

- What is your immediate reaction to these images?

Follow-up questions:

These two images represent two different approaches to using AI. The Guess campaign, published in Vogue in August 2025, features a model that is entirely AI-generated from scratch – no real person lies behind the appearance. The H&M campaign, on the other hand, is based on digital copies of real models, so-called "digital twins", where the models themselves have given their consent and are paid each time their digital clone is used. Both campaigns sparked significant debate about job losses, beauty standards, and ethics.

- How do you view the difference between these two approaches?
- Which feels more ethically justifiable to you, and why?
- How do you think this type of content will affect the industry in the long term, for example for models and photographers?

In practice

- Could you personally imagine using AI-generated models in a campaign? Why or why not?
- If you have used or were to use AI-generated models, what would be the underlying reason? Budget, time, etc.
- How do you think your clients would react?
- Have you experienced any external pressure or requirements regarding the use of AI in marketing, for example from industry organizations, the Swedish Advertising Ombudsman, or legislation?

Brand image & credibility

- How do you think the use of AI-generated models affects how a brand is perceived?

Follow-up questions:

- Do you think it matters for the brand whether the model is entirely AI-generated compared to a digital clone of a real person?
- Are there situations where it could strengthen a brand?
- Are there situations where it could damage it?
- Does it matter which industry the company is in, for example fashion compared to tech?

Ethics & transparency

- Do you think companies should be open about when they use AI-generated models? Why or why not?

Follow-up questions:

- What happens if they are not?

To elaborate:

- Are there situations where you yourself would hesitate to carry out an idea?
- What responsibility do you think those of you working in this field have in this context?
- How do you reason around transparency, for example whether one should disclose that content is AI-generated?

Deepening phase

- How do you think AI-generated models in marketing will affect the relationship between companies and consumers?
- How would you reason if you received a brief from a client who wanted to use AI-generated models but did not want to be transparent about it to consumers?
- Do you think the industry will self-regulate, or is there a need for external requirements, such as legislation or industry standards about this phenomenon?
- Do you notice that you react differently to AI-generated models now that you have encountered them from a professional perspective, compared to how you think an average consumer would react?

Wrap-up

- We have covered quite a lot today, but if you were to highlight the most important thing you feel and think about companies' use of AI-generated models in marketing, what would that be?

Follow-up question:

- Is there anything we have not discussed that you think is important in relation to the topic?
- Have your thoughts on AI in marketing changed during the course of this interview?

Debriefing

Thank you so much for participating in this interview.

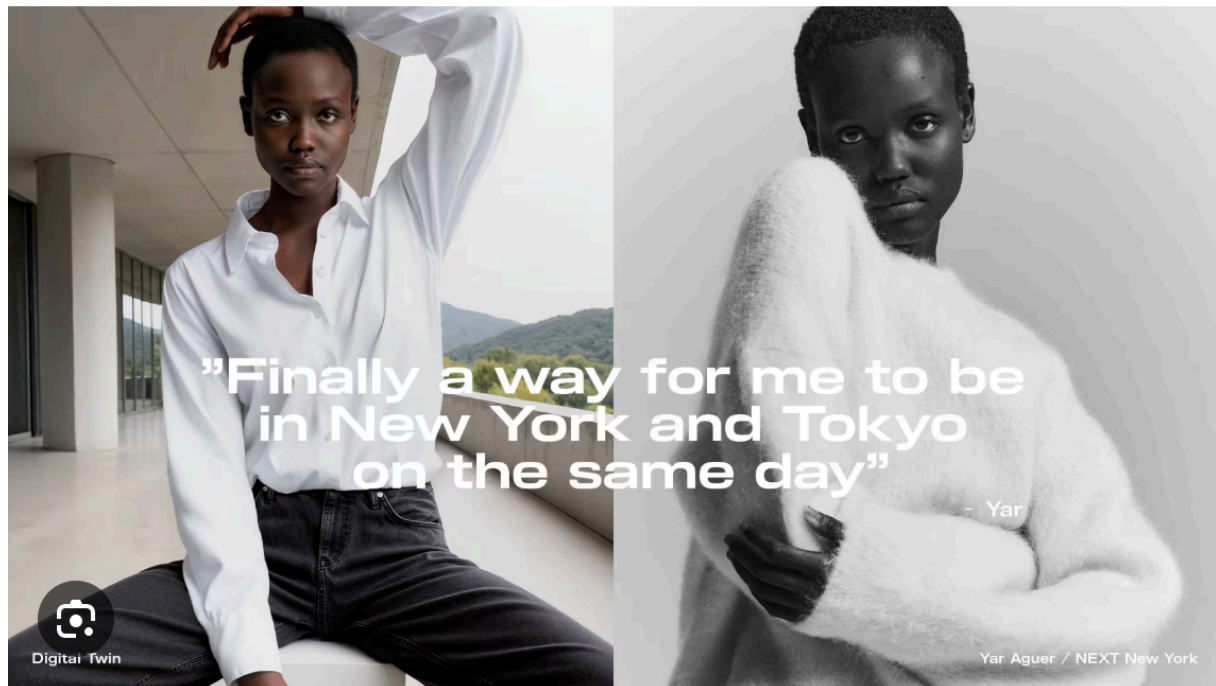
As mentioned, your responses will be treated confidentially and anonymized in the study. The material will only be used for research purposes.

If you would like to receive the final work once the study is complete, you are very welcome to let us know and we can send it to you. Do you have any questions or thoughts about the study or the interview before we finish?

Appendix 2: Elicitation Picture 1



Appendix 3: Elicitation Picture 2



Appendix 4: List of Interviewees

<i>Interviewee</i>	<i>Role</i>	<i>Job Description and relevance</i>
<i>R1</i>	<i>Project Manager</i>	Project manager with 10 years of experience in advertising and production management. Relevance: Practical insight into campaign production, AI use and brand credibility.
<i>R2</i>	<i>Project Manager</i>	Project manager working with strategy, advertising and concept development. Relevance: Strategic insight into brand development, agency work and AI-generated campaign content.
<i>R3</i>	<i>Production Manager</i>	Production manager with a background in marketing and influencer marketing. Relevance: Practical insight into campaign production
<i>R4</i>	<i>Marketing Coordinator</i>	Marketing coordinator working with digital communication Relevance: Practical insight into daily AI use and visual content production
<i>R5</i>	<i>Social Media Assistant</i>	Works with social media content, copywriting and visual material. Relevance: Practical insight into social media communication.
<i>R6</i>	<i>Art Director</i>	Works with image production, graphic design and concept development. Relevance: Creative insight into visual communication.
<i>R7</i>	<i>Public relations consultant</i>	Works with client strategy, events and influencer marketing. Relevance: PR perspective on brand communication.
<i>R8</i>	<i>Production Coordinator</i>	Works with event planning and production execution. Relevance: Practical insight into marketing production.
<i>R9</i>	<i>Digital Marketing Coordinator</i>	Works with digital marketing, campaign planning and content creation. Relevance: Practical insight into digital marketing.
<i>R10</i>	<i>Communication Strategist</i>	Communication strategist with broad consulting experience across different brands. Relevance: Strategic insight into brand communication

Appendix 5: Coding Scheme

Theme	Codes
<i>The Digital Shift</i>	Efficiency Tool Context-Dependent Strategic Use Complement Not Replacement Innovation and Modernity Industry Development Inevitable New Competence Normalization Knowledge Gaps Inclusive representation
<i>The Ethics of Imitation</i>	Compensation Digital twins Consent Transparency Beauty ideals Human craftsmanship Job losses
<i>Navigating Responsibility</i>	Professional responsibility Responsibility Brand identity Industry responsibility Regulation and legislation Transparency
<i>The Authenticity Paradox</i>	Inauthentic and emotionally empty Distrust and skepticism Value of realness Human imperfections Authenticity Credibility