



How Early-Career Professionals Navigate Professional Identity Within AI Transition

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1. Introduction

1.1 How AI reshapes the job market in narratives

By 2025, generative AI tools had not only become embedded in organizational workflows but had also begun to fundamentally reshape the question of what skilled, human-led work actually meant (Singla et al., 2025; Gulati et al., 2025). For those just beginning or changing their careers, this shift arrived not as a distant policy concern but as an immediate, personal disruption to one of the most foundational questions a person can face: "Who am I, professionally, and where do I belong?"

The scale of this transformation has been widely noted. The World Economic Forum's "Future of Jobs Report" has consistently projected large-scale role displacement alongside the creation of new competency demands, with a particular emphasis on roles that rely on routine, process-driven, or entry-level outputs - precisely the roles that early-career professionals depend on to establish themselves (WEF, 2025; Alvesson, 2001). In parallel, public discourse and industry commentary have described what some have called a "hollowing out" of junior and middle-management positions, driven by the automation of analytical, drafting, and coordination tasks that once required years of accumulated expertise (Lawrence, 2026; Wigger, 2026). Headlines such as the Financial Times' "The graduate 'jobpocalypse': Where have all the entry-level jobs gone?" (2025), Bloomberg's "AI Is Waging War on White-Collar Jobs" (2025), and the Harvard Business Review's "The Perils of Using AI to Replace Entry-Level Jobs" (Edmondson & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2025) have framed this variously as a market correction, a structural revolution, or - depending on the moment - both simultaneously.

This hollowing out carries consequences for professional development. Samiolo, Spence, and Toh (2023) found that automating low-level tasks removes the work through which early career professionals learn professional judgment and build professional identity, a pattern Natali et al. (2025) confirmed across healthcare. The tasks that have traditionally served as the scaffolding for professional formation are precisely those most vulnerable to AI-driven reconfiguration.

This research was initiated in early 2026, directly amid this discourse. The AI labor conversation had reached something of a fever pitch: layoff cycles at major tech companies, viral claims that AI would replace entire departments, and an equally energetic counter-narrative arguing that new roles and industries would absorb displaced workers. The noise was considerable. What was less clear - and largely absent from the academic literature - was how individual professionals, particularly those at the earliest stages of their working lives, were making sense of themselves in relation to all of it.

Here, a clarification is needed. Throughout this study, the term **early career professional** refers to individuals who are actively transitioning from formal education or training into sustained professional practice. This period is characterized by three features that distinguish it from later career stages. First, it is a phase of identity formation rather than identity adaptation - the professional self is being constructed for the first time, not renegotiated from an established base (Ibarra, 1999; Kluijtmans et al., 2017). Second, it typically involves provisional employment arrangements - internships, contract roles, graduate programs, or early-stage positions - that heighten exposure to shifts in labor demand (Boucher et al., 2024; Samiolo et al., 2023). Third, it is a period in which professionals rely heavily on the performance of routine, process-driven, and entry-level tasks to build the tacit knowledge and professional judgment that more senior colleagues take for granted. When those tasks are reconfigured or automated by AI, the foundational scaffolding of identity formation is disrupted before it can fully stabilize.

The structural position of being early in one's career - regardless of whether one is 24 or 34 - creates the conditions of vulnerability and identity openness that this study examines. An individual changing careers at 35 and entering their first professional role brings life experience but not professional identity stability; they, too, are forming, rather than adapting. The relevant axis is career stage, not birth cohort.

1.2 Problematization

The AI transition is not merely an economic event. For early-career professionals, it is an identity event - one that arrives before a professional self has fully had the chance to fully form (Byers & Meadows, 2022; Hochman et al., 2023; Gruber et al., 2026). Unlike mid-career or senior professionals who enter this period with an established identity to draw on, those at the start of their careers lack that anchor. They are not *adapting* an identity under AI pressure; they are *forming* one in its confusion or transition.

The concept of professional identity - the internalized sense of who one is in relation to one's work, occupation, and professional community - has been studied across disciplines such as organizational behavior, vocational psychology, and management studies (Ibarra, 1999; Ashforth & Mael, 1989). What the existing literature largely addresses, however, are identity processes under conditions of relative stability or bounded transition, such as a career change, a promotion, or entry into a new organizational culture (Brynjolfsson et al., 2025; Law & Varanasi, 2025; Mayer et al., 2025). The kind of ambient, pervasive, and discursively saturated disruption that AI currently represents is a different kind of challenge altogether, and one that the field is still slowly theorized.

Because this disruption targets the career stage rather than the birth cohort, it does not focus on generational boundaries. A 22-year-old graduate and a 38-year-old career changer entering their first professional role share the same structural position: both are forming a professional identity for the first time, both rely on entry-level tasks to build competence, and both face a labor market where AI is reconfiguring those tasks. The problem is not generational; it is developmental.

This study enters this problem space with a specific focus: the narrative dimension of early career identity formation under conditions of AI-driven disruption. The scholarly conversation across professional identity, AI and professions, and empirical studies of AI at work has converged on the threshold of this question - observing identity tensions, documenting how professionals position AI, and noting the structural conditions under which early career identity is formed. Yet the interpretive, meaning-making dimension of how early career professionals

construct a coherent sense of who they are becoming in relation to AI remains open to further examination. This study positions itself in that interpretive gap.

The question of why this matters extends beyond the general point about labor markets and identity. The public discourse on AI and employment is vast, but it is predominantly quantitative and structural: projections of job displacement, skills gap analyses, and sector-level impact assessments. What is underresearched is the lived, interpretive dimension - how people experience this transition, how they narrate it to themselves and others, and how it shapes the professional selves they are becoming.

The choice of a qualitative approach is not a default; it is a methodological argument. Professional identity is not a variable that can be cleanly operationalized, scaled, and measured. It is a process: relational, narrative, and situated in the specific contexts through which people move (Brown, 2015; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). To ask how someone navigates their professional identity is to ask how they make meaning, and meaning-making cannot be adequately captured through a survey instrument or a pre-coded response set (Creswell, 2013; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). It requires conversation, interpretation, and a willingness to follow the contours of lived experience rather than to impose a framework from the outside.

An AI-saturated labor market is precisely such a narrative environment: it produces fears, expectations, and self-comparisons that individuals then incorporate, resist, or rework as they construct a sense of who they are professionally. Capturing that process requires methods that are sensitive to language, context, and interpretation - the hallmarks of qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

There is also a timing argument specific to this topic. The professional identities being formed right now - by the cohort of early-career workers navigating an AI-disrupted labor market in 2025 and 2026 - are being formed under conditions that did not exist five years ago and may look substantially different five years from now. Studying this moment, as it unfolds, is itself a contribution. The interpretive accounts collected here will become part of the historical record of how a generation of newcomers made sense of an unprecedented transition at the very start of their working lives.

1.3 Research Aim and Question

This study aims to examine how early-career professionals narrate and reconstruct their professional identities in response to AI-driven job market disruption. Rather than measuring identity as a variable or cataloging thematic positions, the study investigates the narrative structures through which professional identity is actively accomplished in story form.

The central research question is the following:

How do early-career professionals narrate and reconstruct their professional identities in response to AI-driven disruption?

Three subsidiary questions follow:

1. What identity work strategies do early-career professionals employ to position themselves as valuable in an AI-integrated job market?
2. How do subjects narrate the role of organizational discourses around AI shape or destabilize their sense of professional self?
3. How do they use personal narratives to manage the tension between human skill and AI capability?

The premise of this study is not that AI is erasing professional identity, but that it is creating the conditions under which identity work becomes more visible, more urgent, and more revealing of how people actively make meaning amid disruption. Early-career professionals are not victims of a technological transition; they are agents navigating one. Understanding how they do so, in their own words and on their own terms, is the animating purpose of this research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Professional Identity and Identity Work

The study of professional identity has accumulated a substantial body of knowledge over the past three decades, spanning organizational behavior, management studies, and the sociology of work. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) established that identity work - the ongoing, effortful process through which individuals construct, maintain, and repair a sense of who they are at work - is not a stable achievement but a continuous and often contradictory practice. People do not simply *have* professional identities; they actively produce, revise, and sometimes struggle to hold them together as the conditions of work shift. Alvesson and Willmott (2002) further showed that this work is shaped by the discursive environments that organizations create, in which language around performance, value, and contribution provides the raw material from which individuals construct their professional selves.

Brown's (2015) systematic review of over 300 sources remains the most comprehensive map of this field. He defines identity at work as the meanings individuals reflexively attach to themselves - the ongoing process of answering the question *who am I, and " Who am I becoming, in relation to my work?* Brown's review maps five recurring debates that structure the field, including the relationship between structure and agency, the tension between stability and fluidity, and the question of whether professional selves form unified narratives or are inherently fragmented. What Brown concludes is significant for this study: identity work becomes most visible, most active, and most analytically accessible precisely during moments of transition, disruption, and threat.

For early-career professionals specifically, Ibarra (1999) introduced the concept of provisional selves - the tentative, experimental identity positions that people try on as they enter new professional contexts, testing what fits before committing to a more stable self-concept. This work highlighted the inherently exploratory quality of early-career identity formation: it is not a linear process of becoming, but a provisional one, marked by rehearsal, revision, and occasional abandonment of possible selves. Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) extended this line of inquiry to

career transitions, arguing that narrative - the stories people tell about themselves and their trajectories - is the primary mechanism through which identity is reconstructed when working life changes significantly.

The dialogical nature of early career identity formation has been further developed by Kluijtmans, de Haan, Akkerman, and van Tartwijk (2017), who studied early career clinician-scientists and found that participants held dual professional identities - care provider and scientist - navigated through a "broker" or "bridge builder" meta-identity that mediated competing demands between the two positions. Their work suggests that early career identity is not necessarily unified but can involve holding multiple professional selves in productive tension, connected through a narrative of bridging rather than choosing.

Together, these contributions establish that early-career identity work is narrative, provisional, dialogical, and acutely sensitive to disruption. The field has developed sophisticated tools for understanding how professionals navigate identity - but has applied those tools largely to conditions that differ fundamentally from the one now unfolding.

2.2 AI and the Transformation of Professional Work

Alongside the identity literature, a separate body of work has examined how technology - and, specifically, artificial intelligence - is transforming the structure and content of professional work. Susskind and Susskind (2015) provide the most ambitious macro-level account of this transformation. Their central argument is that the traditional arrangement between professions and society - what they term the Grand Bargain, in which society grants professional monopolies over specialized knowledge in exchange for trustworthy expertise - is being dismantled by technology. They argue that professional work is decomposable into constituent tasks, and that many of these tasks are amenable to automation. Their survey covers eight professional domains and identifies patterns common across all of them: the externalization of expertise from individual professionals into accessible systems, the unbundling of professional services into discrete deliverables, and the increasing substitution of human judgment by algorithmic output.

The Susskinds' account is structural and sector-level. It describes what is happening to professions as institutions. Still, it says comparatively little about how individual professionals - particularly those entering these disrupted fields for the first time - experience or navigate these changes at a personal level. The developmental question of how one becomes a professional when the traditional pathways to expertise are being reorganized is not addressed.

Samiolo et al. (2023) bring this question closer to the individual level by showing that automating low-level tasks removes the very work through which early career professionals develop professional judgment and identity. Natali et al. (2025) document a parallel dynamic in healthcare, where early-career clinicians face particular vulnerability because their clinical judgment is still under construction. Together, these studies suggest that the most consequential impact of AI on early career professionals may not be job displacement per se, but the erosion of the developmental infrastructure through which professional competence and identity are built.

2.3 Empirical Effects of AI on Workers

The most methodologically rigorous contribution to understanding AI's effects on individual workers is Brynjolfsson, Li, and Raymond's (2025) large-scale study of 5,172 customer support agents following the staggered introduction of a generative AI assistant. Using a difference-in-differences design, they find that AI access increases average productivity by 15%, but the distribution of effects is strikingly uneven across experience levels. Less experienced workers benefit most dramatically - in some cases reaching the productivity levels of workers with six months' tenure within just two months of AI access - while the most experienced workers see negligible or slightly negative quality effects.

Brynjolfsson et al. interpret this asymmetry as evidence that generative AI captures and disseminates the tacit knowledge of top performers to less experienced colleagues, effectively compressing the experience curve that traditionally structures professional development. They also find evidence of durable learning effects: during system outages, AI-exposed workers continue to outperform their pre-AI baselines.

These findings carry implications that the study itself does not pursue. If AI compresses the competence gap between novice and experienced workers, it also disrupts the hierarchical structure through which professional identity has traditionally been organized - where seniority, accumulated expertise, and visible competence progression serve as the markers through which professionals locate themselves in their field. What it means to be at the junior level and the trajectory that position implies may be substantially altered when the developmental arc that gave seniority its meaning is shortened by technological assistance. It is a question about identity, not productivity - and one the productivity-focused literature does not ask.

2.4 How Professionals Position AI: Tool, Partner, or Threat

A central question running through the literature is whether AI is experienced as an identity disruption at all - or whether that experience depends on something more contingent: how professionals discursively position AI in relation to their work. The studies that address this question do not agree, and their disagreement is instructive.

Schapals and Porlezza (2020) offer the strongest case that identity disruption is not inevitable. They found that professionals discursively maintained their existing role conceptions rather than revising them. Journalists, participants of their study, reaffirmed their core skills - verification, contextualization, narrative judgment - as precisely what automation could not touch. The authors describe this as "ideological continuity": the profession's self-understanding remained intact even as its production processes changed (Schapals & Porlezza, 2020).

This finding raises an immediate question: is continuity simply a function of how a given profession talks about itself, or does it reflect something about the kind of AI at play? Amann et al. (2023) complicate the picture by showing that the same professional community can hold multiple positionings simultaneously. In their qualitative study of expectations toward medical AI in stroke medicine, they found that healthcare professionals identified four distinct roles AI could play: administrative, assistive, advisory, and autonomous. Identity concerns emerged unevenly across these roles. AI as an administrative or assistive tool was largely unproblematic, but as AI moved toward autonomous decision-making, questions about role boundaries and

professional responsibility became acute (Amann et al., 2023), which suggests that disruption is not a binary condition but a gradient - and that where a professional community draws the line between acceptable assistance and unacceptable replacement is itself an identity claim.

Lan (2024) extends this insight by explicitly theorizing the relationship between AI positioning and tensions in professional identity. Studying teachers in an AI-enhanced training program, she identified three conceptual models that professionals use to make sense of AI's place in their work: AI as Navigator, AI as Collaborator, and AI as Inventor (Lan, 2024). Crucially, Lan found that adopting one model over another did not eliminate identity tension - it relocated it. Even teachers who positioned AI as a Collaborator reported struggling with a "humanity-technology" tension, trying to locate the boundary between their own contribution and the machine's. Positioning AI was itself an identity claim.

Margherita, Caffieri, and De Maio (2023) provide a concrete case of what happens when that positioning is not freely chosen but structurally imposed. Their study of early-career psychologists working on AI-driven online therapy platforms in Italy found that participants could not simply position AI as a tool or collaborator, because the platform's algorithm positioned *them*. Participants experienced this as a loss of professional autonomy, but they also recognized that the platform provided their livelihood. For these early career psychologists, the question was not "what role should AI play?" but "what role is left for me?"

Taken together, these studies suggest that positioning AI is not a neutral cognitive act. It is an identity practice - and one in which early career professionals, who lack the established ideological resources that more senior professionals can mobilize, may be least able to position AI on their own terms.

2.5 Worker Responses and Narrative Positioning

A further stream of research has examined not the effects of AI on workers but the responses of workers to AI - how they actively adapt their practices, roles, and self-presentations in the face of generative AI integration. Law and Varanasi (2025), in a systematic review of 23 qualitative studies, identify three major patterns of worker-led transformation: work processes being reshaped, role attributes shifting, and professional relationships. They note that these transformations generate tensions around role boundaries and professional identity among practitioners, but their review does not investigate these tensions as a process; identity is named as an outcome rather than examined as a phenomenon in its own right.

Mayer, Baygi, and Buwalda (2025) narrow the focus to early-career professionals specifically, through a qualitative case study of entry-level consultants. Their most novel finding is the concept of signal crafting: the deliberate management of how others perceive one's professional contributions, in a context where AI has made individual competence harder to assess. However, the authors explicitly restrict their analysis to behavioral dimensions and exclude cognitive crafting- how workers perceive and make sense of their work. This means their study stops precisely at the boundary this thesis seeks to cross. Signal crafting is observed as a behavioral strategy; what it means to the professionals engaging in it is not asked.

A further set of studies has begun to examine narrative positioning directly. Teng (2025), in a narrative inquiry with six Chinese EFL teachers, found that teachers positioned themselves as either "worriers" (resisting AI) or "warriors" (embracing AI to redefine their expertise). Al-Haddad (2026), in a narrative inquiry with five EFL teachers, found that participants narrated a shift from "knowledge transmitters" to "facilitators, curators, and guides" - using self-labeling as a narrative strategy to reposition themselves. Karataş and Yüce (2024), analyzing reflective narratives from 141 preservice teachers, found that participants narrated AI through a dual lens - simultaneously empowering and threatening. Boucher, Smith, and Telliell (2024), in an

ethnographic study of early career game development interns, found narratively structured patterns of resistance, negotiation, and reimagination.

Taken together, these studies confirm that narrative is central to how professionals make sense of AI. They show that professionals construct narrative positions - resistance, embrace, ambivalence - and use self-labeling strategies within AI-altered landscapes. Yet these studies identify *what* narrative positions professionals take up without examining *how* those positions are constructed as narratives - the story structures, temporal arcs, character roles, and rhetorical strategies through which professional identity is built in story form.

2.6 Early-Career Professionals in Knowledge Work

A final stream of literature relevant to this study concerns the specific conditions under which early-career professionals form their professional identities within knowledge-intensive organizational environments. Alvehus (2017) provides the most empirically grounded account of these conditions in his longitudinal case study of junior professionals at a Big Four accounting firm in Sweden. Drawing on 42 interviews and extended observation, he finds that the division of labor between junior and senior professionals is a structurally maintained hierarchy in which juniors are systematically allocated decontextualized case work - fragmented analytical tasks disconnected from client relationships - while seniors monopolize the high-status client work through which professional judgment, reputation, and identity are actually formed.

This division is sustained through deliberate practices of obfuscation and exclusion: removing junior names from deliverables, rotating across clients to prevent relationship accumulation, and an ideology of learning-by-doing that legitimizes opaque developmental pathways. What emerges is a picture of early-career professional identity formation as navigating a deliberately ambiguous terrain - where the signals of progress are unclear, and the work that would most directly affirm professional membership is precisely the work that is withheld.

Alvehus's account is set in a pre-AI context, but its relevance to this study is direct. If the case work that juniors are currently assigned is the same category of work that generative AI is most readily able to perform, then the developmental architecture Alvehus describes is disrupted at

its very entry point. This disruption carries implications for how organizational discourses around AI - what is said about junior work, what is automated, and what is withheld - shape early-career professionals' sense of professional self. When organizations delegate entry-level tasks to AI systems, they are not simply changing workflows; they are restructuring the discursive and material conditions under which professional identity is formed. The question of how these organizational discourses shape or destabilize professional identity, raised here as an implication, is a central concern of this study and is addressed directly by the second subsidiary research question.

2.7 The Gap This Study Addresses

Across these streams, a consistent pattern emerges. The professional identity literature has developed sophisticated tools for understanding how identities are constructed narratively, yet has applied them primarily to stable or bounded transitional conditions rather than to the kind of ambient, pervasive disruption AI represents. The macro-level literature on AI and professions has compellingly mapped structural transformation, but without attending to the subjective experience of those living through it. The empirical literature on AI at work has documented productivity effects and behavioral adaptations with increasing precision, but has approached the meaning-making dimension of professional disruption only at its margins.

The literature on how professionals position AI has shown that identity disruption depends on how AI is discursively positioned - and that early career professionals may be least able to control that positioning. The literature on worker responses has shown that professionals adopt behavioral strategies, such as signal crafting, and narrative strategies, such as self-labeling. But across all these streams, a shared limitation holds: the existing research has identified *what* positions and strategies professionals adopt without examining the narrative *form* through which those positions are constructed. The story structures, temporal arcs, character roles, and rhetorical strategies through which early career professionals build a coherent sense of who they are becoming remain unexamined. The literature has established *that* professionals narrate; it has not yet asked *how* they narrate. This study takes up where that literature ends, guided by the research questions stated in Section 3.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study understands professional identity not as something fixed that early-career professionals simply possess, but as something that is continuously constructed, repaired, challenged, and narrated in relation to work. This theoretical position is important because the AI transition not only changes tasks, skills, or employment opportunities. It also changes the symbolic and discursive environment in which professionals answer the question of who they are becoming. As argued in the introduction and literature review, early-career professionals are not only adapting to AI from a stable professional position. They are forming their professional identity while AI is already reshaping the meaning of competence, value, and professional contribution. Therefore, this study requires a framework that can explain identity as a process, as a struggle, as something regulated by organizational discourses, and as something expressed through personal narratives.

The framework developed here brings together three connected theoretical contributions. First, Alvesson and Willmott's (2002) concept of identity regulation explains how organizations and broader managerial discourses attempt to shape employees' self-understanding. Second, Sveningsson and Alvesson's (2003) concept of identity work and identity struggle explains how individuals actively negotiate, resist, and revise these identity pressures in fragmented organizational contexts. Third, Ibarra and Barbulescu's (2010) concept of narrative identity work explains how individuals use stories to make identity claims, construct continuity, and test possible professional selves during role transitions. Taken together, these concepts allow this study to examine how early-career professionals narrate and reconstruct their professional identities in response to AI-driven disruption.

3.1 Professional identity as constructed and processual

The starting assumption of this study is that professional identity is socially constructed and processual. Professional identity is not treated here as a stable psychological attribute, but as an ongoing answer to the question “who am I in relation to my work?” Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) argue that identity should be understood more as a process of becoming than as being. It means that identity is not a final condition, but a continuous process through which individuals form, maintain, repair, and revise understandings of themselves. This view is especially useful for studying early-career professionals because their professional selves are not yet fully stabilised. They are still trying to understand what kind of worker, expert, colleague, or future professional they can become.

Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) define identity work as the effort through which people construct a sense of coherence and distinctiveness. This is not always a calm or linear process. Identity work becomes more visible during moments of transition, uncertainty, contradiction, and self-doubt. In the context of this thesis, AI-driven disruption creates exactly these conditions. Early-career professionals may receive contradictory messages: they are told that AI is a tool that can increase productivity, but they are also told that AI can replace many of the entry-level tasks through which they are supposed to learn. They may be encouraged to use AI creatively, while also fearing that reliance on AI weakens their professional legitimacy. These tensions make professional identity more open, but also more unstable.

This processual view also fits the study’s qualitative and narrative design. If identity is constructed through language, interaction, and interpretation, then it cannot be fully captured by measuring attitudes toward AI alone. Instead, it must be studied through how participants explain themselves, describe their work, position AI, and connect past experiences with imagined futures. The empirical focus of this study is therefore not only what early-career professionals think about AI, but how they construct a professional self in relation to it.

3.2 Identity regulation and the organizational shaping of the self

While identity work is performed by individuals, it is not performed in a vacuum. Alvesson and Willmott (2002) show that organizations regulate identity by encouraging employees to adopt self-images and work orientations that fit managerial objectives. This does not mean that organizations control identity in a complete or mechanical way. Rather, identity regulation works through discourse, values, expectations, training, role descriptions, performance language, and cultural messages about what kind of employee is appropriate or valuable. In this sense, organizational control does not only operate through rules or supervision. It also operates through the shaping of the employee's sense of self.

This concept is highly relevant for an AI-integrated workplace. Organizational discourses around AI often contain identity expectations. For example, employees may be encouraged to see themselves as adaptable, future-ready, efficient, innovative, technologically fluent, or "AI-augmented." These are not neutral descriptions. They provide identity templates that workers are invited, or sometimes pressured, to internalize. For early-career professionals, such templates can be especially powerful because they are still trying to establish what professional competence means. When an organization says that a good professional is one who can collaborate with AI, automate routine tasks, and produce more output with fewer resources, it is also defining what kind of professional self is desirable.

Alvesson and Willmott (2002) argue that self-identity is reflexively organized through available cultural and organizational materials. This means that individuals build a sense of self using language, symbols, values, and discourses that circulate around them. In the present study, AI discourse becomes one of these identity materials. Terms such as automation, augmentation, productivity, upskilling, efficiency, and replacement may enter participants' narratives and shape how they understand their own value. Some participants may adopt these terms positively, presenting themselves as flexible and future-oriented. Others may experience them as threatening, because they imply that human contribution is valuable only when it is compatible with technological efficiency.

However, Alvesson and Willmott (2002) also warn against assuming that identity regulation is always successful. Employees are not passive recipients of organizational discourse. Identity regulation may create commitment, but it may also create anxiety, cynicism, resistance, or distance. This point is important for this study because early-career professionals may not simply accept organizational AI narratives. They may reproduce them, adapt them, question them, or use alternative narratives to protect their sense of professional worth. For example, a participant may accept the idea that AI improves efficiency but reject the idea that AI can replace human judgment. Another may present AI as useful for technical tasks while emphasizing emotional intelligence, creativity, or ethical responsibility as human strengths.

Therefore, identity regulation provides the structural side of the framework. It explains how organizations and broader labor-market discourses shape the identity environment in which early-career professionals narrate themselves. AI is not only a technological object in this framework. It is also a discursive force that participates in defining what counts as professional competence.

3.3 Identity struggle in fragmented and contradictory contexts

Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) extend this discussion by emphasizing identity as struggle. Their work is useful because it avoids two extremes. On one side, identity is not treated as a stable essence that remains unchanged across contexts. On the other side, identity is not treated as completely fragmented or determined by discourse. Instead, individuals are understood as actively trying to create coherence while facing contradictory roles, discourses, and expectations.

This middle position is central for the current study. Early-career professionals in AI-disrupted environments are likely to experience multiple and sometimes competing identity positions. They may want to be learners, but also feel pressure to perform as already competent. They may want to use AI as a tool, but also fear that using it too much makes their own contribution less visible. They may want to appear innovative, but also protect older ideas of professional expertise based on human judgment and gradual experience. These tensions suggest that

identity formation is not only a smooth process of adaptation. It is also a struggle to hold together different meanings of the self.

Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) argue that identity work becomes more concentrated when people face inconsistencies, surprises, and skepticism from others. AI creates these conditions because it destabilizes established relations between task, skill, and professional value. For many early-career professionals, routine work has traditionally been the route through which they prove reliability, learn tacit knowledge, and gradually gain legitimacy. If AI performs or assists with these tasks, participants may need to explain what is still uniquely theirs. This can create a struggle between feeling empowered by AI and feeling displaced by it.

The concept of identity struggle also helps this study avoid reading participants' narratives as simple categories such as "positive toward AI" or "negative toward AI." A participant may be both optimistic and anxious in the same account. They may describe AI as necessary for employability while also worrying that it reduces opportunities to learn. They may present themselves as adaptable while also expressing loss, confusion, or resentment. Sveningsson and Alvesson's (2003) framework allows these contradictions to be treated not as analytical problems, but as part of identity work itself.

In this thesis, identity struggle will therefore be used to interpret moments where participants narrate tension, ambivalence, contradiction, or uncertainty. These moments are not secondary details. They are central evidence of how professional identity is being negotiated. The question is not whether participants have a stable identity position toward AI, but how they work narratively to create temporary coherence in a context where coherence is difficult.

3.4 Narrative identity work and role transition

Ibarra and Barbulescu's (2010) concept of narrative identity work provides the most direct bridge between identity theory and the narrative analysis used in this study. They argue that self-narratives are both expressive and constitutive of identity. In other words, people do not only tell stories that reflect who they already are. Through telling stories, they also produce,

test, and revise who they are becoming. This is especially important during work role transitions, when individuals need to connect past experiences, present uncertainty, and future aspirations into a coherent account.

Although Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) focus on macro work role transitions, their argument can be extended to the AI transition examined in this thesis. Early-career professionals are not necessarily moving from one occupation to another, but they are moving into professional life under conditions where the meaning of work is changing. This can be understood as a form of identity transition because participants must explain how they belong in a professional world where AI changes the value of entry-level work. They must build a story that makes their professional future plausible.

Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) define narrative identity work as social efforts to craft self-narratives that meet identity aims. These identity aims often include authenticity and validation. Authenticity refers to whether a story feels believable to the self. Validation refers to whether the story is accepted by important audiences, such as managers, colleagues, clients, recruiters, or professional communities. This distinction is useful for the current study because early-career professionals may experience a gap between the identity they want to claim and the identity that the AI-integrated workplace validates. For example, a participant may feel authentic when describing themselves as a careful learner, but the organization may validate speed, automation, and output. Another participant may present themselves as an AI-savvy worker because this is externally validated, while privately feeling that this identity is incomplete or insecure.

Narrative identity work also emphasizes the importance of coherence. During transitions, individuals often need to construct a story that links who they were, who they are, and who they are becoming. In this study, participants may narrate AI as a disruption, a tool, a threat, a partner, a filter, or a test. These narrative forms matter because they organize professional identity temporally. A participant who says, “AI pushed me to become more strategic,” is constructing a different identity arc from someone who says, “AI made my first professional tasks disappear.” Both accounts are about AI, but they produce different professional selves.

Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) also introduce the idea of narrative repertoires. A narrative repertoire is the collection of stories people can draw on when explaining themselves. During transitions, individuals may try different stories in different situations, revising them based on feedback. This is relevant for early-career professionals because they may not yet have a stable professional story. They may tell one story in an interview, another to colleagues, another to friends, and another to themselves. Some stories may emphasize adaptability; others may emphasize anxiety, unfairness, or human uniqueness. The analysis in this study will therefore pay attention not only to single statements, but to the broader repertoire of narratives through which participants construct professional identity.

3.5 Bringing the concepts together: AI as discursive disruption and narrative resource

The three theoretical perspectives can now be brought together into one framework. Alvesson and Willmott (2002) show that organizations regulate identity by offering discourses of the appropriate worker. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) show that individuals respond to such discourses through identity work and struggle, especially in fragmented contexts. Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) show that one important form of this identity work is narrative: people tell stories to create continuity, claim legitimacy, and test possible selves.

Applied to this study, AI is understood in two ways. First, AI is a discursive disruption. It changes the language through which professional value is discussed. It introduces new expectations about speed, efficiency, adaptability, and technical competence. It also creates uncertainty about which human skills still matter. Second, AI is a narrative resource. Participants use AI in their stories to explain who they are, what they fear, what they can offer, and what kind of professional future they imagine. AI may appear as a threat, assistant, competitor, collaborator, teacher, or background condition. Each positioning of AI also positions the self.

This framework supports the central research question: how do early-career professionals narrate and reconstruct their professional identities in response to AI-driven disruption in the workplace? The word narrate points to Ibarra and Barbulescu's (2010) concept of narrative

identity work. The word reconstruct points to Sveningsson and Alvesson's (2003) concept of identity work as forming, repairing, maintaining, and revising the self. The phrase AI-driven disruption points to Alvesson and Willmott's (2002) concern with organizational and managerial discourses that regulate identity.

The framework also supports the three subsidiary research questions. The first question, concerning identity work strategies, will be analyzed through the ways participants present themselves as valuable, adaptable, human, technical, creative, or resilient. The second question, concerning organizational discourses, will be analyzed through identity regulation: how participants describe messages from employers, universities, managers, media, or professional communities about AI and future work. The third question, concerning personal narratives, will be analyzed through narrative structures: how participants build stories of continuity, disruption, growth, loss, or reinvention.

3.6 Analytical implications for this study

This theoretical framework has several implications for the analysis. First, the study will treat participants' accounts not as transparent reports of facts, but as identity performances. This does not mean that the accounts are false. Rather, it means that when participants speak about AI and work, they are also positioning themselves. A statement such as "AI helps me focus on higher-level work" may be analyzed as a claim to strategic professional identity. A statement such as "I do not know how I can compete with AI" may be analyzed as an expression of identity threat or destabilization.

Second, the analysis will pay attention to tensions and contradictions. Following Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003), contradiction is not interpreted as weakness in the data. It is evidence of identity struggle. Participants may move between confidence and anxiety, acceptance and resistance, or human uniqueness and technological dependence. These movements can reveal how difficult it is to construct a coherent professional self in an AI-saturated environment.

Third, the study will examine the relationship between external discourse and personal narrative. Following Alvesson and Willmott (2002), organizational and labor-market discourses provide categories that participants may use to understand themselves. However, following Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010), participants do not simply repeat these discourses. They transform them into personal stories. For example, a general discourse about “AI readiness” may become a personal story about needing to prove oneself. A discourse about “automation of junior work” may become a story about lost learning opportunities. In this way, the analysis connects macro-level discourses with micro-level identity construction.

Finally, the framework positions early-career professionals as active but constrained agents. They are active because they narrate, interpret, resist, and revise their professional selves. They are constrained because the stories available to them are shaped by organizational expectations, labor-market insecurity, and the technological restructuring of entry-level work. This balance is important. The study does not present early-career professionals as passive victims of AI, but neither does it overstate their freedom to define themselves independently of structural pressures. Their identity work takes place inside a field of discourse, uncertainty, and unequal power.

In summary, this theoretical framework understands professional identity under AI transition as a narrated and contested process. AI matters not only because it changes work tasks, but because it changes the identity conditions under which early-career professionals become professionals. By combining identity regulation, identity struggle, and narrative identity work, the framework provides a coherent lens for examining how participants construct professional value, manage uncertainty, and narrate who they are becoming in an AI-integrated workplace.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research philosophy and approach

Our epistemological stance is interpretivist, as we believe that understanding social life requires interpretation - that there is no single objective truth about how early-career professionals experience AI disruption, but rather a range of meaningful and context-dependent perspectives (Clark et al., 2021). We, as researchers, are not neutral observers. We bring our own backgrounds and experiences to the process of gathering and making sense of the data, and we consider this a reality to be acknowledged rather than a flaw to be corrected.

These philosophical commitments led us away from quantitative methods. A survey or a statistical model could tell us how many people feel threatened by AI, but it could not tell us what that feeling means to them, how they talk about it, or how they are actively constructing a sense of themselves within it. As Silverman (2007) argues, qualitative research is particularly suited to questions about meaning, process, and lived experience - and those are exactly the kinds of questions we are asking. We were not counting or measuring; we were listening and interpreting.

Within qualitative approaches, we considered three options: thematic analysis, discourse analysis, and narrative analysis. We moved away from thematic analysis because, while it is useful for identifying patterns, it can break up the flow of a person's account in ways that lose the story behind it. We set aside discourse analysis because it focuses more on language as a system than on individual experience, which would have shifted our attention away from the people at the centre of this research. We chose narrative analysis because our participants' responses were organized as stories - stories of becoming a professional, of encountering AI, of managing uncertainty - and because our theoretical framework, built around narrative identity work, required a method that could engage with those stories on their own terms (Riessman, 2008).

Our research process followed a hermeneutic logic. We did not begin with a blank slate - we entered the field with initial theoretical ideas and a first set of questions. After we collected our data, we went back and revised those ideas in light of what we had heard. We refined our theoretical framework, our research questions, and our analytical approach through this back-and-forth movement, guided by iterative consultations with our thesis supervisor. This circular process - moving between existing understanding and new data - is a recognized feature of hermeneutic-interpretivist research (Gadamer, 2004), not a sign of confusion or inconsistency (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). It reflects the fact that good qualitative research is genuinely responsive to what participants share.

4.2 Theoretical framing as it shaped method

The theories we chose did not sit separately from our method - they shaped it directly. Whatmore et al. (2003) argue that social theory and research practice are not separate stages in a research project but are deeply entangled: the concepts we use to think about a phenomenon shape what we look for, how we ask questions, and how we make sense of what we find. That is exactly what happened in our study.

Our central theoretical lens - Ibarra and Barbulescu's (2010) concept of narrative identity work - holds that people construct and reconstruct their professional identities primarily through the stories they tell. This theoretical position has a direct methodological implication: if identity is built through narrative, we need a method that would allow narrative to emerge. Asking closed-ended questions or using response scales would have cut off the very thing we needed to study. Semi-structured narrative interviewing - which gives participants space and time to tell their professional stories in their own words - was the only methodologically coherent choice given the theory we had committed to.

Ibarra's (1999) concept of provisional selves shaped the structure of our interview guide, too. If early-career professionals are still experimenting with their professional identity, we cannot simply ask them to report a settled identity. We needed to invite them into the process of narration first - letting the story come before the reflection. This is why our interviews began

with open background questions rather than direct identity questions. The theory told us how to enter the conversation.

4.3 Research design and interview guide

We used a qualitative research design based on semi-structured narrative interviews. As Booth et al. (2008) note, the design of a study should follow directly from its research questions - and ours required a method that could access the way people build meaning about their professional lives over time. Semi-structured interviewing gave us a flexible structure: we had a guide to keep us oriented, but we were free to follow what participants raised, ask follow-up questions, and let the conversation develop naturally.

The interview guide had two parts, reflecting the two main areas of our research question. The first part invited participants to tell us their professional story - how they got into their field, what drew them to it, how they pictured the kind of professional they wanted to become, and what the journey from student to professional had actually felt like. We designed these questions to be open and backstory-oriented, giving participants room to narrate at length rather than answer briefly.

The second part focused on AI - when participants first encountered it in a professional context, how it had changed their work or job search, whether they saw it more as a help or a threat, and what they imagined for their future. We placed this section second deliberately. By the time we reached it, participants had already built up a narrative of who they are professionally. That meant AI entered the conversation not as an abstract topic but as a force acting on an already-articulated self, which is much closer to how people actually experience it.

Our interview guide evolved during the study. We started with three to four core questions and some probes, expecting - based on what we had read about narrative interviews - that open questions would naturally generate long, self-organized answers. In practice, many participants, especially those with limited professional experience, gave shorter and more focused responses than we anticipated. This makes sense in retrospect: if your professional identity is still forming,

you may not yet have a fully developed story to tell. We responded by expanding the guide to about six questions per section, adding probes and follow-ups to sustain the depth of conversation we needed. We treat this evolution not as a stumble but as a reasonable and transparent response to what we encountered - a form of iterative refinement that is normal in qualitative fieldwork (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

4.4 Sampling and recruitment

We used a purposive and snowball sampling strategy, which evolved in several stages as our understanding of the relevant population developed (Clark et al., 2021). We started with a fairly clear idea of who we wanted to speak to: Generation Z professionals, roughly those born between the late 1990s and early 2010s, who were in the early stages of their careers and navigating a job market increasingly shaped by AI. We began recruiting through WhatsApp groups connected to our master's programme - an accessible starting point, but one we quickly recognized was too close to our own social world to give us the range of perspectives we needed.

We expanded outward through several channels. One of us reached out to contacts from an Erasmus exchange project in Germany, which brought in participants from outside Sweden with different national and professional backgrounds. We also approached classmates from a Swedish for Immigrants (SFI) language course - fellow newcomers to Sweden from a range of countries and career backgrounds. Professional networking events attended by authors in Malmö during the fieldwork period provided further contacts. Participant information and consent forms were shared alongside all recruitment messages, both verbally in interviews and digitally as PDFs to sign, so people knew exactly what they were agreeing to before they responded.

LinkedIn extended our reach beyond our personal networks. Through targeted searches, one of us identified and contacted data analytics and IT professionals in Azerbaijan with between one and three years of professional experience. This resulted in four interviews with Azerbaijani participants. These were conducted in Azerbaijani and translated into English by one of the

researchers, who is a native speaker of the language. Translation was done manually and with attention to preserving the narrative feel of what participants said, not just the surface meaning of their words.

A significant shift in how we defined our sample happened during recruitment. We had started by thinking about the population in terms of age - Gen Z, recently graduated, just entering the workforce. But as we spoke with more people and reflected on our own situations, we realized this was too narrow. There are people in their late twenties or mid-thirties who are, in every meaningful sense, starting over professionally - because they have changed careers, moved to a new country, or entered a completely new field. These people face the same fundamental challenge as a recent graduate: building a credible professional identity from a position of limited established capital, at a moment when AI is reshaping what that identity needs to include. We broadened our sampling criterion from age-based Gen Z to a functional definition: anyone in the process of building or rebuilding a professional identity in a new context, regardless of their age.

This decision is directly reflected in the diversity of our final sample. Our fifteen participants ranged in age from 23 to 40. They came from a wide range of national and cultural backgrounds - including Bangladesh, Iran, Azerbaijan, Germany, Myanmar, Mauritius, Pakistan, and Turkey - and were living and working in Sweden, Germany, and Azerbaijan at the time of the interview. Their fields included data analytics, marketing, sustainability consulting, HR, finance, product design, supply chain management, and academic research. Some were actively job-searching, some were in part-time roles alongside their studies, and others were in their first or second year of full-time employment.

We are aware that snowball sampling carries risks of network bias - a sample built through personal connections tends to cluster around the researchers' own social world and assumptions. We address this honestly in our limitations section.

4.5 Data collection

We conducted fifteen semi-structured narrative interviews between March and April 2026. Thirteen took place over Google Meet, reflecting the geographic spread of our participants and the practical constraints of the study period. Two interviews were held in person, at locations chosen by the participants. Each interview lasted between 60 and 75 minutes. 14 interviews were audio-recorded with participants' explicit consent using voice memo applications on our personal devices and later transcribed verbatim. Only one of them was recorded in real-time by note-taking, and voice has not been recorded.

Our role during the interviews was to listen carefully and adapt. We treated the interview guide as a direction rather than a script. When participants went somewhere unexpected, we followed rather than redirecting - because where a person chooses to take a question tells us something in itself. When silence or hesitation arose, especially around sensitive topics such as rejection, professional uncertainty, or fear about the future, we did not push. We worked around those moments - rephrasing, softening, or simply waiting - to give participants the space to share what they felt comfortable sharing. We wanted the conversation to feel like a genuine exchange rather than an interrogation.

Every interview opened with a clear verbal explanation of the study's purpose and the consent and confidentiality arrangements, ensuring that participants were fully informed before we started recording. The consent form is included in Appendix A, interview guide is included in Appendix B.

4.6 Data analysis

Our approach to analysis was abductive - moving back and forth between our theoretical framework and the empirical material rather than going strictly in one direction (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). We did not simply apply our theories to the data like a template, because that would have missed things the data itself was telling us. But we also did not ignore our theories and start from nothing, because the concepts we had chosen – identity work,

provisional selves, narrative identity work, and identity regulation were there to help us see things we might otherwise overlook. As Booth et al. (2008) put it, good research involves making claims that are grounded in both existing knowledge and the evidence at hand. That is what we tried to do: let the data speak, but through lenses that helped us hear it.

We began by reading all fifteen transcripts carefully, multiple times. Both of us read each transcript independently and marked the moments where participants seemed to be constructing, defending, or struggling with a sense of who they are professionally - whether in relation to their career story, to AI, to their peers and seniors, or to the broader media discourse around job displacement and disruption. We then came together to compare and discuss what we had each noticed. Where we agreed, we had a stronger basis for interpretation. Where we disagreed, we worked through the difference until we understood why, and that process sharpened our thinking. This two-researcher discussion functioned as a form of investigator triangulation, reducing the risk that our interpretations would simply reflect one person's assumptions (Silverman, 2007).

From these readings, we highlighted key phrases and passages across the transcripts - not just looking for words that repeated, but for moments where the same underlying dynamic appeared in different forms. In practice, this highlighting took the form of coding: for each passage that seemed analytically meaningful, we attached a short conceptual label - such as "self-initiation," "identifying with the company," or "AI as competitor" - together with a brief analytic note describing what the passage appeared to be doing in the participant's account (Saldaña, 2016) in tabular way. By coding we mean, simply, this practice of assigning interpretive labels to fragments of data and writing short memos alongside them, so that patterns of meaning could be traced across transcripts rather than confined to individual ones. Some labels were drawn from our theoretical vocabulary and applied deductively, while others were generated inductively from the material itself - which is what allowed the two movements to meet in the abductive way described above. These coded passages were then grouped and examined for what they revealed about how participants were narrating themselves, how they were responding to the pressure of AI discourse, and how the provisional, still-forming quality

of their professional identities shaped all of this. We then checked these emerging groups against our three research sub-questions to see where there was a strong connection and where we needed to look more carefully.

At a later stage of analysis, we used Microsoft Copilot through a verified Lund University email account - as a supplementary tool to check whether our emerging interpretations were coherent and consistently expressed. We did not share any raw transcript data with Copilot or any other AI system at any point. Before any AI tool was introduced, all transcripts had been fully pseudonymized- names and identifying details replaced or removed. We used Copilot to sense-check analytical language and thematic groupings that we had already developed through our own reading and discussion.

Our coding is, we believe, genuinely abductive. Some categories came directly from our theoretical framework - such as identity work strategies, narrative continuity, and responses to identity regulation - and in that sense were deductive. Others emerged from patterns in the data that we had not anticipated before we collected it, and in that sense were inductive. The interplay between these two movements is what makes the approach abductive, and it is also what made the process genuinely iterative: new patterns sent us back to the theory, and the theory helped us see patterns we might otherwise have missed.

4.7 Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, we do not assess quality through the measures of validity and reliability used in quantitative work. Instead, we use the trustworthiness framework developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), which focuses on four dimensions: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility - roughly equivalent to internal validity - was supported in several ways. Our interviews were long enough (60 to 75 minutes) to allow genuine depth and narrative development rather than surface-level responses. Both researchers read and discussed every transcript, which meant interpretations were not produced by one person alone. For the four

interviews conducted in Azerbaijani, translation was performed by a native speaker who was attentive not just to meaning but to the narrative texture of the original language. Throughout the analysis, we preserved participants' own words and expressions wherever possible rather than immediately translating them into abstract categories.

Transferability - the degree to which our findings might be meaningful in other contexts - is supported by the detail we provide about our participants, their backgrounds, professional situations, and the circumstances under which interviews took place. We are not claiming our findings generalize statistically to all early-career professionals everywhere. We are claiming that the identity dynamics we describe may resonate in other similar contexts, and that our analytical framework offers tools that other researchers could use to study those contexts.

Dependability - similar to reliability - is supported by the documented trail of decisions we made throughout the research: how the interview guide evolved, how the research questions were revised after data collection, how our supervisor consultations shaped our thinking, and how our analytical categories were developed and refined. This chapter is itself part of that audit trail, and the appendices provide further documentation.

Confirmability - the degree to which findings are grounded in the data rather than our own assumptions - is addressed through our reflexivity practices, described in the next section, and through the retention of pseudonymized transcripts available for review during examination.

4.8 Reflexivity and researcher positionality

We need to be honest about who we are in relation to this research, because it shapes both how the study was done and what it produced. Reflexivity, here, is not a disclaimer but part of the analytical record (Clark et al., 2021).

Both of us are international students who migrated to Sweden for our master's, hoping to build professional lives here. Both of us have applied for jobs - one of us actively for more than four months at the time of writing, with the automated rejections, opaque screening, and emotional

weight that come with it. The topic of this thesis is not academically observed from a distance; it is something we are personally living.

This closeness brought real advantages. We could recognize what participants were describing from the inside, and several told us - directly or in the way they opened up - that this made it easier to speak candidly. The interviews produced more detailed accounts than a more distanced relationship likely would have.

The same closeness carried risks. We both have views on AI - on its role in hiring, on what it means for those entering the workforce now, on whether its promised opportunities are real. We could not switch these off. We kept questions open, avoided signalling agreement or disagreement, and followed rather than led, but we do not claim to have eliminated our own influence - only to have minimized it and to be transparent about it here.

One of us also brings over 10 years of professional HR experience from her home country. This sharpened our reading of participants' accounts of recruitment, performance expectations, and how organizations treat junior employees, but it may also have drawn attention toward certain dynamics and away from others. We treated this as something to name and discuss between us rather than resolve or hide.

As Silverman (2007) notes, the goal of reflexive research is not to pretend subjectivity away but to make it clear enough for readers to assess. We believe our closeness to the topic made this a richer study than it would otherwise have been - and that distance from one's material is sometimes overrated as a research virtue, particularly when the subject is as immediate and personally consequential as this one.

4.9 Ethical considerations

We followed standard ethical practices throughout, guided by the principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for participants' wellbeing (Clark et al., 2021). Every participant received a written information and consent form that explained the study's purpose, confirmed participation was voluntary, described the right to withdraw at any time, and

outlined how data would be stored and handled. In most cases, written consent was collected before the interview. In some cases, particularly where logistics made this difficult, verbal consent was secured explicitly before recording began and written confirmation was obtained afterwards. In all cases, participants knew what they were agreeing to before the interview started.

All transcripts were pseudonymized before any analysis began. Participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms, and details that could identify them - specific employers, exact locations, and other contextual specifics - were removed or generalized. This pseudonymized material is the only form of the data that was used in analysis, shared between us, or made available to any supplementary tool. No third party has had access to any identifiable participant data.

Audio recordings and original transcripts have been stored on our personal, password-protected devices throughout the research period. They will be permanently deleted following the successful examination of the thesis. Participants were informed of this arrangement and were reminded of their right to withdraw their data at any point prior to full anonymization being completed.

4.10 Limitations

We want to be honest about what this study cannot claim and where future research could go further. The first limitation is geographic and network concentration. Even though we made genuine efforts to diversify our recruitment, most of our participants are connected - directly or indirectly - to our personal and academic networks, and the data comes primarily from Sweden, Germany, and Azerbaijan. This means the findings are shaped by those specific contexts. Labor market conditions, cultural attitudes toward AI, and the institutional support available to early-career professionals differ significantly across countries, and those differences are not fully captured here. Future research should deliberately seek out a more varied and systematically sampled geography.

The second limitation is sample size. Fifteen interviews gave us rich material and produced enough thematic convergence that we felt reasonably confident in our analytical picture. But the decision to stop at fifteen was partly driven by time and resource constraints, not only by a formal assessment of saturation. A larger sample - including more women, more participants from sectors like healthcare or education, and more participants from countries outside our current range - would likely have surfaced dynamics that are not visible in our data.

The third and perhaps most methodologically significant limitation is that our data is entirely self-reported. Participants described their experiences with AI, their professional strategies, and their sense of identity as they chose to narrate them in an interview context. We have no reason to doubt their sincerity, but there is a well-established gap between what people say they do and what they actually do in practice - particularly when the topic is as personally significant as career anxiety and professional self-worth. Ethnographic observation of participants in their real work environments over a sustained period would provide a dimension of data that interviews alone cannot. We did not have the resources or time to do this, but we believe it represents the most important methodological direction for future work on this topic.

Finally, our own proximity to the subject matter - which we have discussed in the reflexivity section - remains a constraint even as it is a strength. We cannot fully step outside our own experiences of migration, job-searching, and AI-mediated professional uncertainty when we read and interpret our participants' accounts. We have been transparent about this throughout. We hope that transparency allows future researchers to trace the influence of our positioning on our findings and to design studies that can complement or challenge what we have found.

5. Findings and analysis

This chapter brings our empirical findings together with the theoretical frameworks of narrative identity work and identity regulation to analyze how early-career professionals navigate technological change. By contextualizing our participants' personal accounts within broader institutional discourses, we explore the specific narrative mechanisms used to reconstruct professional value under the shadow of automation. The following sections break down this analytical process across four interconnected dimensions: narrative structures, identity strategies, discursive pressures, and the management of human-AI tensions.

5.1 The Story They Tell

When early-career professionals are asked to describe how they got to where they are, they do not just list facts. They tell a story. Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) argue that this is not a small detail. The way a person organizes their career into a beginning, a middle, and an end - and the kind of main character they place at the centre of that story - is itself part of how professional identity is built. The story is not separate from the identity; the story is part of the identity.

Reading across the fifteen interviews, two patterns become visible right away. First, the participants who feel most settled in their professional sense of self tell **continuous stories**, where each step leads to the next without major rupture. Second, the participants who are still in the middle of forming themselves tell **provisional stories**, in which the plot has fragments rather than a single clear arc, and the future direction is held in place more by others' encouragement than by their own conviction. Both kinds of stories do identity work, but they do so in different ways.

Abbas's account is a clear example of the first type. He took some sustainability courses, chose a thesis topic slightly outside the core program, and that same topic later helped him land his current role. There is no surprise in the story, no break. Around half of what he does at work is what he learned in his thesis. He frames this directly:

"During the thesis, I became familiar with measuring environmental impact- working with methodologies, software, and databases used to produce what's called an Environmental Product Declaration, a sustainability document required for products sold in Europe. That's essentially what I do now."

This is the kind of plot Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) describe as continuous. Past, present, and imagined future are linked by an unchanging goal - sustainability work - and the protagonist moves toward it without major detour. Husain tells a similar continuous story, although his arc is much longer. Fifteen years of design work, moved across three countries, formally divided in his own telling into clean acts: childhood artistic side despite a commerce education, self-taught graphic design, formal course, animation and ad films, international UK and US projects, Dubai, Sweden, and now e-health. Each transition has its own reason. Samir, much younger than Husain, tells a similarly tight story: student intern, junior accountant, senior analyst at TataPay, then a US fintech. His sentence *"I am living what I imagined"* captures the structure neatly - the present matches the future he projected earlier, and the story closes the loop.

Other participants tell stories that are still finding their shape. Farid is a clear example. He has a bachelor's in business management, worked in marketing in an education company without much enjoyment, was advised by his manager to try analytics, was praised by his course teacher for being good at it, and is now finishing a three-month data analytics course while still in the marketing job. The plot does not yet have an ending. He says it directly:

"Whether I genuinely like this field or not, I'll find out properly once I switch jobs - because right now I'm working in the education company where there's no real data analytics practice I can do."

His career story is not held together by his own conviction yet; it is held together by other people's recommendations. The manager who advised him, the teacher who praised him, the IT instructors he asked for opinions. He himself is waiting to find out who he is. Nilufer is similar in this sense, although her starting point is different. She has a law bachelor's and a one-year legal internship, and is now doing a master's in global politics in Sweden. She says:

"Honestly, I don't feel like I've started my professional life yet. I still see myself as a student."

Both participants are in what Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) describe as the open-ended part of a transition - the part where the new story has begun but has not yet closed.

A second thing the stories reveal is how much **agency** participants claim - meaning, how much they show themselves as actively choosing rather than being carried by events. Some show strong agency. Viktor narrates a layoff at his previous company and a new job two weeks later, and presents the recovery as part of how he is: substantive, intellectually self-directed, not panicked. Ralf's strongest story is the time he listened to a podcast about an European startup, wrote a long cold email to the founder, and ended up creating a working student position that did not exist before. He says it took only "*maybe four or five weeks*" from podcast to job. He still tells this story now, years later, as a small foundational myth - proof to himself that he can author his own role. Other participants show a more shared kind of agency, where the choices are made with family or shaped by circumstance. Nilufer is honest about this:

"My father always thought I'd make a good lawyer - even when I chose architecture he kept saying it. I wanted to make him proud because he placed a lot of importance on education. So I switched to law." The decision was hers, but it was also her father's.

She does not hide this, and it makes her account feel more honest rather than less. Masood's agency is somewhere in between - he chose HR because he loves working with people, but the move to Germany was forced by circumstances at home, and the restart in a new country was not exactly chosen by him.

There are also participants whose stories make heavy use of **turning points** - particular moments that change how the rest of the story is told. Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) describe these as catalytic events, and they often appear in the middle of the story. Tural has one of the clearest. He prepared a logistics report at the Azerbaijani transportation ministry that ended up being used by the president on live television:

"I had created a report on the logistical situation of the country - corridors, infrastructure, et cetera - and it was shared with the president, who referred to it in his speech on live news. I felt like, wow, my impact is really big."

Years and one country later, this moment still anchors his professional identity. It is a story where he uses the anchor that *"I'm a real professional"* and can return to it whenever the present feels uncertain. Ghulam's turning point is darker but does similar work: the ABC company interview, where he reached the final two candidates after five rounds and was rejected because he lacked specific industry experience. This event captures something about the gap between his formal qualifications and the recognition he gets from the new market. He returns to it during the interview, and it shapes how he understands his current restart. Sara's turning point is much smaller but very personal - the first time she ran a stakeholder meeting at the bank by herself, at twenty-five, with department heads twice her age. She says:

"The storms inside me didn't disappear, but I had learned to manage them."

This was the moment, in her own narration, when she first felt she could call herself a professional.

A few participants tell stories where the AI transition itself becomes the turning point. Samir's first use of AI at Tata Pay - when

"something that took me thirty minutes, AI helped me shorten to five minutes."

- is told as the moment he started genuinely contributing. Timathi's PhD thesis was the moment AI first became useful to him when he was struggling with simulation modelling software, which he had no background in. For both, AI enters the story as a helper that makes their professional lives work, not as a threat that disrupts them.

What this section shows is that the same disruption - the rise of AI in early career work - is being absorbed into very different story structures. Some participants fold AI smoothly into a continuous story that is already going forward. Others are in the middle of stories that have not yet found their endings, and AI becomes yet another uncertain element they have to integrate.

The level of agency they claim varies, as does the kind of moment they use as a turning point. As Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) argue, none of this is just description. The way a person tells their career is part of how that career becomes available to them as something they can keep building.

5.2 Legitimizing Scripts They Draw On

When people tell their career story, they do not invent the shape of it from nothing. They borrow. Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) describe this as drawing on **legitimizing scripts** - the familiar cultural stories that already exist in a profession, in a generation, or in a society and that make a personal story easier for others to recognise and accept. The script gives the personal story a kind of cultural backing. If a participant tells their career as a version of a story the listener already knows - the hard-working immigrant, the values-driven young worker, the careful craftsman, the AI-native specialist - the story becomes more believable, both to the listener and often to the narrator too.

Looking across the fifteen interviews, the scripts the participants reach for fall into a few recognizable types. Some of these scripts are very old and well-established in professional discourse. Others are newer and specifically connected to the AI moment. A few participants mix several scripts at once, which is itself a form of identity work.

The first script that appears often is the **hardworking immigrant who restarts and persists**. Ghulam uses it most clearly. He tells his job search in numbers:

"I applied to around 800 companies. I got calls from a handful and went through about 14 or 15 interviews, but things didn't go well most of the time."

Eight hundred applications are not just a statistic. It is a way of asking the listener to recognize the version of him that is putting in the work, even when the market is not giving recognition back. Abbas uses a softer version of the same script:

"You spend a huge amount of time writing applications, preparing for interviews, and refining your CV and cover letter - and for many positions you don't even get a response. For others, you receive an automated rejection email with no explanation. You have to keep going back to your documents and asking, 'What's wrong? How can I improve this?' It's a real emotional rollercoaster. But in some ways it's similar to writing a thesis – there are difficulties you just have to push through."

The frame *"you just have to push through"* does some work here. It places his struggle within a longer cultural story in which difficulty is the cost of eventual arrival. Masood reaches for the same script in a more direct form:

"When I left my country, I knew things wouldn't be easy, but I told myself I would make things work."

All three participants are using a script that is highly legitimate in Western European professional discourse - the immigrant who works hard until the market accepts them - and they use it to convert difficulty into evidence of character rather than evidence of failure.

A second script, very different in tone, is the **values-driven young professional** who refuses to be only optimised. Ralf is the clearest example. He explicitly resists AI for four reasons at once - environmental, political, ethical, and aesthetic - and he positions himself in a long line of people who say no to the dominant industry pull. His preferred future is an NGO or mission-driven company abroad, not a fast-growing tech firm. He says,

"I'd like to work in a role where I don't need to rely heavily on AI. I've been thinking about NGO or charity work after graduating."

The script behind this is one that current culture recognizes easily: the millennial or Gen Z worker who chooses meaning over money and values over efficiency. Nilufer draws on a related script when she talks about the immigrant women's organization she would like to work with. She frames her future not through a job title but through a mission - helping migrants integrate, learn the language, and find work. The script she is using is the **mission-driven professional**,

and, like Ralf's, it carries cultural weight today, especially in European discourse on meaningful work.

A third script that appears repeatedly is the **careful craftsman** - the master who insists on fundamentals, ownership, and depth. Husain uses this script most fully. He has fifteen years of design experience and frames himself as someone who has always wanted to "understand the basics deeply" before doing anything creative. He extends this even to AI:

"if you don't understand the fundamentals of what you're doing, you won't be able to use AI properly either."

Joshgun does almost the same thing in software engineering. His story about junior, mid-level, and senior engineers uses a road-building metaphor - the junior finds any working route, the senior considers erosion and flooding. He claims the senior version of himself by demonstrating he can think this way. He also adds a more current twist:

"AI can write code, yes. But it cannot be held responsible for that code. I own the code I produce - I know it, I can maintain it, I can be held accountable for it. That sense of ownership and responsibility is something AI cannot replicate."

The craftsman script is old, but Joshgun updates it. He uses it not just to describe his work but to define the boundary that protects him from AI displacement. The craftsman becomes the responsible owner of the work - the part of the role that AI fundamentally cannot occupy.

A fourth script is more specific to this moment: the **AI-native specialist who already speaks the language of the future**. Tural draws on it most clearly. He describes his daily practice of opening accounts in every new AI tool, comparing Gemini and Claude, testing what each is good for. He frames his current contract project - analyzing AI decision-making for a sales tool - as proof that he sits one level above the AI that competes with junior analysts. Samir uses the same script with a more playful, builder-like tone. He has done Python work, vibe coding, side projects, and an Upwork freelance account doing financial analysis and AI automation. Both participants are using a script that is highly legitimate in tech and consulting discourse right now - the worker

who is fluent in AI tools before the requirement is formalized. Masood, although his main script is the resilient migrant, also reaches for the AI-native script when he says:

"I'm taking AI and automation courses, following developments in the field, reading books and articles, watching videos from AI professionals. I'm positioning myself as best I can."

A fifth script, less common but striking when it appears, is the **contrarian intellectual** - the person whose authority comes from refusing the hype. Viktor is the clearest case. He uses economic history to back up his AI scepticism, invoking the industrial revolution, fertiliser technology, and the financial bubbles of 2001 and 2007. He explicitly distrusts the generation now championing AI because they "presided over the financial bubbles" of the past. By placing himself inside a longer historical critique, he turns personal scepticism into something culturally legitimate rather than personal preference. Timathi uses a quieter version of the same script when he compares AI to the calculator:

"people became less reliant on mental arithmetic, but they still learned the basics of maths."

The historical-perspective script gives both participants a way to be calm in a moment where most discourse is loud.

What is particularly interesting is the way several participants **mix scripts** - and the mixing itself is identity work. Sara is the clearest case. She holds the careful craftsman script (five years of pre-AI domain depth, observation, judgment) and the AI-native specialist script (portfolio projects in AI-assisted banking workflows, learning a new system design tool, following product communities) together at once. She names this directly as her market strategy:

"I try to position myself as someone who already has the domain knowledge and the cognition - finance, transformation, systems thinking - and who is genuinely AI-native in how I work."

The two scripts cover for each other. The craftsman script protects her against being mistaken for an AI-only junior; the AI-native script protects her against being mistaken for someone who has not adapted. Masood does something similar by combining the resilient migrant script with

the human-centred HR script. Together these mixed scripts allow participants to claim more cultural ground than any single script could give them.

The presence of a few participants who **do not yet have a stable script** is also revealing. Farid's preferred image of the professional is the popular, visible LinkedIn analytics person who holds webinars and shares optimised scripts. This is a borrowed image he has not yet lived. He even admits he does not know how to start building it:

"I really don't know the right strategy to do that - I'm very much unknowledgeable about it."

Nilufer is in a similar place - she has a clear future image (the EU policy worker, the migrant-women's organisation) but no current script that ties her present to that future. In both cases, the script exists but the participant has not yet borrowed it deeply enough for it to do the legitimating work. Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) would say their narrative repertoire is still provisional - scripts have been identified, but not yet inhabited.

Across all fifteen interviews, then, what is visible is not just personal storytelling but a small set of cultural scripts being actively borrowed, combined, updated, and sometimes only partially inhabited. The AI moment puts pressure on this borrowing. Older scripts (the immigrant who works hard, the careful craftsman, the mission-driven professional) are being adapted to the new conditions, and newer scripts (the AI-native specialist, the contrarian intellectual who refuses the hype) are being formed in real time as participants speak.

5.3 Identity Work: What They Are and What They Are Not

The previous two sections looked at the shape of the stories participants tell and the cultural scripts they borrow from. This section looks at something more active: the daily, often visible **work** participants put into shaping who they are. Alvesson and Willmott (2002) describe identity work as the interpretive effort through which people form, repair, maintain, and revise a sense of self. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) push this further and call identity a **struggle** - an ongoing effort to hold together different pressures, expectations, and contradictions rather than the arrival at one settled self. Both descriptions fit what the participants in this study are doing.

Across the fifteen interviews, identity work appears in two main ways: through **positive claims** ("this is what I am") and through **anti-identities**, what Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) describe as the "not-me" positions a person uses to define themselves by what they refuse to be.

One thing that becomes clear quickly is that anti-identities are not just throwaway opinions. They do real identity work. When participants say what they are not, they are sketching the edges of what they are. And the AI conversation produces a lot of these edges, because the figure of the "AI-dependent worker" gives almost every participant something to position against.

Adriana shows this in a quiet, calm way. She is confident in her marketing skills and not worried about AI taking her job -

"marketing requires you to connect with people emotionally, and AI doesn't have that emotional intelligence."

But she actively refuses to use AI for her academic work or anything confidential, because of privacy worries. When asked whether she would go to a colleague or to AI with a work question, she answers without hesitation:

"A colleague, one hundred percent. Always. I'm not afraid to ask for help from people, and a colleague will give me a better, more contextually relevant answer than AI would for work-specific questions."

This is a small but clear "not-me" move. She is not the colleague who turns to AI before asking a person. The refusal does identity work - it places her on the side of human relationship and contextual judgment, even before she explicitly claims that side.

Viktor does much louder anti-identity work. His interview is full of refusals. He distances himself from colleagues who use AI as their first move in meetings.

"they often got nonsense back and couldn't tell the difference"

, from a former VP who talked about human values but in three years spoke to him only once "*when she let me go*", and from the LinkedIn ecosystem of AI-generated posts answering AI-generated comments. Each refusal is identity work. Stacked together, they produce a self-portrait largely built in negative space - substantive rather than impressive-sounding, reliable rather than performed, critical rather than enthusiastic. He puts it directly:

"I'd rather position others well before positioning myself, and I try to be reliable and substantive rather than impressive-sounding."

What is interesting in Viktor's case is that he does not need to fully define what he is. The list of what he refuses already does most of the work. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) would say this is identity work concentrated on the boundary - the active line between self and the discourses around the self.

Joshgun makes a different but equally clear anti-identity claim. His "*not-me*" is the developer who only knows one tech stack and blindly pastes AI-generated code into a system without understanding it:

"if you just blindly paste AI-generated code without that understanding, there will be major mismatches."

He also distances himself from the LinkedIn user who treats AI output as 100% accurate. The image he refuses is precise, and it allows him to make a more confident positive claim - that he is the engineer who owns and understands his code, takes responsibility for it, and supervises AI rather than being supervised by it.

A particularly raw form of anti-identity work appears in Farid's interview. After answering all the prepared questions in a controlled tone, he opens up at the end:

"I am suffering. I'm learning. I'm putting a lot of effort and hard work into gaining new skills and breaking into a new profession. And then there is AI, and we're talking about how it will replace me - but what about my hard work then? It's okay to ask AI for recommendations or help, like an

assistant. But why should I give the code to an AI tool so that it does everything for me - then what will I do?"

Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) describe identity work becoming most concentrated at moments where the dominant discourse threatens the very identity a person is currently building. Farid is in exactly this position. The discourse he is trying to step into (the data analytics professional) and the discourse threatening it (AI replacing junior analysts) point in opposite directions. His refusal -

"why should I give the code to an AI tool so that it does everything for me"

- is identity work as a kind of protest. He is defending the value of the hard work he is putting in right now, against a narrative that says that work may be wasted.

Not all identity work is defensive. Some participants do their identity work by **claiming territory** that AI cannot occupy. Tural is one example. He openly accepts that AI can analyse data, build models, create relationships between tables, generate KPIs. But he carves out human territory carefully:

"It cannot create something truly novel - a new scientific field, a new data topic - that belongs to humans, and I think it always will... It's also not useful when it comes to emotionally nuanced creation... A data analyst sells their product to stakeholders - not for money, but they market their own outcomes, explain them properly. Not all stakeholders understand the data, and selling as a skill doesn't come easily to AI."

Each territory he names - novelty, emotional nuance, stakeholder communication - is identity work. He is not saying AI cannot do his job. He is saying *these specific parts* of his job remain his. Husain does almost the same thing, though more grandly: AI removes friction, not humans; AI compresses learning, not learners. His story about a Swedish client where the team built half a product on wrong assumptions, and only fixed it through real human conversations, is a paradigmatic identity-work story. He uses it to anchor a claim - empathy and intuition cannot be replaced - that he can retell to himself and to clients whenever the AI question comes up.

The most explicitly **effortful** identity work in this study comes from Sara. She is unusually honest about her own struggle, and her honesty is itself identity work. She names a recurring problem:

"I have around five years of solid experience - six if I include university internships - but I tend to play it safe and say four or five because I often struggle to fully own and justify what I've achieved."

This is the kind of self-deprecating framing Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) describe - where the person's own narrative is partly undermining the professional positioning they are trying to claim. But Sara also actively builds her positive identity. Her anti-identity is precise: the **AI-only junior** who knows the tools but has not yet built the years of judgment that the work requires. She uses this distinction directly as her strategy:

"That foundation is real, and it's something a junior who only knows AI-assisted workflows doesn't yet have. That's the argument I'm making, and I believe in it. I just need to find the right room to make it in."

The room she is looking for is the room that will validate the version of herself she is building - the AI-native domain expert, not the AI-only beginner.

Some participants do identity work that is **specifically about visibility and recognition**. Noah, the most experienced participant in this group, articulates an unusually clear contemporary fear:

"I don't really fear that much that AI would replace everything. But I do fear more that someone who knew how to use AI better than me would replace me."

The threat in his account is not the technology - it is the human with better technology. His identity work in response is to claim the parts of his role that resist substitution: local knowledge, relationships, and multi-client nuance.

"If you have a strong relationship with internal people, external people, then this is something that is harder for someone else new who just came into replace you."

This is identity work as protective positioning - claiming territory not against AI directly, but against the other professional who might use AI to outcompete him.

Masood does identity work that is partly about cultural correction. He has ten years of HR experience in Afghanistan but in Germany he says:

"sometimes I feel like I'm at zero."

His main identity work is repairing the continuity that the German labour market keeps breaking:

"My past experience gives me trust in myself. I know I've done things before and I'll be able to do things again."

When a woman at a Berlin event told him he "shouldn't be from Afghanistan because [he] knew too much," he keeps that comment in his account specifically as evidence of the gap between how others see him and how he sees himself. The fact that this story stays with him - that he chose to tell it in the interview - is itself identity work.

A few participants also do identity work that **integrates rather than resists** the AI discourse. Samir is a clear example. He does almost no anti-identity work in his interview. Instead, he absorbs AI into his self-narrative as a builder - using ChatGPT in agent mode to find his next job, vibe-coding stock-trading tools for himself, offering AI automation services on Upwork. His identity work is not about pushing AI away but about including it inside the version of himself he wants to be. The interviewer even notices:

"I didn't sense that with you. You seem very positive about AI."

Abbas also does this kind of work, more cautiously - accepting AI as a tool, while keeping one small refusal (the candidate who lets AI write the whole CV) to mark himself as the selective rather than the colonized user.

Reading across all fifteen interviews, what becomes visible is that identity work is constant, varied, and often most concentrated where the AI discourse pushes hardest. Some participants build their identity by refusing - listing what they will not be, what they will not do, who they will not become. Others build it by claiming protected territory - the parts of the job AI cannot occupy. Others integrate AI into a self that absorbs it rather than resists it. All of these are forms of the same work. As Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) describe, identity at work is not a stable possession but an ongoing struggle to make sense of who one is, especially when the discourses around the self are pulling in contradictory directions. The AI moment intensifies this work, but it does not invent it. What it does is make the struggle more visible - and the participants in this study, in their refusals and their claims, are showing exactly where that visibility lands.

5.4 The Discourses Around Them

The previous section looked at the active work participants do to shape who they are. This section looks at the bigger conversation around them - the discourses that try to shape them from the outside. Alvesson and Willmott (2002) argue that organisations and wider managerial discourses regulate identity by offering employees particular self-images and work orientations that fit the goals of management. This shaping does not happen through orders or rules alone. It happens through language: through how value, competence, productivity, adaptability, and contribution are talked about. The participant does not have to be told who to be. The discourse provides templates the participant is invited, or pressured, to step into.

In an AI-integrated labour market, these templates have multiplied quickly. Several discourses are circulating around the participants in this study at the same time - sometimes reinforcing each other, sometimes pulling in different directions. Reading across the fifteen interviews, four discourses are particularly visible: the **AI-fluency discourse** ("a good professional today is AI-native"), the **AI-displacement discourse** ("entry-level work is disappearing"), the **AI-screening-in-recruitment discourse** ("you may be filtered out by a machine before a human sees you"), and the **immigrant-restart discourse** ("you have to begin again in a new market, no

matter what you did before"). Each of these does identity-regulating work in the sense Alvesson and Willmott (2002) describe. And each is taken up differently by different participants.

The **AI-fluency discourse** is probably the most pervasive. It tells participants that being a professional today means being able to work with AI tools - knowing them, naming them, deploying them. Tural absorbs this discourse fully. He describes himself as opening an account in every new AI tool that is released, comparing Gemini and Claude, testing them for different purposes. He also notes that this is now a labour-market requirement: "even my current company - which I'm working with on a project basis under contract - required from the beginning that I am AI-native." Companies, he says, are not yet specific about which tool they want - they just want someone who is "AI-native and AI-fluent." In Alvesson and Willmott's (2002) terms, this is identity regulation through what they call the **knowledge-and-skills** mode - a discourse that defines who you are professionally by what you can do. Ghulam responds to the same discourse by naming the AI tools he uses: ChatGPT, DeepSeek, Google AI, Gemini. The naming is itself a claim to fit the template.

But the same discourse lands differently for participants who do not occupy it as smoothly. Ralf feels the pressure directly:

"There will always be candidates who are more AI-fluent than me, and some recruiters will value that. I just haven't been put in that position yet, so it remains somewhat hypothetical."

Ralf knows the discourse exists and knows it may eventually corner him. His response is not to comply but to delay - to find work, especially in NGO or charity contexts, where the AI-fluency discourse is less dominant. This is what Alvesson and Willmott (2002) describe as a small form of **micro-emancipation** - finding a corner of the working world where the dominant discourse does not have full reach. Nilufer experiences the same pressure but is only just becoming aware of it. When the interviewer mentions AI screening, she pauses:

"Honestly, I never thought about it before this conversation... It's unsettling to think about, actually."

A discourse she did not know was operating on her becomes visible inside the interview itself.

The **AI-displacement discourse** is the second major template. It tells participants that entry-level and routine work is being absorbed by AI, and that junior careers are at risk. This discourse is heard, named, and processed by almost every participant, but it does not regulate everyone in the same way. Some participants accept it and try to outrun it. Masood is concerned but turns the concern into preparation:

"I'm taking AI and automation courses, following developments in the field, reading books and articles, watching videos from AI professionals. I'm positioning myself as best I can."

He absorbs the displacement discourse but uses it to fuel a particular kind of agency - the resilient migrant who anticipates and adapts.

Other participants push back against the displacement discourse directly. Samir is the clearest example. He treats the discourse as an American media phenomenon that does not fully translate to his actual working context:

"We see companies from America laying off thousands of people and markets screaming it's because of AI. But I don't observe that around us here. I don't think our market is that much impacted by this. America always has this hype, and we consume it from there, but even when you look into it, you often find that either it's not worth the money or the value it delivers isn't exactly what was promised."

This is identity regulation being actively resisted. Samir names the discourse, identifies its source, and gives evidence against it - his CEO's failed search for an AI automation company, the fact that only about 15% of his work is actually repetitive. By naming the discourse he steps partly outside it. Viktor does something similar but with more historical framing. He places AI in a long line of technological transitions - weavers losing jobs to machines, fertiliser used both to feed people and build weapons - and uses this longer view to refuse the loud, polarised current discourse: "Either it's the end of everything or it's the greatest thing in history. Nobody seems

comfortable sitting in the middle, and I find that intellectually dishonest." Naming the discourse is, for him, the first step in not being regulated by it.

Husain goes further and **reframes** the displacement discourse entirely. The dominant version says AI will replace junior workers. He turns it inside out: there will be no more junior roles, but not in a bad way - AI lets you compress the learning curve and reach senior-level thinking faster. This reframing is identity-protective in exactly the way Alvesson and Willmott (2002) describe - it allows him to keep his master-craftsman story intact while acknowledging the changes around him. Joshgun does something similar with the average-of-the-internet framing: AI is

"essentially an average of the internet - it applies something like linear regression over existing web content and serves you a statistically plausible output."

By reducing AI to a known statistical procedure, he reduces the threat the displacement discourse carries.

The **AI-screening discourse** is a third, more specific template, and it touches participants whose validation depends on hiring outcomes. Abbas experiences it directly and accepts it with concern:

"I was also getting advice from people already working in the industry, and they were telling me that hiring managers now use AI to scan CVs and cover letters to detect whether the applicant used AI to write them. So there's this strange dynamic where companies use AI to screen applications, but also penalize candidates for using AI to write them."

Adriana takes the same discourse personally:

"If my CV goes through an AI screening tool before a human ever sees it, there's a real risk it gets filtered out unfairly. I've thought about this a lot. I made my CV on Canva rather than a conventional Word format, and I sometimes wonder if that's hurting me because automated systems might not read it properly."

What is striking about Adriana response is that her main fear is not AI doing her marketing job - she is confident there - but AI cutting off her access to the job market entirely. The discourse regulates her even though she does not believe in the threat it carries about her professional skills. Viktor processes the same discourse but routes it through systemic critique, talking about how companies

"rush to replace people with AI, then realize it doesn't actually work as well, and quietly rehire."

For him, the discourse is not just personal - it is part of the corporate logic he distrusts.

The **immigrant-restart discourse** is the fourth template that runs through many of the interviews. It tells participants - explicitly or implicitly - that the work they did before does not fully count in the new market, and that they have to begin again. Masood experiences this discourse most heavily. Ten years of HR work in Afghanistan does not translate cleanly to the German market:

"maybe people can't trust or rely on my previous experience."

His identity work, as discussed in the previous section, is largely about repairing this discontinuity. Ghulam experiences a quieter version of the same discourse - his seven years at a major shipping company did not translate into a similarly senior Swedish role, and his current restart as an "e-commerce operations specialist" is the visible cost. Rejection from his favorite company, after five rounds and reaching the final two, captures the discourse in one event: he was qualified, but the new market wanted local industry experience he did not have. Noah navigates the same discourse but with the buffer of a niche specialisation that gave him a way in. His role survives partly because it is internal and regional, not client-facing - meaning the Swedish language requirement does not fully apply.

What is interesting is that the immigrant-restart discourse interacts with the AI discourses in specific ways. For Masood, AI fluency becomes a way to **compete around** the recognition gap - if the German market will not accept his ten years of HR experience, he can at least bring AI literacy to the table that local candidates may not yet have. For Ghulam, AI fluency works the

same way. He uses it as a layer of value he can add on top of his prior experience to make the restart easier. Both participants are doing what Alvesson and Willmott (2002) describe - using one identity template (AI-native worker) to push back against the regulation of another (the immigrant who must restart from zero).

There is also a different kind of discourse working on some participants: the **broader social discourse about AI's wider impact** - military use, environmental cost, misinformation, biological weapons, the erosion of democratic communication. Noah closes his interview by explicitly rescaling: "in general, like my fear with AI is like, it's only about my job as well, but then I do fear more on like the environmental impact and like the military implication." Ralf does similar work earlier in his interview - environmental, political, ethical, aesthetic concerns about AI together form his refusal. Timathi ends his interview on the energy-consumption question:

"AI requires enormous amounts of computing power, which requires enormous amounts of energy. That's a real problem from a sustainability perspective."

For these participants, the broader social discourse on AI gives them a way to put their personal stakes in proportion - and also a way to articulate values that the narrower job-market discourse does not capture.

Reading across all fifteen interviews, the picture that emerges is one Alvesson and Willmott (2002) describe well. Discourses do real work on identity, but they do not work in only one direction. The same AI-fluency discourse that templates Tural and Samir lightly puts heavy pressure on Ralf and Farid. The same displacement discourse that Masood turns into preparation, Samir actively dismantles. The same screening discourse that Adriana accepts with concern, Viktor redirects into systemic critique. The same immigrant-restart discourse that hurts Masood and Ghulam, Noah partly escapes through specialisation. Participants are regulated by these discourses, but they are not passive. They name discourses, sometimes reframe them, sometimes refuse them, and sometimes use one discourse to push back against another. As Alvesson and Willmott (2002) note, identity regulation is never complete - and the spaces where participants resist or reroute the discourses around them are exactly the spaces where

their professional identity becomes visible as something they are actively making, not just receiving.

6. Discussion

6.1 Overview

This study set out to examine how early-career professionals narrate and reconstruct their professional identities in response to AI-driven disruption in the workplace. The central finding from our fifteen interviews is that the reconstruction is neither uniform nor linear. Instead, it is heavily shaped by the specific narrative structures that these professionals already possess or are still actively assembling. As we look across our empirical material, this identity reconstruction operates simultaneously at four distinct levels: **story structure**, **cultural scripting**, **active identity work strategies** and **engagement with wider institutional discourses**. By bringing these four dimensions together against our theoretical framework and existing literature, this chapter develops three specific contributions to how we understand professional identity under technological change.

6.2 Narrative structure as the primary mechanism of identity reconstruction

The most significant finding in relation to our central research question is that AI disruption does not produce a single, shared narrative response among early-career workers. Rather, the disruption is absorbed differently depending on the structural state of the career story into which it arrives.

In our data, we can see a clear split based on narrative ground. On one side, participants who already hold a continuous narrative- where past educational choices and work steps lead coherently into their present roles- tend to absorb AI as a manageable element within an arc that was already moving forward. For instance, participants like Tural, Sara, and Viktor do not experience AI as a structural break. They use their existing career momentum to frame AI as a tool that fits into a plot they already control. On the other side, participants who are still in the middle of forming themselves and whose career endings have not yet been found, like Farid, hold AI as one more deeply uncertain variable in a plot that has not yet stabilized. Because Farid's story lacks a settled protagonist, the pressure of AI lands on a fragile foundation, making the future feel much more threatening.

This distinction is important because it reframes the dominant question in the AI-and-work literature. The question is not simply whether AI disrupts professional identity- our data confirm that it creates real, undeniable pressure. The real question is *what kind of story that pressure lands on*, because the same technological disruption does entirely different things depending on the narrative ground it falls into.

This finding extends Ibarra and Barbulescu's (2010) work on narrative identity work in two ways. Their framework, developed originally for macro work role transitions, treats narrative as the primary mechanism for identity reconstruction during major career changes. Our study confirms this mechanism but applies it to a context their original theory did not directly anticipate: not a single, clean transition between two organizational roles, but a continuous, ambient reshaping of what professional value means in the face of ongoing automation. Furthermore, we add precision to their framework by showing that this reconstruction operates through four specific architectural features: plot continuity, agency claims, catalytic turning points, and cultural scripting. Every participant relies on these features to give their identity weight, but they experience them differently based on their career stability. While existing literature on professional responses to AI has focused heavily on categorizing what positions professionals take up (Teng, 2025; Al-Haddad, 2026), it has missed the formal properties of the stories through which those positions are built. That is the primary gap our study begins to close.

6.3 Identity work strategies: territory, refusal, and script-mixing

In relation to our first subsidiary research question- concerning the strategies professionals use to position themselves as valuable in an AI-integrated workplace- our data reveal three distinct moves that together form a coherent repertoire of identity work.

The first strategy is jurisdictional claiming, where participants identify specific professional territories that AI cannot occupy. Instead of making weak, abstract arguments about general human superiority, our participants point to precise competencies and mark them as strictly

human. For example, Tural names novelty, emotional nuance, and stakeholder communication as his exclusive territory. Husain anchors his claim in empathy and human intuition by telling a concrete story about a team that built the wrong product because they relied on automated systems instead of human conversation. Similarly, Joshgun identifies ownership, ultimate accountability, and code maintenance as positions that AI can never hold. This strategy aligns with what Schapals and Porlezza (2020) call "ideological continuity" in automated journalism, where professionals preserve their identity by reaffirming what automation cannot touch. Our data extend this pattern across multiple industries, showing that jurisdictional claims are not static; they are dynamically updated as the boundary between human and machine capability shifts.

The second strategy is anti-identity work, which is constructing the self by explicitly naming what one refuses to be. Across our interviews, the figure of the "AI-dependent worker" emerged as a powerful, widely shared negative reference point. This is the worker who delegates all critical judgment to the machine, cannot evaluate nonsense AI output, and produces work without owning it. Adriana uses anti-identity work by refusing to be the colleague who asks AI before talking to a person. Viktor refuses to be a professional who cannot critically judge the accuracy of AI output, and Joshgun refuses to be a developer who simply pastes AI code without understanding the underlying logic. As Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) describe, these "not-me" positions carry just as much identity weight as positive claims. For our participants whose positive stories are still provisional, this anti-identity work carries even more structural weight, because what they can refuse is often much more certain than what they can currently claim.

The third strategy is script-mixing, where participants deliberately combine multiple cultural templates within a single self-presentation to cover the gaps that a single script leaves exposed. For instance, Sara simultaneously holds the *careful craftsman* script and the *AI-native specialist* script. The craftsman script protects her from being seen as a shallow junior who only knows how to use automated tools, while the AI-native script protects her from being seen as someone who has failed to adapt to modern technology. Masood similarly combines the

resilient migrant script with a *human-centered HR* script to navigate his career entry. Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) introduced the concept of "narrative repertoires" to explain how professionals draw on different stories for different audiences. What our data add is that script-mixing is not just a contextual adaptation, but a complex compositional strategy. It allows early-career professionals to claim more cultural ground and protect themselves against misrecognition from multiple directions at once, especially when navigating multiple forms of career disruption.

6.4 Discourse, regulation, and the compound nature of identity pressure

Against our second subsidiary research question- concerning how organizational and wider institutional discourses shape or destabilize professional self-understanding- our findings show that identity regulation is very real, yet always incomplete. Alvesson and Willmott (2002) argue that organizational discourses regulate identity by offering specific templates that workers are pressured to internalize. In our study, we identified four distinct discourses doing this regulatory work: AI-fluency, AI-displacement, AI-screening, and the immigrant-restart discourse.

The AI-fluency discourse- the idea that a valuable professional today must be entirely AI-native- is the most pervasive template. For some, it operates smoothly; Tural fits this template easily, opening accounts in every new AI tool because his company explicitly requires it. For others, it creates immense pressure; Ralf feels the corners closing in, knowing candidates will always be more AI-fluent than him, which forces him to seek environments where this discourse has less reach. Nilufer only realizes how deeply this discourse regulates her during our interview itself, pausing to note that she had never consciously thought about AI recruitment filters before.

The AI-displacement discourse- the threat that entry-level, routine work is completely disappearing- is recognized by almost all participants. However, it does not regulate everyone in the same direction. Masood absorbs this threat and turns it into proactive preparation, fueling his agency. Samir actively dismantles it by blaming American media hype and offering counter-evidence from his own context , while Viktor places it within a long historical framework, refusing to accept its polarized narrative as intellectually honest.

The AI-screening discourse- the fear of being filtered out by a machine before a human ever sees the application- is highly destabilizing, particularly for those whose market access is already fragile. Adriana, for instance, does not fear AI doing her actual marketing job, but she deeply fears AI cutting off her path to the market entirely by screening her out. This discourse destabilizes her exactly where she is most dependent on external recognition.

The most theoretically interesting finding, however, is how these discourses interact. We see a powerful compound effect where the *immigrant-restart discourse* (the idea that international experience does not fully count in a new local market) collides with AI discourses. For migrant professionals like Masood and Ghulam, AI fluency becomes a portable form of currency to cross this recognition gap. If the local market refuses to accept ten years of their past experience, they use advanced AI literacy as a fresh layer of value that the local market has not yet caught up with. Here, one identity template is actively used to push back against the regulation of another. This specific maneuver- which Alvesson and Willmott (2002) note as a theoretical possibility but do not explore empirically- emerges in our data as a recurring structural pattern among participants managing migration and career entry simultaneously.

This has a broader implication for the wider identity regulation literature, which has traditionally examined regulation within isolated, single discursive environments. Our study suggests that early-career professionals in disrupted markets are rarely subject to only one discourse at a time. Their most resourceful agency arises precisely at the seams between discourses, where the pressure of one can be answered by the resources of another. Future research must treat the regulatory environment as compound from the outset.

6.5 Personal narrative and the management of human/AI tension

Against our third subsidiary research question- focusing on how personal narratives manage the tension between human skill and AI capability- our data show three narrative postures that resolve this tension in structurally different ways.

The first posture is boundary redrawing within the story, which is the most common move across all career stages. Participants do not waste time arguing that AI cannot do useful work-

they accept that it can. Instead, they use their personal narratives to pinpoint specific moments where human judgment or accountability becomes decisive. We see this when Joshgun tells the story of a road builder who must think about long-term erosion and flooding rather than just moving from point A to point B. We see it when Husain shares the story of a project that was rescued from failure through human conversation, and when Tural discusses a logistics report that ended up on live television, as proof that his role produces real-world consequences that require a responsible human professional.

The second posture is to reposition AI as a character within the plot rather than an external threat. Samir tells the story of how AI shortened a thirty-minute routine task to just five minutes, framing it not as an anxiety-inducing moment but as the exact point at which he was freed to contribute fully to his role. Timathi similarly narrates his PhD simulation problem as the turning point where AI became a genuinely useful partner. In both cases, AI enters the narrative as a helper that amplifies professional agency rather than a rival threatening their positions. However, as noted earlier, this posture is only available to participants whose stories already have enough forward momentum; it is completely unavailable to someone like Farid, whose unsettled career plot cannot absorb AI this way.

The third posture is the use of pre-established, catalytic turning points to anchor a secure sense of self. Tural's live television report, Sara's first independent stakeholder meeting, and Viktor's established professional reputation all serve as narrative anchors. These are proven historical moments that the participants return to when the present feels deeply unstable. While these turning points do not make AI anxiety disappear, they provide a proven, stable position from which to face it.

What unites all three postures is that they resolve the human/AI tension *narratively rather than empirically*. None of these stories actually settle the objective question of what AI tools can or cannot do in the future market. Instead, they settle the vital question of where the self stands in relation to that technical uncertainty. This strongly confirms Ibarra and Barbulescu's (2010) core argument that stories are not just expressive reflections of identity, but are deeply constitutive

of it. The personal narrative is not just a report on how a professional manages tension; the narrative itself *is* the management.

6.6 Contribution and return to aim

In conclusion, this study fulfills its primary aim of exploring how early-career professionals narrate and reconstruct their professional identities amid AI-driven disruption. Our data prove that this reconstruction is a highly complex, layered process occurring across plot structures, cultural scripts, targeted identity strategies, and intersecting discourses.

The central contribution of this thesis is to move past existing studies that merely establish *that* professionals narrate in response to AI. Instead, we show *how* these narratives are architecturally constructed and identify the exact formal properties that enable a story to sustain identity work under ambient disruption. Our secondary contributions highlight the compound nature of identity regulation within multi-disruption contexts (such as navigating both migration and automation) and establish script-mixing as an architectural, structural narrative strategy rather than a simple, passive adaptation to an audience. Together, these insights advance the broader discussion of professional identity in the AI era from a simple catalogue of worker positions to a deep, analytical account of the narrative practices through which those positions are actually built and maintained.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Re-examining the Aim and Main Findings

This study set out to explore how early-career professionals narrate and reconstruct their professional identities in response to AI-driven disruption in the job market. By analyzing fifteen in-depth interviews through the lenses of narrative identity work and identity regulation, we find that this reconstruction is fundamentally non-linear and uneven. The central conclusion of this thesis is that technological disruption does not land on a blank slate; its impact on a worker's professional identity is determined by the pre-existing architectural strength of their career narrative. Early-career workers who possess a continuous, stable narrative arc successfully absorb AI as a helper or an expected plot point. Conversely, those navigating fragmented backgrounds or provisional entry-level positions experience AI as a compound threat that amplifies their structural unsafety. Ultimately, professionals do not resolve the human-AI tension by waiting for objective market clarity, but by dynamically rewriting their personal plots, combining cultural scripts, and carving out human-only territory through active identity work.

7.2 Theoretical Contributions

From a theoretical perspective, this thesis offers two distinct contributions to the literature on organizational sociology and identity work. First, we extend Ibarra and Barbulescu's (2010) framework on narrative identity work. While their theory was originally designed to explain discrete, macro-level work transitions- such as moving from one established corporate role to another- our study applies and adapts it to a context of continuous, ambient technological disruption. We demonstrate that narrative work is an ongoing, daily coping mechanism used to maintain a stable sense of self when the very definition of professional expertise is constantly shifting. Second, we contribute to Alvesson and Willmott's (2002) concept of identity regulation by introducing the phenomenon of *discursive compounding*. Our empirical material reveals that institutional discourses do not regulate individuals in isolation. Instead, for migrant or

marginalized professionals, the pressures of the AI-displacement discourse collide directly with the immigrant-restart discourse. By documenting how these workers use AI fluency as a portable currency to cross local market barriers, we show that agency often emerges precisely at the intersection where multiple discourses meet.

7.3 Practical Implications and Societal Relevance

The practical insights of this study carry serious implications for both organizational leaders and the wider job market. For Human Resource practitioners and managers, our findings reveal that the current corporate focus on purely technical upskilling- simply teaching junior employees how to prompt or use AI tools- is insufficient. Because AI fundamentally alters the meaning, ownership, and joy of entry-level work, organizations must intentionally design junior roles that preserve human accountability and creative agency, ensuring that the pipeline for future expertise does not hollow out.

Furthermore, this study highlights a critical need for companies to reform their talent acquisition strategies during this transition period. Just as applicants are struggling to reconstruct their stories, companies themselves are navigating immense structural uncertainty and must urgently innovate how they match with talent. To address the growing gap between what disrupted talents can offer and what automated companies need, organizations cannot rely solely on rigid, automated screening systems that further alienate fragile applicants. Instead, companies must adopt a strategy grounded in transparency, deep market awareness, and active listening. By genuinely listening to the evolving narratives of early-career professionals and being transparent about how AI is utilized internally, companies can build empathetic, realistic talent-matching pipelines that recognize potential rather than just standardized, pre-AI keywords.

7.4 Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study provides a deep, qualitative understanding of narrative identity construction, it has clear boundaries. Our empirical material is built upon a sample of fifteen participants

primarily navigating white-collar, entry-level, or shifting roles within specific digital and service sectors. Because generative AI technologies are developing at an incredibly rapid pace, the narrative strategies observed today may shift as these tools become even more deeply institutionalized.

Therefore, we suggest two main paths for future research. First, there is an urgent need for longitudinal qualitative studies that follow the same cohort of early-career professionals over a period of two to three years. This would allow researchers to observe whether the provisional, script-mixed stories discovered in this thesis eventually solidify into stable, long-term career identities, or if ambient technological anxiety becomes a permanent structural feature of modern professional life. Second, future research should explore how these narrative identity dynamics play out across different geographical regions and legal frameworks, particularly comparing highly unionized labor markets with gig-economy environments, to see how institutional safety nets influence a worker's narrative agency.

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Appendix A: Consent form

For contact: gu4688rz-s@student.lu.se, shyama.sultana.5814@student.lu.se  LUNDS UNIVERSITET Interview consent form We are Gulnar Rzayeva and Shyama Sultana, Master's students in the Faculty of Social Sciences at Lund University, currently working on our final thesis. Our research explores how professionals in the early stages of their careers construct and express their professional identities in the context of AI's growing presence in the job market. To gain deeper insight into this topic, we are conducting semi-structured interviews with individuals navigating these early career years. Each interview will take roughly 60 to 90 minutes and can be held either in person or online, depending on what works best for the participant. Information on the processing of personal data Data collected: As a participant, you will be asked to share your name, age, occupation, city, region, country of residence, and professional experiences. How your data will be processed: With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded for transcription and analysis. All information will be treated confidentially. Quotes or content from the interview may appear in the final thesis but will be anonymised. Only the researchers – and, where necessary, our academic supervisor and examiner – will have access to identifiable material. Pseudonymised transcripts, notes, and signed consent forms will be retained only for as long as needed for the thesis examination, after which they will be deleted in line with Lund University's procedures. Your rights: Participation is entirely voluntary. You may decline any question or stop the interview at any time, without explanation and without consequence. You may also withdraw after the interview; if you do so before your data has been fully anonymised and integrated into the final analysis, your personal data will be deleted. We will not share your personal data with third parties. Contact: If you have any questions or concerns, please reach out to us: • Gulnar Rzayeva – gu4688rz-s@student.lu.se • Shyama Sultana – shyama.sultana.5814@student.lu.se Consent Please check each circle to indicate your agreement. I have read and understood: ◦ The information provided above about the study, its purpose, and how my data will be used. ◦ That my participation is voluntary and I may withdraw at any time without negative consequences.	For contact: gu4688rz-s@student.lu.se, shyama.sultana.5814@student.lu.se I agree to the following: ◦ Participating in this study. ◦ Having the interview audio-recorded. ◦ The use of anonymised quotations from my interview in the final thesis. Name, Date, Location, Signature
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Appendix B: Interview process artifacts

Pseudo name	age	nationality	location	industry	job status	#years of experience	notes
Ralf	27	Germany	SWE	Marketing	Master student	1	Migrated; searches job
Adriana	23	Portugal	SWE	Marketing	Part time master student	1	Migrated; searches job
Viktor	26	Hungary	SWE	Marketing	Working; master student	3	Migrated
Farid	26	Azerbaijan	AZE	Data analytics	Full-time job	1	searches job
Tural	35	Azerbaijan	SWE	Data analytics	Contract job	4	Migrated; searches job
Masood	35	Afghanistan	GER	HR	Unemployed	10 years (restarting in country)	Migrated; searches "feels like zero"
Ghulam	40	Bangladesh	SWE	Logistics	Intern	7	Migrated; Mid-level experience, restarting
Abbas	27	Iran	SWE	Engineering	Full-time job	2	Migrated
Noah	35	Myanmar	SWE	Media	Full-time job	10	Migrated; Mid-senior (restarting)
Timathi	28	Mauritius	SWE	Supply chain	PhD student	1	Migrated
Nilufer	25	Turkiye	SWE	Law	Master student	1	Migrated; searches job
Samir	23	Azerbaijan	AZE	Finance, fintech	Full-time job	3	-
Joshgun	23	Azerbaijan	AZE	Software Engineer	Contract job	4	searches job
Sara	29	Azerbaijan	SWE	Business analytics	Master student	5	Migrated; searches job
Husain	36	Pakistan	SWE	Product design	Working	10+ (last 5 years in a new field)	Migrated; transitioned new field in new country

Interview questions

Introduce yourself.

- Can you tell me the story of how you became a [job title], starting from when you were studying until today?

Possible gentle probes if needed:

- How did you imagine a successful professional in your field when you were studying?
- What did you think your daily work would look like at that time?
- Was there a moment when you first felt like a real professional? Or what level of stage u consider yourself and why?
- At what point did AI become part of your work story, and how did that affect the way you think about your career?

Possible probes:

- Do you remember the first moment you realized AI might change your work?
- Did it change how you see your role as a professional?
- How do you imagine your professional future now because of AI?

Additional questions if needed, in real time:

- How do you make sure with your efforts that you are still competitive, “why you” should be hired, how do you make sure that you get or sustain the job in this amidst of AI where lots of AI layoffs happening
- How you are building your character on LinkedIn or -choice of platform
- Has working with AI tools changed how you think about what your job is actually for?

Extra questions to pick if time is still left:

- Why you have chosen this professional direction?
- How did/do you find your current/future job?
- What do you think separates you from more senior workers?
- How do you think AI affect junior vs senior roles? Which one is impacted more and why?
- Have you felt like your role could be substituted by AI?
- If yes, what do you do about it? How do you adjust yourself
- If no, what makes you confident?
- How do you think future of your industry/profession will be like within 5&10 years?
- Can you share a story about a complex problem you solved recently where you felt your "professional judgment" or "gut feeling" was something an AI could not replicate?

Excerpt from coding process

	easy or difficult? -Challenging, definitely. You spend a huge amount of time writing applications, preparing for interviews, refining your CV and cover letter — and for many positions you don't even get a response. For others, you receive an automated rejection email with no explanation. You have to keep going back to your documents and asking: what's wrong, how can I improve this? It's a real emotional rollercoaster. But in some ways it's similar to writing a thesis — there are difficulties you just have to push through.	of jobsearch also include getting lost in the process, getting no response, rejection emails with no explanations, no feedback. Job search is totally self-guided in noise. Shows importance of resilience	
5	+You mentioned automated emails. Can you say more about that experience, and how it connects to AI? -I spent around six months in active job searching. On the automated emails — yes, it's obvious when a rejection isn't written by a human. I was also getting advice from searchm people already working in the industry, and they were telling me that hiring managers now use AI to scan CVs and cover letters to detect whether the applicant used AI to write them. So there's this strange dynamic where companies use AI to screen applications, but also penalize candidates for using AI to write them. At the same time, I heard that some hiring managers were also using AI to write job postings. It's a bit of a double standard.	Double standards of AI usage by whom? There is notion by the former jobseeker that "employers can use AI in their positing but it is viewed negatively and get rejected if they use AI assistance for their job applications"	Acknowledging AI in recruitment=double standard
6	+How do you feel about AI in that context — helpful or threatening? -It's mixed. It didn't feel great receiving what was clearly a machine-generated rejection. But even before AI, automated responses existed in recruitment. Like most technologies, it has pros and cons. The concern I have is around fairness — the AI scanning tools can make mistakes, and you might get rejected based on a false reading of your document. That's a problem that still	"machine-generated rejection", "concern I have is around fairness"	AI's negative role fairness, bias. A problem to be resolved