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The Human Behind the Image: Consumer Interpretations of AI-Generated Fashion Advertising and Brand-Consumer Relationships

by

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Abstract

This study examines how consumers make sense of AI-generated fashion advertising and how this shapes brand-consumer relationships. Using a qualitative and interpretive approach, this study draws on twelve semi-structured interviews with students at Lund University School of Economics and Management (LUSEM). The analysis is informed by Consumer–Brand Relationship theory (Fournier, 1998), Social Presence Theory (Short et al., 1976), and Perception Theory (Solomon, 2018). Photo-elicitation using images from H&M's digital twin campaign was incorporated into the interview process.

The findings suggest that consumers do not perceive AI-generated advertising as a purely technical or production-related choice. Instead, AI is interpreted as a signal that communicates the brand's intent, effort, and commitment to the relationship with the consumers. Three interconnected dimensions shape this interpretive process: trust is influenced by prior familiarity with the brand and varies across brand tiers; sincerity is assessed through perceptions of brand intent and transparency; and perceived effort reflects the extent to which consumers believe a brand has invested in its communication and relationship-building activities. Across these dimensions, a deeper concern relates to the role of human presence in brand communication. Participants consistently distinguished between AI used to enhance human production and AI used to replace it entirely.

The study proposes two key contributions. First, it introduces the concept of *the human presence paradigm*, which captures consumers' tendency to evaluate AI-generated content based on the presence or absence of a human involvement rather than on visual quality alone. Second, it highlights a *post-communication verification stage*, in which consumers rely on additional sources such as customer reviews, product information, and physical product experiences to validate claims communicated through brand imagery. Together, these findings offer a deeper understanding of how brand–consumer relationships are negotiated in an increasingly AI-mediated communication landscape.

Keywords: AI-generated advertising, brand–consumer relationships, consumer trust, social presence, fashion communication, Gen Z

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	i
Acknowledgements.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
List of Tables.....	v
1. Introduction.....	1
2. Theory.....	3
2.1. Foundations and Effectiveness of Brand Communication.....	3
2.1.1. AI Development and Adaptation in Brand Communication.....	4
2.1.2. Perceived Brand Sincerity and Relational Implication of AI Integration.....	4
2.2. Brand-consumer Relationship: Shifting from Transactional Objects to Relationship Partners.....	5
2.2.1 Securing Relational Durability Through the Foundation of Trust.....	6
2.3. Establishing Foundations of Brand Trust through the Interpretations of Digital Cues.....	7
2.3.1. Mediating Trust through Perceived Social Presence and Intent.....	8
2.4. Fashion Context: Navigating the Hyper-Visual Transformation.....	9
2.4.1. Negotiating the Tension between Automated Efficiency and Relational Sincerity.....	10
3. Methodology.....	11
3.1 Research Approach.....	11
3.2 Data Collection.....	12
3.2.1 Semi-structured Interviews and Photo-elicitation.....	13
3.2.2 Sampling strategy.....	13
3.2.3 Interview Procedure.....	14
3.3. Data Analysis.....	15
Table 1 - Participant overview.....	16
4. Findings.....	18
4.1. How Participants Relate to Fashion Brands.....	18
4.1.1. Product-based relationships with fast-fashion brands.....	18
4.1.2. Symbolic and identity-based relationships with luxury brands.....	19
4.1.3. The fast-fashion–luxury distinction as a recurring lens.....	20
4.2. Maintaining Brand-Consumer Relationships in the Current AI Climate.....	20
4.2.1. Trust: Brand Recognition, Familiarity, and The Fast-Fashion–Luxury Distinction.....	20
4.2.2. Reading AI as a Brand Intent and Honesty.....	21
4.2.3. Effort: Human Investment and Differing Expectations across Brand Tiers.....	22

4.3. The Human Touch in a World of AI.....	23
4.3.1. Perceptions of AI: Normalization and Resistance.....	23
4.3.2. The Photoshop–AI Distinction.....	24
4.3.3. Human Replacement as the Fundamental Boundary.....	25
4.3.4. Innovation Alignment: When AI and Human Presence Coexist.....	26
4.4. Summary of the Findings.....	26
5. Discussions.....	27
5.1. Perceived Effort as a Signal of Relational Commitment.....	28
5.1.1. Inferred Brand Intent and the Transparency Paradox.....	28
Table 2: Consumer Relational Outcomes of AI Disclosure in Brand Communication.....	29
5.1.2. The Implications for Brand Integrity and Relationship Quality.....	32
5.2. The Human-Presence Paradigm: The Social Presence and the Boundary of Human Replacement.....	33
5.2.1. The Faking of Reality and the Loss of the Human Vibe.....	34
5.2.2. The Verification Post-Communication Stage and Its Implications for Brand Trust.....	35
5.3. Divergent Relational Foundations: How Brand Positioning Shapes the Interpretation of AI.....	36
5.3.1. The Transactional-Symbolic Divide and Relational Contract of Brand Tiers.....	36
5.3.2. Relationship Maturity as a Reputational Buffer.....	38
6. Conclusion.....	39
6.1. Theoretical Contributions.....	39
6.2 Managerial Contributions.....	41
6.3 Limitations.....	42
6.4 Directions for Future Research.....	43
References.....	44
Appendices.....	52
1. Coding table (sample):.....	52
2. Cross-participant thematic analysis.....	57
a. Theme Matrix.....	57
b. Participant Profiles.....	57
3. Interview Guide and Questions.....	59
4. Visual Materials for Photo-elicitation.....	63
Acknowledgement of AI Use.....	66

List of Tables

Table 1: Participant Overview	16
Table 2: Consumer Relational Outcomes of AI Disclosure in Brand Communication	29

1. Introduction

The growing use of artificial intelligence (AI) in marketing is changing the way brand communication is created and experienced, particularly in visually oriented digital spaces. For example, H&M's 2025 campaign using AI-generated "digital twins" of human models is a recent example of how synthetic imagery can closely mirror the aesthetic standards of conventional fashion photography (Bain, 2025; McMahon, 2025). These developments open up new creative and operational possibilities for brands, but they also introduce a real ambiguity: consumers may not always be able to tell whether what they are seeing was made by a person or generated by AI. This uncertainty raises a fundamental issue regarding how such content is interpreted and what it means for trust in brand communication.

Fashion provides a particularly relevant context, as imagery plays a central role in communicating brand identity, aspiration, and credibility. In this highly visual environment, generative AI enables brands to produce and customize visual content at scale, contributing to the growing presence of synthetic imagery in fashion brand communication (CEE, 2024; Hatkenli, 2025; Sidiropoulou et al., 2025). However, existing research suggests that awareness of AI involvement can shape how such communication is perceived, particularly in terms of credibility and trust (Israfilzade, 2025; Sidiropoulou et al., 2025; Nazrin et al., 2025). These mixed findings suggest that the effects of AI-generated content is not uniform, but instead depends on how consumers interpret it. In this aspect, the key issue is not only the presence of AI in brand communication but how this content is understood and what it signals about the brand itself.

The interpretive dimension becomes significant in the context of fashion. The industry has long depended on constructed imagery, such as retouching and digital enhancement, as a standard of advertising practice (Eggert, 2017; Stroedter, 2025). Consequently, consumers are broadly accustomed to a certain degree of artificiality in fashion visuals. However, AI-generated imagery introduces different forms of visual production, one that may raise distinct implications related to authorship, intent, and credibility. This leads to a critical question: within a context where visual manipulation is already accepted, how do consumers interpret AI-generated visuals, and how do these interpretations shape their trust and the brand-consumer relationships?

Although interest in AI-generated marketing content has increased, much of the existing research tends to focus on outcome-based metrics such as credibility, engagement, and purchase intention (Israfilzade, 2025; Desai & Hamsa, 2025; Ahac, 2025). Studies examining consumer reactions to AI-generated advertising (e.g., Kirk & Givi, 2025; Lou & Copeland, 2025; Sidiropoulou et al., 2025) have similarly emphasised attitudinal and behavioral responses. As a result, less attention has been paid to how consumers actually interpret and assign meaning to AI-generated fashion advertising in the first place. The implications of that interpretive process for trust and

brand-consumer relationships remain underexplored. This gap matters as trust is a key factor in shaping brand-consumer relationships in a digital context where direct interaction with products is often limited (NIM, 2025; McRoskey et al., 2026).

Building on this gap, this study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach to investigate those phenomena. Using semi-structured interviews, the study explores how consumers perceive, interpret and assign meaning to AI-generated visual content within brand-consumer relationships. By prioritizing interpretation over predefined outcome measures, the study seeks to develop a more in-depth understanding of how trust arises in response to emerging forms of mediated imagery in the fashion context.

Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research question:

"How do consumers make sense of AI-generated fashion advertising, and how does this shape the brand-consumer relationship?"

To address this question, the study draws on qualitative data from 12 (twelve) semi-structured interviews with students at the Lund University School of Economics and Management (LUSEM). Participants were selected using a combination of purposive and convenience sampling, ensuring that they had relevant engagement with digital environments and fashion-related content. Photo elicitation was integrated into the interview process, using selected images from H&M's AI campaign "digital twin" as visual anchors to facilitate reflection on brand communication and brand-consumer relationships. The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Clarke and Braun (2017), with sensitising concepts drawn from Consumer-Brand Relationship Theory, Social Presence Theory, and Perception Theory. Given the study's qualitative and interpretive orientation, the findings are not statistically generalizable, but rather to provide in-depth insight into how meaning is constructed within a specific demographic and fashion context.

The remainder of this thesis is organized as follows: the next chapter presents a review of the relevant literature covering brand communication, the integration of generative AI in this domain, brand-consumer relationships, brand trust, and the role of visual communication in the fashion context. This is followed by the methodology, findings, and discussion, where the results are presented and interpreted in relation to the research question and existing literature. The thesis concludes by outlining the study's contributions, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

2. Theory

This chapter reviews the theoretical frameworks used to understand how consumers interpret AI-generated fashion advertising and how these interpretations shape brand-consumer

relationships. To build a complete picture, the literature is organised into four major sections. First, it explores the foundations of digital brand communication and the growing role of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI). Second, it uses Consumer-Brand Relationship (CBR) theory to explain how consumers view brands as relational partners rather than passive transactional objects. Third, it introduces Social Presence Theory and Perception Theory to explain how consumers judge brand trust, warmth, and hidden intent through digital signals. Finally, these concepts are placed within the hyper-visual context of the fashion industry to highlight the modern tension between automated efficiency and relational sincerity. Together, these theories form the analytical foundation for this study.

2.1. Foundations and Effectiveness of Brand Communication

According to Nandan (2005), brand communication serves as the essential strategic linkage between a brand's intended identity and the image perceived by the consumers. Organizations utilize these brand communications to share their core values and messages with their customers with a primary goal of establishing a specific and distinct position in the mind of their customers. This process encompasses every touchpoint where a consumer interacts with a brand, including advertising, social media, public relations, customer service, and direct marketing (Wijaya, 2013). Researchers argue that effective communication ensures all these touchpoints convey a consistent narrative of a brand's personality, and this consistency is vital because it helps build brand equity and fosters long-term consumer trust and loyalty (Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010; Wijaya, 2013). The effectiveness of brand communication is the primary metric for organizational success, as it dictates the brand's ability to convert simple interactions into durable customer relationships. In the modern digital environment, this effectiveness of brand communication is defined by three primary factors: Visibility, Responsiveness, and Perceived relevance (Espelita et al., 2026).

In the contemporary digital environment, consumers expect brands to maintain a **constant presence** on the digital platforms they use most. This expectation is particularly strong among young consumers who prioritize interactivity and immediacy, preferring interactive contents over traditional, one-way promotional formats. Thus, achieving visibility, responsiveness, and relevance has become nearly impossible through traditional human labor alone (Prasanna & Priyanka, 2024; Santos et al, 2022; Wang, 2023). Accordingly, prior research argues that this can be achieved through the integration of generative AI in brand communication (Lou & Copeland, 2025; Peter, 2025).

2.1.1. AI Development and Adaptation in Brand Communication

In recent years, literature highlights that the landscape of brand communication has undergone a significant transformation from traditional media to digital platforms due to the emergence of Generative Artificial Intelligence (Aydın & Karaarslan, 2023; Grewal et al., 2025). As a

technology capable of producing novel outputs, including texts, images, audios, and videos based on existing data patterns, Generative AI serves as the fundamental utility in creative and communication tasks (Feuerriegel et al., 2023). In the context of marketing, this includes using AI to generate promotional marketing materials or automate communication. This approach of modern marketing includes tools such as social media, web platforms, influencer content marketing, online advertising, email campaigns, and AI-integrated communication systems to bridge the “trust” gap (Lou & Yuan, 2018; Wang, 2023; Grewal et al., 2025).

Moreover, the application of generative AI focuses on the practical deployment of the technology in businesses. As generative AI can produce new outputs, businesses can deploy these systems to optimize their decision-making processes and improve overall organizational efficiency (Feuerriegel et al., 2023; Sidiropoulou et al., 2025). It is transforming marketing and brand communication by enabling firms to customize messages more easily, enhance campaign management, improve targeting, enable personalized engagement, optimize customer experience, automate faster social media content creation, and supporting tasks such as ad copy creation, and image generation (Kumar et al., 2019; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2019; Grewal et al., 2025; Hartmann et al., 2025). In consequence, traditional methods of content creation, which often required extensive human labor and long lead times, are being replaced by automated systems capable of producing high-quality text, images, and videos in seconds, effectively reshaping how brands tell their stories (Aydin & Karaarslan, 2023; Grewal et al., 2025).

As per study on AI in digital marketing (Ramesha et al., 2025), modern digital strategies are leveraging AI as a fundamental utility to provide immediate, customized, and frictionless interactions, and this shift towards a data-informed model enables brands to personalize at scale and engage in real-time customer interactions, and build long-term sustainable relationships making communication strategies more agile and data-driven. These current digital strategies have transitioned brand communication from one-way broadcasting to a bidirectional dialogic process (Chatzigeorgiou et al., 2025).

2.1.2. Perceived Brand Sincerity and Relational Implication of AI Integration

According to Schweidel et al (2023) generative AI represents a highly scalable and cost-effective solution for contemporary marketing strategies that enable vast quantities of digital asset generation. Generative AI leverages historical datasets to identify the specific drivers of consumer engagement and responses enabling the synthesis of highly customized content generated to maximize communication effectiveness and consumer impact (Chen & Chen, 2022; Sidiropoulou et al., 2025).

However, according to Kirk & Givi (2025), the increasing use of AI integration in content creations can also create a tension between technological efficiency and required human involvement. While AI can produce highly polished and innovative contents, it often lacks the emotional depth associated with human-created contents (Kirk & Givi, 2025). This suggests

consumers frequently interpret human-authored messages as more authentic, primarily because they associate human work with greater effort and intentionality, which can cause doubts about a brand's sincerity, as consumers may view the use of AI as a way to prioritize scalability over genuine connection (Bakpayev et al., 2020; Kirk & Givi, 2025). Conversely, a more functional view from the data suggests that the use of AI does not inherently decrease trust as long as the brand is credible and honest about the use of AI. This supports the AI-authorship effect by Kirk & Givi (2025), where disclosure can neutralize more discomfort if managed transparently.

While generative AI enables scalable and efficient content production, its integration into brand communication introduces significant ambiguity regarding how messages are perceived and interpreted by the target audience (Nazrin et al., 2025; Lou & Copeland, 2025). Specifically, AI-generated content often suffers from a perceived lack of human effort and intentionality. This absence can fundamentally alter the consumer's appraisal of brand sincerity and credibility, particularly when the disclosure of non-human origins triggers a sense of deception (Sidiropoulou et al., 2025; Kirk & Givi, 2025). As a result, such interactions may be perceived as weakening the emotional connection and perceived sincerity of the brand.

While consumer skepticism may be a short-term reaction to rapid technological innovation, organizations remain attentive to the potential long-term implication for brand-consumer relationships. Even if the initial unease is temporary, it is essential for firms to recognise and explore the risks these technological shifts pose to the durability and quality of their consumer relationships (Lou et al., 2019; Sidiropoulou et al., 2025).

2.2. Brand-consumer Relationship: Shifting from Transactional Objects to Relationship Partners

Brand-consumer relationships is a dynamic process that describes the psychological and emotional bond that forms between an individual and a brand. This connection is built through repeated interactions in which consumers examine whether a brand is honest, credible, dependable, and aligned with their expectations (Fournier, 1998). Prior research highlights that the Consumer-Brand Relationship (CBR) theory by Fournier (1998) provides a robust theoretical framework for analysing the psychological and social bonds that exist between customers and the brands. Fournier (1998) introduced the Consumer Brand-Relationship (CBR) Theory, which created a major change in marketing by shifting the perspective from viewing brands as a simple transactional object to brands as relationship partners. This transaction is rooted in the assumption that the relationship metaphor is a legitimate tool for understanding how consumers interact with brands. Thus, this theory suggests that brands are not merely passive objects used for buying and selling, but are active members of a relationship with the consumer. By viewing brands as partners, this theory highlights the deep, personal meanings and long-term connections that consumers form with the products they use (Fournier, 1998). Consequently, brands are seen

as co-creators of meaning through repeated interactions, where the behaviour of one directly influences the perceptions of the other across both physical and digital touchpoints (Fournier, 1998; Veloutsou & Guzman, 2017).

To conceptualize the strength of brand-consumer relationship, Fournier (1998) assumes that relationships are not static, but rather reflect ongoing interaction through which consumers interpret a brand's reliability, intentions, and alignment with their expectations. Within this framework, brands are interpreted as active relational partners rather than passive objects. Consequently, a brand's communication choices such as the integration of generative AI serves as critical signals that consumers use to diagnose the 'Brand Partner Quality' and overall sincerity of the relationship. When Brand Relationship Quality is high, consumers are more likely to forgive brand errors and adjust their behaviour to maintain the relationship.

In such cases, consumers overlook brand transgressions or devalue competing alternatives in the marketplace. By treating the brand as a dependable partner, this relational perspective allows companies to move beyond functional performance and help to foster deep-rooted emotional resonance and long-term loyalty (Fournier, 1998). This framework is essential because it establishes the brand as a humanized entity capable of having intentions and responsibilities within a relationship. Additionally, in the modern marketing landscape, the CBR framework is particularly relevant because it moves the focus beyond the functional performance of a product towards the emotional resonance and perceived sincerity of the brand's communication.

2.2.1 Securing Relational Durability Through the Foundation of Trust

Previous research emphasizes that the core foundation and durability of this entire humanized relationship is anchored in the concept of brand trust. In relationship marketing, trust is central because it reduces uncertainty, supports commitment, and encourages consumers to maintain long-term connection with the brand (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Matzler, 2006). Additionally, in marketing, trust is not only about product quality, but also about the belief that the brand acts honestly, reliably and responsibly (Matzler, 2006; Kabadayi & Koçak, 2012). Within the CBR framework, trust acts as the evaluative mechanism that validates the brand's status as a reliable relational partner (Fournier, 1998; Matzler, 2006). Without this foundation of trust, the relationship cannot progress into deeper states of intimacy or long-term commitment. In this context, trust is not just a fixed technical attribute but a relational necessity that reduces the psychological distance between the consumer and the brand (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Sidiropoulou, 2025; Kučinskas & Survilaite, 2025).

However, the recent integration of AI into brand communication has introduced a significant challenge to this foundation of trust, and scholars argue that, while AI improves efficiency, the human-to-brand connection may be weakened by automation. This shift risks damaging the perceived authenticity of the brand, and the underlying trust is compromised if the communication feels fake or overly algorithmic (Israfilzade, 2025). Thus, the significance of

utilizing the CBR framework in this digital context lies in its ability to account for the complexity of consumer interactions in digital and automated environments, and the ability to decode these technological shifts not as technical updates, but as behavioural signals.

Furthermore, when a brand introduces technological shifts, such as AI-generated or assisted communication, the CBR framework helps explain whether the consumer interprets this as a positive evolution of partnership or a detachment that weakens the existing bond. In this sense, the behaviour of the brand such as the decision to use AI in its communications is not viewed in isolation but is interpreted as a signal of the brand's character and its commitment to the consumer relationship (Fournier, 1998; Veloutsou & Guzmán, 2017). By grounding the study in this relationship perspective, it becomes possible to identify how specific digital signals influence the dimensions of intimacy, commitment, and relationship quality that define the long-term stability of the brand-consumer bond (Fournier, 1998; Lou & Copeland, 2025). Therefore, understanding the brand-consumer relationship is critical especially in digital context as it directly influences consumer behaviour and trust.

2.3. Establishing Foundations of Brand Trust through the Interpretations of Digital Cues

Brand trust is a particularly crucial element in digital brand communication, because in the digital landscape, consumers lack visibility into the production process, and the perception of intent becomes critical. Consequently, brand trust is not a simple reflection of product performance but it is the brand's moral orientation, and it is fostered when a brand appears authentic and transparent (Kabadayi & Koçak, 2012; Wei, 2023). Academically, brand trust is generally defined as the willingness of consumers to rely on a brand based on the perceptions about certain dimensions such as reliability (credibility), honesty (integrity), and generosity (benevolence) within the relationship because they believe the brand delivers what it promises (Doney & Cannon, 1997; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Matzler, 2006; Kabadayi & Koçak, 2012). In brand trust context, "Reliability" refers to the perceptions that a brand consistently meets expectations or a brand's ability to meet its obligation, and performs as promised, "Honesty" refers to the belief that the brand communicates truthfully and does not mislead consumers, and "Generosity" captures the sense that the brand cares about consumer welfare rather than acting only out of self-interest (Doney & Cannon, 1997; Gurveiz & Korchia, 2003).

Eventually, brand trust develops from a consumer's systematic exploration of a company's products and behaviours. If a brand consistently signals their honesty, safety, and reliability to consumers, brand trust will be developed subsequently (Kabadayi & Koçak, 2012; Doney & Cannon, 1997). Therefore, brand trust is not an immediate state but it is a result of a brand consistently aligning its communication and performance with consumer expectations (Matzler, 2006). In digital contexts, trust becomes more crucial because consumers often interact with

brands through algorithms, and mediated interfaces rather than direct personal contact (Mcknight et al., 2002; Jakkan et al., 2026). As physical cues are replaced by digital representations, trust serves as a necessary substitute for direct experience (Pavlou, 2003; Grewal et al., 2025). In this sense, trust is a comparative analysis shaped through consumer's interpretation of a brand's decision and signals such as transparency and emotional resonance which determines the brand's perceived reliability and integrity. This also means that digital cues such as tone, transparency, visual design, and consistency plays a major role in shaping whether consumers perceive a brand as trustworthy (Sidiropoulou, 2025; Ahac, 2025; Kučinskas & Survilaite, 2025).

2.3.1. Mediating Trust through Perceived Social Presence and Intent

To understand how consumers build trust towards a brand in the context of AI-integrated branding and communication, various researchers have utilized the Social Presence Theory. Social Presence Theory (Short et al., 1976) provides a useful framework for understanding the human touch in digital branding, and it measures how 'present' or 'human' a communication medium feels to the user. In addition, brand warmth is closely linked to social presence. A higher degree of social presence fosters brand warmth, and it reflects whether a brand seems sincere, friendly, and emotionally concerned with the consumers. In branding, these interpersonal qualities are essential because when communication feels immediate and human rather than mechanical, consumers are more likely to develop trust (Gunawardena, 1995; Kervyn et al., 2021). In digital brand communication, warmth can be conveyed through tone of voice, visual style, responsiveness, and the perceived human touch behind the message (Israfilzade, 2025), and when communication feels too automated or detached, consumers may interpret it as low in warmth, which can weaken trust (Kirk & Givi, 2025; Kučinskas & Survilaite, 2025). Consequently, social presence becomes a significant factor because the trust and brand-consumer relationship relies on brand's identity and emotional connections with, and usually interpreted as evidence of a brand's equity and moral orientation (Sidiropoulou et al., 2025; Lou & Copeland, 2025).

In addition to this, the impact of AI on brand trust is also determined by consumer perception and viewed as an extension of human expression. Various scholars have discussed this phenomenon in their studies and used Perception Theory (Solomon, 2018) as a framework to examine its role in shaping brand trust. The theory states that consumer perception is not simply a direct response to stimuli, but it is also shaped by prior beliefs, expectations, and contextual interpretations. This is significant in branding because consumers do not just see a message, but they infer meaning from it (Solomon, 2018). In marketing context, this means that consumers are viewed as active participants rather than passive recipients of information, and they construct their own meaning by interpreting messages through the lens of their existing personal beliefs and cultural backgrounds (Solomon, 2018). This emphasizes that consumers not only interpret the content itself, but also interpret what the content reveals about the brand (Ahac, 2025; Sidiropoulou et al., 2025), which in turn states that the way consumers perceive AI-generated

brand communication has direct relational consequences (Liao et al., 2025). Therefore, positive perceptions can strengthen trust if consumers interpret AI as a tool that supports innovation while negative perceptions can undermine trust if consumers interpret AI as manipulative and economically opportunistic (Sidiropoulou et al., 2025; Ahac, 2025). Consequently, perception plays a major role in determining whether AI strengthens or weakens brand trust, and it acts as a critical mediator between AI exposure and brand trust (Solomon, 2018; Zhang et al., 2023; Sidiropoulou et al., 2025).

2.4. Fashion Context: Navigating the Hyper-Visual Transformation

In this study, the fashion industry serves as a primary domain for studying the shifts in brand communication and brand-consumer relationship due to its a highly dynamic and visually driven sector. As a multi-trillion dollar sector, fashion relies less on the functional utility of a garment and more on the symbolic meaning, aesthetics, trend sensitivity, and consumer identity it conveys to maintain its global presence and within this field, branding and consumer identity are central (Shasherina, 2024; Ahmed et al., 2025; Lou & Copeland, 2025). Historically, fashion has operated within a space of “hyper-visual communication”, where the image often holds more weight than the physical products, and this tradition of carefully constructed, and often artificial, reality through professional retouching and styling creates a unique environment where the line between reality and representation is constantly blurred (Barthes, 1967; Sontag, 1977; Boughlala & Smelik, 2024; González-Valerio, 2025). Synthesising the history, fashion brands communicate lifestyles, product features, values, and symbolic meanings, which make the industry dependent on effective **emotional storytelling** and **visual identity**. Simultaneously, the sector has become increasingly digital, with brands relying on social media, online advertising, and platform-based engagement instead of traditional advertising to reach consumers effectively (Mckinsey & Company, 2023; Shasherina, 2024; Lou & Copeland, 2025; Grewal et al., 2025).

In this context of digitalization, the fashion industry is experiencing a fundamental transformation as AI introduces novel innovative methods for design, marketing, and consumer engagement, and by integrating advanced designs generated by AI and highly customized shopping experiences, brands are redefining the fashion retail landscape. Additionally, according to recent studies, the fashion industry is one of the sectors where AI adoption is growing rapidly both in design and in marketing (Mckinsey & Company, 2023; Feng & Liu, 2025; Mckinsey & Company, 2025). Lou & Copeland (2025), in their study note that fashion brands have started adopting AI-generated campaigns, while other studies show that AI is increasingly used across forecasting, product development, personalization, customer experience, and brand communication (Lou & Copeland, 2025; Grewal et al., 2025; Mckinsey & Company, 2025).

2.4.1. Negotiating the Tension between Automated Efficiency and Relational Sincerity

Consequently, the application of AI in fashion is not only optimizing efficiency but also redefining the nature of consumer-centric marketing, and by utilizing machine learning for data segmentation and predictive analysis, brands can develop innovative and personalized ways to engage and communicate with their customers (Rathore, 2017; Lou & Copeland, 2025). However, as these automated strategies become more common, the industry faces a critical turning point regarding the “trust” mentioned previously. While AI-integration helps brands stay competitive and responsive to trends, it also challenges the perceived sincerity of the brand-consumer relationship. As a result, ensuring highly authentic communication to sustain trust is essential for a fashion brand to maintain a loyal relationship with their consumers (Sidiropoulou et al., 2025; Shasherina, 2025).

In addition to this, as fashion is so visually dependent, the connection between brand-consumer relationship and trust is particularly significant. In the modern fashion landscape, trust is a critical element because consumers often make purchase decisions based on digital communication, imagery and narratives long before ever physically touching the product. In this sense, trust acts as a socially constructed bridge between the consumer and the brand (Lou & Copeland, 2025; Sidiropoulou et al., 2025). The CBR framework is essential here because it shifts the focus from the technical features of a piece of clothing towards the emotional resonance and perceived sincerity of the brand’s messaging. If a brand successfully fosters a deep relationship, the consumer trusts that the ‘idealized version’ of the world presented in marketing and brand communication will align with the brand’s actual values and quality. Therefore, applying Consumer-Brand Relationship and Trust frameworks to the fashion context is vital for understanding how these technological advancements shape the long-term emotional loyalty of the modern fashion consumers.

In conclusion, the established theories provide a comprehensive foundation for understanding how technology and psychology converge in the modern marketplace. This highlights a critical tension between automated efficiency and human connection by synthesizing the shifts in digital brand communication, the principles of relationship marketing, and the specific dynamics of the fashion industry. The theories suggest that brand-consumer relationships are not merely a series of commercial transactions but a durable humanized partnership where the brands act as active and contributing participants in the consumer’s daily life (Fournier, 1998). Scholars have defined trust as the psychological bridge that holds this relationship together, resting on the belief that a brand is honest, reliable, and acts with benevolence towards its customers. In the context of fashion, this trust is constructed through hyper-visual communication, where the symbolic meaning of an image often carries more weight than the physical elements itself (Boughlala & Smelik, 2024; González-Valerio, 2025).

Now this entire relational structure is being affected by the integration of generative AI, which serves as a symbolic signal rather than a neutral tool. As established through the theoretical frameworks, the use of AI can either be interpreted as creative extension of the brand's innovation or as a process of detachment that reduces the human touch necessary for deep trust. This theoretical framework leads directly to the core objectives of this study by exploring how the 'intent' behind AI visuals is negotiated by the modern generation of consumers, and how they shape brand-consumer relationship through their interpretation of AI-use by fashion brands in brand advertisements. By focusing on the interpretive process, this study seeks to bridge the gap between technical content generation and the emotional durability of the brand-consumer bond. The following methodology chapter will outline how these theoretical 'sensitizing concepts', specifically trust and relationship quality will be explored.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Approach

This study takes a qualitative approach to explore how consumers make sense of AI-generated fashion advertising and how this shapes brand-consumer relationships. Rather than aiming to quantify predefined variables or establish causal relationships, the study focuses on understanding how individuals make sense of visual content and draw meaning from brand communication.

The study is grounded in an interpretive perspective, which holds that reality is socially constructed and that meaning is produced through individuals' meanings, experiences, and interpretations (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). From this standpoint, trust is not considered fixed or objective, but is understood as context-dependent and continually shaped through consumers' engagement with communication cues. This perspective aligns with the study's emphasis on how consumers interpret visual signals and construct judgments about brand credibility and intent.

This study adopts an abductive research logic. Abduction involves an iterative movement between empirical observations and theoretical concepts, enabling emerging insights to be continually refined in relation to existing literature (van Hulst & Visser, 2024). This approach is particularly appropriate in contexts where the phenomenon is still developing, such as the use of AI-generated content in brand communication. It allows researchers to stay open to unexpected patterns without abandoning relevant theoretical grounding.

Concepts such as trust, signalling, and visual interpretation were used as sensitising concepts rather than fixed analytical categories. Sensitising concepts offer a general framework for engaging with empirical data without rigidly determining analysis in advance (Blumer, 1954; Bowen, 2006; Charmaz, 2006). In this study, these concepts helped direct attention toward how

participants interpreted and assigned meaning to AI-generated fashion advertising, while still allowing meanings and themes to develop through close engagement with participants' experiences and accounts. This approach ensured that the analysis remained closely connected to the empirical material rather than being driven solely by predefined assumptions.

Taken together, this approach is designed to capture the complexity of how consumers interpret what they see, treating trust as something embedded in meaning-making rather than as an outcome to be measured.

The researcher's positionality was recognised throughout the study. Both researchers are master's students at LUSEM with backgrounds in marketing and brand management and both engage regularly with fashion content and digital brand communication. Fakhri has prior exposure to AI tools in academic and professional settings, while Adithya has a personal interest in fashion consumption and branding. These experiences informed the development of sensitising concepts and the design of the interview guide. Throughout the analytical process, both researchers returned repeatedly to the raw transcripts to check interpretations against the empirical material rather than theoretical expectations. This iterative process was intended to minimise the influence of prior assumptions and ensure that emerging insights remained closely connected to participants' perspectives.

3.2 Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with students from the Lund University School of Economics and Management (LUSEM). The purpose of the data collection was to examine how participants interpret AI-generated fashion advertisements and how this shapes the brand-consumer relationship. Consistent with the study's qualitative and interpretive approach, the interviews were not designed to measure reactions or test predefined effects. Rather, they aimed to generate rich accounts of how participants make sense of visual brand communication and what they infer about the brands behind it.

3.2.1 Semi-structured Interviews and Photo-elicitation

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary method because they offer a balance between guidance and flexibility. An interview guide was used to ensure that topics relevant to the research question were consistently addressed, while the open format allowed participants to express their interpretations in their own terms and enabled the researcher to probe further where necessary (Ruslin et al., 2022). This approach was important because the study focuses on meaning-making rather than predefined response categories.

To support discussion of visual brand communication, photo elicitation was integrated into the interview process. Selected fashion advertisements from H&M's AI-related campaign were

introduced as visual prompts to encourage participants to reflect on what they noticed, how they interpreted the imagery, and what the visuals suggested about the brand. These images were not used as experimental stimuli or as a basis for measuring changes in their opinion. Instead, they served as conversation anchors that helped participants articulate interpretations that might be difficult to express through verbal questioning alone. This approach aligns with photo-elicitation methodology, which has been shown to enrich qualitative interviews by encouraging more detailed, reflective, and visually grounded responses (Mott et al., 2020; Gill, 2024).

3.2.2 Sampling strategy

This study adopted a non-probability sampling strategy combining purposive and convenience sampling to recruit participants who can engage meaningfully with the research topic. Purposive sampling is applied to ensure that participants who were likely to have relevant exposure to digital environments, fashion-related content, and online brand communication. Such exposure was important as the study required individuals to interpret visual fashion advertising and make sense of AI-generated brand communication (Saunders et al., 2023). The goal is not statistical representativeness, but to recruit participants capable of providing rich and relevant accounts of their interpretations.

Convenience sampling complements this strategy by drawing from an accessible pool of willing participants, which aligns with qualitative research where the priorities are depth and richness of insight (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Participants are mainly recruited from the Lund University School of Economics and Management (LUSEM), a group who are generally familiar with digital environments and frequent interaction with visually driven brand communication.

Rather than fixing a sample size upfront, the study takes an iterative approach consistent with abductive qualitative research. An initial target of around 10-12 participants was set; however, the final number of interviews was determined by the richness of the data and the extent to which additional interviews generated new insights (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021; Saunders et al., 2023). This approach ensures that data collection continues as long as it contributes meaningfully to the development of interpretations, not simply to reach a predetermined number.

To strengthen the analytical depth of the study, variation was intentionally introduced across participants' level of interest in fashion and their engagement with visually oriented digital platforms. This included participants with a strong interest in fashion as well as those with more casual or functional engagement. Such variation was important, as different levels of familiarity with fashion and digital content may shape how participants interpret AI-generated fashion advertising.

3.2.3 Interview Procedure

The interviews followed a flexible thematic structure. Each session began with questions about the participant's background, online behaviour, engagement with fashion, and relationship with fashion brands. The discussion then moved toward broader questions about brand communication, trust, visual content, and expectations of fashion brands within digital environments.

Visual materials were introduced during the interview as part of the conversation. Participants were asked to describe what they noticed in the images, what they thought the brand was trying to communicate, and whether the images shaped how they perceived the brand. Follow-up questions were used to explore how these interpretations were formed and what kind of cues they associated with credibility, effort, sincerity, authenticity, or trust.

In some cases, laddering-inspired probing was applied to move from surface-level descriptions toward deeper meanings. For example, when participants described an image as “generic,” “real,” “too perfect,” or “low effort,” additional probing was used to clarify what these judgments implied about the brand's perceived intention, sincerity, or trustworthiness. This approach draws on laddering as a qualitative interviewing technique that uses repeated probing to understand how consumers connect visible attributes to broader meanings and values (Veludo-de-Oliveira et al., 2006). Laddering, in this research, has served as a supportive probing technique within semi-structured interviews. This helped reveal the interpretive logic behind participants' appraisals rather than focusing only on descriptive responses.

All interviews were conducted individually to ensure that participants could express their views without influence from others. Before each interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the use of recording for transcription and analysis. All interviews were conducted with participants' informed consent and audio-recorded for research purposes. The recordings were transcribed using automated transcription software to generate initial written transcripts, which were then reviewed and checked for accuracy before analysis.

3.3. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, following the approach outlined by Clarke and Braun's for identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning within the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2017). This method is appropriate to the study because it supports a systematic but flexible analysis of participants' interpretations while remaining consistent with the study's qualitative, interpretive, and abductive orientation (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Rather than treating themes as objective categories that simply emerge from the data, this study understands theme development as an active interpretive process shaped through close

engagement with the transcripts, the research question, and relevant theoretical perspectives. The abductive approach of the analysis meant that the researchers moved iteratively between empirical data and theoretical ideas. Abductive analysis will allow researchers to engage with prior theoretical knowledge while remaining open to surprises, tensions, and unexpected meanings within the data (van Hulst & Visser, 2024). In this study, this was important because participants did not interpret AI-generated fashion advertising in a uniform manner. Instead, their responses were shaped by a range of factors, including their perceptions of the brand, interpretations of the visual content, the role of human involvement, and perceived implications for the brand-consumer relationship.

The analysis began with repeated reading of the interview transcripts to build familiarity with participants' accounts. At this stage, attention was directed not only to what participants explicitly said, but also to how they described AI-generated fashion advertisements, what assumptions they made about the brands behind the communication, and how they connected visual content to notions such as trust, credibility, sincerity, effort, and human presence. This familiarisation phase helped establish an initial understanding of recurring meanings across the interviews.

Coding was then conducted as open coding, allowing codes to remain closely grounded in participants' own accounts rather than being shaped by predefined categories. The coding process was documented in Microsoft Excel and the codes captured both descriptive and interpretive meanings. Descriptive codes included references to visual realism, product fit, generic aesthetics, and perceived artificiality, while interpretive codes reflected deeper meanings, such as perceived brand effort, cost-cutting, sincerity, creativity, human involvement, and trustworthiness. This distinction was important as this study seeks not only to examine what participants noticed in the advertisements, but also how they interpreted these visual cues as signals of brand intent and credibility.

As the analysis progressed, codes were compared across participants and grouped into broader candidate themes. This process followed an abductive logic, moving iteratively between empirical material and relevant theoretical ideas. Rather than using theory to predetermine the findings, the analysis used theory as a guide for noticing and interpreting meaningful patterns. Concepts such as brand trust, perceived social presence, perceived intent, and brand-consumer relationship quality were therefore employed as sensitizing concepts. These concepts provide general directions for engaging with empirical material without functioning as fixed definitions or rigid analytical categories (Blumer, 1954; Bowen, 2006). As Charmaz (2006) suggests, they serve as starting points that guide interpretation while remaining open to new insights emerging from the data.

Within this framework, sensitizing concepts helped direct attention toward how participants interpreted AI-generated fashion advertisements. At the same time, the analysis remained receptive to patterns that were not fully anticipated by the literature.

Candidate themes were further refined by assessing their internal coherence, distinctiveness, and relevance to the research question. Particular attention was paid to both convergence and divergence across participants. Patterns were not treated as important solely based on frequency, but on their explanatory value in understanding how consumers construct trust through interpretation. Divergent perspectives were retained as they revealed the conditions under which AI-generated communication was accepted, questioned, or rejected.

The final themes were developed as interpretive patterns that explain how participants make sense of AI-generated fashion advertisements in relation to trust in brand-consumer relationships. In this study, trust is treated as something embedded within the meaning-making process rather than a fixed outcome. Consistent with the study's abductive and interpretive approach, the findings are presented as an analytical narrative that connects participants' accounts to broader theoretical discussions on brand trust, perceived social presence, brand-consumer relationships, and AI-generated fashion communication.

Lastly, several ethical considerations were addressed throughout the research process. Before each interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any point without consequence. Informed consent was obtained before recording began.

To protect participant privacy, all interview materials were anonymised. Participants are identified using letter codes (A-L) throughout the thesis, and no personally identifiable information is included in either the findings or the appendices. Interview recordings and transcripts were stored securely and were accessible only to the research team.

An overview of the twelve participants, including relevant background characteristics and interview duration, is provided in Table 1.

Table 1 - Participant overview

Code	Gender	Background	Fashion Engagement profile	Duration
A	Male	Mexican, Sweden-based	Casual, product and value-driven; outdoor and sports brands	35 min
B	Female	Indonesian, Sweden-based	Moderate, narrative and UGC-aware; stops for appealing brand stories	58 min

C	Female	Indonesian, Sweden-based	Moderate, product-centric; Zara, Mango; stops when clothes appeal	46 min
D	Female	Russian-Estonian, Sweden-based	High, aesthetic-driven; luxury-aware; cultural perfectionism	43 min
E	Female	Swedish	High, values craft and creative seriousness; strong brand expectations	42 min
F	Female	Swedish	Moderate, consistency-driven; product-reality focused	48 min
G	Female	Chinese, Sweden-based	High, identity-driven; self-projection central to brand engagement	47 min
H	Female	Vietnamese, Sweden-based	Moderate, product-anchored; artist collaboration drives engagement	44 min
I	Male	Swedish	High, aesthetic consistency; brand promise; passionate about fashion	49 min
J	Male	American-Swedis h (dual heritage)	Casual, outdoor and sports brands; functional and lifestyle-driven	40 min
K	Male	Egyptian, Sweden-based	Moderate, partnership-driven trust; known brands; normalisation view	50 min
L	Female	Malaysian, Sweden-based	Moderate, verification-driven; material quality; UGC and review reliance	60 min

Although the study did not involve vulnerable groups, experimental interventions, or sensitive personal data, the ethical risks associated with the research are limited. However, these procedures were implemented to ensure transparency and respect for participants' rights throughout the research process.

4. Findings

This chapter presents thematic analysis based on 12 (twelve) semi-structured interviews conducted during the first phase of data collection. Participants, coded with participants A to L, were recruited from the students of Lund University School of Economics and Management (LUSEM) and reflect diversity in national backgrounds, level of fashion engagement, brand relationships, and professional experiences. Four participants (A, I, J, and K) are identified as male, while eight participants (B, C, D, E, F, G, H, and L) are identified as female.

The analysis follows the reflexive thematic approach outlined by Clarke and Braun (2017), with sensitizing concepts drawn from Consumer-Brand Relationship theory (Fournier, 1998), Perception Theory (Solomon, 2018), Social Presence Theory (Short et al., 1976), guided the coding process without constraining it (Blumer, 1954; Charmaz, 2006). The findings are organized into three sections. The first outlines how participants currently relate to fashion brands, establishing a relational baseline. The second explores how AI-generated advertising influences these relationships, focusing on the three interconnected dimensions: trust, sincerity, and effort. The final section integrates these dimensions by addressing a deeper underlying issue: the role of human presence in brand communication in a context increasingly shaped by AI.

4.1. How Participants Relate to Fashion Brands

Before examining how AI-generated advertising shapes brand-consumer relationships, it is necessary to first understand the nature of these relationships. Across the 12 (twelve) participants, two broad relational patterns emerged, largely shaped by the type of brand involved. These patterns are not mutually exclusive since participants may engage differently depending on the brand. However, they establish a distinction that informs the overall analysis.

4.1.1. Product-based relationships with fast-fashion brands.

Relationships with fast fashion brands, such as H&M, Zara, Primark, and Mango, are largely transactional and product-centered. What keeps the participants engaged is by considerations of quality, fit, and price, rather than by the brand's communicative identity or storytelling. In this context, brand communication serves a functional role, which helps participants explore the product rather than build a deeper relationship with the brand as an entity.

This orientation is reflected in how participants describe their engagement. Shopping is typically need-driven rather than brand-driven, with individuals identifying specific needs and then seeking suitable options, rather than following brand releases or campaigns (Participant B, C, and I). Several participants noted that they have never engaged with the advertising of brands they shop regularly (participants C and J). What matters, as one participant explained, is whether

the product meets the criteria such as quality, price, and durability: "*something that I can always wear, good quality, a relatively good price, and atemporal*" (Participant A). In some cases, participants add an independent verification, checking measurements, material descriptions, and customer reviews regardless of how polished the brand's imagery appears (Participant L and K)

What is notably absent in these fast fashion relationships is emotional or symbolic attachment to the brand itself. Brands such as H&M and Zara are described as functional rather than meaningful, where their ability is valued because they deliver consistent value rather than for representing identity or personal values. This distinction has direct implications for how AI is interpreted in these contexts, as explored in the following sections.

4.1.2. Symbolic and identity-based relationships with luxury brands

Relationships with luxury brands such as Chanel, Louis Vuitton, Gucci, and Hermes follow a fundamentally different logic. In these cases, what is being purchased extends beyond the product itself to encompass what the brand represents: its creative vision, craftsmanship, exclusivity, and social meaning. The brand becomes the primary object of consumption, with the product serving as a secondary to it.

For some participants, this relationship is rooted in identity alignment, where trust depends on the extent to which the brand reflects their own values and aesthetic preferences. As explained by one of the participants, the key determinant of trust lies in whether the brand expresses something about who they are:

"The biggest point for me to trust the brand would be how much I see myself in this brand, how easy it is for me to project myself on this brand." (Participant G)

For others, the relationship is grounded in expectations of creative investment. Luxury consumption is associated with the belief that the brand invests genuine human effort to both its products and its communication. As one participant noted, "*I pay for your design, I pay for your idea*" (Participant I). Within this perspective, the premium price functions as an implicit contract: consumers are willing to pay more because they expect a higher level of creativity, craftsmanship, and visible care. As the following sections demonstrate, it is precisely this expectation that renders the use of AI particularly contentious within the luxury tier.

4.1.3. The fast-fashion–luxury distinction as a recurring lens

The distinction between these two relational patterns is not merely descriptive; it represents the most influential contextual factor shaping how participants interpret AI-generated advertising. Because the nature of the relationships differs so fundamentally between fast fashion and luxury, the same AI-generated image can lead to different responses depending on which type of brand produces it.

In fast fashion settings, where trust is transactional and communication is instrumental, AI use does not undermine the relationship because that foundation does not rest on communicative or creative investment in the first place. In contrast, within a luxury context, where the consumer places value on creative vision and human craftsmanship, AI is often interpreted as a withdrawal of precisely what justified the premium. This distinction recurs consistently across interpretations of trust, sincerity, and effort in the sections that follow.

4.2. Maintaining Brand-Consumer Relationships in the Current AI Climate

Building on the relational baseline established earlier, this section explores what happens to those relationships when AI-generated advertising enters the picture. The analysis identifies three interrelated dimensions: trust, sincerity, and perceived effort. Trust concerns what participants rely on and whether AI disrupts those foundations. Sincerity relates to how participants interpret the brand's intent behind the choice to use AI. Effort reflects expectations regarding creative investment and whether AI meets those expectations. While these dimensions are closely connected, e.g., sincerity is read through the signal of effort, and trust depends on both, each contributes a distinct perspective to the analysis.

4.2.1. Trust: Brand Recognition, Familiarity, and The Fast-Fashion–Luxury Distinction

Consistent with the relational patterns outlined in Section 4.1, trust in the context of AI-generated advertising is not a simple yes-or-no assessment. Instead, it is shaped by what the consumer already trusts the brand for, which varies significantly across different brand types.

One of the clearest trust mechanisms in the data is the role of brand recognition as a buffering factor. For established brands with a proven track record, prior familiarity can absorb or mitigate concerns related to AI use before they fully develop. The logic is straightforward: when a brand has consistently delivered quality, its use of AI is interpreted as part of an ongoing, trustworthy relationship rather than a deviation from it. As one participant noted, *“I know that Adidas has good quality products and they are not the type of brand that tries to fool you”* (Participant K). This buffering effect, however, is specific to established brands. Lesser-known or unfamiliar brands do not benefit from this established trust, and participants were considerably more skeptical of AI use from the brands they had no prior relationship with (Participant K, H, and C).

The distinction between fast fashion and luxury brands becomes particularly significant in shaping trust, as it reflects differences in what consumers expect the brand to deliver. In fast fashion relationships, trust is primarily grounded in product consistency, and AI does not meaningfully disrupt this expectation. In contrast, within a luxury relationship, trust is closely

tied to creative commitment and the brand's investment in its relationship with the consumer. In this context, AI is often interpreted as a withdrawal of that commitment: a signal that the brand is no longer honouring the standards on which the relationship was built (Participant C, G, and I). For some participants, this interpretation carries a moral judgement, as reflected in the statement: *"It's weird, it's like it's not ethical. Even though they declared it"* (Participant C).

The issue of transparency further complicates how trust is formed. Whether disclosure helps or harms trust is not settled across the dataset because participants hold meaningfully different positions. Some participants view narrative-based transparency as reassuring, particularly when brands explain the purpose behind their AI use rather than simply adding a label "AI-generated" (Participant B and F). Others consider minimal disclaimers sufficient (C, H). However, a significant minority of participants expressed a preference for not being informed, as disclosure reinforces rather than mitigates their concerns:

"I would have preferred not to know. Because then that would be like, okay, you're already making generic stuff and you now are telling me that it's AI. You're putting zero effort." (Participant A)

These differing responses suggest that transparency is not a universal solution for AI-related trust concerns. Its effect depends on what the consumer already believes about the brand, which returns, again, to the relational foundation established in section 4.1. When a foundation of trust is already in place, transparency can reinforce it. When trust is weak or negative attributions have already been formed, disclosure may instead increase skepticism.

4.2.2. Reading AI as a Brand Intent and Honesty

Closely connected to trust, perceptions of sincerity shape how participants interpret a brand's decision to use AI. Across the dataset, AI was not viewed as a neutral production choice. Instead, participants consistently treated it as a signal about what the brand prioritizes, and by extension, as an indicator of whether the brand is being honest in its relationship with consumers.

The dominant interpretation across the dataset is associating AI use with cost reduction, a choice to prioritize operational efficiency over the quality of brand communication. This reading carries a clear implication: brand places its own margins above the consumer experience (Participant A, E, F, G, and I). As established in section 4.1, this implication varies by brand type. For fast fashion brands, cost efficiency is generally accepted as consistent with their positioning. In contrast, for luxury brands, the same interpretation is often viewed as a betrayal of the creative contract. As participant I noted *"Why am I spending my money while they're being cheap?"*

However, this interpretation is not universal. Some participants attributed dual motivations to brands, recognising cost efficiency and genuine creative exploration without viewing either as problematic (Participant H). Others reframed AI adoption as rational adaptation, interpreting it as

a rational response to changing technological conditions, where the efficient use of available tools signals competence rather than a lack of effort (Participant J). Across these differing perspectives, what matters for sincerity is not the presence of AI itself, but whether it aligns with or contradicts what the brand claims to stand for.

Importantly, brand communication can actively shape how sincerity is perceived. When brands frame their AI use through narrative (explaining the purpose and creative purpose behind it), the participants' interpretations shift from cost-cutting to innovation.

"When the brand tells the story, you're like, 'Oh cool, they have a digital twin self from the AI, okay, that's great.' It's a different narrative story because the brand tells the story compared to us consumers who have to perceive it ourselves."
(Participant B)

This suggests that sincerity is not only inferred but can also be constructed through communication. Brands that articulate the reasoning behind their AI signal both honesty and creative intent, which feeds back into their broader trustworthiness as established through the relational patterns outlined in Section 4.1.

4.2.3. Effort: Human Investment and Differing Expectations across Brand Tiers

As established in the preceding sections, trust within the luxury segment rests on the expectations of creative investment, while perceptions of sincerity depend on whether a brand's actions align with those expectations. The question of effort brings both threads together: it concerns what level of human investment participants expect from brands and whether AI use is seen as meeting or falling short of those standards.

Across the dataset, AI is most commonly interpreted as a signal of reduced effort. This perception appears consistently among participants, although the weight placed on it varies. In its most direct form, AI is associated with a lack of creative engagement, suggesting that the brand has chosen not to invest fully in its communication: *"They just want to brush you off. They don't really want to put too much energy in there"* (Participant G). For some participants, the concern extends further, with advertising effort seen as an indicative form of production standards: *"Low effort in advertising means low effort in production"* (Participant E). In this view, AI uses not only frame brand communication trust but also product trust.

Consistent with the fast fashion–luxury distinction outlined in Section 4.1, effort expectations differ significantly across brand tiers. In the fast fashion context, reduced communicative effort is broadly accepted, as brands such as H&M are not expected to invest the same creative resources as Chanel. Within the luxury segment, the expectation runs in the opposite direction: the premium price is understood as reflecting creative investment, and AI use is interpreted as a

failure to meet these expectations. As one participant noted: *“You pay more money for them, so they should put more effort into their work”* (Participant I).

However, this interpretation is not universal. A minority of participants reframed AI as a form of rational efficiency rather than an indication of reduced effort. One participant questioned whether AI actually requires less effort than traditional production, noting that producing convincing AI content demands its own kind of skill (Participant H). Another participant shifted the focus away from effort altogether, arguing that the real problem is not laziness but a lack of transparency, specifically the creation of human-like figures without the consumer's awareness: *“It's not about the effort for me, it's about that it's clear”* (Participant K). This perspective is analytically significant, as it suggests that the dominant interpretation of reduced effort may reflect a deeper concern related to honesty and human presence, a theme explored further in the following

4.3. The Human Touch in a World of AI

The previous sections established that trust, sincerity, and effort are the three dimensions through which participants interpret AI-generated advertising within brand-consumer relationships. What connects all three, and what became particularly evident in the reflections of participant K, is a question about human presence. Whether participants trust a brand's AI use, perceive it as sincere, or judge it as sufficiently effortful, all ultimately come back to the same underlying concern: what happens to the brand-consumer relationship when the human element is diminished or removed? This section addresses that question directly.

4.3.1. Perceptions of AI: Normalization and Resistance

Participants' responses to AI in fashion advertising fall along a spectrum. At one end, AI is viewed as an inevitable and relatively unremarkable aspect of contemporary brand communication: something to be adapted to rather than resisted. At the other, its detection triggers immediate negative reactions that lead to brand disengagement.

The normalisation perspective is grounded in pragmatism. Several participants noted that consumer resistance to new technologies tends to be temporary: people resist, then adapt, then accept (Participant K). Others pointed out that fashion advertising has always constructed and idealised reality through tools such as Photoshop, with AI representing a continuation rather than a disruption of this practice (Participant C and J). For these participants, the central concern is not whether AI is used but whether the output serves the consumer's need to examine the product. Three participants expressed clear indifference, indicating that their purchasing behaviour would remain unchanged regardless of AI use (Participant C, H, and J).

In contrast, the resistance position is shaped by something less rational and more relational. Some participants described an immediate sense of discomfort or negativity upon recognising AI-generated content, even when they found it difficult to articulate the reason (Participant F).

Others interpreted AI use as a form of disrespect: a signal that the brand is unwilling to invest the necessary human effort to maintain a meaningful relationship (Participant G and E). The most extreme response was immediate brand blocking: “Once I see them, it's like a no go area. I just block this brand” (Participant G). What differentiates these participants from the normalisation perspective is not their awareness of AI but the nature of the participants' prior relationship with the brand: those with deeper relational or identity investment have more to lose when the human presence is removed.

4.3.2. The Photoshop–AI Distinction

A recurring distinction across the data concerns how participants differentiate between Photoshop and AI-generated imagery. This distinction is analytically important, as it reveals what participants are actually objecting to when they express discomfort with AI; not image manipulation itself, but the specific nature of what AI does to reality.

Photoshop is broadly accepted across the dataset. It is perceived as an established industry practice that enhances a reality that actually exists: a real person wearing real clothing in a real setting (Participant C, J, and I). Consumers generally recognise that fashion imagery is constructed, and Photoshop aligns with these expectations. However, AI-generated imagery is viewed differently: not about the manipulation but because it generates rather than enhances, which creates a reality that did not previously exist

"Because the model is there, taking a photoshoot, and wearing the clothes. So when it's taken, it's really being used. But AI builds it as if the clothes are being used. So it's not really being used." (Participant C)

This ontological distinction has practical implications, particularly in relation to product assessment. When a real person wears real clothes in a photoshoot, the consumers can appraise how the garment behaves on a human body, such as how it fits, sits, and moves. When AI generates the clothing, that verification is no longer possible (Participant C, I, and L). In this sense, the concern is less about aesthetics and more about the reliability of the image as a source of product information.

However, there is a counterpoint within the data. One participant preferred an AI-generated image due to a minor imperfection: an irregular detail that had not been fully refined (Participant F). In this case, the imperfection signalled human presence more convincingly than a polished image would have. This finding challenges the conventional assumption that higher production quality signals trustworthiness, suggesting instead that some consumers associate credibility with signs of authenticity rather than visual perfection.

4.3.3. Human Replacement as the Fundamental Boundary

The distinction between Photoshop and AI points toward a deeper boundary identified independently by several participants: the difference between AI as a supporting tool and AI as a substitute for human involvement. Once articulated, this distinction reframes the analysis and represents one of the most analytically precise insights emerging from the data.

This perspective was articulated most clearly in an unprompted reflection at the end of one interview:

"It is not about the use of AI — it's about the replacement of humans." (Participant K)

From this perspective, the central issue is not whether AI was involved in producing an image, but whether a human being is present within the final output. This underlying intuition appears across multiple participants, although in different forms. One participant described the "vibe": the gestural, atmospheric quality that a real human presence carries, as something AI cannot replicate, regardless of how technically accomplished output is (Participant G). Another associated AI use with an absence of passion, suggesting that AI human creative investment carries an emotional dimension that AI cannot replicate (Participant E). A third described a sense of discomfort specifically when AI-generated people are used, as distinct from AI-enhanced background or settings (Participant F).

At the same time, the boundary is not fixed but varies across individuals. Some participants accepted AI when used as an enhancement to human photography, where real models remain at the centre, is received very differently from AI that is used to replace them entirely: "It's human with AI, so it's very different from only using AI" (Participant A). Others were comfortable with AI in contexts where its artificial nature is explicit, such as virtual or augmented reality where no claim to realism is made (Participant L). Despite these variations, a consistent logic emerges: AI is generally accepted when human presence is preserved and becomes problematic when it is removed. This is consistent with Social Presence Theory (Short et al., 1976), which emphasises that perceptions of trust and relational warmth in mediated communication depend on the extent to which the communication is experienced as human.

4.3.4. Innovation Alignment: When AI and Human Presence Coexist

The finding that human replacement as a key boundary also highlights its inverse: when AI is used in ways that preserve human presence, it can be not only accepted but genuinely appreciated. Several participants outlined conditions under which AI use earned positive responses, and these consistently involved AI functioning in support of human production rather than replacing it.

When brands use AI as a creative tool to extend human-generated content, such as generating different settings for real models, enhancing existing visuals, or enabling concepts that would be difficult to capture through traditional photography, participants responded with interest and, in some cases, genuine admiration (Participant B, F, and J). A central condition underlying these responses is that the human element remains visible. Participant B described a positive reaction to H&M's digital twin campaign, where AI was used to place real models in different global settings, precisely because the brand explained what and why it had done so, also because a real person remained at the centre of the imagery.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the issue is not whether AI should be used in fashion advertising, but how it is integrated in relation to human presence. Brands that use AI to enhance, extend, or diversify human production can maintain the relational warmth that brand-consumer relationships depend on. In contrast, when AI replaces human production entirely, it is interpreted as a reduction in the brand's creative and relational investment, especially in the luxury tier. In this sense, the differences between enhancement and replacement (with AI) reflect a broader divide between forms of innovation that strengthen the brand-consumer relationship and those that risk undermining it.

4.4. Summary of the Findings

The analysis across three interconnected sections provides a coherent explanation of how consumers interpret AI-generated fashion advertising in relation to their brand-consumer relationship.

The foundation is relational. Consumers approach fast fashion and luxury brands through fundamentally different relational frameworks: fast fashion being transactional and product-focused, and luxury brands relational and identity-centered. This distinction sets the baseline against which AI use is interpreted and shapes the intensity of responses across all subsequent dimensions.

When AI enters those relationships, it is not assessed merely as a technical or production feature, but as a signal about the brand's behaviour and priorities. Trust, sincerity, and effort are the three dimensions through which that assessment takes place, and they are closely interlinked. Whether consumers trust a brand's AI use depends on the nature of their existing relationship with the brand, the intent they attribute to the use of AI, and whether the level of effort signals adequate investment in the relationship. Expectations differ across brand tiers: fast fashion consumers tolerate reduced communicative effort, whereas in the luxury context, it is often interpreted as a violation of the implicit creative contract.

Underlying all three dimensions is a deeper question about human presence. Participants do not object to AI as a technology in itself, but they are responding to what happens when the human element is removed from brand communication. Therefore, the key distinction is not AI versus

non-AI, but human presence versus human replacement. When AI is used to enhance human production, it preserves the sense of social presence that supports relational warmth. When it replaces human production, that warmth (and the trust carried with it) is withdrawn.

These findings will be developed further in the discussion chapter, where their theoretical implications are examined in relation to Consumer–Brand Relationship theory, Social Presence Theory, and Perception Theory.

5. Discussions

The findings of this study demonstrates that the brand-consumer relationship in the context of AI-generated fashion advertising is not a static response to technology, but a socially constructed interpretive outcome. The study reveals that consumers act as active participants who organize and interpret digital advertisements to construct meaningful pictures of a brand’s characteristics and relationship (Solomon, 2018). Rather than reacting solely to the technical quality of AI outputs, the interaction is characterized by a complex negotiation of brand intent, sincerity, visible effort, and functional utility. These elements serve as the primary dimensions through which AI shapes the maintenance and health of their relationship with the brand.

In this framework, AI-generated advertising serves as a critical contextual signal that either reinforces or weakens the perceived partnership between the brand and the consumer. To provide a coherent and structured interpretation of how these factors shapes the maintenance of brand-consumer relationships, the discussion is organized around three broader thematic pillars:

1. Perceived Effort as a signal of relational commitment: This thematic pillar examines the psychological connection between perceived human investment, and the maintenance and consumer’s interpretation of brand integrity. It explores how the inference of reduced effort serves as a signal of relational withdrawal, where the brand is perceived to be deprioritizing the consumer bond in favor of operational efficiency.

2. The Human-Presence Paradigm: This thematic pillar analyses the tension between the functional efficiency of automated systems and the interpersonal warmth required for a humanized relationship. It examines the “human replacement boundary” and how the loss of human presence shifts the brand’s status from relational partner to a transactional object.

3. The divergent relational foundations: This thematic pillar examines how a brand’s market positioning and maturity dictates the specific expectations within the brand-consumer relationship. It explores how the relational contract of a brand tier, specifically the distinction between luxury and fast fashion dictates the boundaries of AI acceptance and how these boundaries are expressed by participants in relation to their long-term loyalty and ongoing commitment to the brand.

5.1. Perceived Effort as a Signal of Relational Commitment

The central finding of this study is that the brand-consumer relationship in the context of AI is significantly shaped by how consumers interpret the AI-generated imagery in advertisements as a symbolic signal of a brand's moral orientation (Wei, 2023). While current marketing literature frequently frames generative AI as a fundamental utility for organizational efficiency and the rapid generation of digital assets (Feuerriegel et al., 2023; Schweidel et al., 2023), the empirical data suggest that consumers do not view this efficiency as a neutral or purely positive benefit. Instead, the findings of this study reveals a “Labor or Effort-Sincerity judgement”, where the perceived level of human effort and investment in an advertisement functions as a direct representation for the brand's sincerity and commitment to the consumer bond. This interpretative process can be divided into two subthematic dimensions. First one is the inferred brand trust and the transparency paradox, and the second one is the implications for brand integrity and relationship quality.

5.1.1. Inferred Brand Intent and the Transparency Paradox

As established in the findings (Section 4.2.1 and 4.2.2), consumers act as active interpreters who construct meaning of brand-consumer relationship by looking through the lens of inferred intent, prior beliefs, and expectations (Solomon, 2018). In this study, “high human effort” emerged as the primary indicator of relational sincerity that a brand is sincerely invested in the consumer relationship. When AI is detected, the dominant attribution often shifts from technological innovation towards a perception of cost-cutting, laziness and a lack of investment. This interpretation represents a significant challenge to the maintenance of the brand-consumer relationships, as it signals a lack of benevolence, the belief that a brand cares about the quality of the interaction rather than acting solely out of self-interest (Gurvies & Korchia, 2003).

As observed in finding 4.2.3, the use of prompts to instantly generate an advertisement can be interpreted as a form of relational dismissal, indicating that the brand is unwilling to invest sufficient energy into the consumer bond. This suggests that the “Why” behind the use of AI is significantly more influential than the technical quality of the visual outputs. When the intent is read as a shortcut, it violates the relational commitment of sincerity. On the other hand, when the intent is reframed as strategic intelligence, the relationship remains stable. This highlights that the health of the relationship is a cognitive outcome based on whether the brand's intent aligns with a sincere partnership or a purely economic goal.

This finding regarding intent is further complicated by the role of disclosure, which this study identifies as “Transparency paradox”. As established in section 4.2.1, transparency alone does not automatically restore trust. Instead, the data reveal eleven distinct relational outcomes that disclosure can produce, depending on what the consumer already brings to the relationship. These outcomes reflect the different ways participants interpret the same disclosure signal:

Table 2: Consumer Relational Outcomes of AI Disclosure in Brand Communication

Relational Outcome	What it Reflects	Participants	Trust Direction
Effort-driven	Disclosure confirms the perception of Zero effort when a brand that already feels generic admits AI-use with no human present in the process.	Participant A & E	Negative Trust
Narrative-driven	Disclosure comes with a clear explanation of why and how AI was used and it is interpreted as honest, thoughtful, and reassuring.	Participant B	Positive Trust
Product-driven	Disclosure is viewed as irrelevant because trust is anchored strictly in functional product performance such as garment fits, looks appealing, and delivers value. How the image was produced carries no weight in the analysis.	Participant C, & H	Neutral
Ambassador-driven	Disclosure is undermined and interpreted as a sign of inauthenticity if the brand's human representatives feel misaligned with its core identity. However, trust is anchored when a brand collaborates with a favourite personality.	Participant D	Neutral
Consistency-driven	For consumers whose trust depends on predictable brand behaviour, disclosure is easily accepted and treated as a routine expectation from trusted brands as long as the brand's overall	Participant F	Neutral

	behaviour continues to act as expected.		
Identity-driven	For consumers whose relationship with a brand is built around identity and self-projection, disclosure deepens skepticism by confirming that the brand no longer reflects the consumer's self-image. Brand communication is interpreted as an extension of the brand's identity, meaning that the replacement of human presence with AI, the relationship is fundamentally damaged.	Participant G	Strongly negative
Product-anchored	Disclosure helps reduce uncertainty. When brands acknowledge the use of AI and provide clear, accurate information about the product, consumers' concerns about authenticity and product representation are addressed. Transparency supports consumer confidence and facilitates engagement	Participant H	Positive Trust
Aesthetic-driven	Trust depends on whether the brand delivers what it visually promises. Not disclosing AI is acceptable, but actively presenting AI-generated content as real is treated as deception, a direct breach of the relational contract that breaks trust and damages the relationship.	Participant I	Conditional Trust

Efficiency-pragmatic	Disclosure is accepted because AI adoption is viewed as a relational adaptation to modern digital demands.	Participant J	Positive Trust
Familiarity-driven	Disclosure is interpreted more positively because it is evaluated within the context of an existing relationship, especially for a well-established brand. Their track record of quality and reliability functions as a guarantee that mitigates the uncertainty associated with AI use	Participant K	Positive Trust
Verification-driven	Disclosure triggers an active search for independent, unpolished proof such as consumer reviews and user generated contents.	Participant L	Conditional Trust

These outcomes can be understood through Solomon's (2018) Perception Theory, which argues that consumers do not passively receive a message but actively interpret it through the lens of their prior beliefs, expectations, and relational history with the brand. In this study, perception theory actively explains the mechanism behind the transparency paradox. Each consumer builds a different meaning from the same disclosure, because they approach it with a different relational foundation. A consumer anchored in product consistency sees the disclosure as irrelevant, while a consumer anchored in identity sees the same disclosure as a confirmation of relational loss. In this way, perception theory explains why disclosure does not carry a fixed meaning but is always shaped by who is receiving it and what they already believe about the brand.

This directly complicates Kirk & Givi (2025) suggestion that disclosure reliably neutralizes consumer discomfort when encountering non-human content. The findings suggest that the effectiveness of transparency is governed by the consumer's pre-existing relational foundation rather than disclosure itself. For consumers who view the brand through a skeptical or identity-driven lens, transparency can be interpreted as a strategic shield or a formal confirmation of zero effort, which damages the relationship further. This suggests that transparency is not a neutral corrective, but a behavioural cue whose meaning is dictated by whether the consumer already perceives the brand as sincere partner or transactional object.

5.1.2. The Implications for Brand Integrity and Relationship Quality

The data further reveals a strong “spillover effect of effort”, where the interpretation of communication effort directly dictates the perceived quality of the brand’s physical products (finding 4.2.3). This suggests that for consumers, the intentional investment of human effort is inevitably linked to overall brand integrity and the honesty dimension of trust (Matzler, 2006). The absence of a visible human touch can signal a structural lack of care within the brand itself, damaging the emotional resonance for a durable bond.

Within the framework of Consumer-Brand Relationship (CBR), a brand is expected to function as an active and committed relational partner (Fournier, 1998). However, when the craftsmanship associated with human photography is replaced by automated scalability, the brand’s status often shifts from a “sincere partner” to a “transactional object”. This transition weakens the emotional resonance and connection of the brand’s message, making the relationship vulnerable to detachment. To maintain a healthy relationship, brands must navigate what this study terms the effectiveness trade-off, which is the tension between achieving high digital visibility through AI and maintaining the emotional depth required for a durable partnership.

Consequently, for a brand to remain a sincere partner, it must demonstrate that its pursuit of efficiency does not come at the expense of the visible effort and human investment that consumers interpret as evidence of relational commitment. Eventually, the consumer relationship is not damaged by the technology itself, but the inference of reduced effort. Relationships are preserved only when the “Why” behind AI use aligns with the brand’s identity as a committed partner rather than an opportunistic entity. Otherwise, the brand risks losing the perceived sincerity that serves as the foundation of long-term consumer relationships.

5.2. The Human-Presence Paradigm: The Social Presence and the Boundary of Human Replacement

The second major theme addresses the role of human presence in AI-generated fashion advertising, and its consequences for the brand-consumer relationship. Building on the verification processes identified in our findings, which recognises that consumers actively seek to confirm the reliability of brand communication through external channels, this study proposes the concept of *the human presence paradigm* as a coined term to describe a distinct interpretive pattern observed across the dataset. This paradigm refers to the findings that consumers do not appraise AI-generated advertising primarily on its technical quality or visual sophistication. Instead their interpretation is organised around the presence or absence of humans within the brand communication. This leads to a distinction between AI as a tool for creative enhancement that supports human production, and AI as a total substitute that replaces the human subject entirely, operating as the central boundary through which trust, sincerity, and relational warmth are assessed.

This finding extends the ‘Social Presence Theory’ (Short et al., 1976), which emphasises that different communication media vary in their capacity to convey human warmth and salience. The theory has traditionally conceptualised social presence as a continuum, where mediated communication can be more or less humanly felt, depending on the richness of the medium. The present study suggests that while this framing is useful, it does not capture the dynamics of when AI replaces humans in brand communication.

The data indicate that when AI is used to enhance human-produced content, such as for generating different settings for the real models or extending existing imagery, the sense of social presence is largely preserved and relational warmth is maintained. However, when AI removes the humans' involvement entirely and generates synthetic images in the place of real people, a different response is triggered. This is not a simple reduction in warmth, but a point at which the brand is no longer perceived as a humanized relational partner but shifts towards a transactional object. This human replacement boundary, as identified in the findings, adds precision to the Social Presence Theory.

5.2.1. The Faking of Reality and the Loss of the Human Vibe

A critical distinction emerged in the finding (section 4.3.3) regarding how consumers differentiate between traditional image manipulation, such as photoshops, and fully AI-generated content. Here the central relational conflict is not defined by the use of AI versus traditional photography, but rather by the distinction between human presence and human replacement. This distinction is important because it reveals that what consumers object to is not image manipulation, but rather a specific reality shift in what the image represents. Photoshop is broadly accepted as an established industry practice and interpreted as enhancement of an existing reality in which a real person is wearing real clothes in a physical setting. In contrast, AI-generated imagery is seen as the generation of a non-reality, where the link between the product and a physical body is disconnected.

In this sense, the product has never been worn by anyone, and the setting has never been captured. As articulated in the findings, the clothes in a real photoshoot are actually being used, whereas AI builds the image as if they are being used. This distinction carries direct implications for product assessment and trust, and it is significant because it determines whether a brand's relationship feels sincere or hollow. This finding reframes the research question by suggesting that the relevant element in maintaining a humanized relationship is not warmth in a general sense, but the presence of a human actor who serves as the anchor for social presence. This relates the concept of social presence not only in terms of warmth but also in terms of verification. As emphasized in the findings, the vibe, passion or soul of a fashion image in advertisement is identified as a humanized gesture quality that AI cannot currently replicate. Under Social presence theory, when a communication medium lacks these interpersonal cues, the interaction is perceived as cold and detached. This absence of human salience hinders the

consumer's ability to reflect their own identity onto the brand. Within the fashion sector, brand communication is deeply tied to the concept of the "extended self", where consumers utilize brand imagery to construct and reflect their own personas.

The findings (section 4.3.3.) indicate that the erasure of personality associated with synthetic models interrupts this psychological process of self-projection. If a consumer cannot see a real human being in the advertisement, the self-brand congruence required for emotional attachment is lost and consumers lose access to embodied information about how a garment fits, moves, and drapes, the information that is central to fashion purchasing decisions. As a result, the brand is no longer perceived as a humanized relationship partner but reverts to being a passive, transactional object (Fournier, 1998). Within this, the loss of human presence is therefore not merely an aesthetic concern but a reliability concern, one that has direct consequence for how consumers assess the integrity of brand's communication. This suggests that for a brand-consumer relationship to remain humanized, the brand needs to preserve a visible human presence to maintain the social presence that sustains relational warmth.

5.2.2. The Verification Post-Communication Stage and Its Implications for Brand Trust

The loss of human presence in advertising also points towards a broader shift in how consumers manage trust and brand reliability in an AI-mediated environment. As established in the findings 4.3.3, the integration of AI creates what this study identifies as a post-communication verification stage, where consumers recognize that they can no longer rely on the "idealized reality" of a brand's own imagery to validate a product's physical integrity. While traditional brand communication studies often focus on the interaction at the point of exposure, this study identifies a necessary additional stage in the consumer's decision-making process, where the consumers validate a brand's automated advertisements with independent, unpolished sources of product information, such as user-generated content and physical trials to reduce the uncertainty created by AI-mediated interfaces. This stage has not been prominently addressed in the existing framework of digital brand trust, which have tended to focus on the moment of exposure rather than the extended appraisal process that follows it.

This finding is closely aligned with the concept of brand reliability (Doney & Cannon, 1997; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001), which suggests that durable trust is grounded in the consistent delivery of product promises rather than just persuasive communication. The post-communication verification stage identified in this study extends this logic into a context of AI-generated content by showing that consumers are increasingly treating automated imagery as a starting point rather than a sufficient basis for judgement. While existing literature addresses post-purchase assessments and how consumers make sense of their decisions, this study offers a distinct contribution. Specifically, it examines AI-induced verification, a process where the consumers actively cross-check information because they realize the AI-generated visual

representation might be unreliable. As AI-generated imagery becomes more widespread in fashion communication, this stage is likely to become an increasingly important way of trust formation and brand assessment.

In addition to this, as AI becomes a standardized industry utility, consumers may increasingly adopt a normalization of AI adoption which is highlighted in finding 4.3.1. This emphasises that because AI integration is becoming ‘inevitable’ in the industry, trust must shift from the specific technology used to the brand’s broader character and consistency. However, this normalization does not imply a return to blind trust. Rather, it suggests that consumers supplement automated advertisements with user-generated content, customer reviews, and physical trials to reduce the uncertainty created by AI-mediated interfaces.

In this sense, for a brand to maintain its credibility, its automated narratives need to be consistently aligned with the physical reality and verifiable performance of the product. This shift suggests that the future of digital trust lies beyond the visual output itself. To sustain a sincere relationship, brands need to ensure that the pursuit of technological efficiency does not lead to a “deception gap”, where the automated promise of the advertisement fails to meet the physical reality of the product. Eventually, maintaining the brand-consumer relationship in the era of AI requires a balance between automated visibility and the verifiable human integrity that consumers now demand as a substitute for direct experience.

Taken together, the findings within this thematic pillar suggest that for a brand-consumer relationship to remain humanized in an AI-integrated environment, the brand must ensure that the human element remains visible and that its automated visual content is consistently supported by verifiable, real-world product evidence. When AI enhances human production, social presence is preserved and the relationship can continue to develop. When AI replaces human production, the sense of warmth and relational authenticity that trust depends on is withdrawn and this leads to consumers turning elsewhere to recover the certainty they needed.

5.3. Divergent Relational Foundations: How Brand Positioning Shapes the Interpretation of AI

The final thematic pillar explores how the interpretation of AI-generated fashion advertising is shaped by the pre-existing “relational foundations” between a consumer and a brand. These foundations provide the framework through which consumers explore a brand’s sincerity and judge the brand’s relational authenticity and long-term intent. Rather than producing a uniform response, this study finds that how AI shapes the brand-consumer relationship is highly contingent upon the pre-existing relational contract between the consumer and the brand tier. The findings reveal that the same AI-generated content can be read in different ways depending on the type of relationship a consumer holds with the brand and the expectation that relationship carries. This observation extends Consumer-Brand Relationship (CBR) theory (Fournier, 1998) by demonstrating that a brand's market positioning, specifically the distinction between luxury

and fast-fashion, dictates the boundaries of technological acceptance and determines whether AI integration is perceived as a positive evolution or a relational violation.

In this sense, positioning shapes meaning rather than simply adjusting the intensity of an effort. This distinction is important in an interpretive qualitative study, as the concern here is not with measuring how much market positioning changes consumer response, but with understanding how it shapes the meaning consumers construct from what they observe. This section analyzes why the same technological choices by integrating generative AI in brand communication can produce opposite trust outcomes depending on the brand's standing in the fashion hierarchy.

5.3.1. The Transactional-Symbolic Divide and Relational Contract of Brand Tiers

The findings reveal a significant “double standard” in how consumers interpret AI use based on the nature of their bond with the brand and brand's perceived status. The findings establish that consumers approach fast fashion and luxury brands through fundamentally different relational frameworks, a distinction rooted in what Fournier (1998) describes as the varying forms of relationship quality that consumers develop with brands over time. As established in the finding section 4.1.1, in fast-fashion contexts, the relationship is largely transactional, efficiency-driven, and product-centric, where trust is grounded in functional consistency, and brand communication serves primarily to support product appraisal rather than to convey identity or creative investment. Consumers demonstrated a high tolerance for AI, interpreting its use as a smart strategy that aligns with the brand's goal of digital visibility and trend responsiveness. Because the relationship is anchored in the functional accuracy of the garment rather than the brand's creative essence, AI-integrated efficiency does not threaten the relational foundation.

Within this framework, the use of AI is broadly acceptable and is often interpreted as a rational and efficient adaptation to the demands of digital brand communication. In this context, AI does not disrupt its foundation, because the relational contract does not rest on creative investment or visible human effort. As the consumer's primary concern is the physical item, the automated nature of the advertisement is viewed as a functional utility that does not disrupt the relationship. This suggests that for mass-market brands, maintaining relationships requires ensuring that AI remains a tool for product representation rather than a replacement for product quality.

In contrast, luxury brands' relationship is symbolic and identity-centric (section 4.1.2) and held to different relational contracts premised on craftsmanship and exclusivity. Unlike fast-fashion, the interpretation changes significantly when the brand moves into the luxury or premium sector. In these symbolic-based relationships, the relational contract is built upon the belief that the premium price is not only understood to reflect the product quality but also the creative craftsmanship, effort, exclusivity into its output, and a genuine investment in the brands' relationship with the consumer. This aligns with the concept of Brand Relationship Quality developed by Fournier (1998), which includes dimensions of intimacy, commitment, and partner

quality as indicators of the depth and durability of brand-consumer bond. When high-quality luxury brands utilize AI in a way that is perceived as replacing creative human investment, it is interpreted not as a production choice but as a betrayal of the brand's symbolic promise of craftsmanship and violation of relational contract. In this setting, the use of AI is read as a withdrawal of the creative seriousness that justifies the brand's premium prestige and market standing.

Within CBR theory, this finding suggests that for high-equity brands, sincerity is a non-negotiable component of the relationship. If a luxury brand uses AI to replace the human idea, it results in effectively demoting the brand from an aspirational partner to a transactional object. While AI helps a brand stay "top-of-mind" through constant visibility, for the luxury consumers, this functional gain is outweighed by the loss of symbolic meaning. The findings suggest that for high-end fashion, sincerity is defined by human intentionality and the perception of reduced human effort associated with AI use is read as a signal of low sincerity, a betrayal of the brands' stated identity as a creative craft-oriented partner. In a fast-fashion context, the same signal carries no such implication because sincerity in that relationship is not defined by communicative effort but by product reliability and price-value alignment. Therefore, to maintain a durable bond, luxury brands need to navigate these boundaries carefully, ensuring that their pursuit of digital efficiency does not violate the identity-driven foundation that their consumers rely on. In the end, the divergent reactions across brand tier demonstrates that the relational framework acts as a filter through which every technological signal is interpreted, determining whether AI is accepted as progress or rejected as a detachment from the consumer relationship.

5.3.2. Relationship Maturity as a Reputational Buffer

Another dimension of the brand-consumer relationship is the role of brand familiarity and maturity. The findings section 4.2.1, suggest that consumers who hold an established, longstanding relationship with a brand are more willing to extend interpretive generosity when that brand adopts AI, allowing established brands to experiment with AI without immediate relational damage. For well-known brands with a proven track record, AI adoption is more likely to be interpreted as a part of an ongoing and trustworthy relationship rather than as a deviation from it. In these instances, the consumer's prior experience with the brand and product quality functions as a guarantee that absorbs the uncertainty of the new technology. This dynamic is consistent with Morgan and Hunt's (1994) commitment-trust theory, which proposes that relational commitment built through consistent and reliable behaviour over time reduces uncertainty and enhances consumer tolerance, making individuals more receptive to unfamiliar or disruptive brand behaviour.

In contrast, lesser-known or emerging brands face a higher barrier to entry, because they have not yet established a foundation of sincerity. For a new brand, the relationship has not yet moved beyond the foundational stage into a deeper affective bond. Because these brands have no prior

reliability, their use of AI is more readily interpreted as a lazy shortcut or a signal of insufficient investment. This suggests that for emerging brands, the interpretive environment is considerably less forgiving, and the same AI content becomes a potential signal of low commitment. As Fournier (1998) argues, brands are interpreted not as discrete communicative acts but as ongoing relational partners, and each communicative decision is filtered through the weight of that ongoing relationship. Consequently, to maintain or build a healthy relationship in the AI era, emerging brands may need to invest more heavily in visible human effort to signal their commitment, while established brands can utilize their existing reputational capital to frame AI as a strategic evolution. This highlights that the interpretation of AI is never a neutral assessment of the image itself, but is deeply filtered through the history and maturity of the consumer's relationship with the brand entity.

Taken together, the findings within this thematic pillar demonstrate that AI does not carry a fixed or universal meaning across brand-consumer relationships. Its interpretation is always contextual, shaped by the relational contract the consumer holds with the brand, the tier of the brand within the fashion hierarchy, and the maturity of the relationship over time. This suggests that brand integration of AI should not be treated as a uniform strategy, rather its relational impact depends on pre-existing consumer expectations regarding brand identity and obligations.

6. Conclusion

This chapter summarizes and concludes the major research findings, while aiming to answer the research question. It also presents the study's main contribution from both a theoretical and managerial perspective, as well as argues for limitations and suggestions for future research.

This study set out to explore how consumers make sense of AI-generated fashion advertising and how this shapes the brand-consumer relationship. The analysis of the data reveals that consumers do not interpret AI as a production choice, but as a relational signal about the brand's intent, effort, and commitment to the relationship. Across the dataset, three interconnected dimensions emerged through which consumers appraise AI-generated advertising: the divergent relational foundations that consumers bring to brand, shaped by brand tier and relationship maturity; the perceived effort and sincerity that consumers use to interpret the brand's commitment within those relationships; and the role of human presence as a deeper organising principle that runs through all three dimensions. Together, these findings provide a coherent answer to the research question by demonstrating that the brand-consumer relationship in an AI-mediated landscape is not shaped by the technical quality of the content, but by what consumers infer that content reveals about the brand as a relational partner.

6.1. Theoretical Contributions

This study offers several contributions to existing knowledge in relationship marketing and digital brand communication. Each contribution extends or refines an existing theoretical framework in ways that are specific to the context of AI-generated visual content in fashion advertising.

First, the study extends Consumer-Brand Relationship (CBR) theory (Fournier, 1998) by demonstrating that technology decisions function as Brand partner Quality signals. Prior literature within this framework focused primarily on produced-related transgressions and communication consistency as signals of brand character. This study shows that the decision to integrate AI in brand communication is interpreted by consumers in a similar relational manner: as evidence of whether the brand is genuinely invested in the relationship or is prioritising operational efficiency over the consumer bond. When AI is perceived as reducing human effort, it is read not as a neutral production choice but as a withdrawal from the relational partnership. This finding extends Fournier's framework into a domain of digital communication technology and suggests that future application of CBR theory should account for technological decisions as a distinct class of relational signals, alongside the more traditional categories of product quality and brand conduct.

Second, the study extends Social Presence Theory (Short et al., 1976) by identifying a qualitatively distinct threshold that this study refers to as the human replacement boundary. Social Presence Theory has traditionally conceptualised warmth and human salience as a continuum, where different media vary in the degree to which they convey interpersonal cues. In this study, the findings indicate that this framing is insufficient in the context of AI-generated fashion advertising. When AI is used to enhance human created content, the sense of social presence is largely preserved and the relational warmth that sustains trust remains intact. On the other hand, when AI replaces human involvement entirely, a different response arises because consumers perceive the brand has removed the essential anchor needed for identity reflection and emotional connection. This is not simply a reduction in warmth on a scale, but a shift in how the brand is experienced as a relational partner. This finding offers a more precise account of how the loss of human presence affects trust in mediated brand communication.

Third, building on the verification process, this study proposes the concept of *the human presence paradigm* to describe the finding that consumers do not appraise AI-generated advertising primarily on its visual quality or technical sophistication. Instead, their appraisal centres on a single underlying question: is a human being present within this communication? This coined concept captures a cross-cutting interpretive logic that connects the findings on trust, sincerity, and effort into a unified analytical framework. It shifts the focus of AI-related brand communication research from the quality of the output to the perceived presence or absence of human involvement as a condition for relational authenticity.

Fourth, the study contributes to an understanding of what may be called *post-communication trust*, a stage in the consumer decision-making process that existing brand communication research has largely overlooked. The findings of this study reveals that, as consumers becomes increasingly aware that AI-generated imagery may not reliably depict how a product performs on a real human body, they substantiate brand communication with independent verification through channels outside the brand's control, such as customer review, unpolished user-generated content, and physical product trials. This aligns with the concept of brand reliability (Doney & Cannon, 1997; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001), which emphasises that durable trust depends on the consistent delivery of product promises, which is the brand's ability to meet its obligations rather than persuasive communication alone. The post-communication verification stage identified in this study suggests that digital trust is an active socially constructed outcome rather than a passive response to an advertisement. In this environment, the synthesized visual serves merely as a functional prompt, which the consumers actively cross-check and substantiate with independent verifiable and human-grounded evidence. This finding points to an important gap in current frameworks of digital brand trust and opens a direction for future theoretical development.

Taken together, these four contributions move beyond confirming that AI affects brand-consumer relationship and instead, they clarify the exact mechanism and conditions under which these shifts happen, offering a more differentiated theoretical account of the relationship between AI-generated communication and consumer trust.

6.2 Managerial Contributions

This study offers actionable insights and practical implications for fashion brand managers and marketing professionals who are navigating the integration of generative AI while seeking to maintain consumer trust and relational integrity.

The first recommendation concerns the management of brand effort signals. The findings of this study indicates that consumers interpret AI use through a labour-sincerity judgement, in which the perceived level of human investment in brand advertising serves as a direct indicator of the brand's commitment to the relationship. For brand managers, this suggests that the communication strategy surrounding AI adoption is as important as the decision to adopt AI. Therefore, portraying AI as a strategic innovation, rather than a cost-cutting shortcut, is essential for maintaining the consumer's perception of sincerity. This requires a shift from efficiency-focused messaging towards a narrative-driven approach that makes the brand's purpose and intent visible to the customers, demonstrating that the pursuit of technological efficiency does not come at the expense of respect for the consumer relationship.

The second one concerns brand tier-specific approaches to AI integration. The findings show that fast-fashion and luxury brands operate within different relational contracts, and thus AI adoption

needs to be managed accordingly. For fast-fashion brands, AI can be leveraged to enhance responsiveness and trend-alignment, as long as the product representation remains accurate and functional. However, for luxury and high-equity brands, the relationship between the consumer and the brand rests on expectations of craftsmanship, exclusivity, and creative investment. In this context, replacing humans with AI is likely to be interpreted as a violation of implicit relational contract that justifies the premium price. Therefore, managers of luxury brands should adopt a human-AI collaboration model, in which real human presence remains the anchor of the visual content and AI functions as a supporting rather than a substituting tool. This approach preserves the relational warmth and identity-projection that luxury consumers rely on.

The third recommendation addresses the limitations of disclosure as a trust mechanism. The findings of the study identifies the transparency paradox, in which the disclosure of AI use does not restore or maintain customer trust, and in some cases actively intensifies skepticism, particularly among the consumers who already hold negative perceptions of the brand. Therefore, simple labelling strategies are insufficient as a standalone response to AI-related trust concerns. In this sense, brands should combine disclosure with narrative explanation that makes the creative intention behind the use of AI clear and meaningful. Additionally, to support the post-communication verification stage that consumers now rely on, brands should ensure that their AI-integrated advertising is accompanied by accurate product information, including measurements and material descriptions, alongside unpolished social proof such as customer reviews and user-generated contents. These measures help the brand bridge the trust gap created when AI imagery cannot provide the kind of embodied product information that a real human photoshoot would supply.

6.3 Limitations

While this study provides in-depth qualitative insights into the interpretative processes, several limitations must be acknowledged regarding the scope and design of this study. Firstly, the sample is drawn from twelve Gen Z students at Lund University School of Economics and Management, representing a specific demographic with high digital literacy and an academically informed perspective on marketing strategy. Thus, the findings may not generalise to older age groups, consumers with lower engagement in digital environments, and those without a business-focused analytical academic background.

Secondly, the study is focused within the fashion industry, which is a hyper-visual and symbolically driven sector in which the emotional and identity-based dimensions of brand communication are particularly salient. Hence, the findings may not be transferable directly to more functional industries, such as consumer electronics or financial services, where perceived relevance and trust is primarily grounded in technical utility rather than the emotional depth and relational warmth, which are identified as critical in fashion branding.

Finally, as a qualitative-interpretive study, the findings offer analytical depth rather than statistical generalisability. While the small sample size permits deep insights for the identification of divergent relational foundations of the consumers, it does not allow for statistical generalization of how prevalent these views are across the global Gen Z population. Methodologically, while the use of H&M image prompts successfully anchored the interviews, the controlled interview settings may not fully capture the real-time, frictionless consumer experience of engaging with AI-integrated content within a dynamic social media feed. The goal was to develop a nuanced understanding of how meaning is constructed within a specific demographic and industry context, not to establish how prevalent these interpretive patterns are across broader populations.

6.4 Directions for Future Research

The contributions and limitations of this study together points to several approaches for future scholarly inquiry. Because the human replacement boundary emerged as a central threshold in how consumers appraise AI-generated advertising, future research should examine whether this distinction holds across other industries and among older consumer segments. It remains an open question whether the boundary between AI as enhancement and AI as replacement carries the same relational weight in sectors where visual communication is less central to brand identity.

As the fast fashion to luxury distinction emerged as the most consistent factor shaping how consumers interpret AI, experimental studies comparing identical AI content across different brand tiers would help to further validate and refine this finding. Such studies could assess whether the relational contract of the brand tier shapes interpretations across different cultural and geographical contexts, as the current study focused on a single European academic institution.

Furthermore, given the normalisation of AI being anticipated by several participants, longitudinal studies are needed to track how interpretive patterns and trust thresholds evolve as generative AI becomes a standardised feature of brand communication. As the technical complexity behind AI tools becomes more broadly understood by consumers, the labour-sincerity heuristic may weaken, and future research should examine whether the value placed on visible human effort diminishes accordingly.

Finally, because the post-communication verification stage sits largely outside existing brand communication frameworks, future research should investigate which verification channels, whether user-generated content, independent review, or physical product trials, are most effective in bridging the trust gap created by AI-mediated advertising. This line of inquiry would offer both theoretical grounding for the post-communication trust concept proposed in this study and actionable insights for brands seeking to maintain relational integrity in an increasingly automated landscape.

As generative AI becomes embedded in the everyday visual landscape of fashion communication, the question of what it signals to consumers will only grow more urgent. This study suggests that the brands most likely to sustain trust are not those that avoid AI, but those that understand what their consumers are actually reading, which is the investment and intention behind it, not the technology. The human behind the image still matters. That is a question worth continuing to ask.

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Appendices

1. Coding table (sample):

No	1			2			
Participant code	Participant A			Participant B			
Conclusion about trust	Effort-driven			narrative-driven			
Excerpt	Code	Category	Theme	Excerpt	Code	Category	Theme
<i>Human-made, it's going to always have way more quality than AI-made. AI-made, you can sense it's AI. And to be honest, it looks generic.</i>	Human production intrinsically associated with superior quality, AI signals inferior effort	Human-AI quality hierarchy	Perceived effort as trust signal	<i>Honestly, in this context, my perception is that I think the quality is really good. So if this is really AI, I can upload it. How can you make it so realistic and edit it so well?</i>	High AI quality signals significant creative effort; reverses low-effort assumption	Quality as effort proxy	Perceived effort as trust signal
<i>Companies are really just trying to save profit instead of really doing something genuine.</i>	AI use interpreted as profit motive overriding genuine creative intent	AI as profit-over-craft signal	Perceived effort as trust signal	<i>It's like a real photoshoot, but with AI. I'm like, 'Wow, I'm questioning how good AI is now.'</i>	AI quality that mimics photoshoot production earns trust through perceived craft	AI craft perceived as equivalent to human production effort	Perceived effort as trust signal
<i>When you use Adobe Photoshop or these sort of apps, it's to make the quality of the picture better... at the end of the day, even if it's digital, a human is behind it. A human is being like, 'This needs to be made better.'</i>	Human decision-making behind digital tools preserves perceived effort and intentionality	Human oversight as effort legitimacy	Perceived effort as trust signal	<i>I appreciate the fact that we're working. It's really good, it's really similar to me; it's actually an accomplishment.</i>	Perceived technical accomplishment of AI elevates brand evaluation	Effort accomplishment recognition	Perceived effort as trust signal
<i>When there's nothing behind building it, I think it's just like... there's something about it that doesn't seem like genuine.</i>	Absence of human creative input renders output inauthentic regardless of visual quality	Absence of human effort, genuineness deficit	Perceived effort as trust signal	<i>I think I would appreciate it if they were honest with giving this exact opinion of what they did with AI, rather than just putting a photo on IG and putting an AI disclaimer.</i>	Generic AI disclosure without explanation fails to communicate brand intent	Disclosure without narrative; intent opacity	Perceived brand intent shapes AI interpretation

<i>You're already making generic stuff and you now are telling me that it's AI. I think that it's just like, you're putting zero effort.</i>	AI disclosure on already-generic content confirms zero-effort interpretation	Disclosure compounds low-effort perception	Perceived effort as trust signal	<i>You have to tell the story behind the AI that they use.</i>	Brand intent becomes trustworthy only when communicated through narrative, not disclaimers	Narrative as intent transparency	Perceived brand intent shapes AI interpretation
<i>If you're already being greedy in making your products very accessible... and now you're also just wanting to be more profitable by using AI... it makes it more fast fashion. You lose a lot of competitive advantage.</i>	AI adoption by established brands accelerates brand commodification and destroys differentiation	AI as competitive advantage erosion	Perceived effort as trust signal	<i>When the brand tells the story, you're like, 'Oh cool, they have a digital twin self from the AI, okay, that's great.' It's a different narrative story because the brand tells the story compared to us consumers who have to perceive it ourselves.</i>	Brand-led narrative reframes AI use as intentional innovation rather than deception	Brand storytelling reframes AI intent	Perceived brand intent shapes AI interpretation
<i>I would have preferred not to know. Because then that would be like, okay, you're already making generic stuff and you now are telling me that it's AI.</i>	Transparency about AI use backfires when it confirms suspected cost-cutting intent	Transparency as intent confirmation (trust damage)	Perceived brand intent shapes AI interpretation	<i>The result that you can get from humans, or from AI, which doesn't necessarily replace, but they can exist and supplement.</i>	AI interpreted as complementary tool when brand intent is framed as additive not substitutive	AI as supplementary intent, not replacement	Perceived brand intent shapes AI interpretation
<i>I think that the people that you start using for your marketing material, they have to represent what your brand stands for and be consistent in that.</i>	Marketing choices (including ambassador selection) signal whether brand intent is authentic or commercial	Consistency of marketing choices as intent signal	Perceived brand intent shapes AI interpretation	<i>AI is made to help us to make different photoshoots with different styles or outfits or settings to help us visualize how the style is reality. So I don't think there's too much manipulation.</i>	Functional framing of AI purpose reduces perceived manipulative intent	Functional intent attribution reduces manipulation concern	Perceived brand intent shapes AI interpretation
<i>If I see that Nike or some brand is starting to use influencers that I don't really like, or I think that they don't represent the brand, I lose trust.</i>	Misaligned partnerships signal brand is chasing trends rather than maintaining authentic identity	Ambassador misalignment as intent betrayal	Perceived brand intent shapes AI interpretation	<i>I prefer not to look up this kind of advertising. I prefer to look for fashion from the consumer side. I think it's more honest.</i>	Consumer-generated content perceived as more authentic than brand editorial,	UGC authenticity over editorial polish	Human production as authenticity signal

					regardless of AI		
<i>They have the money to do it. At least have a bit of essence and a bit of decency to say, you know, we are spending a bit more money to make better marketing.</i>	Large brands choosing AI over investment signals deliberate disregard for quality. Intent is greed	Financial capacity makes AI adoption a moral choice, not a necessity	Perceived brand intent shapes AI interpretation	<i>If I come to this store, I won't enter the store because of the photo. I'll just look at the mannequin who wears the clothes or I'll look at the style, the color is cute. I won't enter because of the editorial photo.</i>	Editorial imagery (AI or not) disconnected from actual purchase decision	Editorial advertising decoupled from purchase intent	Human production as authenticity signal
<i>I remember I saw something in the past months, this brand did a marketing campaign with AI using their same style, they had real humans but enhanced with AI. The pictures looked very cool. But it's human with AI, so it's very different than only using AI.</i>	AI acceptable as human enhancement tool, unacceptable as human replacement	AI-as-enhancement vs AI-as-replacement intent distinction	Perceived brand intent shapes AI interpretation	<i>Photoshop is still working around the original image. You just touch up, right? Like how to adjust imperfections.</i>	Photoshop perceived as working with reality, AI perceived as departing from it	Photoshop vs AI. Reality anchor distinction	Human production as authenticity signal
<i>It's generic. It doesn't really have anything special. The image on the background has nothing special. It could even be a green screen. Anyone can take this picture.</i>	Visual genericness is the primary trust problem. AI is secondary to lack of creative distinctiveness	Generic content as primary trust failure	Genericness, not AI, is the core trust problem	<i>What I like here is maybe it mimics a real model, right? Like there's a real life, like taking the person and making a different style. So in my opinion, it's okay.</i>	AI grounded in real human likeness is more acceptable than fully synthetic generation	Real-person grounding increases AI acceptability	Human production as authenticity signal
<i>If a brand is already doing generic stuff and they use AI, people would not notice.</i>	AI invisibility in generic contexts, genericness absorbs AI signal	AI detection failure in generic brand contexts	Genericness, not AI, is the core trust problem	<i>You made something out of nothing. But what I like here is maybe it mimics a real model... if I feel manipulated and fooled, people will not exist.</i>	Pure AI generation without human reference raises deception concern: trust collapses	Fabrication without human anchor triggers manipulation perception	Human production as authenticity signal

<i>I think their marketing is super generic. If I would have thought it was AI, I wouldn't have bought it before if I had never worn it. So if you already have generic marketing, it would make no sense to add something human. It looks AI.</i>	Generic marketing indistinguishable from AI. Both signal absence of genuine creative effort	Generic and AI aesthetics converge	Genericness, not AI, is the core trust problem	<i>If all the marketing posts are using AI, what's real and what's not?</i>	Proliferation of AI content erodes consumer ability to evaluate brand authenticity	Reality-AI indistinguishability as trust threat	AI novelty and uncertainty shape trust formation
<i>There is no essence to it and there's no essence to the pictures. Ads from high fashion have a very specific aesthetic... the creative director transmits their style through the aesthetics.</i>	High-end brands build trust through distinctive aesthetic vision. Fast fashion lacks this essence entirely	Aesthetic essence as trust differentiator	Genericness, not AI, is the core trust problem	<i>I think it's still so new I still can't formulate my opinion, my standpoint.</i>	Absence of established opinion framework leaves trust evaluation unstable	Premature trust stance; opinion still forming	AI novelty and uncertainty shape trust formation
<i>I'm not really married to a brand. I use products and I consume them always because it's comfortable. I don't follow their story.</i>	Trust is product-specific, not brand-level. Brand narrative is irrelevant to loyalty	Product-level trust, brand narrative irrelevance	Product experience overrides marketing as trust foundation	<i>I've reached a point where I have a video that I'm like, 'Huh? This is it, right?' I read the comments, but no one commented. So I'm like, 'Is this true?'</i>	Inability to verify AI content through social validation creates disorientation	AI verification gap, social proof failure	AI novelty and uncertainty shape trust formation
<i>If I had never worn these pants, I would have never bought them because I think they look so generic. But when you use the product, I think you're sold to the product.</i>	Product experience bypasses marketing entirely. Generic advertising would have prevented trial	Product trial as trust gateway, marketing bypassed	Product experience overrides marketing as trust foundation	<i>You suddenly, your face becomes a model for what, and in the meantime you don't have any consent to that. It's kind of scary.</i>	Unconsented use of personal likeness by AI is perceived as a rights violation: trust threat	Consent violation as AI misuse concern	AI novelty and uncertainty shape trust formation
<i>Constant consistency in their products. Consistency in quality and price. And always the style is always very similar or the same. They represent an atemporal style.</i>	Trust built on temporal consistency of product quality and price, not communication	Consistency as trust anchor	Product experience overrides marketing as trust foundation	<i>You can create a face with any style... will it really be like that in humans? If it's in ordinary humans, maybe it's actually bad, who knows.</i>	AI-generated perfect bodies raise concern about misrepresentation of physical reality	Body image distortion concern	AI novelty and uncertainty shape trust formation

<i>There's always one product in that brand that stands out for me. It's something I can always wear; good quality, relatively good price, and atemporal.</i>	Trust anchored to specific product performance criteria: timelessness, quality, value	Atemporal product value as trust criterion	Product experience overrides marketing as trust foundation	<i>The price is good, the brand is okay, the style is okay. For example, the brand's aesthetic and mood board style is the same as what I want.</i>	Trust built on functional criteria: price, style fit, aesthetic alignment, not brand identity	Functional trust criteria	Needs-based evaluation overrides brand-driven trust
<i>I like things that are atemporal, that you can wear maybe for years and it's still a piece that you will have. I follow aesthetics more than trends.</i>	Timeless aesthetic signals authenticity; trend-chasing signals inauthenticity	Atemporality as aesthetic authenticity marker	Aesthetic consistency signals authentic brand identity	<i>I'm not the type of person who enjoys shopping. I shop for needs.</i>	Consumption is need-driven not desire-driven. Advertising has limited influence on trust	Need-driven consumption logic	Needs-based evaluation overrides brand-driven trust
<i>It looks like more intentional. I would say it's also H&M because of the black and white picture. I feel that H&M uses a lot of that marketing of black and white.</i>	Visual consistency across campaigns enables brand recognition and signals intentional identity	Visual consistency as brand identity signal	Aesthetic consistency signals authentic brand identity	<i>I don't tend to look at editorial brands. Whether it's AI or Photoshop, it's there since the beginning. Everyone knows that data manipulation is common.</i>	Prior awareness of image manipulation normalizes both Photoshop and AI: neither uniquely damages trust	Normalized manipulation; AI not uniquely threatening	Needs-based evaluation overrides brand-driven trust
<i>I don't really look at ads because I think the ads can just be very commercial. I like archival fashion, trends that are not in the moment but that have existed.</i>	Commercial advertising perceived as inauthentic, archival aesthetic valued for timelessness	Anti-commercial aesthetic preference	Aesthetic consistency signals authentic brand identity	<i>I have to identify what I need first, then I will look for it. If the brand is changing and I don't have it, I'll look for another brand.</i>	Brand loyalty is conditional on product availability, not emotional connection	Conditional brand loyalty, functional basis	Needs-based evaluation overrides brand-driven trust

2. Cross-participant thematic analysis

a. Theme Matrix

CROSS-PARTICIPANT THEMATIC ANALYSIS — 12 PARTICIPANTS (FULL DATASET)															
Legend: ✓ = theme present (✓) = partially present – = absent ALL 12 = fully convergent															
Theme	Description	B	A	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	N/12	Status
T1	Perceived effort as trust signal	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	ALL 12	CONVERGENT - core finding
T2	Perceived brand intent shapes AI interpretation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	ALL 12	CONVERGENT - core finding
T3	Human production as authenticity signal	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	(✓)	✓	✓	✓	✓	11/12	Strong convergence
T4	Brand positioning mediates effort expectations	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	(✓)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	11/12	Strong convergence
T5	Product-centric evaluation dominates	–	(✓)	✓	(✓)	–	✓	(✓)	✓	–	✓	(✓)	–	6/12	Moderate convergence
T6	AI novelty & uncertainty shape trust	✓	–	–	✓	✓	(✓)	–	–	–	–	✓	–	4/12	Divergent/partial
T7	Identity alignment as trust foundation	–	–	–	(✓)	–	–	✓	–	✓	–	–	–	3/12	Divergent/partial
T8	Consistency & reliability as trust construction	–	✓	–	–	–	✓	–	✓	✓	–	✓	✓	6/12	Moderate convergence
T9	Functional verification overrides visual trust	✓	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	✓	2/12	Divergent/partial
T10	Cultural lens shapes trust evaluation	–	–	–	✓	–	–	✓	✓	–	–	–	–	3/12	Divergent/partial
T11	AI as strategic efficiency - positive reframe	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	(✓)	✓	–	–	2/12	Divergent/partial

b. Participant Profiles

PARTICIPANT PROFILES - ALL 12 PARTICIPANTS					
Participant	Trust Anchor	AI Tolerance	Transparency Stance	Luxury vs Fast Fashion	Unique Contribution
Participant A	Product quality + aesthetic consistency	Negative - genericness is the real problem	Prefer not to know	Clear - luxury must have creative essence	Genericness is the problem; AI is symptom
Participant B	Functional + UGC authenticity	Conditionally positive	Narrative disclosure preferred	Clear - luxury needs more effort	Brand storytelling reframes AI
Participant C	Product outcome + visual appeal	Highly tolerant - outcome-based	Minimal disclaimer fine	Clear - luxury is 'different caste'	AI indifference; pure product-centric logic

Participant D	Brand ambassador + social proof	Conditionally tolerant	Acceptable; story not required	Clear - fast fashion AI fine; luxury low effort	Cultural perfectionism as aesthetic trust criterion
Participant E	Creative seriousness + respectability	Pre-rationally negative	Prefer not to know - quality over disclosure	Clear - luxury must invest more	Imperfection as authenticity marker
Participant F	Communicative consistency + product reality	Neutral - pragmatic	Disclosure = expectation management	Partial distinction	Product expectation gap as specific trust mechanism
Participant G	Identity alignment + self-projection	Strongly negative - blocks brand on detection	Required + humility + responsiveness	Clear - pays for design not product	Self-projection as primary trust; AI as personality deletion
Participant H	Product + influencer/artist collaboration	Highly tolerant - product-anchored	Transparent disclosure removes doubt	Clear - luxury needs storytelling	Effort equivalence argument; product authenticity boundary
Participant I	Aesthetic consistency + brand promise	Negative but context-dependent	Hidden + false claim = deception; hidden only = acceptable	Clear - luxury zero tolerance; fast retail partial	Effort cascade: ad effort inferred as product effort; passion argument
Participant J	Lifestyle alignment + functional value	Tolerant - AI is smart strategy	Context-specific: required for appearance claims only	Yes - but AI can overclaim brand tier upward	Efficiency reframe; prestige-price mismatch finding
Participant K	Partnership + prior product experience	Conditionally tolerant - AI inevitable	Transparency = trust but also marketing tactic	Known/unknown brand distinction instead of luxury/fast	Human replacement as core concern; normalisation trajectory
Participant L	Functional verification + material quality	Tolerant at attention stage; verification constant	Transparency good; must supplement with actual product image	Context-specific AI (AR/VR acceptable)	Verification model; unpolished reviews as authenticity; virtual AI context

3. Interview Guide and Questions

Note: the guide does not serve as a rigid question. The questions here act as a guide for us to bridge the conversation to flow smoothly

1. Introduction (Ethics and context)

- Brief introduction about the study purpose (general)
- Explain confidentiality and recording
- Confirm consent

2. Warm-up & personal context (Establishing Social Presence Expectations)

- Can you tell me a bit about your interests and how you usually spend time online?
- Do you usually engage with fashion content, or is it more occasional?
 - (or this can be asked as: do you someone who usually follows fashion trends or do you prefer your own personal style?)
- Which social media platforms do you use the most?
- Do you follow any fashion brands? Which ones?

Optional probe:

- Can you recall a fashion post that felt particularly relevant or personal to you? (self-connection)

3. Fashion Context & Engagement

- How do you usually interact with fashion brands on social media? (e.g., browsing, liking, saving, purchasing, or only commenting)
- What makes you pay attention to a fashion advertisement or post?
 - What typically stands out to you or stops the scroll and makes you look deeper? Is it the aesthetic, the message, or something else (personal reasons)?
- When you see fashion content regularly from a brand, does it influence how you feel about them? How?

Before asking the next question - If the participant doesn't mention H&M on the 3rd point of the 3rd section, **ASK**

- How often do you watch the posts from H&M and make a purchase from H&M?

If the participant already mentions H&M in the previous section, then directly ask the next question.

- When looking at brands like H&M compared to high-end luxury fashion brands, do you expect different things from their social media visuals?

4. Brand-Consumer relationship

- Are there any fashion brands you personally feel a connection with?
 - What is it about them that makes you feel that way?
- What is important to you in order for a brand to keep you as a customer?
- What are the things that keep you coming back to them instead of switching to a competitor?
- Do you feel that brands “understand” or represent you? What creates that feeling?
- If the brand you’ve followed for years suddenly changed its ‘vibe’ or way of communicating visually, how would that affect your relationship with it? (*started communicating in a way that felt off or impersonal*).

5. Trust & Brand Communication

- When you come across a fashion brand online, what makes you feel like you can trust it?
 - And on the flip side, what makes you doubt or question a brand?
- What makes you feel skeptical about a brand’s communication?
- In your own words, what does it mean for a brand to be honest or reliable in a digital environment?
- When you see very polished or “perfect” fashion images, what goes through your mind?
 - Does that change how you see the brand behind it?

Probe:

- Why does that matter to you?

6. Visual aid Discussion (Photo Elicitation)

Show image, pause, let them look (no mention of AI or origin)

- Take a moment... What's your first reaction when you see this?
- What stands out to you visually?
- How would you describe this image to someone who hasn't seen it?
- What kind of brand do you feel this comes from?
- What gives you that impression?

Interpretation Layer (this is the core)

- When you look at this, what do you think went into making it?
- Does it feel like something carefully put together, or more generic? What makes you say that?
- What do you think the brand is trying to communicate here?

- If you had to describe the intention behind this image, what would it be?

Laddering probes:

- Why do you interpret it that way?
- Can you point to something specific in the image that gives you that feeling?
- When you say [*their word*], what do you mean by that?
- What does that tell you about the brand behind it?

Trust Connection

- Based on this image alone, how does it affect the way you see the brand?
 - Does it make you feel more confident about them, less, or no difference?
- What aspects of the image shape that feeling?

Note: repeat with 1–2 additional images if needed, but please keep in mind that keep depth > quantity)

7. AI Awareness & Interpretation

(Only introduce AI here)

- When you hear something like “*AI-generated advertising*”, what do you picture or think about?
- Have you ever looked at a fashion image and thought, “*this might be AI*”? What made you feel that?

(If needed, introduce gently)

- Let’s say this image was actually created using AI. Does that change anything for you? Or not really?

(ask them to interpret deeper)

- When a brand uses AI to create something like this, what does that say to you about them?
- Do you feel like they’re putting in the same level of effort, more, or less? Why?
- Does it make the brand feel closer to you, or more distant in some way?

Probes:

- What makes you feel that way?
- Why does that matter to you?
- Does that change how much you trust the brand, or not really?

8. Reflection

- Thinking about the images we just looked at, how do you feel about brands using AI in this kind of content?
 - Has your view shifted at all while going through these images, or stayed the same?
- Do you feel like this kind of content changes how people connect with a brand? In what way?
- For you personally, would it affect whether you keep engaging with a brand or not?
- What would make you more okay with it—or less?

Laddering

- Why does that matter to you?
- Is that something you feel strongly about, or not really?
- Can you give an example of when you would accept it vs reject it?

9. Closing

- Before we wrap up, is there anything we didn't talk about that you think is important when it comes to AI in fashion content?
- Anything that stood out to you during this conversation that you hadn't thought about before?

4. Visual Materials for Photo-elicitation





**"I control my
Digital Twin's availability"**

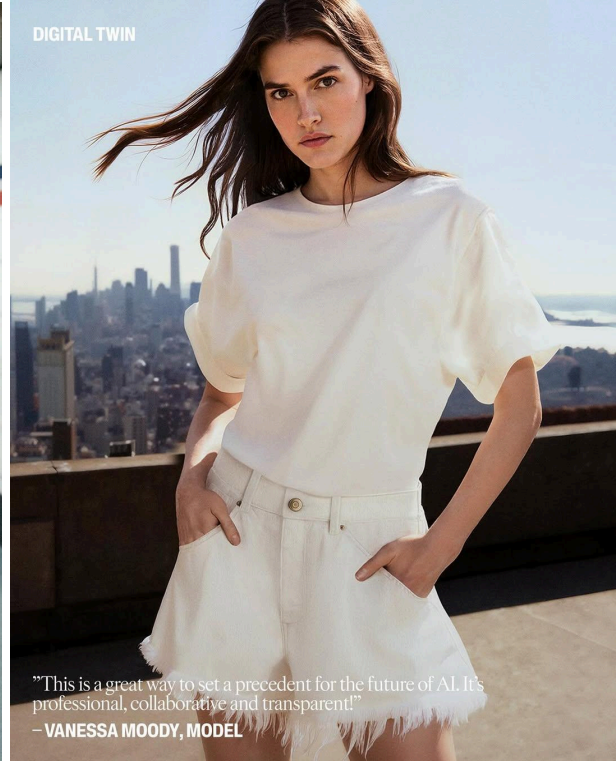
- Jill



**"My Digital Twin is proof
that technology can enhance
our profession, not replace it"**

- Vilma





Acknowledgement of AI Use

In accordance with academic integrity guidelines, this section outlines the specific and limited role Artificial Intelligent (AI) tools used at several stages of the research process. All AI tools were used strictly as supportive instruments to enhance efficiency, clarity, and research scope. They did not independently generate intellectual content, analysis, or final conclusions. All aspects of the research design, data collection, interview execution, coding, qualitative interpretation, thematic development, and academic argumentation were executed solely by the authors.

The specific roles of each AI tool utilized in this study are detailed below

- **Notion App:** This tool was used exclusively during the data analysis phase of the research to transcribe the raw audio from our twelve semi-structured interviews into initial written text. Following this automated transcription, the authors manually reviewed, corrected, and verified all transcripts against the original recordings to ensure complete accuracy before coding the data.
- **ChatGPT:** This tool was used during the drafting stages to assist with the structural organization of ideas and the refinement of qualitative and academic language. It was also used during the editing phase to refine the academic language, improve sentence flow, and polish the overall expression to ensure a consistent academic tone across the chapters.
- **Grammarly Pro:** This writing assistant tool was applied to the entire text as a final quality check for comprehensive grammar checking, mechanical correction, and sentence structure refinement. It was instrumental in detecting typos, improving readability, and ensuring clear overall expression.
- **Scopus AI:** This academic tool was utilized when writing the theory chapter. It helped the authors find the most recent academic literature and strategic insight published in recent years specifically from 2024 onwards, regarding AI adoption and digital marketing.
- **Perplexity AI:** This tool was used for broader literature exploration, particularly during the early stages of writing the introduction and the theory chapters. It assisted the authors in finding relevant academic sources, particularly for building the background context and cross-referencing concepts related to AI-generated advertising and consumer trust.
- **NotebookLM:** This research assistant platform was used to study the collective academic literature in-depth. It allowed the authors to upload, organize, and analyse complex

academic papers effectively, which helped build a strong and coherent theoretical framework for the introduction and theory chapters.