

Original Article

Seeing Class Through Code: How AI-Based Visual Marketing Reproduces Social Hierarchies in Global and Indian Marketing Strategies

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Abstract - AI-generated visuals are growing more common in advertising, as they are used to cut costs and time. However, the results of these visuals are not the same across audiences, and realism may be unevenly distributed between luxury and mass-market brands. Existing research mostly examines AI visuals through individual variables (trust, creativity) and in Western contexts, rarely comparing the AI visuals across different brand classes, especially in India. The objective of this study was to examine how AI aesthetics shape perception and whether those perceptions are class-coded across luxury and mass brands. This study used qualitative-dominant mixed methods. It takes the form of a comparative digital case study of three ads (Coca-Cola, Valentino, Tata Gluco+), with a human-made Apple ad used in interviews as a human-made reference point, supported by 3 semi-structured interviews, a 32-respondent survey of urban participants 15–25, and secondary data from public and industry commentary. The study found that a brand's class shaped how its visuals were judged, rather than them being judged on their own. It also found that there was a shared visual grammar for detecting the presence of AI; however, detection did not lead to disengagement alone, but execution and brand positioning were more significant. This study shifts the question from whether AI harms perception to under what conditions it does.

Keywords - AI-Generated Visuals, Brand Perception, Class-Coding, Luxury And Mass-Market Brands, Visual Marketing.

1. Introduction

Artificial intelligence has become more prevalent in visual marketing, especially in digital and social media marketing. AI-assisted advertising is most commonly utilised as a tool to improve efficiency and reduce marketing costs. Research argues that advertisements with AI-generated visuals do not produce the same effect across different audiences (Sun et al., 2025). Recent marketing campaigns suggest that qualities such as refinement, realism, emotional depth, and narrative sophistication in AI visuals are unevenly distributed across brands targeting different socio-economic audiences (Valentino, 2025; Coca-Cola, 2025; Tata Gluco+, 2025).

This study investigates AI-generated visual marketing within the international and specifically Indian context and marketing campaigns. Current literature has paid less attention to how luxury brands are often associated with sophistication, realism, subtlety, and emotional restraint in AI visuals, whereas mass market brands tend to use exaggerated AI imagery (Sun et al., 2025; To et al., 2025). Due to these stylistic differences, audiences may perceive brands across different social groups differently. However,

existing research has largely been conducted in Western contexts and often examines AI advertising through variables like trust, creativity, or anthropomorphism, rather than comparing how AI visual aesthetics change across brand classes, with less attention given to emerging markets like India. Therefore, it is essential to study this gap to understand how social perception in modern consumer culture varies due to the aesthetics of AI-generated marketing.

The primary goal of this research is to analyse the differences in the use of AI-generated and AI-assisted visual marketing in the luxury and mass markets, and how these differences reflect class-coded patterns in visual communication. It also aims to perform a comparative study of AI-driven advertisements released by Coca-Cola, Valentino, and the Tata Gluco+ IPL campaign, using Apple's human-made campaign as a reference point in the interviews. Lastly, the research seeks to explore how audiences interpret AI-based visuals in relation to brand value, trust, aspiration, and social status. This way, the study provides a comparative, brand-class analysis of AI visual marketing across luxury and mass-market brands from within an



Indian-inclusive sample, a combination that few of the existing studies make use of.

2. Review of Literature

Research shows that digital marketing plays a prominent role in strengthening customers' trust and loyalty. The findings of a quantitative analysis conducted on 248 respondents indicated a positive impact of digital marketing on purchase intention, consumer trust and brand loyalty. The findings also show that digital marketing improves trust and brand loyalty, thus boosting purchase intention (Desembrianita et al., 2024). However, while the focus of this study is on digital marketing as a whole rather than AI, it highlights the crucial role of effective marketing that AI-powered ads can either build upon or tear down.

Similarly, a study of digital marketing strategies in e-commerce revealed that engaging with customers digitally, especially by personalising and interacting with them, helps to improve the perceived value and customer engagement, and eventually strengthens brand loyalty. The key variables connecting digital marketing to repeat purchasing behaviour were trust and perceived value (Rowi et al., 2024).

The effect of AI generated visuals varies by different social and class groups. Research indicates that different social classes of audiences have different preferences: AI that shows stronger human characteristics, such as expressiveness of emotions, facial realism, and narrative tone, is often preferred by those of higher social class, whereas audiences of lower social class individuals often want AI that seems more functional and with fewer human characteristics. These results indicate that the perception of AI-generated advertisements is not the same across socio-economic classes (Sun et al., 2025).

In the context of luxury branding, research demonstrates that the usage of AI-generated visuals can negatively affect consumer attitudes when it is recognized as low-effort and inauthentic. Findings indicate that luxury brands, including disclosed AI-generated visuals, tend to face backlash compared to mass-market brands, unless the AI content is recognized as highly creative (To et al., 2025).

Recent academic research recognizes many characteristics of AI-powered marketing campaigns. Research examining AI-generated advertising highlights features such as informativeness, entertainment, and perceived innovativeness as central characteristics influencing consumer engagement (Wu et al., 2025). AI-driven campaigns tend to be characterised by lower costs and faster production of content, enabling brands to make consistent marketing content. Research also demonstrates that in an informational context, AI-generated content often performs superior, where clarity and efficiency are emphasised (Chen et al., 2024; Lu et al., 2025).

Simultaneously, existing literature suggests that completely AI-generated campaigns may face restrictions in emotional storytelling and cultural impact when compared to human-made advertisements. This is the main cause of the emergence of human and AI collaboration, which includes AI-assisted visual production and humans giving narrative direction and storytelling (Madathil, 2025). This collaboration between AI and humans has been shown to reduce the artificiality of AI-driven advertising.

Research finds that factors in addition to audience class, such as brand class, also shape the way AI ads are received. In a 2×2 experiment crossing model type (AI versus human) with brand type (luxury versus non-luxury), it was determined that the AI models led to a rise in advertising skepticism, which in turn lowered brand advocacy, word-of-mouth intention, and purchase intention; participants associated AI use with concerns about low effort and the devaluation of the brand's marketing (Kim, 2026). Therefore, Brand class, as well as audience class, is a factor that shapes the reception of AI-visual marketing.

Empirical scholarship within the Indian context is still limited. The existing literature in India is mostly interpretive: qualitative analyses of AI-powered campaigns and virtual influencers focus on the impact on authenticity and brand perception without measuring consumer response directly (Patel & Dada, 2025). Most of the remaining literature has been done within Western or global contexts, with little empirical attention given to emerging markets such as India. Although existing research provides insights into the effectiveness of AI-driven advertising and consumer perception across differing socio-economic groups, many limitations remain. Existing studies mainly examine AI advertising in contexts of purchase intention, trust, and engagement; they tend to focus on isolated variables such as anthropomorphism, creativity, and informational effectiveness. However, limited literature compares how the characteristics and style of AI-generated visuals differ between luxury and mass-market brands.

3. Methodology

The study used a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods research design taking a social constructivist approach, which argues that reality and meaning are socially produced through cultural interpretation rather than existing as objective truths (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This perspective is suitable for this research because it interprets AI-driven advertising aesthetics as culturally produced meanings that can reproduce class hierarchies.

The study takes place as a comparative digital case study, examining three campaigns: the Coca-cola Christmas 2025 campaign, the Valentino Garavani DeVain Bag 2025 Advertisement and the Tata Gluco+ IPL 2025 advertising campaign. These are analysed across YouTube, Instagram,

and X, with a fourth ad — Apple’s human-made campaign — included in the interviews as a reference point rather than a case study. These campaigns were chosen as they were all high-visibility 2025 releases across different brand classes: Coca-Cola as a mass-market brand, Valentino as a luxury brand, and Tata Gluco+ as an Indian campaign, each using AI-generated visuals.

To add a layer of primary data to the study, the study includes an eight-question questionnaire and 3 semi-structured interviews. All participants were aged 15-25 and based in Telangana, India, and consistently engaged with digital advertisements. The survey was fully anonymous and did not collect names or identifying details; as a result, gender and other demographic breakdowns were not recorded. Participants were chosen using a convenience sampling method, a non-probability sampling method where participants are selected because they are accessible to the researcher (Lichtman, 2013). While a larger survey sample size was sought, recruitment was constrained by the short data collection window of 2-4 weeks and also convenience sampling.

The research methods used in this study are surveys and interviews. Aimed at capturing participants’ opinion on AI-assisted advertising, including their perspective on creativity, authenticity and brand perception. The three interviews were semi-structured and took place over a zoom call, each lasting approximately 5-6 minutes. The same set of questions was used in each interview to keep responses comparable. Interviews were recorded and transcribed using Adobe Podcast, and the transcripts were then coded manually. The questionnaire had eight closed-ended items and was administered online through google forms. All questions used fixed-response formats, multiple-choice and rating-scale options, which allowed responses to be summarised quantitatively.

The data collected was analysed using thematic analysis — which Braun and Clarke (2006), as cited in Flick (2014), describe as a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns of meaning within qualitative data, allowing researchers to interpret and organise findings around recurring themes rather than statistical outcomes— and in this study, it was used to identify stylisation, emotional tone, narrative depth, visibility of AI, and class-coded “luxury/mass” cues. The coding of the responses was done manually by a single researcher to identify patterns. Codes were developed through observation and repeated reading of the interview transcripts, and then they were organised under the study’s three themes. Microsoft Excel was used for creating descriptive charts to summarize survey responses.

Multiple ethical considerations were followed while collecting data. The advertisements were sourced from publicly accessible digital platforms, and no sensitive

information, financial, or social, about the respondents was collected.

This research does not involve vulnerable, marginalized, confidential, or endangered groups, sites or datasets. The participants involved in this study consist of urban youth and young adults aged 15-25, recruited through convenience sampling. As the sample included participants aged 15–17, verbal informed consent was obtained, and parental consent was secured for participants under 18. To maintain confidentiality while collecting the data, names, phone numbers, handles, or school identifiers of the participants were not collected. Responses were recorded anonymously to ensure that participants’ privacy was protected.

This study was ethically reviewed by a doctoral researcher with over 10 years of qualitative research experience.

4. Analysis

4.1. Class-Coded Perception

Brand hierarchy was legible to participants even before visual analysis began. This is shown by three interviewees, two of whom ranked the Apple advert first, although for different reasons. For one participant, the ranking required no visual reasoning — Apple is “clearly a more high-end product”, and that was enough. Another participant reached the same conclusion through a visual analysis: “every shot was carefully lit...it all came together in a way that felt like real effort went into every single detail.”

This difference is also reproduced in the results of the survey, showing that there is a difference in the way visual polish and realism are assessed. In Q2, 21.9% of respondents said that AI visuals are “Highly polished and premium”, and in Q4, 56.3% said AI visuals are “noticeably artificial.” This indicates that realism and visual polish are not fully related and are judged separately.

The class-coded divergence is not unique to the participants; it is also visible in how AI advertising was received publicly. Valentino’s advert had Instagram comments describing the campaign as “anti-class, anti-taste, anti-luxury” (Cybernews, 2025). These responses are not complaints about only visual quality; they frame AI use as a contradiction of what luxury is supposed to represent. Contrastingly, the Tata campaign was celebrated by the press not as visually superior but as a milestone for AI production in Indian markets (Afaqs, 2025). These two reactions reflect two entirely different ways of evaluating AI in advertising — Valentino was judged against luxury branding and was found to violate it, while Tata was judged against the context of innovation in the Indian markets and was celebrated. The technology was identical, but what differed was what each brand is expected to represent.

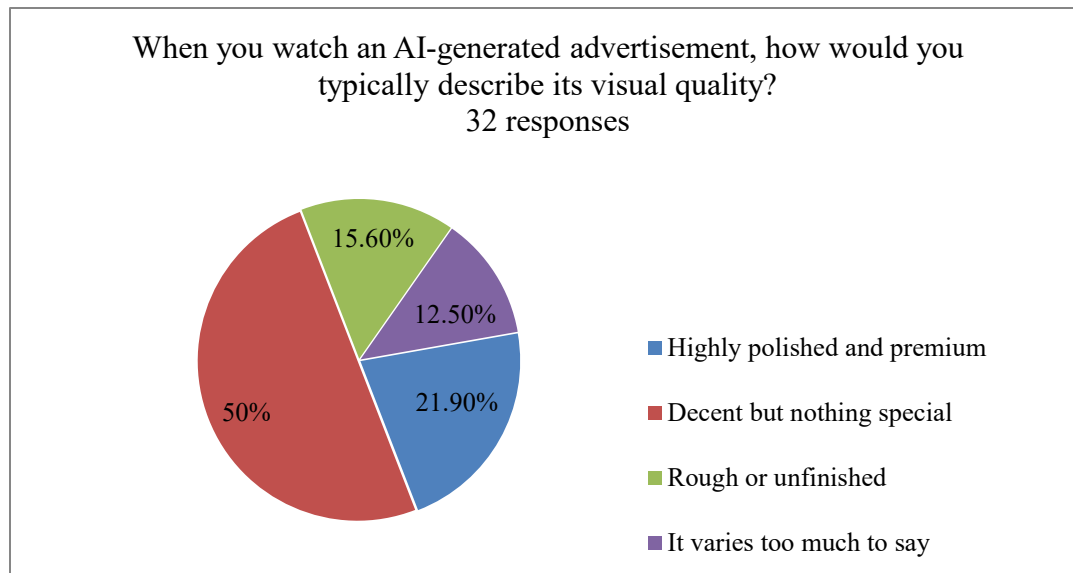


Fig. 1 Q2 – Perceived visual quality of AI-generated advertisements

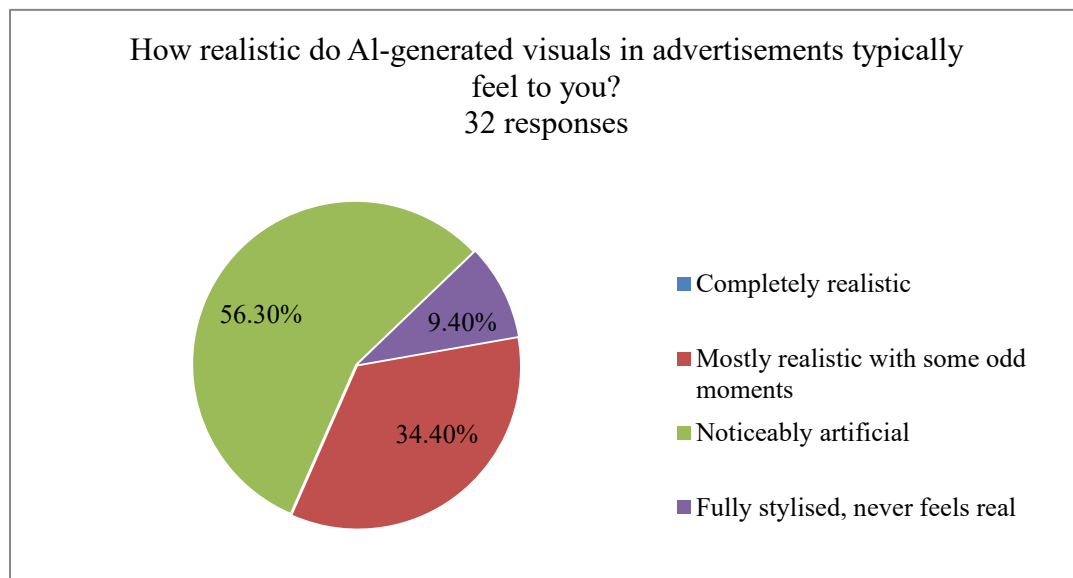


Fig. 2 Q4 – Perceived realism of AI-generated visuals

4.2. Visual Aesthetics

Across the three interviewees (n=3), all independently identified the same visual markers as evidence of AI generated visuals, implying that there is a common visual language for identifying AI generation that does not require technical knowledge. These markers fell into three categories: movement distortion, skin texture, and environmental artificiality. Interview 1 noted that “the movements and the animation, especially in the bag advertisement, were clearly distorted”. Two participants pointed out skin texture in the Tata ad. Interviewee 1 mentioned “very soft skin tones,” and Interviewee 3 stated “the skin looked too smooth and the movements were unnatural.” The Valentino ad most visibly showed

environmental artificiality, which was described as “nothing about it felt like it existed in a real space,” by interviewee 3. The same ranking was given to the ads by all 3 participants: Apple, Coca-cola, Tata, Valentino. Both Valentino and Tata were AI-generated, but no participant placed Valentino above Tata. Participants were therefore differentiating between AI ads by execution quality, not merely by the presence of AI.

The finding that AI detection is prevalent but does not necessarily lead to emotional disengagement is supported by the survey results. In Q4, 56.3% of respondents stated that AI visuals are “noticeably artificial”. In Q3, the modal score was 2 (46.9%), indicating low engagement, but 18.8% scored 3, 12.5% scored 4, and 6.3% scored 5, meaning over a third of

respondents found AI ads moderately to highly engaging despite describing AI visuals as artificial. This suggests that the fact that the advert is made by AI itself does not drive

disengagement; it is poor quality or execution. A well-made AI ad can still land emotionally.

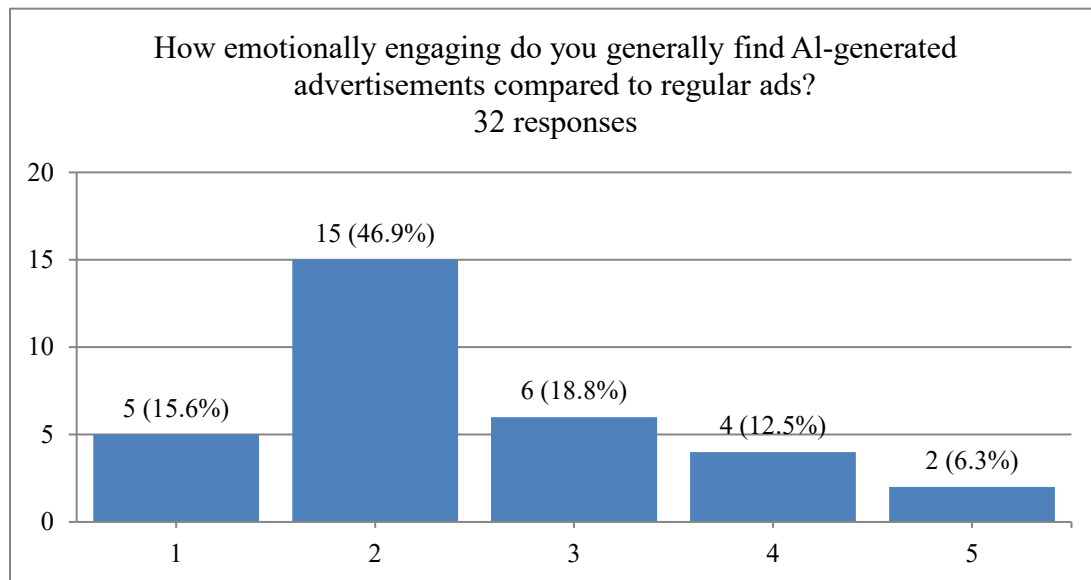


Fig. 3 Q3 – Emotional engagement with AI-generated advertisements

Audience response to these campaigns shows that this AI detection is not limited to the participants but is widespread. Industry analysis of the Coca-Cola campaign used terms like “digital slop” and described its CGI animals as “part shiny part plastic” (Hyperight, 2025). Words that mirror the visual cues that the participants depended on, especially uncanny smoothness and unnatural texture. The same detection was shown by the viewers of the Tata campaign. Many viewers identified it as AI without being provided extra information. One commented, “100% AI generated,” another said, “watched it on TV and ran to YouTube to confirm.” This immediate detection, which happens in everyday life, points out that the visual literacy for recognizing AI visuals is a common cultural skill.

4.3. Consumer Trust

The interviews show that consumer trust and intent to purchase products that were advertised through AI are not consistent. All three interviewees were asked whether trust is impacted by the use of AI. Interviewees 1 and 2 had conflicting views. Interviewee 1 had linked use of AI to distrusting the product: the decision to use AI for “such an important element, marketing the product” shown as “a little bit disappointing,” and the line “If they were to use AI for something so important, I do not know why I would trust the brand to make a quality product.” shows that it may carry into product quality and purchase intent. Interview 2 makes the same connection and rejects it, saying “the connection people make between AI and product quality... a bit of a stretch,” and this participant decides what to buy based on need, not on whether the ad used AI. However, these

positions do not resolve in one direction. Instead of settling this disagreement between interviews 1 and 2, Interview 3 reframes it. Interview 3 took apart the connection of AI use from quality as separate variables: “Valentino is last not just because of AI, but because the quality was so poor for a brand at that level.” Another piece of evidence in this interview is the “it did not make me dislike them” in response to Coca-Cola using AI, while Valentino using AI is viewed less favourably. So, from a certain consumer’s perspective, it was not the presence of AI but rather the execution that dictated consumer trust.

The analysis of the survey results indicates that there is a difference that remains between Interview 1 and 2, though it is not uniform. In Q5, 56.3% of respondents said that an AI-generated advertisement reduces their trust in a brand, versus 28.1% who said it had no impact, and 15.6% said it affected their trust but depends on the brand. The same can be said for Q7, with 43.8% of respondents’ attitudes toward the brand being negatively affected upon learning the ad was made by AI, vs. 12.5% who had a positive reaction. So Interviewee 1’s position is aligned with the majority, but a significant minority rejects this stance or claims that it depends. These conditional responses, 15.6% on Q5 and 28.1% on Q7, align with the opinion of interviewee 3, which states that the trustworthiness of an ad is not just about AI use; ad execution is also a significant factor. Q8 goes in a similar direction: half the sample (16/32) wanted disclosure only when an ad was heavily AI generated, and only 37.5% wanted it always, suggesting people judge AI by the degree to which it was used and not just any use.

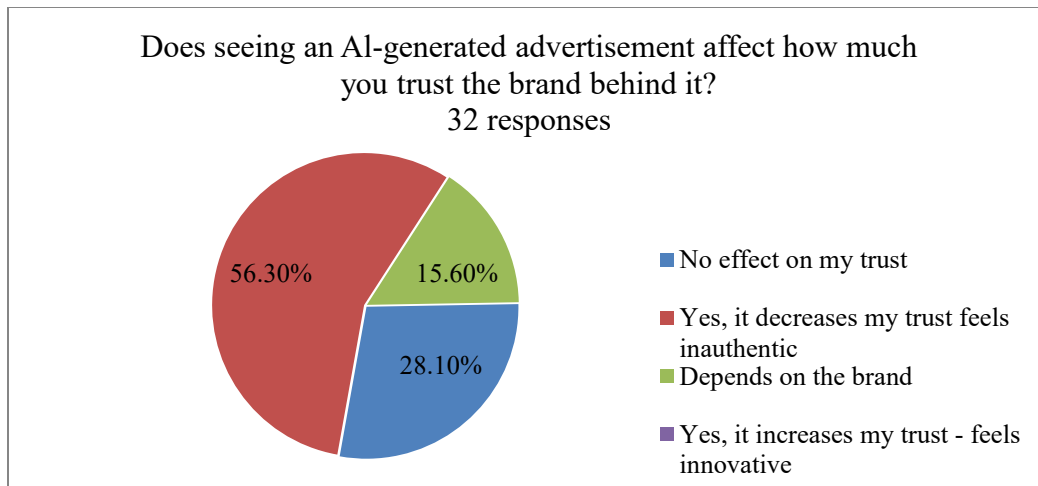


Fig. 4 Q5 – Effect of AI-generated advertising on brand trust

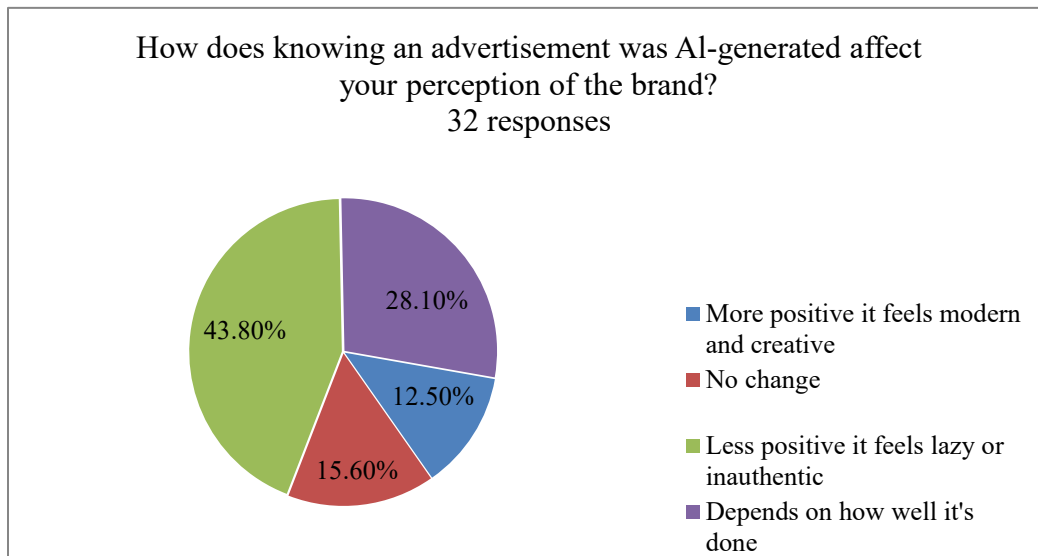


Fig. 5 Q7 – Effect of knowing an ad is AI-generated on brand perception

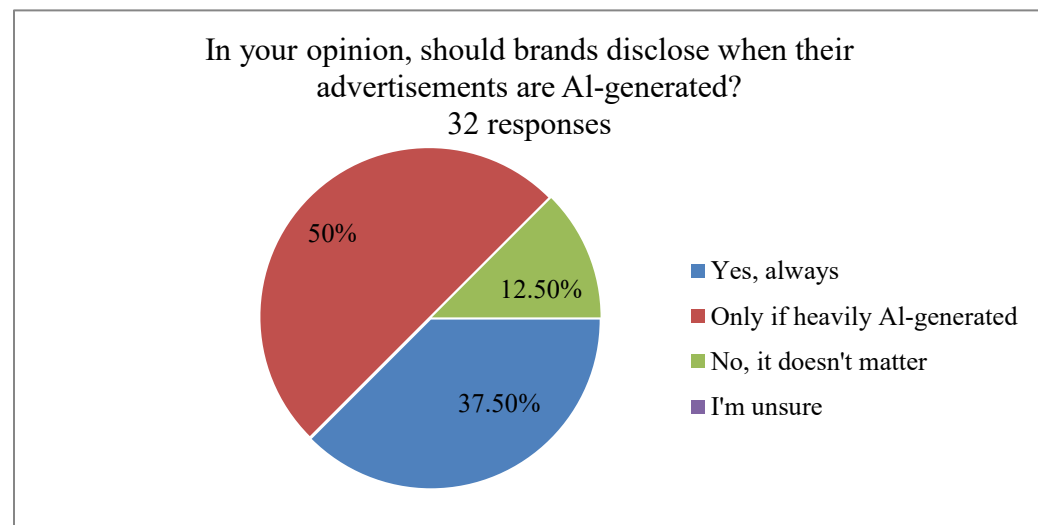


Fig. 6 Q8 – Opinions on whether brands should disclose AI use

The secondary data demonstrates that revealing AI use does not resolve negative feedback, because the objection was not about whether the brand disclosed it. Dr Rebecca Swift of Getty Images found that AI content is seen as less valuable for premium brands and that Valentino's disclosure did not reduce its backlash (Complete AI Training, 2025). If the problem were that audiences wanted brands to be transparent about AI use, the disclosure would calm the response, but it had no effect. This reveals that people were not reacting to the AI use not being disclosed; they were reacting to the use of AI and what it says about the brand. The comments under Valentino's campaign support this, calling the campaign "cheap and not on brand" (The Nod Mag, 2025), and saying "AI does not match luxury and craftsmanship". The same pattern appears with Coca-Cola, where AI consultant Dino Burbidge, founder of the firm Dinova, pointed out Coca-Cola's continuity errors: "If you genuinely did not notice that no two trucks are the same, that is a worry. If you did notice and launched it anyway, that is even more worrying." (The Cooldown, 2025). Either way, the failure is about the decisions made, not AI's capabilities.

The results carry practical implications for brands leveraging AI-driven content. First, disclosure alone is not enough of a risk mitigation strategy for luxury brands: Audience perception was shaped by execution quality alongside AI use (Q5, Q7, Q8), so an AI campaign that is poorly executed risks criticism regardless of disclosure. Second, brand class should guide the use of AI: AI, when used for an Indian mass-market campaign (Tata), was received as innovation, but when AI is used by a luxury brand (Valentino), it was perceived as a betrayal.

5. Conclusion

This paper sought to investigate the effect of the aesthetics of AI generated advertisements on the perception of consumers and whether that perception adheres to the class-coded patterns across the mass and luxury brands. The three data sources highlight that the impact of AI on perception is related to the effectiveness of the execution and positioning of the brand, and not to just the use of AI.

Participants read the brand class first, visuals second. Apple was rated premium on brand image, prior to any comments made about the ad itself. This addressed the class-coded objective and was reflected in the survey, with respondents judging polish and realism separately. On the visual aesthetics objective, there was common visual grammar between the participants and industry commentary

on the ability to identify AI. Although the factor driving the negative responses was how well executed the ad was, not just the presence of AI. There is a divide in the interviewees' opinions regarding the impact of AI on brand trust. The survey reflected this divide as a majority-minority split; however, the conditional responses and disclosure data indicated that what mattered was not whether a brand used AI, but how much.

Limitations

However, a few constraints on the research were noted. The sample size was small and narrow (32 urban participants aged 15-25). This results in findings that are not completely generalisable. In the 4 ads, it is more challenging to see which of the two factors is driving the feedback, because both AI usage and class of brand are being mixed. All three interviews produced the same effort ranking of the ads. While this consistency strengthens the idea of a shared visual grammar, it may also reflect convergence within a small, similar demographic sample rather than something that would hold across a broad population. Also, due to the anonymity of the survey, demographic data, like gender, were not collected, preventing analysis of whether demographics had a role in perception.

Future Research

This research topic could be expanded by future research through the isolation of these variables: this could be done by presenting the same brand in two versions, one AI-generated and one human-made, across both luxury and mass market brands so that they can be measured independently. This research could also be further expanded by broadening the sample size and choosing a demographically varied sample, and by giving more attention to emerging markets like India, which have been under-researched by current literature. This study changes the question of whether or not AI would harm perception, and under what conditions it would harm perception.

Author Contribution Statement

The author conceived and designed the research, conducted the comparative digital case study, administered the survey and the semi-structured interviews, performed the thematic analysis of all primary and secondary data, and wrote the manuscript in its entirety.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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