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# Beyond Real and Fake: A Hybrid Visual Authenticity Framework for Generative AI in Creative and Media Ecosystems

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## ABSTRACT

The emergence of generative artificial intelligence has radically transformed the production, dissemination, and interpretation of visual media, precipitating a crisis of confidence regarding visual authenticity—a concept historically predicated upon the indexical nature of photography. This research investigates the reconfiguration of visual authenticity within photography, illustration, and packaging design in the age of generative AI, identifying cross-domain thematic regularities to develop a conceptual model of "hybrid visual authenticity." Utilizing an interpretive qualitative methodology and a multiple case study design, this study conducted visual-semiotic analyses of 40 cases and in-depth interviews with 16 practitioners across the fields of photography, illustration, packaging design, and media studies. Analytical procedures incorporated Barthesian semiotic inquiry and Braun and Clarke's six-stage thematic analysis, employing triangulation of data sources and methodological approaches to ensure rigor. Findings suggest that visual authenticity in the generative AI context transcends the traditional binary of "genuine" versus "fake," manifesting instead as a multifaceted construct shaped by the interplay of creator intent, process transparency, and underlying socio-cultural and regulatory frameworks. Notably, photography and media studies exhibit the strongest emphasis on transparency, whereas illustration and packaging design display greater openness toward human-AI hybrid practices. Accordingly, this study proposes a Hybrid Visual Authenticity Model, synthesizing frameworks of indexicality, aura, and simulacra into a unified analytical lens for diverse creative domains. This research makes both theoretical and practical contributions: it rearticulates classical concepts of visual authenticity for the generative AI paradigm and offers actionable recommendations for design education, professional associations, the packaging sector, and media policymakers.

## Keywords

visual authenticity; generative artificial intelligence; photography; illustration; packaging design; media studies.

## INTRODUCTION

This transition presents profound epistemological implications for one of the foundational concepts in visual studies: authenticity. Historically, the authenticity of modern photography has been largely predicated upon indexicality, the assertion that the photograph constitutes a causal trace of real-world events occurring before the camera lens (Bazin, 2005; Cohan, 2025, p. 64). Conversely, authenticity in illustration is derived from the artist's technical skill and personal style, while packaging design depends upon consumer trust in the verifiable and honest representation of the product. As images can now be generated entirely from textual prompts without external referents, or manipulated to the point of being indistinguishable from conventional optical recordings, this foundation of authenticity is experiencing what observers identify as a crisis of visual trust (Farooq & Vreese, 2025; Gross & Petrean, 2026).

This crisis is not just a technical issue, but also a real social and ethical one. In mid-2024, several photojournalists and professional photographers complained that Meta's automated labeling system was actually marking original photos taken by cameras as "Made with AI," an incident that illustrates how fragile the line between verified and synthetic images is in the eyes of both the public and the detection system itself (Campos et al., 2023, p. 138; Willie, 2025). At the same time, research shows a sharp increase in the volume of synthetic content circulating in the digital public space, with a projected increase from around half a million deepfake videos shared on social media in 2023 to eight million by 2025 (Romanishyn et al., 2025). This phenomenon has triggered what some researchers call "truth fatigue," namely cognitive exhaustion and public cynicism in distinguishing fact from visual fabrication (Shin, 2026).

In the realm of creative practice, responses to generative AI have been far from uniform. Longitudinal research on digital painters in China found that most creators described AI-generated works as "too perfect" yet "emotionally empty," using the metaphor of "soullessness" to express their dismay at the loss of intentionality and personal coherence in machine-generated works (Meng et al., 2025). These concerns intersect with the commodification of artistic styles extracted from training data corpuses without consideration for the labor history and cultural contexts that gave rise to them (Kawakami & Venkatagiri, 2024; Szostak & Modliński, 2025, p. 566). Meanwhile, in the realm of packaging design, the adoption of AI tends to be embraced more pragmatically as a tool to accelerate processes, from mockup creation and virtual shelf simulations to sentiment analysis-based consumer response

predictions [GlobalData \(2025\)](#); [Amcor \(2024\)](#) which raises a different question: not about the loss of soul in the work, but about transparency and responsibility in representing the product to consumers.

Addressing these lacunae, this study was formulated to investigate three primary research questions. First, how do practitioners within the spheres of photography, illustration, and packaging design re-evaluate the construct of visual authenticity following the integration of generative AI? Second, what thematic commonalities and divergences emerge across these four creative domains in response to this shift? Third, what conceptual framework can be developed to elucidate the nature of visual authenticity in the AI era while simultaneously offering actionable insights for practitioners, educators, and policymakers?

In line with the formulation of the problem, this study aims to: (1) explore and describe the reinterpretation of visual authenticity in photography, illustration, and packaging design practices in the era of generative AI; (2) identify cross-domain thematic patterns regarding process transparency, anxiety about losing creative aura, and acceptance of hybrid practices between AI and humans; and (3) formulate a conceptual model of hybrid visual authenticity that can serve as an academic and practical reference.

This study introduces several scholarly contributions. Theoretically, it synthesizes the discourse surrounding photographic indexicality, Benjaminian notions of aura and mechanical reproduction, and Baudrillardian concepts of simulacra and hyperreality. This triangulation creates a unified analytical framework tailored to examine the nuances of generative AI—a synthesis that remains sparse within current literature. Methodologically, the research employs a comparative multiple-case study design encompassing four distinct visual practice domains, facilitating a comprehensive exploration of thematic patterns that a single-domain analysis might overlook. Practically, the derived conceptual model provides a robust reference for educational institutions in design and visual communication, professional bodies in photography and illustration, the packaging sector, and media policymakers tasked with establishing ethical guidelines and transparency standards for generative AI adoption.

The article is organized into five sections. Following the introduction, Section 2 reviews the relevant literature and establishes the theoretical foundations underpinning the analysis. Section 3 details the employed research methodology. Section 4 presents the empirical findings and discussion, structured by practice domain, followed by a cross-domain synthesis and the proposal of the conceptual model. The final section concludes the article, acknowledging limitations and offering recommendations for future research.

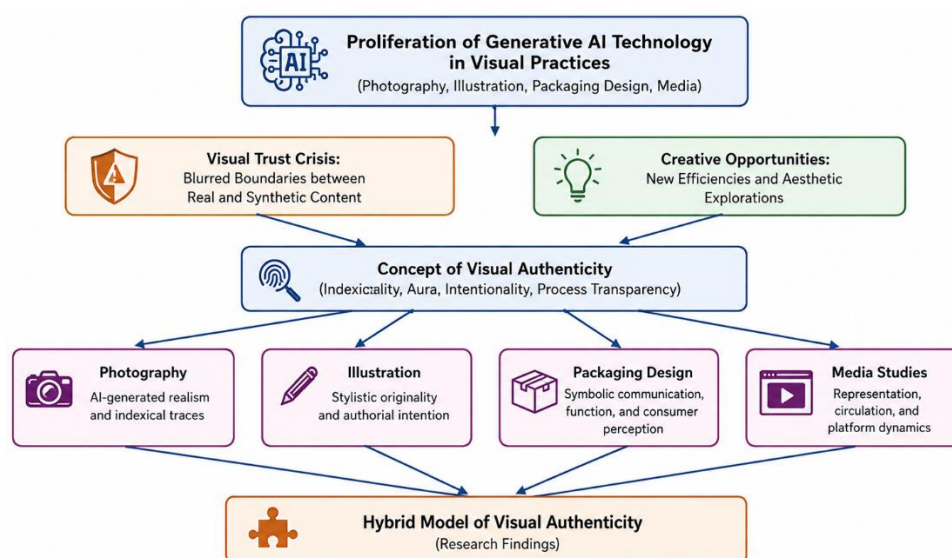


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Research (Source: Researcher Processed, 2026)

## Literature Review and Theoretical Basis

This section outlines five groups of theoretical ideas that form the foundation of the research analysis: visual authenticity and indexicality of photography, aura in the era of mechanical reproduction and generative reproduction, simulacra and hyperreality, the dynamics of generative AI in creative practice, and media studies perspectives on visual literacy and provenance governance. This section concludes with a mapping of the research's novelty positioning against previous studies.

### Visual Authenticity: From Photographic Indexicality to the Postphotographic Era

Roland Barthes further explores this premise in *Camera Lucida* through his concepts of *punctum* and *studium*, emphasizing that a photograph consistently conveys the message of "*ça-a-été*"—an existential certainty that the object was physically present before the lens at a specific moment. This existential affirmation constitutes what many scholars regard as the essence of photographic authenticity: it is not merely a matter of aesthetic appeal or technical precision, but a guarantee of the referent's prior existence in the real world.

The emergence of generative imaging technology, capable of producing photorealistic human faces, landscapes, or objects that have no basis in empirical reality, fundamentally destabilizes this guarantee of "*ça-a-été*". Contemporary observers describe this shift as the "post-photographic condition"—a visual regime in which the truth value of an image can no longer be automatically assumed from its production process but must instead be validated through metadata, digital trails, or external provenance mechanisms ([Farooq & Vreese, 2025](#)).

### Aura and Reproduction: The Relevance of Walter Benjamin in the Era of Generative AI

While Benjamin's conceptual framework remains highly pertinent, it necessitates nuanced adaptation when interrogated

through the lens of generative AI. Whereas traditional mechanical reproduction involves the replication of an existing, singular original, generative AI models synthesize imagery devoid of a definitive ontological precursor, with outputs functioning as probabilistic derivations from vast training datasets. Consequently, while mechanical reproduction involves the diffusion of aura from a single source, generative AI fabricates a "pseudo-aura" through the amalgamation of myriad sources, lacking discernible provenance or a singular point of origin. This phenomenon manifests in what some scholars characterize as an "overly perfect yet emotionally empty" quality (Chatterjee, 2022, p. 1024451)—an output that approximates human aesthetic norms while remaining bereft of the singular intentionality that defines authentic creative endeavor.

### **Simulacra and Hyperreality as Lenses for Understanding AI Images**

Baudrillard's theoretical framework clarifies that societal apprehension regarding generative AI transcends narrow anxieties about deception, reflecting instead a fundamental reconfiguration of representational regimes. As simulacra achieve a level of verisimilitude that renders them indistinguishable from "reality," the critical discourse shifts from ontological verification ("is this real?") to an assessment of the sociopolitical ramifications of this ambiguity. This pivot is particularly salient given contemporary evidence regarding "truth fatigue" and the ongoing erosion of public confidence in visual information ecosystems (Al-khazraji et al., 2023, p. 433; Kaya, 2025, p. 219).

### **Generative AI in Creative Practice: Photography, Illustration, and Packaging Design**

In the realm of illustration and the visual arts, research by (Zhou & Lee, 2024) demonstrates both increased productivity and positive reception toward AI-augmented processes. Conversely, other studies indicate that in the absence of attribution, audiences may demonstrate a preference for AI-generated works over stylistically comparable human-made pieces—a finding that precipitates complex inquiries regarding the tension between perceived authenticity and aesthetic value (Zhang et al., 2026). Concurrently, longitudinal examinations of professional digital artists highlight significant concerns regarding the commodification of individual stylistic expression, as well as the emerging legal debates surrounding copyright ownership for works generated or assisted by AI (Chiou, 2022; Dee, 2018; Zhang & Li, 2024).

Within the domain of packaging design, industry literature suggests a markedly pragmatic adoption of these technologies. AI is currently utilized to facilitate virtual shelf simulations, predict consumer responses, execute large-scale design personalization, and accelerate concept iteration (Amcor, 2024; Confetti Design Studio, 2026; GlobalData, 2025). Nevertheless, industry practitioners caution that AI functions as a supplement rather than a substitute for professional expertise, emphasizing that ultimate creative determinations regarding taste, brand credibility, and commercial readiness continue to necessitate human judgment.

### **Media Studies Perspectives: Visual Literacy, Disinformation, and Provenance Governance**

Nevertheless, emerging scholarship has identified a critical paradox: while AI detection technologies are intended to safeguard the public from visual disinformation, they may inadvertently erode trust in authentic imagery by misclassifying genuine content as AI-generated (Farooq & Vreese, 2025). This phenomenon underscores the reality that the governance of visual authenticity transcends mere technical detection; it necessitates robust frameworks for risk communication and enhanced media literacy. Crucially, audiences must be equipped to critically interpret the probabilistic nature of detection verdicts, rather than treating them as infallible evidentiary standards.

### **Previous Research and Position of Research Novelty**

The literature review summary above shows that research on generative AI and visual authenticity has grown rapidly, but remains largely fragmented into single domains: art and audience perception research (Cetinić & She (2022, p. 11); Kattan (2026) deepfake and disinformation research (ScienceDirect, 2025; arXiv 2510.22128), and research on industrial applications of packaging design (Amcor, 2024; GlobalData, 2025). Media studies, a field that traditionally examines the reception, governance, and public literacy of visual content, is rarely explicitly included within the same framework as studies on creative production practices (photography, illustration, design). This research positions itself to fill this gap by taking a cross-domain approach that integrates three theoretical traditions (indexicality, aura, simulacra) as well as four practical domains (photography, illustration, packaging design, media studies) within a single analytical framework, as visualized in Figure 1.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Approach and Type**

This research uses an interpretive qualitative approach with a multiple case study design as developed by (Wang et al., 2017, p. 76), which allows researchers to compare thematic patterns between cases and between practice domains. The choice of a qualitative approach is based on the nature of the research questions, which are oriented towards practitioners' meaning-making regarding the concept of visual authenticity, a socially constructive phenomenon that is difficult to reduce to purely quantitative measures. The research combines two main analytical strategies: a visual-semiotic analysis of the corpus of works and a thematic analysis of in-depth interview data, which are then triangulated to strengthen the validity of the findings.

### **Research Objects and Corpus**

The research corpus comprises 40 purposively selected visual works produced between 2022 and 2026, stratified equally across four domains: photography (encompassing photojournalism, commercially retouched imagery, and contested public visuals), illustration (including editorial works, prompt-based generative outputs, and human-AI hybrid artifacts), packaging design (comprising AI-based mockups, algorithmically personalized designs, and mass-market synthetic packaging), and media studies (involving viral social media content, platform labeling policies, and provenance regulatory initiatives). Selection criteria prioritized the relevance to visual authenticity, the availability of comprehensive production documentation, and the representation of varying degrees of AI integration.

Complementing the visual corpus, the study engaged 16 participants recruited via purposive snowball sampling. The cohort includes four professionals from each domain—photography, illustration, and packaging design/brand strategy—alongside four academics specializing in media and visual communication. Participation was contingent upon a minimum of five years of professional experience and direct, substantive involvement with the integration of generative AI into creative practices.

## Data Collection Techniques

Data was collected through three main techniques. First, visual documentation, namely the collection and archiving of works that constitute the research corpus along with their production metadata (where available). Second, semi-structured interviews lasting 45–75 minutes with 16 participants, conducted both online and offline, recorded with the participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim. The interview guide covered four main themes: personal experiences using or dealing with generative AI, the meaning of the concept of authenticity in their respective work practices, perceptions of transparency and disclosure of processes, and expectations for future regulations and ethical standards. Third, literature and document studies, covering platform policies, regulations (such as the EU AI Act and the C2PA standard), and media coverage of relevant visual authenticity disputes.

## Data Analysis Techniques

The visual dataset was subjected to a semiotic analysis utilizing Barthes's framework, which differentiates between denotative meaning, connotative meaning, and myth. This analytical lens was employed to investigate how specific visual indicators—such as hyper-realistic skin textures, physically incongruent lighting, and excessive compositional symmetry—function as heuristic cues that trigger suspicion regarding the authenticity of an image from the observer's perspective.

The interview data were examined using the six-phase thematic analysis framework developed by Braun and Clarke. This procedure involved recursive stages: familiarization with the data through repeated transcript review, generation of initial codes, thematic development through category grouping, iterative review of themes against the raw dataset, definition and naming of final themes, and synthesis of the thematic report. To minimize the potential for subjective interpretation bias, the coding process was performed independently by two research team members, followed by a consensus-building dialogue to ensure methodological rigor.

## Data Validity

Data validity was maintained through four strategies. First, source triangulation, which involves comparing findings from visual corpuses, interviews, and policy/regulatory documents. Second, method triangulation, which combines semiotic and thematic analysis to check the consistency of findings across methods. Third, member checking, which involves confirming interview summaries with participants to ensure accurate interpretations. Fourth, an audit trail, which involves systematically documenting all stages of analytical decision-making to ensure the research process can be traced and rechecked (dependability). All stages of this research method are visualized in Figure 2.

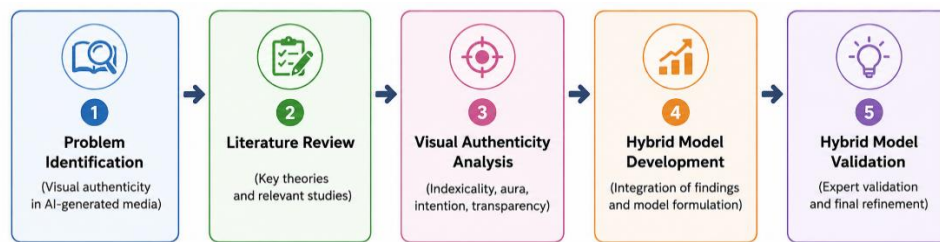


Figure 2. Flow of Research Method Stages (Source: Researcher Processing, 2026)

Table 1. Interview Participant Profile (n = 16)

| Code | Profession/Role                | Experience   | Work Context                   |
|------|--------------------------------|--------------|--------------------------------|
| P1   | Journalism Photographer        | 12 years old | National print & online media  |
| P2   | Journalism Photographer        | 9 years      | International news agency      |
| P3   | Commercial Photographer        | 8 years      | Advertising & e-commerce       |
| P4   | Commercial Photographer        | 15 years     | Product & fashion photography  |
| P5   | Editorial Illustrator          | 10 years     | Print media & books            |
| P6   | Editorial Illustrator          | 7 years      | Magazines & publishing         |
| P7   | Generative Digital Illustrator | 6 years      | Digital content & NFT          |
| P8   | Generative Digital Illustrator | 5 years      | Independent creative studio    |
| P9   | Packaging Designer             | 11 years old | National FMCG                  |
| P10  | Packaging Designer             | 9 years      | Brand design agency            |
| P11  | Brand Strategist               | 13 years old | Brand strategy consultant      |
| P12  | Brand Strategist               | 8 years      | Sustainable packaging industry |
| P13  | Media Studies Academic         | 16 years     | Public universities            |
| P14  | Media Studies Academic         | 10 years     | Private universities           |
| P15  | Media Policy Researcher        | 7 years      | Independent research institute |
| P16  | Digital Literacy Researcher    | 6 years      | Civil society organizations    |

Source: Researcher's Process, 2026

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION

This section explicates the research findings, which are systematically organized into seven subsections: the evolving nature of authenticity in AI-era photography and illustration; the integration of generative AI within packaging design; media studies perspectives on disinformation, regulatory frameworks, and visual literacy; a comparative cross-domain analysis; a proposed hybrid conceptual model of visual authenticity; and an examination of the theoretical and practical implications of these findings.

### Authenticity in AI-Era Photography

An analysis of ten photographic cases in the research corpus reveals a fundamental shift in how photographers and audiences interpret authenticity. In the journalistic photography cases, interview participants consistently emphasized that indexicality, the assurance that images are direct recordings of real events, remains a core value that cannot be compromised. One

journalistic photographer participant explained that the use of generative fill, or the removal of elements with the help of AI, even the slightest, is considered a fundamental ethical violation because it changes the causal relationship between the image and the event it records. This finding aligns with concerns documented in the incident of Meta mislabeling authentic photographs as "Made with AI," which, according to Springer AI & Society (2025), has the potential to erode trust in authentic journalistic photos.

A different pattern was found in the realm of commercial photography. Participants in this category tended to view AI-retouching, generative canvas expansion, and background synthesis as natural extensions of post-production practices that have long existed since the days of darkroom manipulation and Adobe Photoshop. However, a crucial boundary considered by participants was transparency to clients and, in some contexts, to end consumers, particularly when the imagery is used in contexts that imply factual representation, such as product photos that claim to show the original texture or color of an item.

A semiotic analysis of the sample images found a number of visual markers that consistently aroused audience suspicion regarding the authenticity of the photographs, including: over-smoothing of skin or surface textures, physically implausible inconsistencies in shadow direction and intensity, excessive compositional symmetry, and artifacts in small details such as fingers, writing on the background, or repeating patterns. These markers, in Barthes's framework, function as connotative levels that trigger the "myth of suspicion," the naturalization of contemporary audiences' skeptical attitudes toward photographic images previously considered taken-for-granted visual evidence.

### Authenticity in the AI Era Illustration

In the realm of illustration, the findings of this study reinforce and enrich the results of previous studies on creators' anxieties regarding generative AI. In line with the findings of (Kameo & Gupte, 2025; Tsao et al., 2025, p. 10), the illustrator participants in this study repeatedly used vocabulary such as "feels empty," "too neat but lifeless," and "lost track of hand" to describe purely generative AI works. Interestingly, similar vocabulary also emerged when participants evaluated the generative AI works of others, but participants tended to be more tolerant and even positive when describing the use of AI in their own work process as an aid to ideation or exploration of initial compositions, rather than as a producer of final works.

This pattern of ambivalence confirms the findings of Porquet et al. (2025, in arXiv 2511.03117) that while AI systems are capable of replicating surface stylistic features such as color palettes and compositional motifs, they fail to convey the intentionality and narrative coherence that artists associate with authentic expression. Some participants linked this unease to a more structural issue, namely the commodification of personal style into an "extractable resource" by AI models without compensation or recognition to the artist Caporusso (2023, p. 6); Kawakami & Venkatagiri (2024); Krekovic et al. (2023, p. 5) concern that intersects with legal debates regarding copyright ownership of AI-based or -assisted works (Lovato et al., 2024, p. 907; Pasa, 2024, p. 39).

On the other hand, a number of generative illustrator participants offered a more affirmative perspective, emphasizing that authenticity in hybrid practices should not be measured by the "purity" of the process (purely hand-drawn versus pure AI), but rather by substantive curatorial and editorial engagement, namely the extent to which the artist selects, revises, combines, and contextualizes the AI output. This view aligns with the findings of Anthropic-adjacent research (ScienceDirect, 2024) on co-creation with generative AI, which suggests that revealing the artist's intentional involvement, for example through training a model on personal curatorial imagery, can enhance perceptions of authenticity compared to the direct use of off-the-shelf generative tools.

### Authenticity in AI-Era Packaging Design

Findings in the packaging design realm indicate significantly different acceptance patterns than photography and illustration. Participating packaging designers and brand strategists consistently viewed generative AI as a capability multiplier—a term also widely used in industry literature (Confetti Design Studio, 2026)—that accelerates concept exploration, virtual shelf simulations, and predictive analysis of consumer preferences (Amcor, 2024; GlobalData, 2025) rather than as a threat to personal creative authenticity, as is often complained about in the illustration realm.

However, the issue of authenticity in this realm has shifted its focus: it is not about the authenticity of the creative process alone, but rather about the authenticity of the product's representation to consumers. Participants highlighted the tension between the use of AI-based photorealistic mockups for pre-production purposes (which is considered reasonable and efficient) and the use of synthetic visuals in final marketing materials that could potentially mislead consumers about the actual product's appearance, texture, or quality—a concern that resonates with consumer research findings that 72 percent of purchasing decisions are influenced by packaging design Fang & Fang (2023, p. 62); (Orlowski et al., 2022, p. 103119) meaning that misleading visual representations could potentially have a material impact on consumer trust and brand reputation.

A number of participants also highlighted the hyper-personalization dimension enabled by generative AI in packaging design (ResearchGate, 2024), which raises new questions about authenticity at a different level: whether packaging individually tailored based on consumer data profiles can still be said to represent a consistent and authentic "brand identity," or whether it becomes a collection of algorithmically customized simulacra without a coherent brand narrative—a question that directly intersects with Baudrillard's simulacra framework outlined in the literature review.

### Media Studies Perspectives: Disinformation, Regulation, and Visual Literacy

The academic/media studies researchers in this study emphasized that the issue of visual authenticity at the production level (photography, illustration, packaging) cannot be understood separately from the broader ecosystem of content reception and circulation. They confirmed concerns already documented in the literature regarding the surge in the volume of synthetic content and its risks to the integrity of public information (Frontiers in Artificial Intelligence, 2025; arXiv 2510.22128), including the potential for more serious abuses such as digital identity forgery and non-consensual content that have prompted feature restrictions by some platforms (Shin, 2026).

Media study participants offered critical remarks about regulatory approaches based on mandatory labeling (such as the EU AI Act and the C2PA standard). While appreciating the good intentions of these regulations, they recalled the key finding from Springer AI & Society (2025) that imperfect AI detection tools can produce false positives that undermine trust in authentic content. Therefore, participants emphasized the need for a layered approach that combines three elements: (1) a reliable provenance technical infrastructure, (2) a proportional and flexible regulatory framework, and (3) what participants considered most crucial but

least addressed, public visual literacy programs that teach people to think probabilistically about image authenticity, rather than seeking binary certainty (authentic/fake) that is often unrealistic in this hybrid era.

Another key theme emerging from the interviews was the shifting burden of verification. Before the era of generative AI, the burden of authenticity generally fell on the party alleging manipulation of an image. Media study participants observed a shift in the opposite direction: there is now an implicit expectation that content creators/publishers must proactively prove and disclose the authenticity or involvement of AI in the images they publish—an epistemological shift that participants viewed as a logical consequence of the decline in default trust in visual imagery in general.

### Cross-Domain Analysis: Patterns, Differences, and Common Ground

Thematic synthesis across the four domains (summarized in Figure 3) identified three major themes that emerged with varying intensity across each domain: (1) demands for transparency of process, (2) anxiety over the loss of aura/indexicality, and (3) acceptance of AI-human hybrid practices. Media and photography studies showed the highest intensity of the demand for transparency theme (66% and 72% of the units of analysis in the corpus and transcripts, respectively), confirming that these two domains most emphasize the importance of revealing process as a condition for authenticity, in line with the centrality of indexicality in traditional photographic epistemology and media studies' concern for the integrity of public information.

Illustration and packaging design, on the other hand, showed the highest intensity of the theme of acceptance of hybrid practices (78% and 82%, respectively), indicating that these two applied-creative domains tend to interpret authenticity not as a pure binary process, but as a negotiable spectrum of creator engagement. The theme of anxiety over the loss of aura shows an interesting pattern: it is highest in media studies (70%) and photography (64%) reflecting structural concerns about the broader visual trust ecosystem but relatively low in packaging design (33%), confirming that the realm of commercial applied design has a fundamentally different value orientation than the realms of factual documentation and personal expression (Ding et al., 2024; Guo et al., 2025, p. 36046).

Further mapping of the cases in the corpus, as visualized in a two-dimensional matrix (Figure 5) that intersects the degree of AI involvement with the degree of process transparency, reveals four quadrants of practice positions: (a) traditional authenticity verified with low AI involvement and high transparency, commonly found in journalistic photography and editorial illustration that maintain manual labor processes; (b) hybrid authenticity with high AI involvement integrity but balanced with high transparency, found in commercial photography and generative illustration that explicitly disclose the use of AI; (c) a zone vulnerable to misattribution with low AI involvement but also low transparency, risking misunderstanding even without deceptive intent; and (d) a zone of visual disinformation risk with high AI involvement and low transparency, most commonly found in cases of unlabeled bulk packaging and unwatermarked social media content, and therefore requiring the most urgent regulatory attention.

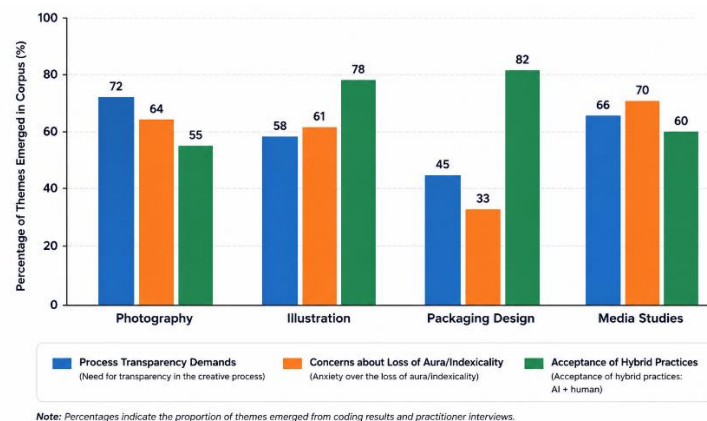
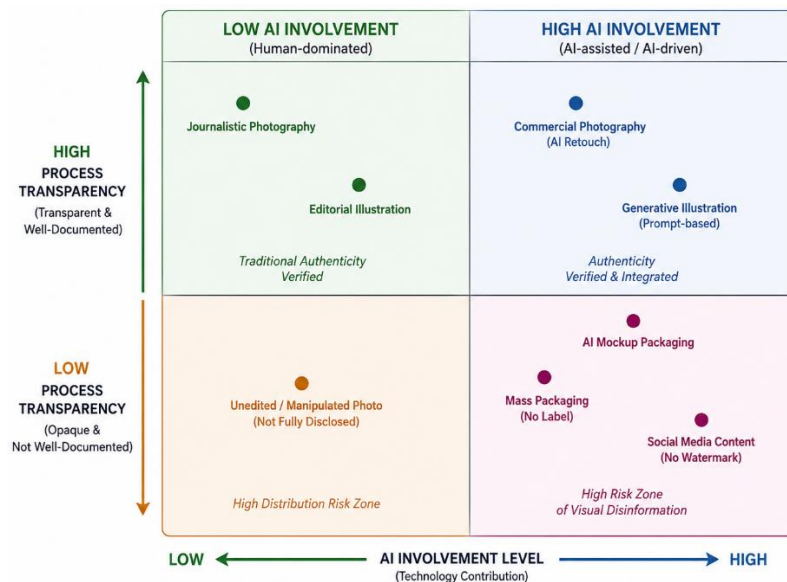


Figure 3. Thematic Distribution of Visual Corpus and Interview Coding Results per Domain (Source: Researcher Processing, 2026)



### Conceptual Model of Hybrid Visual Authenticity (MAVH)

Synthesizing the preceding evidence, this study introduces the Hybrid Visual Authenticity Model, illustrated in Figure 4. This framework conceptualizes visual authenticity as a multi-dimensional construct rather than a binary state, emerging from the interplay of three primary components and a governing contextual framework.

The initial dimension, "creator intent and involvement," assesses the extent of human agency in curatorial, editorial, and authoritative capacities during production, independent of the volume of AI-assisted technical operations. The second dimension, "process transparency," evaluates the integrity of disclosure regarding AI utilization through mechanisms including explicit labeling, digital watermarking, or adherence to standards such as C2PA. These elements exist in dynamic tension: robust creative agency lacking transparency may be perceived as deceptive, whereas high transparency lacking substantive human contribution may result in the artifact being viewed merely as machine-generated output, devoid of human value.

The third dimension, serving as an overarching framework, comprises the socio-cultural and regulatory environment—incorporating industry norms, public media literacy, and relevant jurisdictional legal standards. This contextual dimension is critical, as tolerance thresholds for AI integration are domain-specific; for instance, journalistic photography maintains significantly more rigorous standards than those observed within commercial packaging design.

The proposed framework asserts that visual authenticity within the generative AI era cannot be circumscribed by a monolithic inquiry; instead, it establishes three diagnostic criteria applicable across diverse disciplines: the extent of substantive human engagement in creative decision-making, the transparency with which such involvement is disclosed to the audience, and the degree to which this disclosure aligns with the normative and regulatory expectations governing the specific publishing context. Designed to balance cross-disciplinary flexibility with domain-specific granularity, the MAVH model facilitates the formulation of practical recommendations, as delineated in Table 2.

**Figure 4. Hybrid Model of Visual Authenticity (MAVH)**

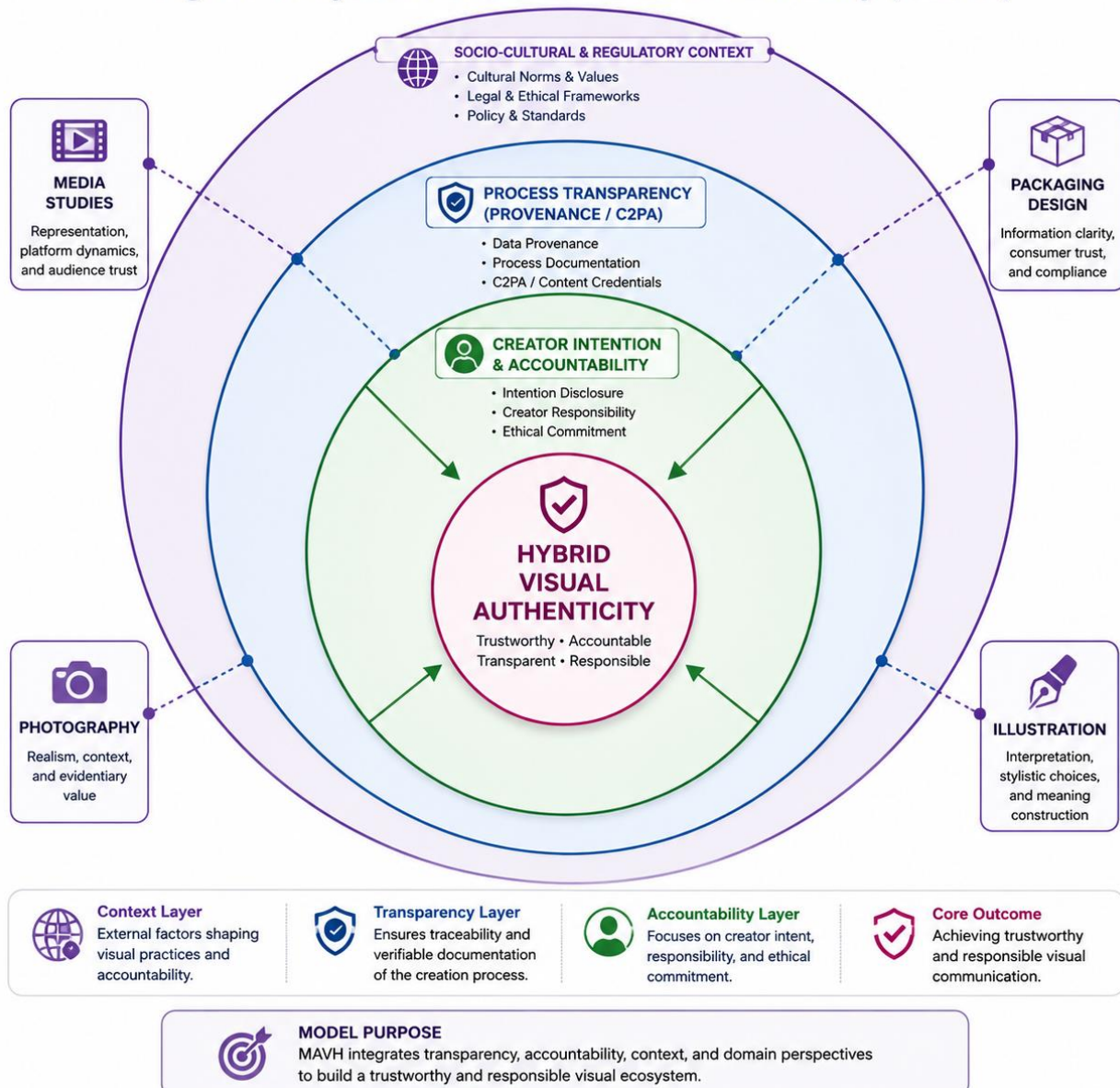


Figure 4. Conceptual Model of Hybrid Visual Authenticity (MAVH) (Source: Researcher Processing, 2026)

Table 2. Practical Recommendations for MAVH Models per Domain

| Domain               | AI Engagement Tolerance Threshold                                            | Transparency Recommendations                                              | Policy Recommendations                                                                 |
|----------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Photography          | Very low for factual/journalistic content; medium-high for commercial        | Mandatory labeling & provenance metadata (C2PA) on factual content        | A professional code of ethics that differentiates journalistic vs. commercial contexts |
| Illustration         | Flexible; determined by the creator's curatorial-editorial involvement       | Voluntary disclosure but driven by community & platform norms             | Personal style copyright protection & training data attribution                        |
| Packaging Design     | High for concept/pre-production stage; low for final product representation. | The honesty of the product's visual representation to consumers           | Advertising standards governing the visual representation of AI-based products         |
| Media/Public Studies | Depends on the purpose of the news/education; requires high caution          | Public visual literacy program & uncertainty communication detection tool | Layered regulation: technical infrastructure, law, and public education                |

Source: Researcher's Process, 2026

## Theoretical and Practical Implications

From a theoretical perspective, this study affirms the enduring relevance of classical frameworks—specifically indexicality, aura, and simulacra—while positing that they necessitate rearticulation to effectively interpret contemporary generative AI phenomena. A primary contribution of this work lies in the synthesis of these theoretical constructs into a unified model, thereby translating philosophical abstraction into empirically observable dimensions. Practically, these findings carry significant implications across multiple sectors. Educational institutions in visual communication and journalism are advised to revise curricula to prioritize digital provenance literacy and the ethics of disclosure, extending beyond mere technical proficiency with generative tools. Professional associations within photography and illustration must develop ethical guidelines that delineate acceptable AI usage thresholds contingent upon the specific context of application. For the packaging and marketing sectors, enhancing the transparency of product representation is critical to mitigating the discrepancy between promotional imagery and physical product reality. Furthermore, for policymakers and regulators, these findings underscore the necessity of a multifaceted approach—one that balances technical infrastructure with sustained investment in public visual literacy initiatives.

## CONCLUSIONS & SUGGESTIONS

This study concludes by addressing its core research objectives through three primary insights. First, visual authenticity in the era of generative AI is interpreted divergently across disciplines: photographers prioritize indexicality and restrict generative intervention in factual contexts; illustrators navigate the tension between concerns regarding the erosion of individual artistic expression and the utility of AI as an ideation tool; and packaging designers perceive authenticity primarily as a function of honest product representation rather than the sanctity of the creative process.

Second, the cross-domain analysis revealed three distinct thematic patterns—demands for procedural transparency, anxieties surrounding the attenuation of aura and indexicality, and the assimilation of hybrid practices—which manifested with varying intensities across the four examined domains. The findings highlight a clear dichotomy in approach: photography and media studies exhibit a conservative stance, whereas illustration and packaging design demonstrate greater accommodation toward AI-human hybridity, underscoring fundamental differences in the epistemological values underpinning each practice.

Third, this research proposes a Hybrid Visual Authenticity Model that conceptualizes authenticity as a three-layered interaction comprising creator intent and engagement, process transparency, and socio-cultural and regulatory contexts. This model provides a diagnostic framework consisting of three inquiries applicable across visual domains, effectively synthesizing the theoretical traditions of indexicality, aura, and simulacra into a unified analytical framework suited to contemporary technological realities.

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. First, while the sample size and number of interviews align with the requirements of interpretive qualitative research—which prioritizes depth over statistical generalizability—they necessarily constrain the scope of broad extrapolation. Second, the study focuses predominantly on practitioners within global, English-speaking industrial contexts, leaving cultural variations in the interpretation of visual authenticity within Indonesia and other developing nations underexplored. Third, the rapid evolution of generative AI implies that specific technical findings may become obsolete; however, the MAVH framework is constructed to remain conceptually robust despite such shifts.

In light of these limitations, future research should: examine and refine the Hybrid Visual Authenticity Model within Indonesian and broader Southeast Asian cultural contexts, with particular attention to local wisdom and distinct media norms; employ large-scale quantitative methods to psychometrically evaluate the validity of MAVH dimensions against general audience perceptions; conduct longitudinal studies to track the evolution of norms and regulations in tandem with advancements in AI technology and digital provenance; and extend the research scope to adjacent domains, such as film, animation, and architectural design, which are undergoing similar transformations due to generative AI integration.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no financial, commercial, professional, or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper. The authors have no competing interests related to the conception, design, data collection, analysis, interpretation of findings, or publication of this research. All interpretations and conclusions presented in this article are solely those of the authors.

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