A campaign with no photoshoot

What a fashion image gains and loses when it is built with AI from a handful of stills

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ABSTRACT

This working paper is a practice-based case study of an influencer-led social campaign for a Thailand-based eyewear brand, directed by the author in early 2026. The campaign had no photoshoot. A short film and a set of stills were generated with AI from a handful of photographs of the influencer and the brand's product shots. Drawing on photography theory (Barthes, Sontag, Gunning, Wilde), research on virtual influencers, and UK, EU and Thai rules on likeness and AI disclosure, the paper examines what the image gained (consistent jewellery-style lighting, motion from stills, open-ended editing and lower cost) and what it lost (the accident, the photographic trace, the presence of the person and the judgement of a shoot crew). Most production effort went into reproducing the influencer's hair and movement, while the product needed little correction. The post drew more comments than the brand's real-photo posts, and none questioned whether it was AI-made. The paper closes with recommendations on when brands should build and when they should shoot, including written consent and labelling for synthetic likenesses, and reflects on the implications for teaching.

Keywords: AI-generated imagery; digital fashion; influencer marketing; synthetic media; digital doubles; photography theory; indexicality; AI disclosure; fashion campaigns; creative direction

This paper is a practice-based case study of a social campaign I directed in early 2026. The brand and the influencer are not named. The evidence comes from my own account of the production and from the public post, including its engagement figures and comments, read against published work on photography, influencer marketing and image regulation.

The client was a Thailand-based eyewear brand launching a new collection with a Thai influencer who has more than a million Instagram followers. I was project manager and creative director. A 3D artist on my team built the work under my direction. There was no photoshoot. Our inputs were two sets of stills: a handful of images of the influencer, and the brand's product shots of the frames. From these the artist produced a short film in which she turns her head from profile to face the camera, plus profile and close-up stills. The AI work ran on Higgsfield, an AI image and video platform. It took about a week.

Before any of that, the moodboard set the direction. It treated the frames as jewellery, borrowing the soft light, close scale and slow pace of jewellery advertising and setting them against contemporary fashion photography. That brief governed the lighting and framing of every output.

The finished work is a hybrid. Its raw material is photographic, since every source still was made by light reaching a sensor in front of a real person, yet no camera ever recorded the scenes the final images show. This paper asks what that hybrid gains and loses against a conventional shoot.

What the image gains

Jewellery advertising depends on light passing through material and on very tight framing. These frames are translucent acetate with a small metal detail at the temple, and the work moves from the influencer in profile, to face-on, to a crop where the frames fill the picture. Holding the same glow across every angle and crop takes a lighting crew and studio time on a shoot. In a built image it holds by default. Any crop can also be reopened later, which is what made the jewellery direction affordable for a brand of this size.

On a shoot, anything the camera missed on the day is gone for good, whereas on this project a new crop or a slower turn meant another render and no crew to recall. Särmäkari (2023) describes how 3D practice turns the fashion image from a record of a finished product into an asset that can circulate before the product exists. On speed, one comparison of catalogue production found that a 3D pipeline cut preparation time per product variation from 179 to 36 minutes (Kolmanič et al., 2025). Motion came almost free. Social platforms favour video and we had only photographs, so the artist animated the stills into a head turn the influencer was never filmed doing.

Location, set and crew account for most of the difference between a large campaign and a small one, and a virtual set removes nearly all three. Under UK advertising rules, building the image does not make it misleading in itself. The Committee of Advertising Practice treats AI-made content that could have been produced with actors, photographers or CGI as making relatively little difference to how consumers perceive an advertisement (CAP, 2025).

What the image gives up

Barthes (1981, p. 76) located the essence of photography in its guarantee that the thing was there, which he called the "that-has-been". Sontag (1977) drew a related line. A painting interprets the real, while a photograph is also a trace of it. Gunning (2004) qualifies this, arguing that a photograph's truth was always partly a claim made on its behalf, and Wilde (2023) points out that computer-generated imagery abandoned the index decades ago, so the loss is long-standing and the recent development is the ease with which a generated image now passes for a photograph.

Almost none of the week's reworks concerned the glasses. They concerned the influencer's hair and the head turn itself. One early version gave her a chin-length bob and a different top, a convincing picture of someone who was not quite her. A set of stills records a few fixed angles and no motion, so every frame between them had to be generated, including the way her fringe and the back of her hair move through the turn, and then corrected until it matched her. The glasses

needed little correction, since we had product shots and their shape does not change with the angle. Whatever the camera never recorded had to be invented, and as director it fell to me to judge whether each invention was close enough to the real person.

On a shoot the strongest frame is often unplanned, a laugh between poses or a change in the light, and the photographer is there to catch it. The bob was also unplanned. Nobody witnessed it, though, and it was discarded in the next round of revisions.

The influencer posed for a handful of stills, and the campaign then showed her in moments that never took place, even though her value to the brand rests on a real person having worn the product. Audiences do register the difference between real and synthetic people. In an experiment by Sands et al. (2022), followers were as willing to follow an AI influencer as a human one but rated it lower on source trust. Shen (2024), studying 33 virtual influencers on Instagram, found that personas seen to have a life outside the brand attract more engagement. A synthetic double of a real influencer borrows that outside life directly.

The post gave no sign that the film was AI-generated, and none of its dozen comments mentioned it or asked whether she had been there. Followers called it beautiful, said they could not wait for the launch and complained that they never manage to buy in time. A reseller offered to buy on followers' behalf. The influencer commented too. The film reached about 50,000 views, more than a thousand likes and over a hundred shares, while the brand's other posts with her, which used real photographs, drew more views but almost no comments. One campaign cannot explain that gap, and I am not sure the comparison is fair, since a launch teaser carries anticipation that an ordinary post does not. The pattern does match the finding of Sands et al. (2022) that AI influencers prompt stronger word-of-mouth intentions.

Legal protection for the influencer is uneven. English law has no free-standing image right, so a celebrity must rely on contract, copyright or passing off (*Fenty v Arcadia*, 2015, paras 29, 33). Thailand's Personal Data Protection Act requires consent before personal data is collected, used or disclosed, and treats facial recognition data as sensitive (Thailand, 2019, ss. 19, 26), although I have found no ruling on whether a face model built from stills falls into that stricter category. Under the EU AI Act, a deep fake is generated content that resembles an existing person and would falsely appear authentic, and whoever publishes one must disclose it (European Parliament and Council, 2024, arts 3(60), 50(4)). As far as I can establish, no rule required this campaign to carry a label. Thailand has no AI-labelling rule that I could find, the UK imposes no blanket duty to disclose AI (CAP, 2025), and the EU obligation applied only from 2 August 2026, after the launch.

In practice the influencer's main protection is the contract that licenses her stills and her digital double. On this campaign the brand managed that agreement and the production team worked to the brief, which left the people building her digital double without sight of what she had agreed to, and I would close that gap before anything else.

A shoot gathers a photographer, a stylist, hair and make-up artists and a model, each making decisions the others would not. This pipeline put that judgement in the hands of two people, a maker and a director. Erickson (2024) found that AI-assisted creative products were often more labour-intensive than conventional ones, with the human work hidden behind the technology. The person who shot the source stills is one example. Their photographs became raw material for images that credit no photographer.

Implications for practice

For brands deciding between a build and a shoot, I would build anything where the product is the subject, such as detail, material, colourways and images likely to need updating. Images claiming that a person wore the product call for a shoot, and any built alternative should rest on written agreement with that person and carry a label. Our post was not labelled. No rule required it, but I would label it now. Someone outside the pipeline should also hold responsibility for judging the result, because the tools have removed the crew that once supplied a second opinion. On this campaign that responsibility was mine.

The same question now shapes my teaching. When students hand in built campaigns, my first crit question concerns what the image claims about the product and the person in it, before any discussion of the software they used.

Eshwar Nagilla is a creative technologist and educator based in London, and a Technical Tutor in Digital Fashion at the University for the Creative Arts.

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