



**UNIVERSITY  
OF TURKU**

Turku School of  
Economics

# **The Influence of Generative Search Engines on Brand Image**

Managerial Perspectives from Digital Strategists

Master's thesis in International Business

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18.5.2026  
Turku

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## Master's thesis

**Subject:** International Business

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**Title:** The Influence of Generative Search Engines on Brand Image: Managerial Perspectives from Digital Strategists

**Supervisor:** Niina Nummela

**Number of pages:** 97 pages (+ appendices 10 pages)

**Date:** 18.5.2026

## Abstract

In recent years, the rapid advancement of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed how brand image is formed and managed in global business environments. Traditionally, firms have relied on digital visibility and search engines to guide how brands are perceived, positioning brand image as a strategic asset, widely recognized as a critical driver of organizational success. However, the emergence of generative search engines—capable of synthesizing information into AI-generated responses—has introduced a new layer of complexity to this process. As brand-related information is increasingly mediated through AI-driven systems rather than firm-controlled channels, questions arise regarding how these changes influence brand image and its management in these evolving environments.

In response, this study examines how generative search engines influence brand image from a managerial perspective, drawing insights from digital strategists. The research seeks to address the question: *“how do digital strategists perceive the influence of generative search engines on brand image from a managerial perspective?”*. The study is grounded in brand image theory, digital visibility, and search engine literature, which are integrated with emerging research on generative AI to develop an integrative conceptual framework. This framework positions brand image as an outcome of associations and perceptions formed through both brand-controlled and third-party digital content, increasingly mediated by AI-driven processes.

The study adopts a qualitative research design, drawing on semi-structured interviews with professionals working at the intersection of brand management and AI-driven business strategy. The data is analyzed through an iterative and interpretive process, allowing themes to emerge from participants' experiential insights while being guided by the integrative conceptual framework. This approach enables an in-depth exploration of how practitioners interpret the rapidly evolving phenomenon, capturing nuanced, context-specific understandings rather than seeking generalizable causal relationships.

The findings suggest that generative search engines may significantly influence brand image by reducing the visibility of firm-controlled channels, increasing reliance on third-party content, and synthesizing fragmented information into brand representations. This shift appears to weaken managerial control over brand image while intensifying risks related to inaccuracy, bias, and fragmentation. Simultaneously, generative search engines create new strategic opportunities, such as enhanced visibility through AI recommendations and new approaches to brand communication (e.g., generative engine optimization). Overall, the study indicates that brand image is increasingly co-created through AI-generated representations, requiring firms to adapt their brand management strategies to safeguard brand image in this rapidly evolving context.

**Keywords:** Brand image, digital visibility, generative search engines, global brand management, artificial intelligence, search engine optimization (SEO), generative engine optimization (GEO)

## Pro gradu -tutkielma

**Oppiaine:** Kansainvälinen liiketoiminta

**Tekijä:** Pinja Kaakinen

**Otsikko:** Generatiivisten hakukoneiden vaikutus brändi-imagoon: johtamisen näkökulma digitaalistrategisteilta

**Ohjaaja:** Niina Nummela

**Sivumäärä:** 97 sivua (+ liitteet 10 sivua)

**Päivämäärä:** 18.5.2026

### Tiivistelmä

Viime vuosina digitaalisten teknologioiden nopea kehitys on muuttanut merkittävästi sitä, miten brändi-imago muodostuu ja miten sitä johdetaan globaalissa liiketoimintaympäristössä. Perinteisesti yritykset ovat hyödyntäneet digitaalista näkyvyyttä ja hakukoneita ohjatakseen sitä, miten brändit näyttäytyvät ja tulevat koetuiksi. Tämä on korostanut brändi-imagon merkitystä strategisena resurssina, joka tunnustetaan laajasti organisaation menestyksen keskeisenä tekijänä. Generatiivisten hakukoneiden yleistymisen on kuitenkin tuonut tähän prosessiin uudenlaista monimutkaisuutta, sillä nämä järjestelmät kykenevät yhdistämään tietoa ja tuottamaan siitä tekoälyn muodostamia vastauksia. Kun brändiin liittyvä tieto välittyy yhä useammin tekoälypohjaisten järjestelmien eikä yrityksen hallitsemien kanavien kautta, herää kysymyksiä siitä, miten nämä muutokset vaikuttavat brändi-imagoon ja sen johtamiseen muuttuvissa digitaalisissa ympäristöissä.

Tähän vastaten tämä tutkimus tarkastelee, miten generatiiviset hakukoneet vaikuttavat brändi-imagoon johtamisen näkökulmasta, hyödyntäen digitaalisten strategioiden näkemyksiä. Tutkimuksen tavoitteena on vastata tutkimuskysymykseen: ”Miten digitaaliset strategit hahmottavat generatiivisten hakukoneiden vaikutuksen brändi-imagoon johtamisen näkökulmasta?”. Tutkimuksen teoreettinen perusta muodostuu brändi-imagoa, digitaalista näkyvyyttä ja hakukoneita koskevasta kirjallisuudesta, jotka yhdistetään tuoreeseen generatiivista tekoälyä koskevaan tutkimukseen integratiivisen käsitteellisen viitekehityksen muodostamiseksi. Viitekehitys tarkastelee brändi-imagoa assosiaatioiden ja käsitysten lopputuloksena, joka muodostuu sekä yrityksen hallitsemien että kolmansien osapuolten tuottaman digitaalisen sisällön kautta ja jota tekoälypohjaiset prosessit yhä vahvemmin välittävät.

Tutkimus toteutetaan laadullisena tutkimuksena, joka perustuu puolistrukturoituihin haastatteluihin brändijohtamisen ja tekoälyn liittyvän liiketoimintastrategian rajapinnassa työskentelevien asiantuntijoiden kanssa. Aineisto analysoidaan iteratiivisen ja tulkinnallisen prosessin kautta. Tämä mahdollistaa teemojen nousemisen haastateltavien kokemuksellisista näkemyksistä samalla, kun analyysiä ohjaa tutkimuksen integratiivinen käsitteellinen viitekehitys. Lähestymistapa mahdollistaa syvällisen tarkastelun siitä, miten asiantuntijat tulkitsevat tätä nopeasti kehittyvää ilmiötä. Sen sijaan, että tutkimus pyrkisi yleistettäviiin kausaalisuhteisiin, se tavoittaa vivahteikkaita ja kontekstisidonnaisia näkemyksiä.

Tulokset viittaavat siihen, että generatiiviset hakukoneet voivat merkittävästi vaikuttaa brändi-imagoon vähentämällä yrityksen hallitsemien kanavien näkyvyyttä, lisäämällä riippuvuutta kolmansien osapuolten sisällöistä sekä yhdistämällä hajanaista tietoa brändiä koskeviksi representaatioiksi. Tämä muutos näyttää heikentävän yritysten mahdollisuuksia hallita brändi-imagoaan ja samalla voimistavan virheellisyyteen, vinoumiin ja pirstaloitumiseen liittyviä riskejä. Samanaikaisesti generatiiviset hakukoneet voivat luoda uusia strategisia mahdollisuuksia, kuten näkyvyyden vahvistumista tekoälyn suosituksissa sekä uusia lähestymistapoja brändiviestintään, esimerkiksi generatiivisen hakukoneoptimoinnin kautta. Kokonaisuudessaan tutkimus osoittaa, että brändi-imago rakentuu yhä vahvemmin yhdessä eri toimijoiden kanssa tekoälyn tuottamien representaatioiden kautta. Tämä edellyttää yrityksiltä brändijohtamisen strategioiden mukauttamista brändi-imagon turvaamiseksi tässä nopeasti kehittyvässä kontekstissa.

**Avainsanat:** Brändi-imago, digitaalinen näkyvyys, generatiiviset hakukoneet, globaali brändinhallinta, tekoäly, hakukoneoptimointi (SEO), generatiivinen hakukoneoptimointi (GEO)

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# 1 Introduction

This thesis examines how digital strategists perceive the influence of generative search engines on brand image from a managerial perspective. This chapter introduces the research by contextualizing the topic, defining the research problem and gap, presenting the aim and objectives, and outlining the structure of the study.

## 1.1 Background of the Study

Digital technologies have created an increasingly interconnected environment where brands can extend their geographical reach, while simultaneously altering the ways how brands are perceived and managed (Rowles 2018, 3-5; Swaminathan et al. 2020, 24-25, Nagalakshmi et al. 2025, 623). Brand image, commonly defined as the set of perceptions and associations held in stakeholders' minds, is widely recognized as a central driver of organizational success (Keller 1993, 3; Nagalakshmi et al. 2025, 623), supporting differentiation from competitors (Lee & Griffith 2012, 44-46), and long-term financial performance (Balmer et al. 2020, 853). Consequently, managing brand image is a strategic priority for firms operating in both business-to-consumer (B2C) and business-to-business (B2B) contexts (Rowles 2018, 5).

In digital environments, the long-term value of a brand increasingly depends on its ability to communicate a coherent and consistent image across diverse cultural and competitive settings (Lee & Griffith 2012, 44-46). Consequently, firms need to continuously develop and adapt their branding strategies to manage brand image and sustain competitiveness (Nagalakshmi et al. 2025, 623-624; Cui 2024, 415; Swaminathan et al. 2020, 24). A central element in this process is digital visibility, defined as the likelihood that users encounter a brand online. It plays a critical role in shaping initial perceptions, as brand image depends on the information encountered and by the sources that are available (Tarazona-Montoya et al. 2024, 2843-2844; Peco-Torres et al. 103-104). Traditionally, search engines such as Google, Yahoo, and Bing have enabled firms to influence digital visibility and guide users toward brand-owned platforms, where brand image can be intentionally managed (Tarazona-Montoya et al. 2024, 2843-2844; Almukhtar et al. 2021, 71-72). While prior research often conceptualizes search engines primarily as neutral gateways that facilitate access to information, other studies emphasize their more active role in shaping perceptions through algorithmic ranking and prioritization, suggesting that search engines not only mediate visibility but also influence how brands are interpreted (Samet 2023, 1253; Dou et al. 2010, 263-264).

However, managing brand image in digital environments has become increasingly complex. Rather than being shaped primarily through firm-controlled communication, brand image is now co-created

within a broader ecosystem of brand-owned and third-party content. As a result, firms no longer fully control how their brand is represented, and a single brand may be interpreted differently across audiences, leading to fragmented and sometimes conflicting brand images (Brecic et al. 2013, 276; Swaminathan et al. 2020, 25-27; Peco-Torres et al. 2025, 104; Cui 2024, 411-412.)

This challenge has intensified with the rapid emergence of generative search engines, such as Microsoft Copilot, Google Gemini, and Perplexity AI, which further reduce firms' control over brand representation. Unlike traditional search engines that direct users to external sources, these systems synthesize information from multiple sources into a single, conversational response presented directly within the search interface (Aggarwal et al. 2024, 25; Li & Sinnamon 2024, 205). As these AI-generated summaries increasingly appear at the top of search results, users are often able to satisfy their information needs without engaging with brand-owned channels. While this enhances the convenience of information search, it also challenges existing assumptions about how firms influence visibility and manage brand image online (Kim & Priluck 2025, 4-5; Aggarwal et al. 2024, 25.)

At the same time, generative search engines rely heavily on third-party content, further limiting firms' ability to control how their brand is represented. Users also tend to perceive AI-generated responses as objective and trustworthy, despite the lack of transparency in how these outputs are produced (Chen et al. 2025.) These systems are seen to reproduce biases, prioritize certain sources, and present outdated or inaccurate information with high confidence (Christensen et al. 2024, 547-549; Park & Ahn 2024, 2; Liu et al. 2023, 7009).

Taken together, these developments point to a fundamental shift: brand image is no longer primarily formed through firm-controlled communication but is increasingly co-created within AI-mediated information environments (Swaminathan et al. 2020 26-28; Peco-Torres et al. 2025, 103-104). In this study, this change is seen to create growing challenges for firms seeking to maintain a coherent and favorable brand image. Despite increasing managerial interest and the recognized relevance, existing research remains limited in explaining how generative search engines shape brand image, particularly from a managerial perspective. This highlights the need for research that examines how practitioners understand and respond to these changes, providing a foundation for more effective brand management strategies in this rapidly evolving, AI-mediated digital environment.

## **1.2 Research Aim and Objectives**

The aim of this study is to examine how generative search engines influence brand image from a managerial perspective by drawing on insights from “digital strategists”, a term used to describe

professionals working at the intersection of brand management and AI-driven business strategy in marketing agencies and digital consulting firms. These professionals offer valuable insights into this emerging phenomenon, as their managerial expertise directly aligns with the key areas examined in this study.

Accordingly, this study explores the following research question: *“How do digital strategists perceive the influence of generative search engines on brand image from a managerial perspective?”*.

To achieve the aim of this research, it pursues four interrelated objectives that together build a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon:

**First**, the study examines the significance of brand image as a strategic asset in today’s increasingly interconnected and global business environment. This demonstrates the foundational strategic importance of brand image and its management for firms, clarifying the conceptual base for this study. **Second**, the study examines how digital visibility and traditional search engines have influenced brand image and its management in digital environments. This provides a foundation for understanding why the emerging phenomenon of generative search engines is significant in this context. **Third**, it explores how AI-driven generative search engines are influencing brand image, with a particular focus on shifts in brand visibility, representation, and managerial control as AI-generated responses increasingly mediate these aspects. **Lastly**, the study explores the strategic implications related to managing brand image in this emerging context.

This study builds on established theories of brand image and brand management, situating them within prior research on digital visibility and traditional search engines. It further integrates these perspectives with emerging literature on generative search engines to develop an integrative conceptual framework, which serves as a foundation for the empirical analysis of the study. To achieve its objectives, this study adopts a semi-structured qualitative interview approach to capture in-depth insights from digital strategists. Through this process, this study generates new insights that extends scholarly understanding and can be applied in practice.

This study could be beneficial for brand managers, as it helps them understand how generative search engines can influence brand image and supports the development of more effective brand management strategies in this evolving digital context. As the phenomenon is new and underexplored, instead of focusing on a single specific context, such as a particular industry, this study includes perspectives from both B2B and B2C settings to build a broader foundational understanding of the phenomenon. The specific perspective is clarified when necessary to ensure accurate interpretation

of the findings. Furthermore, due to the rapid evolution of generative AI, the findings reflect the state of the technology and professional understanding at the time of data collection, as developments in this context occur quickly and may reshape insights over short periods.

### **1.3 Structure of the Study**

This thesis is structured into six main chapters, each building upon the previous to provide a comprehensive understanding of how generative search engines influence brand image from a managerial perspective.

Chapter 1 introduces the study by outlining the background and relevance of the research topic, focusing on how digital and AI-driven search environments are transforming brand image. It defines the research problem by highlighting the growing challenges related to managerial control over brand image in generative search contexts. The chapter then presents the aim of the study, the research question, and the key objectives that guide the analysis. In doing so, it establishes the foundation for examining how generative search engines influence brand image from a managerial perspective.

Chapter 2 establishes the theoretical foundation of the study by reviewing literature on brand image, its strategic importance, and its formation in digital environments. It conceptualizes digital visibility and traditional search engines as key mechanisms shaping brand image, and extends this understanding by integrating emerging and fragmented research on generative search engines. Through this integration, the chapter develops a conceptually grounded explanation of how generative search engines influence brand image, which is synthesized into a conceptual framework that guides the empirical analysis.

Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology of the study. It explains the qualitative research approach, describes the data collection process based on semi-structured interviews with digital strategists, and details the data analysis procedures. In addition, the chapter addresses research evaluation and ethical considerations.

Chapter 4 presents the empirical findings of the study. The findings are organized into four thematic sections, examining brand image as a strategic asset, the role of digital visibility and traditional search engines, the influence of generative search engines on brand image, and the strategic responses to managing brand image in this context. The chapter concludes with a synthesis of the findings.

Chapter 5 discusses the conclusions of the study by answering the research question and reflecting on the findings in relation to existing literature. It also outlines the theoretical contributions and

managerial implications of the study, and discusses its limitations. Finally, suggestions for future research are presented.

Chapter 6 provides a brief summary of the study, highlighting its key insights and contributions.

## 2 Literature Review

This chapter reviews the theoretical foundations for examining how digital strategists perceive the influence of generative search engines on brand image from a managerial perspective. It integrates relevant academic literature, clarifies key concepts, and identifies underexplored areas in existing research. Building on this, the chapter integrates established theories relevant to the study with emerging research on generative search engines to explain how these systems influence brand image. These insights are used to derive theoretical propositions and are integrated into a conceptual framework that serves as a foundation for the empirical analysis.

### 2.1 Strategic Management of Brand Image

#### 2.1.1 The Concept of Brand Image

Brand image is a widely researched concept, yet it can be defined in multiple ways due to its multidimensional nature and the variety of perspectives through which it can be understood. Keller's (1993, 3) well-established framework defines brand image as "*perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory.*" While this perspective focuses on consumers and product-related brands, more recent studies adopt a broader business-level view. For instance, Jiang et al. (2024, 3) define brand image as "*a network of positive and negative associations stakeholders form towards a brand*", which takes into account a wider range of actors beyond consumers alone, conceptualizing brand image as a multi-stakeholder phenomenon.

According to Keller (1993, 3), *associations* represent the meaning a brand holds. He classifies associations into three main categories of increasing scope: *attributes, benefits, and attitudes*. According to this view, attributes refer to the descriptive features of a brand. Biel (1992, 8) further characterizes these descriptive associations (i.e., *attributes* in Keller's (1993, 4) framework) as either concrete, such as functional qualities (e.g., speed, price, user-friendliness, and durability), or more abstract and emotional, such as excitement, trustworthiness, fun, or stability. *Benefits*, in turn, are explained by Keller (1993, 4) to capture the personal value or outcomes individuals derive from it. Lastly, he describes *attitudes* to represent the overall evaluation of the brand and form the basis for behavioural responses. Wijaya (2013, 58) emphasizes that associations are formed through both direct and indirect interactions with the brand. Jiang et al. (2024, 1) further notes that the strength, favourability, and uniqueness of brand associations determine how effectively a brand is differentiated from its competitors. Together, associations shape perceptions through all past experiences with a brand, which collectively form the brand image (Keller 1993, 3-4; Pratisthita et al. 2022, 182).

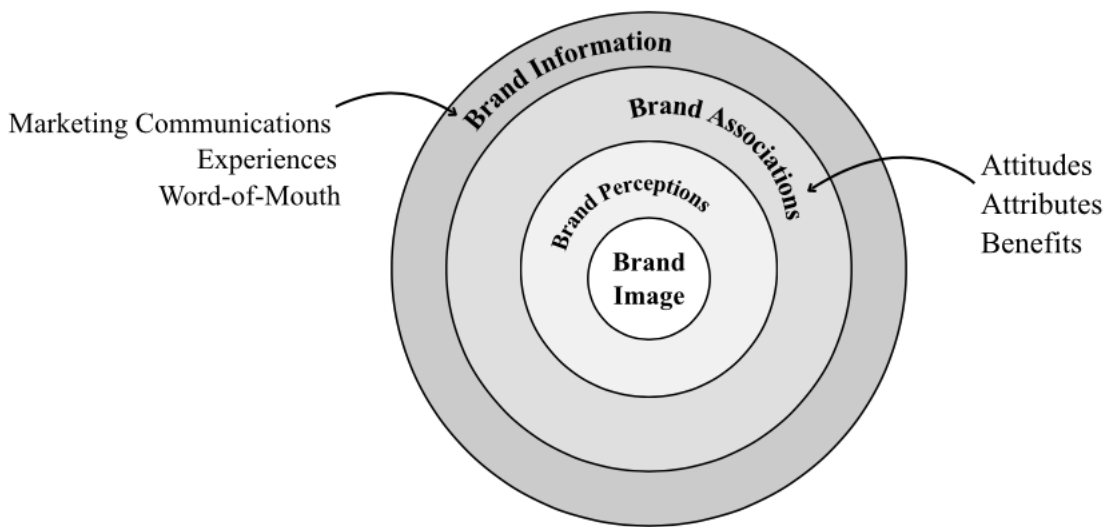


Figure 1: Formation of Brand Image (Created based on theories by Keller (1993), Biel (1992), Jiang et al. (2022), Wijaya (2013), Pratisthita et al. (2022)).

Brand image is shaped through multiple interconnected factors, including personal experiences with the brand's products or service, its marketing communications such as advertising and public relations, and informal exchanges like word-of-mouth (Chang & Liu 2009, 1689; Nagalakshmi et al. 2025, 624). Srivastava and Kamdar (2009, 85) conceptualize the development of brand image as a process that begins when an individual notices and attends to brand-related information in their environment. They explain that this information is subsequently processed and stored in memory for later retrieval. Building on this, Kim and Priluck (2025, 4) emphasize the role of repeated exposure in this process: as individuals encounter the same brand-related cues multiple times, familiarity develops. This familiarity tends to enhance liking and can positively influence behavior, for example by increasing favorable responses toward the brand. This can be understood as the process through which initial brand associations are formed and subsequently reinforced in memory, in line with Keller's (1993, 3-4) framework.

Srivastava and Kamdar (2009, 85) further describe that the way in which information is interpreted depends on its characteristics, such as its relevance to the individual. They note that information perceived as meaningful is processed more deeply, which strengthens memory. This interpretation stage can be understood as the formation of perceptions, in line with Keller (1993, 3-4). As a result, when a brand is familiar and engaging, individuals are more likely to understand its messages clearly and retain them over time. This process ultimately contributes to the development of a stable and consistent brand image across audiences (Srivastava & Kamdar 2009, 85).

Wijaya (2013, 58, 62) argues that the core of brand image lies brand identity, which consists of the internal meanings and associations a firm seeks to communicate to its stakeholders. They describe that brand identity consists of tangible and sensory elements that enable individuals to recognize and distinguish a brand from others, such as logos, colours, sounds, scents, packaging, locations, corporate design, and slogans. A clear and consistent brand identity guides how the brand is presented across different contexts. Over time, these internally defined associations are translated into external perceptions, contributing to the development of a coherent and stable brand image.

Furthermore, brand image serves as a key driver of brand equity (Biel 1992, 7), defined as the added value a product or service gains through its association with a brand name or symbol (Ahn 2023, 913; Kalra 2016, 26). Momen et al (2019, 3) further states that “brand equity is the ultimate goal of all marketing and branding activities”. Brand equity develops when stakeholders form strong, favorable, and distinctive associations about a brand, which constitute the overall value of brand image (Lee & Griffith 2012, 46-48; Chang & Liu 2009, 1688; Keller 1993, 3-4). Kato and Tsuda (2018, 1368) note that since the introduction of the brand equity concept, firms have increasingly focused on managing brands as valuable assets through a range of activities aimed at enhancing their value, emphasizing that maintaining a consistent brand image is a key consideration in this process. In line with this, Nagalakshmi et al. (2025, 623) argue that brand image is a central element of modern business strategy. Taken together, these perspectives highlight the importance of brand image management, which is examined in the following section within the broader framework of brand management.

### 2.1.2 The Strategic Importance of Brand Image Management

To achieve a desired brand image, firms engage in strategic brand management activities (Kato & Tsuda 2018, 1368). Brand management does not have a single, universally agreed definition, but is instead conceptualized in various ways across the literature. The American Marketing Association (1960) defines brand management as a coordinated set of organizational practices aimed at building, maintaining, and strengthening a brand’s perceived meaning and reputation among target audiences, which is seen suitable for the context of this study. Keller and Lehmann (2006, 742) emphasize that a central task in brand management is the management of intangible brand elements, such as brand associations, which shape image-based perceptions. Brand associations are described to be positive, negative, or neutral (Huang & Ku 2016, 81), and they are strengthened through repeated encounters with brand-related communications (Keller & Lehmann 2006, 742). Keller (1993, 5, 8) argues that the favourability of associations reflects the effectiveness of marketing activities. Aaker (1991, 115-118) further explains that associations facilitate information processing and recall, while also provide a compelling reason to choose a particular brand. He adds that strong and favourable associations

also contribute to long-term brand value. Building on this, Keller (1993, 8) argues that consistently reinforced associations form the basis of a coherent brand image, which is further strengthened when firms successfully cultivate trust, credibility, and reputation among both internal and external stakeholders, as Popoli (2011, 422) emphasizes. Ianencko et al. (2020, 1) adds that planned brand image serves as a guiding foundation for all marketing activities.

However, Aaker (1991, 115) note that “an association and an image both represent perceptions which may or may not reflect objective reality”. This viewpoint is further explained by Jiang et al. (2024, 1-2), noting that the intended image does not always align with how the brand is actually perceived by audiences, as it is formed through diverse information sources, as mentioned in section 2.1.1 Keller (1993, 8) describe that inconsistent or fragmented brand associations weaken clarity, reduces the accessibility of brand knowledge during decision-making, increase vulnerability to competitive influence. To address inconsistencies, firms are required to identify and compare the difference between the image a firm aims to project and the image that is actually perceived by audiences (Jiang et al. 2024, 1-2).

Building on these perspectives, a wide body of literature indicates that a strong and established brand image holds significant strategic value for firms, highlighting the importance of its strategic management. Strong brand image is widely recognized as a critical driver of organizational success, long-term competitiveness, and business continuity across both consumer and business-to-business markets (Rego et al. 2009, 50; Balmer et al. 2020, 854; Marvi et al. 2024). A clear and well-managed brand image enables customers to recognize the brand’s key attributes and supports its differentiation from competitors (Goenawan et al. 2023, 39; Lee & Griffith 2012, 44-46). Furthermore, well-established brands are described to be more likely perceived as reliable and of higher quality, increasing their likelihood of being chosen over unfamiliar alternatives (Wijaya 2013, 58; Brakus et al. 2009).

Alam and Mubarak (2025, 757) argue that ultimately, brand success or failure is determined how its image is perceived. This can be understood through the relationship between brand associations and perceptions. As associations are seen to shape perceptions (Keller & Lehmann 2006, 742), the way a brand is represented in memory directly influences how it is interpreted and evaluated. Alam and Mubarak (2025, 757) further explain that positive perceptions further reinforce purchasing, recommendation, and long-term commitment. Huang and Ku (2016, 82) describe that brand perceptions shape satisfaction, which in turn influences behavioural intentions. This process can be explained by the role of familiarity (explained in Subsection 2.1.1), which further fosters trust and

reduces perceived risk (Aaker 1991). As a result, this sense of assurance contributes to brand credibility, defined as the belief that a brand can consistently deliver on its promises (Moin et al. 2016, 116; Kalra 2016, 24-25). Supporting this view, Popoli (2011, 421-422) states that the more brand-oriented the company's overall strategy, the stronger the relationship between stakeholder satisfaction and financial performance. Similarly, a positive brand image is recognized to contribute to superior financial performance (Balmer et al. 2020, 854) for example by increasing repurchase intention (Pratisthita et al. 2022, 182), stabilizing cash flows, and reducing price sensitivity due to higher perceived quality (Rego et al. 2009, 50)



Figure 2: Core Benefits of Brand Image (created based on theories by Keller (1993), Aaker (1991), Alam & Mubarak (2025), Lee & Griffith (2012), Jiang et al. (2024), Balmer et al. (2020), Rego et al. (2009), Popoli (2011)).

Taken together, the literature indicates that brand image can be understood as a perceptual outcome formed through brand associations, which are shaped by multiple interconnected factors such as personal experiences, marketing communications, and word-of-mouth interactions (Keller 1993, 2-3; Chang & Liu 2009, 1690-1691; Nagalakshmi et al. 2025, 624). As these associations accumulate, they influence broader evaluations of the brand, linking brand image closely to brand reputation and positioning it as a key driver of brand equity (Wijaya 2013, 55; Ahn 2023, 913; Biel 1992, 7). Overall, a strong brand image is associated with positive outcomes, ultimately supporting business continuity, financial performance, and competitive advantage (Rego et al. 2009, 50; Balmer et al. 2020, 858). Therefore, achieving and maintaining a desired brand image requires active and continuous management of brand-related associations and experiences (Kato & Tsuda 2018, 1369), particularly the intangible elements that shape how the brand is perceived (Keller & Lehmann 2006, 741).

However, the context in which brand image is formed and managed has evolved significantly due to digital advancements. These developments have enabled firms to reach market segments that were previously difficult or impossible to access, while simultaneously reshaping how brands are perceived

and managed (Alam & Mubarak 2025). The implications of these changes are discussed in the following section.

## **2.2 Brand image in Global Digital Contexts**

### **2.2.1 Digitalization of Brand Image**

The rapid evolution of digital technologies has created an interconnected world that enables brands to extend their geographical reach (Swaminathan et al. 2020, 24), making markets increasingly global and competitive (Nagalakshmi et al. 2025, 623). Today, a brand's first impression is increasingly formed online, where each interaction contributes to the ongoing construction of brand meaning (Pascucci et al. 2023, 41; Cui 2024, 411). Accordingly, a strong online brand presence has become a critical determinant of success across industries (Cui 2024, 412). However, despite the growing importance of digital environments, the long-term value of a brand depends on its ability to communicate a coherent brand image across diverse cultural and competitive contexts (Lee & Griffith 2012, 44-46).

To sustain and strengthen a brand's image and reputation in such environments, reliability plays an increasingly important role, functioning as a core element of a brand's digital identity (Cui 2024, 413; Alam & Mubarak 2025, 756). This can be explained by the characteristics of digital environments, where the lack of physical contact and the intangibility of interactions increase uncertainty, making brand reputation a critical factor in building trust (Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou 2013, 21-22). Extending this perspective to global markets, brands must maintain recognition, credibility, and trust across contexts (Castro & Saiz 2020, 8; Kalra 2016), as limited recognition often leads to weaker local brand equity and reduced profitability (Lee & Griffith 2012, 52-53). In this regard, a central challenge in entering new markets lies in strengthening and extending brand associations while ensuring that the brand's core identity and values are consistently perceived across contexts (Lee & Griffith 2012, 51-52).

Building on these considerations, Cui (2024, 415) argues that firms must continuously develop and maintain a strong brand image within this dynamic digital and global environment. This requires a reassessment of branding strategies to effectively manage brand image and sustain competitiveness (Swaminathan et al. 2020, 24; Nagalakshmi et al. 2025, 623). At the same time, well-established brands can leverage their existing image, as Wijaya (2013, 59) argues that a strong brand image creates an initial competitive advantage in new markets.

Taken together, digitalization has transformed brand image and its management into a continuous, online-driven process in global and highly competitive environments (Swaminathan et al. 2020, 24; Nagalakshmi et al. 2025, 623; Pascucci et al. 2023, 30-31; Cui 2024, 411). In this context, maintaining a coherent and reliable brand image across markets is essential yet increasingly challenging due to uncertainty and reduced control (Lee & Griffith 2012, 44-46; Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou 2013, 21-22; Cui 2024, 413-415; Alam & Mubarak 2025, 756). Consequently, firms must continuously adapt their branding strategies, while a strong existing brand image can provide a competitive advantage, particularly in new markets (Swaminathan et al. 2020, 24; Nagalakshmi et al. 2025, 623).

A key difference of online brands is that how they are experienced depends on the context in which they are encountered (Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou 2013, 22). In this context, the likelihood of encountering a brand—referred to as digital visibility—plays a critical role in shaping initial perceptions and fostering trust (Tarazona-Montoya et al. 2024, 2843–2844). As brand image is formed through perceptions derived from brand associations (Keller 1993, 3), digital visibility can be understood as a foundational driver of brand image formation. This relationship is examined in the following section.

### 2.2.2 Digital Visibility as a Brand Image Driver

According to Cui (2024, 413) visibility is increasingly a key determinant of brand success, particularly in digital settings where users have easy access to information and face abundant alternatives. Supporting this view, Almkhatar et al. (2021, 79) argue that “visibility is everything in modern business if you intend to go ahead”, emphasizing that firms must be discoverable by their target audiences in order to compete effectively in crowded digital environments. Building on these perspectives, Peco-Torres et al. (2025, 104) notes that the information that is accessed and the sources that are available shape brand image. Rowles (2018, 5) highlights that these dynamics applies to both B2B and B2C contexts, noting that impressions formed online shape preferences, trust, and purchasing behaviour, even if the final transaction would occur offline. In B2B settings, digital information sources play a central role in the evaluation of potential partners. Similarly, Pres et al. (2023) notes that in B2C contexts, consumers rely heavily on digital platforms to search for information about products and services, compare alternatives, and assess firm reliability.

Peco-Torres et al. (2025) describe that information ecosystem in digital environments consists of three main content types: induced content (e.g., company websites), autonomous content (independent platforms providing relatively neutral information such as booking pages), and organic content (e.g., user-generated reviews). These elements collectively shape how brand is perceived and

sustained in the digital age (Cui 2024, 411-412). Pascucci et al. (2023, 32) argue that user-generated content represents a major challenge for brand reputation in the digital era. This is because, as Swaminathan et al. (2020, 27-28) and Peco-Torres et al. (2025, 103-104) explain, organic content enables consumers and other stakeholders to co-create brand meanings by sharing their own experiences and opinions, thereby extending firm-controlled content. As a result, brand ownership is no longer fully controlled by firms. At the same time, this content may include misinformation and negative feedback (Alam & Mubarak 2025, 756), which firms cannot fully manage. In turn, Cui (2024, 413) notes that favourable reviews and positive feedback attract potential customers and reinforce their confidence in choosing a specific brand. Consequently, as Brecic et al. (2013, 276) note, a single brand can be perceived in multiple ways, leading to fragmented and sometimes conflicting brand images across regions and audiences. Connecting these insights to prior research discussed in subsection 2.2.1, which suggests that a brand's long-term value depends on its ability to communicate a coherent image across diverse cultural and competitive contexts (Lee & Griffith 2012, 44-46), this fragmentation can be seen as a significant challenge for maintaining a coherent brand image.

In response to this challenge, firms must actively manage how their brand is represented in digital environments. Cui (2024, 411–412) emphasizes that safeguarding brand image requires continuous efforts to cultivate and protect online reputation while expanding digital reach. In this regard, strategic online reputation management can be understood as a firm's active efforts to manage its reputation by encouraging, tracking, and evaluating what is created online about its products and services. Opinions need to be further examined and these insights to be used to make improvements in the firm's performance. Strategic online reputation management helps create a positive first impression of the company, motivating audiences to engage with its online channels or to seek further information through external platforms and review sites. (Peco-Torres et al. 2025, 106-107.)

At the same time, effective brand positioning becomes critical for maintaining coherence. As Salciuviene et al. (2009, 177, 187) explain, firms must balance standardization to ensure consistency with adaptation to local preferences to enhance relevance across markets. This requires aligning brand attitudes with differing cultural values, reinforcing the role of brand image strategy as a foundational element of positioning (Roth 1992, 25, 28).

Taken together, these insights highlight that brand image in digital environments is increasingly shaped by visibility, source dynamics, and stakeholder-generated content, rather than firm-controlled communication alone (Cui 2024, 413; Peco-Torres et al. 2025, 103-104; Swaminathan et al. 2020 26-

28; Pascucci et al. 2023, 32). In this context, search engines play a central role, as they structure how information is encountered and presented to users (Dou et al. 2010, 274; Kim & Priluck 2025, 3-5; Tarazona-Montoya et al. 2024, 2843–2844), which is discussed in the following subsection.

### 2.2.3 Search Engines as Gateways to Brand Image

In digital environments, search engines such as Google, Yahoo, and Bing act as primary gateways through which users access, compare, and connect brand-related information from multiple sources. Consequently, they function as powerful tools for guiding targeted audiences toward brands, while playing a central role in shaping brand image. (Tarazona-Montoya et al. 2024, 2843–2844; Kim & Priluck 2025, 3-5; Dou et al. 2010, 262-264.)

These traditional search engines respond to search queries with a list of ranked links. This list, called search engine rankings represent the system's assessment of how relevant different web pages are to a user's query (Pan et al. 2007, 802.) These systems determine the extent to which brands are visible and able to reach online algorithms (Ahmad et al. 2024, 3-4). Each search engine applies its own ranking algorithms and differs in how results are presented, including the layout and additional features designed to guide users toward related content. Before choosing to open a link, users typically rely on the snippets or descriptive information shown in the results to judge whether a page is worth visiting. (Pan et al. 2007, 802.)

Search engines play a central role in shaping brand image in two key ways. Samet (2023, 1253) and Peco-Torres et al. (2025, 104-105) describe that first, search engines influence digital visibility by determining whether a brand is shown to users at all, what information they see and in what order, acting as a key gatekeeper of online information. As discussed in subsection 2.2.2, digital visibility initiates the process of brand image formation (Tarazona-Montoya et al., 2024, 2843–2844) and is a key determinant of brand success (Cui 2024, 413). Samet (2023, 1253) further explain that search engine algorithms can subtly influence what people think by prioritizing certain results over others, which can reinforce existing beliefs and shape opinions. Dou et al. (2010, 262-264) share a similar view, explaining that when a brand appears at the top of search results for certain keywords, user perceptions of the brand are shaped based on the context of the search results presented. Consequently, users' perceptions of the brand begin to form based on the context and content in which the brand is presented.

Almukthar et al. (2021, 79) describe that through visibility, a firm's distinctive products or services can be recognized. They note that this visibility is valuable both locally and internationally, supporting companies that operate across borders by strengthening their online presence and

competitive positioning at relatively low costs. However, Samet (2023, 1247) further describe that for brands, this means visibility and public perception are not fully in brands' control but are strongly influenced by these algorithms. This aligns with the discussion in subsection 2.2.2. suggesting that, according to Swaminathan et al. (2020, 27-28) and Peco-Torres et al. (2025, 103-104), brand ownership is increasingly shifting from being solely controlled by firms to being co-created among multiple stakeholders in online environments.

Second, search engines act as gateways that guide users to brand-related content, particularly corporate websites. At this stage, according to (Tarazona-Montoya et al., 2024, 2843–2844, control shifts back to the brand, as firms can directly manage what information is presented and how it is communicated in their owned platforms. Denga et al. (2023, 183) notes that the shared information on a website function as a key source through which perceptions are formed of a brand, which according to Pires et al. (2022, 5-6), directly impact brand image. Huang and Ku (2016, 82) explain that a website influences brand image particularly in situations where audiences have limited information. In such cases, users rely on cues provided by the website to form impressions about the organization. These cues activate related associations in memory, shaping thoughts and attitudes, and ultimately influencing how the brand is perceived. They further suggest that brand image formed through a company's website can enhance viewers' trust in the organization, which in turn encourages trust-related behaviours, such as purchasing. At the same time, user interactions on these websites provide valuable insights into customer needs and preferences, allowing firms to continuously refine their brand communication. (Tarazona-Montoya et al. 2024, 2843–2844; Peco-Torres et al. 2025, 103-104.)

Consequently, Denga et al. (2023, 183) suggests that website design should be user-oriented and convey the company's brand identity in a clear and consistent way. They note that while effective and well-designed website facilitates information while evokes positive emotions, its impact remains limited if audiences are unable to find or access it online in the first place (Denga et al. 2023, 182). This brings the discussion back to the importance of search engine visibility on brand image, highlighting a critical tension: although corporate websites provide firms with a relatively high degree of control over brand communication, this control is relied on algorithmically mediated visibility. In other words, the ability of firms to shape brand image through owned channels is fundamentally dependent on whether search engines make these channels visible to users.

To improve organic (non-paid) visibility and website traffic, firms have traditionally relied on search engine optimization (SEO) (Tarazona-Montoya et al. 2024, 2844, Almkhtar et al. 2021, 72). Momen

et al. (2019, 6-7) emphasize that a strong understanding of search engines and optimization strategies is essential for strengthening brand recognition. They note that the primary objective of SEO is to enhance a website's visibility by improving its ranking in search results, thereby increasing the likelihood that a brand appears among the top results for relevant queries. Furthermore, they describe that SEO has become widely adopted across different types of organizations, as it often delivers higher returns on investment while maintaining relatively low customer acquisition costs compared to other forms of promotion and advertising.

Ahmad et al. (2024, 4) note that effective SEO strategies aim to secure a brand's placement on the first page of search results, as users rarely scroll to the bottom of the page or continue beyond it due to time constraints. They further explain that this visibility in search rankings is improved through for instance creating high-quality and frequently updated content using targeted keywords on websites. Glick et al. (2014, 99) describe that the higher and more frequently a company website appears in search results, the more website visitors are attracted.

Taken together, these insights highlight a fundamental tension in digital brand image management. While firms retain a relatively high degree of control over brand image through owned channels such as websites (Denga et al. 2023, 183; Pires et al. 2022, 5-6), this control is dependent on visibility within search engines. As search engines determine whether and how these channels are encountered, they act as powerful intermediaries that shape both access to and interpretation of brand-related information (Dou et al. 2010, 262-264; Samet 2023, 1253; Tarazona-Montoya et al. 2024, 2843–2844). Consequently, brand image is no longer formed solely through firm-controlled communication, but through an interplay between algorithmically mediated visibility and brand-managed content, reflecting a broader shift in which brand ownership is increasingly co-created across digital environments (Swaminathan et al. 2020 26-28; Peco-Torres et al. 2025, 103-104).

However, more recently, a shift has occurred from traditional search engines toward generative search engines, driven by the rapid advancement of AI technologies (Chen et al. 2025; Park & Ahn 2024, 1). This transformation has fundamentally changed how information is searched and consumed online (Hu et al. 2024). As a result, it also reshapes how brand image and its management are understood, a development that is examined in the following section.

## 2.3 Rise of Generative Search Engines

### 2.3.1 Concept of Generative Search Engines

Generative search engines, such as Microsoft Copilot, Perplexity AI, and Google's Gemini, are systems built on large language models (LLMs) like ChatGPT that together synthesize and summarize information from multiple sources to provide direct responses within the search interface (Kim & Priluck 2025, 3; Aggarwal et al. 2024, 25). Chen et al. (2025) categorize the sources used by AI systems into three types: brand-owned (e.g., company websites), social (such as social media and public forums), and earned media (authoritative third-party sources such as professional reviews, publisher domains, and institutional sites). This classification is similar to the content typology proposed by Peco-Torres et al. (2025, 103-104) in subsection 2.2.2, which distinguishes between induced, autonomous, and organic content. Chen et al. (2025) argue that traditional search engines typically present a relatively balanced mix of these sources, whereas generative AI systems tend to favour certain types—particularly authoritative third-party content—over others.

The AI-generated responses go beyond traditional search engine hyperlink retrieval by replacing lists of links with a single, coherent block of text. Generative search engines are designed to help users navigate large volumes of information by simplifying the information-seeking process: they interpret the query, retrieve relevant documents, and generate instant, automated responses with minimal effort from the user. In doing so, they are able to produce coherent and contextually relevant text across a wide range of domains. (McKay 2024, 3-4; Dai et al. 2025, 3922-3923.) For example, these systems answer questions, solve problems, provide advice, and generate personal recommendations based on customer preferences and behaviors (Christensen et al. 2025 547; Park & Ahn 2024, 2). The responses are described to be engaging, personalized, and human-like (Hu et al. 2024; Aggarwal et al. 2024, 25).

McKay (2024, 2-4) together with Kim and Priluck (2025, 3-5) adds that these systems considerably increase accessibility and efficiency of information retrieval, as the use of generative AI is generally faster and more user-friendly compared to traditional search methods. Due to the benefits they offer, these systems have rapidly gained global attention and reduced reliance on traditional keyword-based search queries, leading users to increasingly turn to generative AI tools instead. (Christensen et al. 2024, 548; Kim & Priluck 2025, 3-5; Aggarwal et al. 2024, 25; Hu et al. 2024.) In line with these viewpoints, Aggarwal et al. (2024, 25) explain that generative search engines rapidly reshape the online search landscape and are becoming the dominant method of accessing digital information.

Furthermore, a study conducted by Kim and Priluck (2025, 12-13) reveal that the information produced by generative search engines are often perceived as more objective than those provided by traditional search engines. Chen et al. (2025) align with this view, describing that users increasingly trust AI-generated content and recommendations in high-value decision-making contexts. However, they further note that this trust remains fragile and depends on the perceived reliability of the AI and the credibility of its information sources.

Regardless of all benefits, generative search engines pose significant risks related to accuracy, transparency, and reliability of the information that they provide. Liu et al. (2023, 7001) describe that depending on the platform, references to original sources may or may not be included in the responses generated by these systems. They further argue that a key requirement for a reliable generative search engine is verifiability, meaning that all generated claims should be directly supported by citations. In their view, each citation should accurately reflect the statement it accompanies, ensuring that users can easily confirm the reliability of the information by reviewing the original sources. However, their empirical study conducted in 2023 indicate that generative search engine outputs frequently include unsupported claims and inaccurate citations, where only 51,5% of generated sentences were verified through citations, and even when citations were provided, only 74.5% actually supported the associated statements.

Kim and Priluck (2025, 4) argue that the AI-generated responses may provide inaccurate, outdated, and unreliable information. They further describe these systems have limited domain expertise and an inability to control mistakes. Christensen et al. (2024, 548) as well as Park and Ahn (2024, 2) add to this view that these systems can frequently generate nonsensical, factually incorrect information or ideas that is presented in a highly convincing manner, a phenomenon referred as “hallucinations”. Li and Sinnamon (2024, 205) further highlight a concern that these systems are widely trusted, while users often lack the skills to critically evaluate and understand the information they provide, making them more vulnerable to inaccuracies. Christensen et al. (2024, 558) aligns with this view, noting that even when AI-generated recommendations contain errors, the trust and enthusiasm toward AI may lead to reliance on these flawed suggestions rather than on more accurate information from other sources.

Taken together, the literature indicates that generative search engines fundamentally transform the information environment by synthesizing content from multiple sources—particularly brand-owned, social, and earned media—into unified AI-generated responses (Aggarwal et al. 2024, 25; Chen et al. 2025; Kim & Priluck 2025, 3, 12). While these systems enhance efficiency, accessibility, and user

experience (McKay 2024, 3-4; Aggarwal et al. 2024, 25; Kim & Priluck 2025, 3-5), they also introduce significant challenges related to transparency, accuracy, and reliability, including unsupported claims and “hallucinated” content (Liu et al. 2023, 7009; Christensen et al. 2024, 548-549; Park & Ahn 2024, 2). At the same time, AI-generated outputs are often perceived as objective and trustworthy, increasing user reliance on them despite their limitations (McKay 2024, 4; Kim & Priluck 2025, 3-5; Chen et al. 2025).

As this subsection has established a comprehensive understanding of generative search engines as a rapidly evolving technological context that fundamentally reshapes the digital landscape, the following subsection builds on these insights to develop a conceptually grounded explanation of the underlying logic of how they influence brand image. This step is necessary because existing literature remains limited and fragmented in explaining this relationship. Consequently, synthesizing these insights is required to construct a coherent conceptual framework that provide the basis for the empirical investigation of the study.

### 2.3.2 Underlying Logic of Influence on Brand Image

The transition from traditional search engines to generative search engines can be seen to revolutionize various aspects of brand image and its management, which can be theoretically grounded by synthesizing both established theoretical perspectives and emerging, evolving insights to develop a conceptual understanding of the underlying mechanisms of this phenomenon.

Initially, Aggarwal et al. (2024, 25–26) note that users are often satisfied with the synthesized responses provided directly by generative systems, which reduces the need to visit external websites. As a result, the rise of generative search engines has led to a decline in organic website traffic and visibility (Aggarwal et al. 2024, 25-26). As discussed in subsection 2.2.3, the ability of firms to shape brand image through owned channels is fundamentally dependent on whether search engines make these channels visible to users. Drawing from these theoretical perspectives, decreasing traffic and visibility creates a significant challenge for brand image management, as the role of firm-controlled channels in shaping brand image becomes progressively weaker.

Building on this issue, Chen et al. (2025), in their comparative analysis of AI search and traditional web search, found that generative search engines systematically favor major, well-known brands over niche or smaller brands. Given from subsection 2.2.2 that digital visibility plays a critical role in shaping initial brand perceptions and building trust (Tarazona-Montoya et al. 2024, 2843–2844), and is increasingly a key determinant of brand success in digital environments (Cui 2024, 413), this bias further weakens the position of smaller brands in this context. Chen et al. (2025) suggest that now,

the primary goal is not just to be found online, but to be recommended by AI systems, as generative search engines increasingly act as decision-making intermediaries rather than passive information providers.

The influence of generative search engines can be seen extending even further, as according to Kim and Priluck (2025, 3-5), the operational logic of generative search engines fundamentally alters how and in what context brands appear in search-generated responses. As outlined in subsection 3.2.1, generative search engines rely highly on sources beyond company-owned channels (Chen et al. 2025). This means that brand representations are increasingly constructed from external content, which is, as discussed in subsection 2.2.2, posing a threat to brand reputation (Pascucci et al. 2023, 32). Combining these perspectives, it can be argued that generative search engines further increase the risk of inconsistent, fragmented, or even misleading brand images which are formed through AI-generated responses. Aggarwal (2024, 25) adds to this issue that it cannot be controlled when and how digital content is displayed in generative responses, further reinforcing the lack of control over how brand-related information is presented and interpreted in these environments.

Furthermore, Chen et al. (2025) notes that AI systems differ in terms of sources used, information freshness, language stability, and sensitivity to phrasing. This suggests that brand representations may vary across platforms and queries, increasing the risk of inconsistent and fragmented brand images. This development stands in contrast to prior research, which emphasizes that a brand's long-term value depends on its ability to communicate a coherent image across diverse cultural and competitive contexts (Lee & Griffith 2012, 44-46).

The loss of control is further highlighted by the concern discussed in subsection 2.3.1, noting that information produced by generative AI is not always accurate. As mentioned, generative systems can produce misleading brand-related content that may appear credible but contain errors or entirely false information. As users can create and share biased content, such as prejudiced or stereotypical materials, AI models trained on such data have also been found to reproduce these biases. (Feuerriegel et al. 2023, 117.) Furthermore, as mentioned, responses generated by generative search engines are often perceived trustworthy (Chen et al. 2025), making the issue particularly problematic, as users may accept biased or inaccurate brand information, influencing brand image.

Taken together, the literature indicates that generative search engines fundamentally influence brand image by reducing the visibility of firm-controlled channels, prioritizing third-party content, and mediating how brand-related information is interpreted and presented to users (Aggarwal et al. 2024, 25; Chen et al. 2025; Kim & Priluck 2025, 3-5). As a result, brand image becomes increasingly shaped

by AI-generated representations that are often perceived as trustworthy, despite potential inaccuracies, biases, and inconsistencies (Chen et al. 2025; Liu et al. 2023, 7009; Christensen et al. 2024, 548-549). This development weakens managerial control over brand image and increases the risk of fragmented and inconsistent brand perceptions across contexts. This contrasts with prior research, such as Lee and Griffith (2012, 44-46), which emphasizes the strategic importance of maintaining a coherent brand image across markets.

These insights highlight that generative search engines influence brand image through a set of interconnected mechanisms, including changes in digital visibility, increased reliance on third-party content, and AI-driven synthesis of information. However, existing literature does not provide a coherent structure for understanding how these mechanisms interact. Therefore, the following section develops an integrative conceptual framework that synthesizes these insights into a structured model.

## 2.4 Integrative Conceptual Framework

Building on the previous discussion, this section presents a researcher-developed integrative conceptual framework that synthesizes the key insights identified in sections 2.1–2.3 into a coherent structure. The framework guides both the research design and the interpretation of findings by illustrating how the central concepts of the study are interconnected, as well as clarifies the relevance of the study. (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik 2021.)

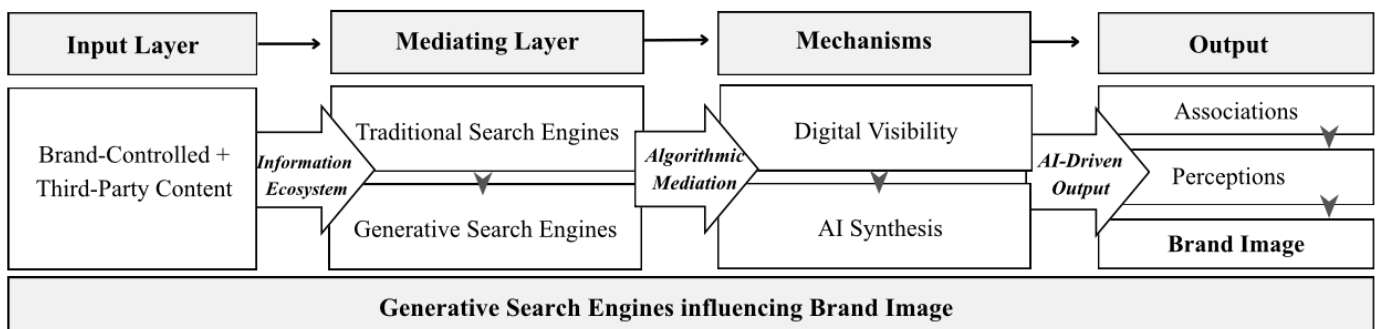


Figure 3: Integrative Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study explains how generative search engines influence brand image through four interconnected layers: **input**, **mediation**, **mechanisms**, and **output**. Together, these layers describe how brand-related information is transformed into brand image through influencing perceptions and associations in AI-mediated search environments.

First, the **input layer** represents the digital information ecosystem from which brand-related information originates. This includes both brand-controlled content (e.g., company websites) and third-party content, such as independent platforms and user-generated reviews.

Second, the **mediation layer** captures the role of search engines as intermediaries between information and users. Both traditional and generative search engines structure how information is accessed, filtered, and presented, thereby determining which brand-related content becomes visible to users (Dou et al. 2010, 262-264; Kim & Priluck 2025, 3-5). However, a key distinction emerges: while traditional search engines primarily provide ranked lists of links, generative search engines actively synthesize information from multiple sources into a single, AI-generated response. This represents a shift from information retrieval to information construction (McKay 2024, 3; Dai et al. 2025, 3922-3923.)

Third, the **mechanisms layer** explains the underlying processes through which this mechanism influences brand image. Two key mechanisms are identified. The first mechanism, digital visibility, determines how the brand is represented in digital environments, both search engines and generative search engine outputs. As audiences encounter brand-related information from diverse and often inconsistent information sources, they construct brand image from these fragmented inputs which can lead to that a firm's intended brand image does not always align with how it is perceived by audiences. (Cui 2024, 413; Jiang et al. 2024, 1-2.)

The second mechanism is AI-driven synthesis, through which generative systems select, combine, and interpret information from different sources (Chen et al. 2025; Kim & Priluck 2025, 3; Aggarwal et al. 2024, 5). As brand image fragmentation already exists because audiences encounter brand representations formed through multi-source inputs (Jiang et al. 2024, 1), this phenomenon is further intensified in generative search environments, synthesizing diverse and potentially inconsistent inputs into a single representation of the brand.

Finally, the **output layer** represents the formation of brand image as associations and perceptions, and overall evaluations held by stakeholders (Keller 1993, 3). In this framework, these are increasingly influenced by AI-generated brand representations, which serve as an increasingly prominent source of brand-related information in search environments. Consequently, brand image is no longer formed directly from original sources, but from algorithmically mediated interpretations of those sources. Due to the nature of generative search engines, AI-generated brand representations may include inaccurate, outdated, unintended or unreliable information. (Christensen et al. 2024, 548;

Kim & Priluck 2025, 3-5; Aggarwal et al. 2024, 25; Hu et al. 2024.) Thus, generative search engines can influence brand image through the way they represent brands in their outputs.

Taken together, the framework illustrates that generative search engines influence brand image by mediating how brand-related information is selected, synthesized, and presented to stakeholders. Brand image is therefore no longer shaped primarily through firm-controlled communication, but increasingly through AI-generated representations based on multiple information sources. This shift reduces managerial control over brand representation and increases the complexity and variability of brand image management across digital contexts, thereby highlighting the need to examine this phenomenon from the managerial perspective of digital strategists.

### **3 Research Methodology**

This chapter presents the research methodology of the study. Methodology can be understood as the structured and reasoned approach through which researchers design a study, choose suitable methods for data collection and analysis, and justify these methodological choices in relation to the research objectives (King et al. 2019, 7). In addition, the chapter evaluates the trustworthiness of the study and discusses ethical considerations related to the research process. Together, these elements provide a structured account of how the study has been conducted and how the research question and objectives are approached in practice, forming a clear foundation for the empirical findings presented in the following section.

#### **3.1 Research Approach**

In this study, a qualitative approach is adopted as the most appropriate research method, grounded in an interpretivist perspective that views reality as socially constructed and emphasizes the subjective meanings individuals assign to their experiences (Alharahsheh & Pius 2020, 41-42). Qualitative approach is seen particularly suitable, as it aims to understand individuals' perspectives and experiences while examining phenomena within their real-life contexts (Merriam & Tisdell 2016, 26–27; Creswell & Poth 2023, 4), aligning with the purpose of this study. Rather than relying on numerical data, qualitative research enables the generation of rich, nuanced insights that are difficult to capture through quantitative methods (Bazen et al. 2021, 241; Saldaña 2011, 10–11). Furthermore, qualitative methods support in-depth, context-specific exploration of participants' viewpoints (Creswell & Poth 2023, 4). Its flexible and emergent nature allows the research process to evolve as new insights arise, facilitating the capture of diverse perspectives (Merriam & Tisdell 2016, 38–39, 181).

These characteristics are particularly relevant in this study, which focuses on expert-based knowledge, including experiential insights and tacit understanding that are not easily measured. The approach allows for the exploration of differing or even contradictory viewpoints, as well as uncertainty and context-specific interpretations. It also enables participants to reflect on their experiences, elaborate on their reasoning, and introduce perspectives that may not be anticipated in advance. This is especially important given that the influence of generative search engines on brand image remains an emerging and under-researched area, where identifying new and unexpected insights is essential. In addition, qualitative research often aims to produce practically relevant knowledge (Flick 2007, 6; Creswell & Poth 2023, 4; Merriam & Tisdell 2016, 26–27.) Accordingly,

this study aims to advance understanding of the phenomenon and to provide insights that are useful for managerial practice.

Building on the outlined philosophical foundation and qualitative research approach, the following section presents the data collection procedures employed in this study.

## **3.2 Data Collection**

### **3.2.1 Data Collection Method**

This study draws on primary qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews based on open-ended questions. Semi-structured interviews are organized around predetermined themes, while allowing flexibility in the sequence and formulation of questions. Rather than being followed verbatim, the interview guide provides a structured yet adaptable framework that enables the conversation to develop naturally. This approach ensures that key topics are consistently addressed across participants, while also allowing for the capture of their unique perspectives. (Merriam & Tisdell 2016, 110–111; Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik 2021, 1360.)

This method is particularly appropriate for this study given the expert nature of the participants, ensuring that the discussion remains focused on themes relevant to the research objectives, while allowing participants to articulate their expertise in their own terms without restricting their responses (Walliman 2006, 90). It also allows the researcher to probe relevant issues more deeply and clarify responses when necessary (Bazen et al. 2021, 241-242). This proved essential throughout the data collection process, as the discussions often evolved in different directions depending on the participants' areas of expertise.

To recruit interview participants, non-probability purposive sampling was employed. This approach involves the researcher intentionally selecting individuals who meet predefined criteria relevant to the study, such as possessing particular characteristics, experience, or expertise related to the phenomenon under investigation. This ensures that the data captures informed and relevant perspectives. (Bazen et al. 2021, 242; Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik 2021, 1362; Walliman 2006, 78.) By focusing on participants with relevant expertise, purposive sampling enables the collection of rich and meaningful insights. The initial intention of this study was to interview brand managers from firms with strong brand image. However, during the data collection process, access to these professionals proved limited. In several cases, brand managers were either difficult to reach or unwilling to participate. Additionally, some potential participants indicated that they did not possess sufficient knowledge or familiarity with the topic to provide informed insights, reflecting the

emerging and still-evolving nature of the phenomenon. As a result, the focus of the study shifted toward interviewing professionals with relevant expertise and interests instead of a specific role.

Drawing on the researcher’s professional network as a starting point, the sample was expanded through participants recommending subsequent participants. This method is referred in theory as “snowball sampling” which is, according to Biernacki and Waldorf (1981, 141), a method generating a sample by relying from individuals who either share or are aware of others possessing characteristics relevant to the study. In this study, the chosen individuals are referred as “digital strategists”, a term introduced by the researcher. Rather than being defined by a specific job title, digital strategists are characterized by their relevant knowledge, interests, and professional experience related to the research topic. This selection ensured that the interviewees could provide informed, experience-based insights into how generative search engines influence brand image from a managerial perspective. Interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy, transparency, and reliability, and to enable precise use of quotations. The firms represented by the interviewed digital strategists share a common focus on the intersection of digital marketing and AI-driven business strategy.

Table 1: List of Study Participants

Participant	Current Title	Company	Date	Duration
1	New Business, Digital & AI	Avidly	20.11.2025	57 min
2	Business Area Director, Digital & AI	Avidly	3.12.2025	58 min
3	Client Director	Avidly	15.3.2025	1h 5 min
4	CEO	Meom	5.1.2026	55 min
5	Co-Founder	Meroid.ai	9.1.2026	41 min
6	CEO	Kuubi	16.1.2026	1h 1 min

In this study, the formulation of the questions is directly informed by the literature review and the conceptual framework. Consequently, the theoretical foundation is reflected in the questions, which are organized into categories according to the main themes. To ensure that all essential themes related to the research question were addressed, significant attention was placed on to the careful operationalisation of the study’s central concepts. An operationalisation table served as the foundation for developing the interview questions. It is considered that, as Merriam and Tisdell (2016, 116-117) notes, the phrasing of interview questions influences the quality and relevance of the information gathered from participants. Furthermore, because qualitative research is emergent and evolving, as Merriam and Tisdell (2016, 181) suggest, all interview questions or subsequent directions cannot be predetermined, but rather developed through ongoing analysis during data collection. Analysis during data collection is appropriate in this research especially as the topic is emerging and complex.

Therefore, it was expected that interview questions and directions could evolve during the process. This flexible approach allows the researcher to follow up on possible unexpected but relevant themes, capturing participants' perspectives more fully, and avoid being limited by a pre-set structure. In addition, as Bazen et al. (2021, 242) suggests, to maintain neutrality, leading questions are avoided, and attention is given to ensure that the interviewers' own characteristics and interactions will not influence participants' responses.

Table 2: Operationalization Table

Research question	Objectives	Theoretical background	Interview themes
How do digital strategists perceive the influence of generative search engines on brand image from a managerial perspective?	1. To examine the significance of brand image as a strategic asset in global and digital environments	Brand image theory (Keller 1993; Biel 1992)  Brand equity & reputation  Strategic brand management	Perceived role of brand image in business  Brand image in global digital environments  Managing brand consistency across markets  Strategic brand image building practices
	2. To investigate how traditional search engines influence brand image and its management	Digital visibility  Search engines as brand touchpoints  SEO and ranking mechanisms	Role of search engines in shaping brand perceptions  Importance of digital visibility and discoverability  SEO as a tool for influencing brand image  Control through brand-owned channels (websites)
	3. To examine how generative search engines influence brand image in digital environments	Generative search engines (LLMs)  Algorithmic mediation of information  Co-creation of brand image through third-party content	AI-generated responses as brand representations  Role of third-party content  Changes in brand visibility, discoverability and brand interpretation  Loss of managerial control over brand image
	4. To explore strategic implications for managing brand image in AI-driven search environments	Strategic brand management in digital contexts  Online reputation management  Emerging practices (e.g. GEO vs SEO)	Opportunities, risks and challenges  Managing negative or incorrect AI-generated content  Strategies to influence AI-generated brand representations

### 3.2.2 Data Collection Process

For this research, the interviews were conducted in an online Microsoft Teams environment, lasting approximately one hour. Once suitable interviewees were identified, they were contacted by email or phone and provided with a brief introduction to the study and its aims. All participants expressed interest in the topic, and finding suitable interview times was straightforward. A reminder email was sent before each interview to outline the main themes of the discussion, allowing the interviewees to prepare if they wished. As both the interviewer and the participants were native Finnish speakers, the interviews were conducted in Finnish. This was seen beneficial as it allows participants to express perceptions more naturally and authentically, without the barrier of communicating in a foreign language. For the researcher, it enabled a deeper understanding of the responses, reduces the risk of misinterpretation, and facilitate a more authentic and nuanced collection of data. Despite the remote format, the interviewees spoke openly and in detail, and no noticeable differences in interaction or engagement were observed compared to typical face-to-face interviews. With the participants' permissions, the discussions were audio-recorded. Recording allowed the researcher to focus fully on the flow of the conversation and ensure that no relevant details were lost.

The interview structure was designed to help interviewees move from general topics to more specific ones, making it easier for them to move step-by-step into the more detailed parts of the discussion. Each main question was supported by additional prompts to encourage deeper reflection and to clarify issues when needed. The interview guide (Appendix 3) enabled the researcher to move the conversation in a purposeful direction and ensured that the discussion remained aligned with the core focus of the study. (Kallio et al. 2016, 2958-2959; Roberts 2020, 3191.) Furthermore, the wording and sequence of the questions were adapted to the background and expertise of each interviewee, acknowledging that different informants could contribute distinct perspectives to the thematic areas. During the interviews, the researcher also posed spontaneous follow-up questions that were not included in the original guide. This enhanced the flexibility of the data collection process, allowing emerging themes to be explored in greater depth and supporting a more nuanced understanding of participants' perspectives (Kallio et al. 2016, 2958-2959).

Although a common interview guide was used to ensure coverage of all central themes, the interviews varied notably in emphasis, depth, and direction. These differences can be explained by the diverse professional backgrounds, areas of expertise, and organizational contexts of the participants. In

addition, the emerging and evolving nature of the topic meant that participants demonstrated varying levels of familiarity with the phenomenon, and their responses were shaped by their individual professional experiences.

During the interviews, it became evident that participants tended to emphasize subthemes aligned with their areas of expertise, while contributing less to others. At the same time, both converging and diverging perspectives emerged, reflecting the complexity of the phenomenon under study. This diversity enriched the findings by capturing a wide range of context-dependent insights. In cases where one participant had limited input on a particular topic, others were able to provide complementary perspectives, contributing to a more comprehensive overall understanding of the phenomenon.

During the data collection process, it was observed that certain themes began to recur relatively quickly across interviews, indicating that no substantially new insights were emerging in those areas. At the same time, other topics generated a wide range of perspectives and could have been explored in greater depth, reflecting the complexity and multifaceted nature of the phenomenon. This suggests that while saturation was reached in terms of identifying key themes and patterns, the richness and diversity of viewpoints within those themes highlight that the topic allows for multiple interpretations.

### **3.3 Data Analysis**

In this study, the collected data are analysed using thematic analysis to address the research question, with the study's objectives guiding the identification of key themes and patterns. The interview data are organized into meaningful categories, enabling a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Merriam & Tisdell 2016, 186–187; Bazen et al. 2021, 243–244). Thematic analysis was considered particularly suitable for this study due to the exploratory and interpretive nature of the study, as this method allows for the systematic examination of large qualitative datasets while facilitating the identification of patterns and emergent insights (Braun & Clarke 2006, 97). Furthermore, its flexibility enables a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the data, which is essential when examining complex and evolving phenomena (Braun & Clarke 2006, 78–79).

In practice, the analysis follows three stages outlined by Saldaña (2011, 32–33): description, analysis, and interpretation.

**First, in the description stage**, the recorded interviews were transcribed into written form using UTU Transcribe, creating a foundation for systematic analysis. The transcripts were carefully reviewed alongside the recordings to ensure accuracy and preserve the interviewees' intended

meanings. As the platform relies on automated transcription, minor inaccuracies were identified and manually corrected. The material was then read multiple times to achieve familiarity, during which preliminary notes were made on recurring ideas, meaningful statements, and connections to the operationalization table. As Naeem et al. (2023, 5) suggest, illustrative quotes were selected for highlighting key patterns and relevant viewpoints in the data. Overall, this phase supported the development of an initial understanding of the data, helping to find relevant information to the research objectives, as well as identify contrasts and similarities).

**Second, in the analysis stage,** coding—defined as the process of organizing data into meaningful themes to simplify complex textual data and support systematic analysis (Klenke 2016, 98; Naeem et al. 2023, 4)—was conducted manually by dividing the transcripts into smaller segments and assigning labels based on their content, for example “trust”, “risk reduction”, “brand strength”. Some codes emerged inductively from the data, reflecting participants’ own expressions and unexpected insights, while others were informed by the conceptual framework and predefined themes derived from the operationalization table. In this way, the operationalization table guided the coding process while still allowing new patterns to emerge from the data. Through this iterative process, the analysis moved continuously between the raw data and the developing structure of codes and categories. It was also acknowledged that coding is inherently interpretive, as the selection of codes may vary depending on the researcher’s prior knowledge and perspectives (Saldaña 2011, 97; Schreier 2012, 2). Next, the codes were grouped into clusters to identify broader patterns and relationships in the data (Frades & Matthiesen 2010).

**Finally, in the interpretation stage,** the clustered codes were grouped into broader thematic categories that captured central patterns in the data. In line with Braun and Clarke (2006, 79) and Naeem et al. (2023, 4), a theme was understood as a meaningful pattern within the data that offers insights into the research question. Therefore, themes further refined, merged, or separated to ensure they accurately represented the participants’ perspectives. The final themes were then interpreted in relation to the research question and situated within established theory and the conceptual framework developed in this study, with the operationalization table supporting this process by linking the empirical findings back to the underlying concepts. The analysis resulted in four integrative themes: **(1)** the strategic importance of brand image, **(2)** the role of digital visibility and traditional search engines in brand image formation, **(3)** the influence of generative search engines on brand image, and **(4)** strategic responses to managing brand image in AI-driven digital environments.

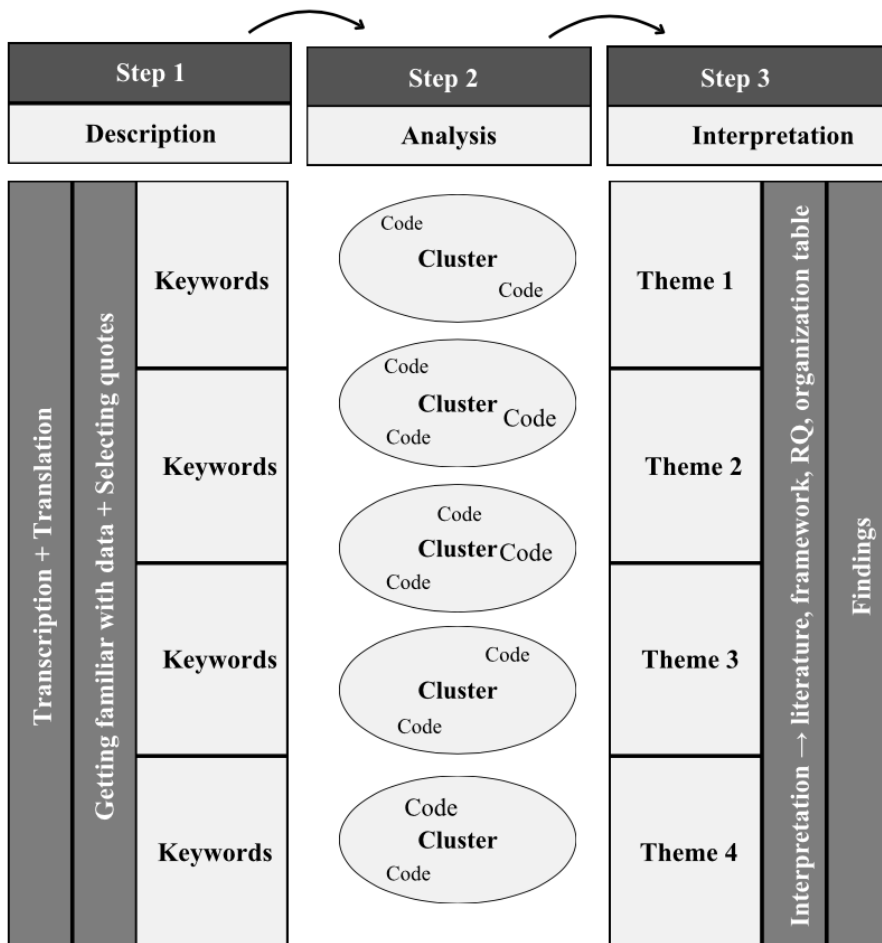


Figure 4: Data Analysis (created based on theory by Saldaña (2011), inspired by Naeem et al. (2023, 4))

Although the analysis is presented as a three-stage process, it was not strictly linear. Throughout the study, data collection and analysis were conducted iteratively, involving continuous movement between the data and their interpretation. This iterative approach is common in qualitative research and allows the findings to become progressively more refined and analytically meaningful (Merriam & Tisdell 2016, 181–183; Walliman 2006, 129). Overall, the analysis indicated that a sufficient level of data saturation had been reached, as additional interviews were unlikely to generate fundamentally new themes but rather further elaborate on existing ones. While the phenomenon under investigation is inherently evolving and could be explored indefinitely, the repetition of similar themes and responses across interviews suggest that no substantially new insights were emerging (Meyer, 2001).

The final output of the analysis integrates participants' perspectives, the researcher's interpretive reflections, resulting in a comprehensive interpretation of the studied phenomenon. This outcome contributes to existing knowledge and may suggest implications for practice or organizational change. (Creswell & Poth 2025, 18.) As Bazen et al. (2021, 241) notes, qualitative findings are not intended

to be statistically generalizable. They note that rather, qualitative findings can be used to develop hypothesis regarding a phenomenon or behavior of interest and may generate hypotheses for further research. Furthermore, in line with the characteristics of interpretivist research philosophy, this study does not attempt to measure results objectively. Instead, the researcher must interpret the responses within their temporal and organizational context, acknowledging that both the researcher's and the participants' perspectives influence the final understanding of the phenomenon.

As the interviews were conducted in Finnish, special attention was given to the translation of empirical material into English. After the themes and interpretations had been fully developed, selected quotations and analytical summaries were translated into English for inclusion in the thesis. The guiding principle in translation was to prioritize meaning over literal wording. However, only minor adjustments were made to improve readability and conceptual clarity while preserving the original expressions, which may result in slightly non-native or imperfect phrasing in the quotations. Due to the researcher's strong proficiency in both Finnish and English, the translation process did not pose significant challenges, and no substantial loss of meaning was identified.

### 3.4 Research Evaluation

This section evaluates the trustworthiness of this study by applying the framework proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), which assesses research quality across four key dimensions: *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability*, and *confirmability*. The evaluation of a research is necessary to ensure that its findings can be applied effectively in professional practice and decision-making (Noble & Smith 2015, 34-35).

**Credibility** refers to how believable and trustworthy the research findings are, meaning that the findings reflect the reality of the phenomenon under investigation (Sinkovics et al. 2008, 699; Lincoln & Guba 1985, 296-307). It can be strengthened through sustained engagement with the research context, careful and continuous observation, triangulation, and the use of multiple data sources or perspectives for rich data and reduced bias (Lincoln & Guba 1985, 296-307; Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 294). In addition, Bazen et al. (2021, 242) emphasize the importance of researcher neutrality during interviews, particularly by avoiding leading questions and being aware of how the researcher's own characteristics and interactions may influence participants' responses.

Therefore, in this study, credibility is enhanced by demonstrating strong familiarity with the research topic (Kettunen & Tynjälä, 2018 7), supported by an in-depth engagement with the literature. The use of semi-structured interviews with participants from diverse professional backgrounds, while sharing

a similar level of relevant expertise, enabled the collection of rich and in-depth data (Kallio et al. 2016, 2958-2959). In line with Bazen et al. (2021, 242), particular attention was paid to maintaining a neutral and non-leading interview approach, while remaining aware of the potential influence of the researcher's role during the interaction. While participants offered differing viewpoints and opinions, their shared domain knowledge supported a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and reduced the likelihood of a single-sided interpretation (Meyer 2001).

Triangulation in this study is partially achieved through the use of multiple expert participants from diverse professional backgrounds and the integration of different theoretical perspectives. However, it could have been improved through for instance using more than one data collection method. Further supporting credibility of the findings, the use of audio recordings during interviews are seen to ensure the accuracy of the data, as they capture participants' responses verbatim, reduce reliance on memory or selective note-taking, and allow for repeated review during the analysis process.

**Transferability** refers to generalisability of the data, the extent of validity to which the findings of a study can be applied to other contexts or to similar settings over time. As qualitative studies' findings are contextually unique, they may still offer insights that are applicable to other settings. To support transferability, the researcher should demonstrate how the findings relate to existing studies and provide a clear, detailed account of the research context and underlying assumptions. This allows readers to evaluate whether the results may be applicable to different groups, settings, or time periods and to make their own judgments about transferability. (Kettunen & Tynjälä 2018, 7; Lincoln & Guba 1985, 296–298; Eriksson & Kovalainen 294.)

Therefore, transferability is supported by the clear description of the research context, approach, and methods. While certain findings align with existing literature—particularly regarding the established theory used as a base for understanding the phenomenon, the emerging nature of generative search engines means that the results do not fully replicate prior research. Instead, the findings extend existing knowledge by offering new insights and managerial viewpoints. Furthermore, as the findings of this study are based on interviews with a relatively small number of professionals, they reflect the perspectives and experiences of the specific participants and are therefore not intended to be generalized. Instead, the findings should be understood as context-specific insights that may inform, but do not represent, broader organizational practices.

**Dependability** relates to the consistency and reliability of the study, referring to how clearly, transparently, and systematically the research process is documented (Lincoln & Guba 1985, 300; Kettunen & Tynjälä 2018, 7). Merriam and Tisdell (2016, 237-238) further refine that reliability refers

to whether the findings would remain consistent if the study were repeated or examined by others. Dependability in this study is established in accordance with the recommendations of Merriam and Tisdell (2016, 238–239) and Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, 294) by clearly outlining the theoretical foundations and underlying assumptions, and by systematically documenting the research process and the steps through which conclusions were derived from the data.

**Confirmability** refers to the extent to which a study remains objective and free from the researcher's personal biases or interpretations (Lincoln & Guba 1985, 300–324). To enhance confirmability, Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, 294) suggest that the findings and interpretations should be closely grounded in the collected data and presented in a transparent and understandable manner, allowing others to follow and, where possible, replicate the analysis. However, it is considered that as Saldaña (2011, 29–31) and Geoff (1995, 376) argue, the researcher in qualitative research is not a neutral observer and inevitably shapes the research process through interpretation and analytical decisions, which may influence the outcomes. Building on this, Merriam and Tisdell (2016, 232) suggest that the researcher may unintentionally emphasize evidence that supports their expectations while overlooking contradictory information. They further note that it is essential to engage in critical reflection on personal assumptions, perspectives, biases, and the theoretical framework, as well as the researcher's relationship to the study.

In this study, this risk is addressed through ongoing critical reflection, although it is acknowledged that complete objectivity cannot be fully achieved, and that some degree of researcher influence remains inherent in qualitative research. It is ensured that interpretations are grounded as closely as possible in the empirical data, rather than in the researcher's personal views or preferences. For instance, links between data and interpretations have been illustrated in direct interview quotations, which supports the trustworthiness of the findings (Naeem et al. 2023, 5). However, an additional challenge relates to the translation of interview quotations. While the interviews were conducted in Finnish to allow participants to express themselves naturally, translating selected quotations into English introduces the possibility of subtle changes in meaning. As the researcher was responsible for both conducting the interviews and translating them, these choices may influence how participants' views are represented. To address this, the translated quotations were reviewed multiple times alongside the original Finnish recordings to ensure that the meaning remained as accurate as possible.

Overall, it is seen that this study meets the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to a satisfactory extent. Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability have been

sufficiently addressed, supporting the overall trustworthiness of the findings. In addition, ethical considerations have been carefully addressed throughout the research process and are discussed in the following section.

### **3.5 Research Ethics**

This study addresses ethical considerations and follows the principles of good scientific practice, complying with the principles of The Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK 2023). King et al. (2019, 27) emphasize that ethics in qualitative research is a central yet complex part of social research, as moral questions arise at every stage of the research process, from planning to reporting. The primary ethical guideline in qualitative research is “do not harm” when working with human participants (Saldaña 2011, 27-29).

The core ethical principles include informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality and anonymity, transparency, and respect for participants throughout the research process. (TENK 2023, 13; Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 6). In this research, participants were given a written consent form (Appendix 2) before the interviews to ensure they understood the purpose of the study, how their data is used, and that participation was voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any stage if wished. The study does not ensure full anonymity, as the participating organizations and the professional roles of the interviewees are reported. However, the findings are presented in anonymized form, such that individual contributions cannot be linked to specific participants. Participants were informed of these conditions in advance. This level of anonymity is seen particularly important to protect confidentiality and encourage open responses, as participants draw on expertise that is commercially valuable and typically provided in a professional advisory context. Furthermore, particular care is taken to present the research findings in a transparent and truthful manner, while acknowledging the research evaluation considerations outlined in the previous section.

Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (2021, 1362) suggest that researchers should limit data collection to what is strictly necessary for the study. Aligning with this, only information that directly supports the research objectives and aligns with the study’s theoretical or conceptual framework is gathered. Furthermore, the study complies with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, EU 2016/679) and the Finnish Data Protection Act. All personal data were treated confidentially and stored in a secure manner to prevent unauthorized access (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2015, 75). Any information that could identify individual participants was removed once it was no longer necessary for the research process. Participants were informed that the data would be used only for academic purposes and that their identities would remain anonymous. These procedures reflect the researcher’s

ethical obligation to safeguard personal data and protect the privacy, dignity, and integrity of the participants (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2015, 72).

A data management plan (Appendix 4) has been developed, supported by a detailed privacy statement outlining how personal data are handled during the research process. All collected data are stored securely with access restricted only to the researcher, and the data will be permanently deleted upon completion of the study.

By adhering to these ethical principles, the study seeks to ensure that the research process is conducted responsibly and that participants' rights are safeguarded throughout. Building on this ethically grounded approach, the following chapter presents the empirical findings derived from the data.

## 4 Findings

This chapter presents the empirical findings of the study. Its purpose is to report the key insights that emerged from the interview data and to deepen the understanding of the phenomenon examined in this thesis. The findings are organised according to the thematic categories addressed in section 3.3, directly addressing the research objectives outlined in section 1.2.

### 4.1 Overview of the Findings

The aim of this thesis is to explore how generative search engines influence brand image from a managerial perspective through exploring digital strategists' perceptions of the phenomenon, forming the research question: *“How do digital strategists perceive the influence of generative search engines on brand image from a managerial perspective?”*. The findings are organized into four themes that reflect the objectives of the study: **(1)** the strategic importance of brand image in today's hyperconnected and global business environments, **(2)** the role of digital visibility and traditional search engines on brand image in digital environments, **(3)** analyze how generative search engines are influencing brand image through new form of representation, and **(4)** the strategic responses to managing brand image in an AI-driven digital environments. The reflections were shaped in meaningful ways by the interviewees' professional backgrounds and strategic orientation, resulting in diverse interpretive lenses through which the phenomenon was understood.

The interview participants consisted of professionals with extensive experience in brand management and digital consulting services, with career backgrounds ranging from approximately 10 to over 25 years. Several participants had experience in both B2B and B2C contexts, including work with international brands and brand development projects. Interviewees frequently discussed generative search engines through the lens of current brand management practices, both in their own firms and in the client organizations they support. These reflections highlight how AI-driven systems are altering the conditions under which brand image is built and controlled in online environments. Their reflections included both opportunities and risks, along with concrete examples of situations where AI-generated responses affected brand representations either positively or negatively. These perceptions reveal how digital strategists interpret the rapid technological shift and how uncertainty, limited control, and new responsibilities influencing brand management.

The results are first presented according to the thematic categories identified during the coding and clustering of the data, as the interview topics were closely connected. After the empirical findings, the next section revisits each research objective and synthesized the relevant insights across all themes. Together, the objectives build a comprehensive understanding of how digital strategists

perceive the influence of generative search engines on brand image from a managerial perspective. Presenting the results in this structured way also prepared the empirical material for the subsequent discussion, where the findings are connected to existing literature and the conceptual framework, and where their implications for brand management in AI-driven digital environments are examined.

## **4.2 Brand Image as a Strategic Asset**

This section presents the findings on how digital strategists perceive brand image as a strategic asset within today's global and digitally interconnected business environment context. Establishing these perceptions is essential, as they reflect the underlying assumptions that shape how practitioners interpret brand image in practice. These assumptions form the interpretive foundation and guide subsequent findings related to how the main research question and research objectives are understood.

### **4.2.1 Brand Image as a Competitive Advantage**

Across interviews, brand image was acknowledged as strategically important, yet the level of perceived importance varied significantly. Most participants noted the significance to be highly context-dependent, varying across industries and market conditions, such as competitive intensity. Despite the view of contextual differences, most interviewees perceived brand image as a key asset that drives competitive advantage, differentiation from competitors, and long-term success. This suggests that while its relative importance may vary, its strategic relevance remains broadly recognized on a general level.

Two participants described brand image as one of the most valuable, and in some cases the most important, assets an organisation can possess. One participant argued that brand image can be the most important asset for a firm, unless it has a truly disruptive innovation compensates for weaker brand positioning. While the importance of brand image was seen as context-dependent, it was still described as having key impacts, such as enabling pricing power and building emotional attachment and communities around the brand, which can elevate it beyond functional value toward fandom.

“In many cases, brand image is actually the most important asset a company has, unless there is some completely disruptive innovation behind it ... it depends largely on the context, but one of its most significant effects, it enables pricing power ... and in best cases, it can even form communities around the brand, at which point moves to the next level, and becomes more like fandom. Especially in this time of digitalization, those kinds of touchpoints are extremely important.”

Another participant, who emphasized brand image as one of a firm's most critical assets, argued that strong brands consistently outperform weaker ones. This advantage was perceived to extend across

both digital and offline environments, suggesting that brand image shapes competitive outcomes across contexts and over time.

“I’d say, quite simply, that brand really determines success. Strong brands outperform others in digital environments; they also outperform in offline channels - they simply win.”

Building on the importance of brand image, another participant noted that brand image has tangible implications for financial performance and resilience and referred to a publication that indicates that brand image has impacts on a firm’s stock price and revenue. They further emphasized that strong brands better withstand global economic fluctuations, compared to weaker brands. This implies that brand image functions as a protective asset, helping firms preserve their market position and reputation despite changing economic conditions.

“There are many examples of how strong brands are better able to withstand fluctuations in the global economy, not only in terms of building awareness but also in terms of maintaining a strong brand image.”

Several interviewees viewed brand image operating as a shortcut in decision-making. One participant noted that a strong brand image can place a company directly on a “shortlist” before detailed comparison even begins, both in B2B and B2C contexts. This was seen evident especially in context with information overload or limited ability to evaluate offerings in depth. Similarly, in situations where audiences lack direct experience with a firm, a coherent and recognizable brand image was described to serve as an indicator for trust, reducing perceived risk and increasing confidence in the organisation’s competence and reliability.

Another shared element concerned the long-term nature of brand image formation. Several interviewees noted that brand image cannot be created through isolated campaigns or short-term optimisation. Instead, a strong brand image was described as the outcome of sustained, consistent strategic choices across communication. This reinforces the understanding of brand image as a cumulative asset that requires long-term organisational commitment.

“Brand building requires years of consistent work before it really starts to influence business outcomes in a meaningful way.”

An interviewee emphasised the managerial responsibility to actively leverage brand image. From this perspective, brand image was understood as something every organization has, regardless of whether it is intentionally managed, and therefore its potential for business benefits should be maximized.

“In my view, from a business perspective, it’s quite a critical not to fully take advantage of it, because you have a brand whether you want to or not. So, in that sense, why wouldn’t you try to leverage it as much as possible?”

The participant further noted that a weak brand image is a major disadvantage that cannot be fully compensated for through operational excellence alone. Another interviewee described how weak or unclear brands tend to disappear into what was referred to as a “grey mass”. Without a clearly articulated brand image, audiences struggle to understand what the brand is genuinely good at, what mission it stands for, or why its existence is meaningful. As a result, weaker brands were described as fading quickly from customer’s awareness. They suggested that firms should clearly identify their unique strengths in relations to competitors and commit to these as core elements of their brand. This clarity was seen to guide the development of content strategies, ensuring that communication consistently reinforces the themes through which the brand aims to be recognized. Most participants gave similar descriptions, emphasizing that brand image becomes meaningful only when a firm is clearly positioned within its own category, demonstrating differentiation and their specific relevance to the target audience.

In addition, many digital strategists noted a gap between the recognized importance of brand image and its practical implementation. While its strategic value was widely acknowledged, organizations were often perceived as lacking the focus, resources, and long-term commitment required for its effective development. One participant critically remarked that many B2B firms operate “at half capacity” in their branding efforts, suggesting that they fail to fully leverage their brand potential. This underperformance was attributed to insufficient strategic clarity, particularly regarding target audiences and the desired brand experience. Without clear choices in these areas, branding was described as fragmented and consisting of isolated actions rather than a coherent strategy. Consequently, brand image was perceived as inconsistent and weak, limiting its ability to support sustainable competitive advantage.

“In my opinion, majority of B2B firms kind of operate at half capacity communicationally, which then also means that they kind of don’t get everything out of the brand either. And if we go even further into how I think about it, straight to the core: companies don’t really — which in my opinion is also part of branding — genuinely understand or have made decisions about who their target customers are, who their best customers are and why. Then at the next level, how to actually communicate to them — what kind of image or emotional experience they want to create in order to differentiate from competitors or communicate that the experience for those target customers — or it could also be recruited employees as one target group — would be such that they feel, “hey, this feels unique, this speaks directly to me”.”

Bulding on this, one participant highlighted structural factors that further explain the underutilization of brand image. In their view, brand investments are frequently among the first to be cut during periods of economic uncertainty. This short-term orientation was seen as incompatible with the inherently long-term nature of brand image development. In contrast, another participant adopted a slightly more structural explanation, suggesting that brand image is often undervalued because its impact is indirect and difficult to measure. While performance metrics favour short-term outcomes, brand image contributes through cumulative effects that unfold over time, making it harder to justify within traditional management frameworks that prioritize measurable, short-term indicators of success.

Overall, some interviews suggest that brand image remains a misunderstood strategic asset: widely acknowledged in principle but insufficiently integrated into strategic decision-making in practice. The underutilization of brand image appears to stem from a combination of limited strategic clarity, short-term performance logic, and structural difficulties in demonstrating impact. Consequently, many organizations fail to fully activate brand image as a long-term source of trust, differentiation, and competitive advantage.

#### 4.2.2 Digitalization and Globalization as Reshaping Forces of Brand Image

The underlying assumption presented in this thesis was that digital environments enable international reach. Most digital strategists agreed that brand image becomes increasingly important in this context. A participant reasoned that in such environments, audiences are exposed to vast amounts of information across multiple channels, leading users to rely on quick signals when deciding which brands are worth further consideration. Today's digital environments were described to be highly saturated in which many brands appear similar, indistinct, and interchangeable, where technical visibility alone was described to be insufficient to generate attention or memorability.

“A strong and positive brand image is being discussed in a favourable way, and it is increasingly visible in the digital game.”

One interviewee emphasized that if a company operates in a very small, concentrated market, brand image could be formed through direct human interaction. But in most markets, this is impossible, and brand image cannot rely on sales interactions or direct contact. Therefore, firms must use digital channels to build brand image. In these contexts, even the brand name itself becomes an important tool: repeated exposure to the company name through digital touchpoints can gradually influence subconscious recognition, even when visual expression is limited. This indicates that companies must rely on digital channels to build recognition at scale. As buyers progress further along the buying

funnel, more in-depth messaging becomes relevant. This includes the use of owned terms, clear category positioning, and content that communicates how the firm differentiates itself. Other aspects of a brand image, such as visual elements and richer materials, also become more important once users spend more time engaging with digital content, such as on websites or other owned channels. This was seen particularly important in contemporary B2B contexts, where buying processes were described to typically involve several touchpoints prior to a purchase decision, the majority of which are digital rather than physical.

Another participant further emphasized the B2B buying funnel in this context. They noted that over the past decade, the number of relevant buyer touchpoints has reportedly doubled, and as another participant mentioned, these touchpoints are now mostly digital, creating additional complexity maintaining consistent brand image. As visibility spreads across more platforms, ensuring coherence and avoiding “digital mush”, where brand distinctiveness weakens, becomes increasingly challenging. This finding converges with earlier insights around the shared risk of brand dilution, as another interviewee emphasized that in fragmented digital environments, unclear brands disappear into “grey mass”, losing recognizability and distinctiveness.

I recently looked at this more from a sales perspective — where B2B buyers want to reach sellers. In 2016 there were five channels that were considered relevant; by 2024 the number had grown to ten. So the number of channels doubled in less than ten years.

That naturally creates challenges for manageability, and challenges for keeping the brand unified and consistent and recognizable across all channels, so that it does not become digital “mush,” where everything looks the same and the core of the brand gets lost.

Another interviewee extended these viewpoints, stating:

“Regardless of whether in B2B or B2C contexts, and across owned, earned, or paid media, or any touchpoint where a stakeholder can encounter a firm, brand image must be communicated consistently and coherently.”

This participant also described that the importance of brand image and its construction increases when companies expand into international markets, where they are not yet well known and where market size is larger. In their view, as internationalization and digitalization progress, companies increasingly operate across borders, and information, patterns, and benchmarks are sought globally.

“As internationalization and digitalization advance – not only in terms of brands entering foreign markets, but also in the sense that information is sought from abroad and benchmarks and partners are looked for from international markets to domestic market – the importance of one’s own brand and brand image has definitely increased.”

In this context, the participant emphasized that companies cannot rely on existing familiarity or reputation, and brand image is only effective when supported by precise segmentation and clear targeting. They described that companies often underestimate how large and diverse foreign markets are and attempt to target overly broad markets. Here, aiming to build a strong, niche and differentiating brand image in the mind of a specific audience is crucial.

However, while many participants argued that the strategic importance of brand image increases in a digital and hyperconnected business environment, one participant offered a contrasting perspective. Rather than becoming universally stronger, brand image was described as increasingly polarized in its strategic importance. According to this view, brand image can become increasingly important in certain contexts, while in others its relevance may be significantly reduced, or even diluted. This was described to depend strongly on contextual factors such as industry, business model, and position in the value chain.

As an example, the participant observed the effect of dilution in large-scale e-commerce platforms, where the platform interface often prioritizes products over brand identity. They described that on digital marketplaces, multiple sellers may offer similar products on the same platform and the original sellers' brand is often minimized. In this context, the product attributes, price, and availability often dominate decision-making and become the primary point of relevance. As a result, the participant described that brand image may become secondary or irrelevant for sellers offering standardized products. For instance, firms selling generic goods may achieve commercial success through platform optimization rather than brand building, whereas brand identity holds little independent value.

However, later in the interview, the participant emphasized that in their view, trust will always be a key factor guiding buyer decision-making, and that the importance of trust is likely to increase in digital environments. Using Amazon as an example, the participant noted that consumers are often uncertain about the origin and quality of products. As a result, consumers are becoming increasingly segmented: for some, brand image plays a significant role in assessing trustworthiness, while for others its less important. Nevertheless, in such contexts, recognizable visual identity remains particularly important, as products need to be easily identifiable in order to signal reliability and familiarity.

By contrast, in sectors where firms sell products directly to consumers and whose value proposition is inherently tied to the brand itself, such as iconic consumer brands or companies with strong symbolic, emotional, or identity-based associations, remain highly dependent on brand image for competitiveness.

”If you are a company that manufactures end products and your core value lies in the brand—such as Nike or Tommy Hilfiger, or a similar brand with established brand equity—then brand image is clearly important. However, if you simply produce T-shirts and sell them on Amazon under an unknown brand, then your brand itself has little value, as you are essentially selling generic products. And if you manage to optimize your products to become Amazon’s favourites, then you will most likely sell best among the T-shirts.”

Overall, the findings suggest that brand image is widely recognized as a strategically important asset, particularly through its role in driving competitive advantage, differentiation, trust, and long-term business performance. Strong brands were often perceived to outperform weaker ones, while also functioning as a cognitive shortcut that simplifies decision-making in information-rich environments. At the same time, brand image was understood as a long-term, cumulative asset requiring sustained and coherent strategic effort. However, the findings also show that brand image is not universally perceived as equally important. Its strategic relevance was described as highly context-dependent and, in some cases, increasingly polarized. While brand image becomes critical in contexts where differentiation, trust, and recognition are central, its importance may be reduced or diluted in environments driven by product attributes, price, or platform dynamics. In addition, despite its acknowledged potential, many organizations were described as underutilizing brand image due to short-term performance focus, lack of strategic clarity, and difficulties in measuring its impact.

Taken together, these insights suggest that the role and effectiveness of brand image are closely tied to the environments in which it is encountered. As interactions between firms and stakeholders are increasingly mediated through digital channels, understanding how brand image is formed within these environments becomes essential. In this context, search engines emerge as key intermediaries shaping visibility and influencing how brand-related information is accessed and interpreted, which is examined in the following section.

### **4.3 Brand Image Formation in Digital Search Environments**

The second theme of the findings focuses on how and traditional search engines have historically shaped the formation and interpretation of brand image through digital visibility. This section addresses the second research objective by establishing a baseline understanding of how brand image has been formed in digital search environments prior to the widespread adoption of generative search engines. Furthermore, this section addresses digital strategists’ viewpoints on the importance of websites and search engine optimization.

### 4.3.1 Traditional Search Engines and Digital Visibility

Digital strategists had two different interpretations regarding the role of search engines in brand image formation. Some saw search engines as directly influencing brand image, while others saw them mainly as traffic drivers, with brand image formed after the click on owned channels, such as websites.

When discussing the influence of digital visibility and traditional search engines on brand image formation, several participants emphasized that search engine visibility is highly important. One participant noted that digital visibility serves as the first point of contact between a brand and its audiences, indicating that search engine visibility can be conceptualized as a foundational stage in brand image formation, influencing first impressions and the likelihood of continued interaction. Another participant highlighted a reputational perspective, suggesting that appearing first in search engine results for relevant keywords functions as a signal of authority and market leadership. In this sense, visibility at the top of search rankings was seen as a reputational asset. High rankings were also interpreted as an indication of brand success, implying that the firm has performed effectively in the market to earn such a position.

“ I think it has a significant impact ... it is the first point of contact with the brand, and it influences where efforts are directed, as well as how easy the brand is to find and access. So it has a huge impact whether you appear at the top of the list.”

“Brand image is strengthened if you appear at the top of Google search results for keywords that are directly related to what the brand offers. If you’re Company X and you rank first for a key term, it signals that you’ve done something right in the market and earned that leading position.”

One participant highlighted the historically transformative role of search engines, particularly Google, in shaping business models and brand visibility. This perspective suggests that search engines became a central gateway through which brands are discovered, requiring firms to adapt their digital presence accordingly. As visibility in search results increasingly determined success, entire industries were described as restructuring their business and advertising models around search-driven discovery.

“When Google first became dominant, some pioneering companies realized they needed to reshape their digital presence to fit the new ecosystem, where 99% of people searched for information through Google’s homepage. Media, entertainment sites, content platforms, recipe pages — entire business models transformed because visibility in Google determined success. Advertising models were built around that.”

This participant further noted that Google visibility is still highly important and many companies initially underestimate its impact, but this importance was again described context dependent. The participant gave an example that in sectors where purchasing decisions rely heavily on digital

information seeking, search visibility remains critical for brand perception and competitiveness. In contrast, industries driven by relational networks and large-scale contracts may experience a more limited direct impact. For such industries, companies were described to perform reasonably well without active brand management or the need for visibility because relationships, credibility, and trust are already embedded in existing stakeholder ties.

“But it also depends a lot on the industry. For example, I was just talking with a large Nordic company that does consulting and design work related to construction. The deals they make are so large, as they work with cities, major corporations, and large construction projects, that the lead still does not come from the web. It comes from the fact that their sales network knows the right people. They build their brand, people contact them, and so on. For companies like that, the importance of Google visibility is much lower than it is for another type of company whose target audience is very strongly on Google.”

In contrast to findings indicating search engine visibility directly influencing brand image, two participants saw traditional search engines mainly as a practical tool for helping users discover content and directing traffic to firm-owned channels. From this viewpoint, the core function of search engines is to determine whether a brand becomes visible to potential customers at all, therefore aligning with the earlier findings indicating that these platforms act as the entry point for brand discovery. One participant described that in the traditional “ten blue links” model, search engines, mainly Google, functioned as gatekeepers, enabling brands to appear in relevant keyword-based queries. This was seen particularly important during the consideration phase of the buying journey, where users actively search for information and compare alternatives. However, brand image itself was seen to form after the click, through website content, messaging, and value propositions.

“Well, back then it was more about traffic direction. The brand perception itself was formed only after the click — on the website, for example. So, Google’s role was mainly about discoverability and guiding traffic. You had to appear on the results page through relevant themes, keywords, and search terms, particularly when someone was already in the consideration phase. Of course, even then Google already provided some zero-click content — for example, if you searched for a brand or product category, you might see suggestions like “Did you mean this, this, or this?”. But overall, its role was primarily about findability and traffic redirection.”

This view was reinforced by another participant, who similarly emphasized that while search engines facilitate discovery, brand perceptions are ultimately shaped through the experience and communication encountered on the company’s website.

“Yes, so it has been, and is still very important that companies are found through search engines, that when people look for information, our content appears there. Then the user ends up on our website to explore the specific topic further. That is where we are able to

influence brand perceptions – what they thought about us, what kind of feelings our brand created, and how helpful we appeared in supporting their needs - through how we communicate and present information.”

A third interviewee built on these viewpoints, noting that even though owned channels and websites were the main environments for shaping brand image through for instance emotional resonance and differentiation, search engines are the environment where multiple impressions must first be built through visibility, as they influence brand image less through rich visual expression and more through repeated exposure to the brand name and associated terms. These recurring impressions were described as gradually shaping subconscious recognition, even when visual elements are limited. This accumulation of exposure was seen as particularly important in early stages of B2B buying funnel. In this context, the participant argued that Google’s advertising network is among the most critical tools that B2B companies should be utilizing, meanwhile understanding which stage of the buying journey should be optimized.

“The website is one key touchpoint, but multiple impressions must first be built through Google before you can guide users to owned channels”.

Most of the participants viewed websites as the main space for brand image formation, where organizations communicate who they are, what they stand for, and how they differentiate themselves. Websites were described as places to articulate values, positioning, and identity in a coherent and intentional manner.

#### 4.3.2 Search Engine Optimization to Guide Brand Visibility and Interpretation

In response to the question of how SEO strategies can be utilized to guide brand image through visibility, findability, and interpretation in search engines, the findings indicate that SEO and brand image are deeply interconnected, either directly or indirectly.

One participant positioned SEO as being “at the core of the whole thing”, framing it as a strategic mechanism that shapes how, where, and in what context a brand appears across the digital buying journey. The interviewee emphasized SEO in B2B buying context. First, the interviewee emphasized that SEO should support all stages of the B2B buying funnel. They described that it can be used to increase general awareness at the brand level, but also to target more specific customer intentions during the consideration and decision-making stages. In competitive markets where modern digital tools are widely used, investment across all these stages was seen as necessary. Second, SEO was described as a way to guide interpretation. By strategically choosing the keywords and topics where the company aims to rank highly, firms can influence which themes, categories, and associations become connected to the brand in search results. In this sense, search engines are not neutral

platforms: what is visible shapes how the brand is perceived, therefore directly shaping brand image. Third, the interviewee noted that SEO must be used strategically and consistently. Companies should “choose the battles” where they want to rank and invest in them over time, describing that there are no shortcuts and sustainable visibility requires continuous production of high-quality content.

“In my view, SEO is really at the core of the whole thing. It depends on what you want to achieve — whether the goal is simply to increase awareness, or to target the consideration or decision-making stage. But in a way, all of these stages need investment, especially if the target market is competitive and modern marketing tools are being used. Whether we’re talking about brand-level visibility or a more specific level tied to customer intent and topics that genuinely interest the audience, it is critical to leverage these strategically. The key question is how to use them. They should be used strategically — meaning you choose the battles where you want to rank high and invest in them consistently. If you’re looking for a shortcut, there really isn’t one. Today it comes down to producing high-quality, continuous content.”

Another participant saw that SEO strategies should be used more actively in this manner. They described that if SEO is perceived as a secondary investment or operational cost rather than a strategic priority, this perception becomes increasingly problematic especially in internationalization contexts. They pointed out that insufficient organic visibility may weaken a brand’s competitive position, especially when international competitors rank higher in search results. In such cases, relying primarily on paid search was described to be insufficient for sustaining long-term visibility. Organic traffic was described as strategically important for ensuring that brands remain discoverable and competitive, particularly in markets where digital information seeking strongly influences the consideration phase of decision-making.

One interviewee noted despite technological evolution, the fundamental principles of search visibility have remained largely unchanged. SEO was described to rely on three essential elements: producing useful content for the end user, demonstrating authority on the topic, and ensuring technical accessibility and sound website structure.

“It has always been – and still is – about creating useful content for the end user, having genuine authority on the topic, and ensuring that everything is built in a technically sound and accessible way. There are fairly simple principle at their core. The core strategic question then becomes: what is truly useful information, for whom, and in which context? That is what makes it interesting.”

Another interviewee further emphasized that SEO can be utilized by creating clearly defined content rather than covering topics broadly and in a scattered manner. The interviewee illustrated this through the concept of topic clustering: firms should define a limited number of core topic areas and build structured “topic clusters” around them. This involves creating one comprehensive main page per

priority theme and supporting it with interlinked, in-depth subcontent. This structure signals to search engines that the company possesses deep expertise in that specific area. The more clearly a company communicates that it consistently produces content around a defined theme, the stronger its perceived authority becomes within that domain. From a brand image perspective, this strengthens brand image by making the company appear focused, authoritative, and clearly defined within specific domains in search environments.

However, the interviewee acknowledged that most companies operate across multiple areas. In such cases, firms should deliberately define a limited number of main themes (e.g., three core areas) and build structured content clusters around each. The key prioritization was described to be that companies must “dare to prioritize” the topics they want to be known for, rather than attempting to rank for everything.

Taken together, the findings of this section suggest that traditional search engines have played a foundational role in shaping brand image through digital visibility. While participants differed in whether search engines directly influence brand image or primarily act as gateways to firm-controlled channels, a shared understanding emerges: search engines determine whether a brand becomes visible at all, thereby influencing first impressions, recognition, and the likelihood of further interaction. In this sense, search engines function both as entry points to brand-related information and as environments where early-stage brand associations begin to form. At the same time, the findings highlight that brand image formation has traditionally relied heavily on firm-controlled environments, particularly websites, where organizations are able to communicate their positioning, values, and differentiation in a more comprehensive and intentional manner. Search engines, in turn, have supported this process by guiding users toward these controlled touchpoints, making visibility a prerequisite for brand image formation rather than its sole determinant.

Building on this logic, the following section shifts the focus to how this process is being fundamentally reconfigured in AI-driven search environments. As generative search engines increasingly provide direct answers within the search interface, the role of search engines is evolving from a gateway to a site of brand representation itself. This transition raises new challenges for brand image management, particularly as it reduces firms’ ability to guide users toward owned channels and instead embeds brand-related information within algorithmically generated responses.

## 4.4 Generative Search Engines Influencing Brand Image

This section examines the shift from traditional search engines to AI-driven generative search engines and analyzes how this transformation influences brand image by altering brand representation and the managerial control in digital search environments.

### 4.4.1 From Traditional Search to Generative Search

All interviewees emphasized a clear user shift from traditional search engines toward generative AI-driven search environments. This development was seen to introduce new challenges for brand image management while increasing the strategic importance of brand image across most contexts. While most interviewees perceived platforms such as Google to remain relevant platform for search, particularly for commercial and transactional queries, they noted that informational searches were increasingly seen to be answered directly within AI-generated summaries. In many cases, these summaries appear automatically in search results, even do not intentionally seek AI-generated responses.

As discussed in the previous section, organic search traffic traditionally enabled companies to direct users to their owned platforms such as websites, where brand image could be managed through controlled brand communication. The findings suggest that generative search engines are perceived to reduce this opportunity. When AI systems provide direct responses within the search interface, users increasingly obtain the information they need without visiting company websites. As a result, the opportunity to manage brand image through exposing users to brand-controlled content is reduced.

“It is good to notice that less and less benefit is gained for brands from Google. When we don’t get people to move from the search engine to the website anymore, we don’t get to create our brand image. AI-engines answer their informational questions already right there. So those informational searches, with which the brand has previously been built very strongly, are kind of leaving this game.”

This participant further emphasized that this shift is already clearly visible in empirical data. They referred to a research indicating a significant decline in organic website traffic among globally leading websites with strong SEO capabilities, suggesting that the decline cannot be explained by weak optimization practices. Instead, the data points toward a structural shift in user behaviour, suggesting that users increasingly appear to rely on AI-generated summaries presented directly within AI-driven search environments, rather than clicking through to original sources, weakening the role of brand-owned websites as the primary site of information exposure.

“Data currently shows that traffic has decreased quite dramatically. There was a recent study showing that among the world’s top 500 websites, which previously received the most organic traffic from search engines, their organic traffic has dropped by nearly 30 percent, to 27 percent. These are the most visited websites globally, and their search engine optimization has been in excellent shape — they have been among the best in the world at it. So the data shows that people specifically do not go beyond that AI answer and are satisfied with that information.

On the other hand, the participant viewed that for more complex, high involvement, or deeper topics, users still seek out original sources. In these cases, AI platforms can be seen to function as gateways rather than endpoints, directing traffic toward cited sources. Therefore, meanwhile websites are seen to have significantly less user traffic, AI platforms are emerging as a growing traffic source for websites. Thus, both dynamics occur simultaneously: AI reduces traffic for simple informational queries while potentially channelling qualified traffic for deeper exploration. This reinforces the conclusion that firms can no longer rely solely on SEO strategies (“playing the Google game”) but must strategically consider visibility and representation within AI-generated ecosystems.

“However, when it comes to more in-depth topics, people still want to dive deeper and visit the original source. We continue to see that as well. At the same time, we see that AI-driven traffic is currently a growing source of website visits. So both are happening. Because of this shift, we can no longer rely solely on playing the “Google game.” We must also take AI into account. Google traffic is declining, while AI-driven traffic is increasing.”

When reflecting whether the importance of traditional search engine visibility has decreased or increased due to the AI-driven technological change, another participant expressed uncertainty but did not perceive a clear decline. Similarly to most of the interviews, this participant suggested that while AI tools and AI summaries have become more visible within search environments, Google’s relevance has not necessarily diminished. However, in their view, information-seeking behaviour appears to be fragmenting across platforms, mostly related to the age of users. Particularly among young users, search may increasingly occur in environments such as ChatGPT or social media platforms, especially TikTok and Instagram, rather than through Google queries. Older users were seen to rely more on traditional search engines for searching information. This indicates that search behaviour is becoming platform-diverse and generationally differentiated. Furthermore, they noted that brand visibility strategies cannot depend on a single search channel and discoverability needs to be adapted to changing and diverse user behaviours.

Another participant had a similar viewpoint about information search being fragmented across multiple platforms but interpreted it primarily through context and product type rather than age. According to their view, the choice of search channel depends on factors such as product category,

purchase complexity, and the target audience. They pointed out that high-involvement B2B purchases (e.g. ERP systems), traditional search or professional networks remain central, whereas consumer products are increasingly researched through peer-driven platforms such as social media.

They also added a viewpoint that traditional search behaviour, such as browsing Google results, clicking links, navigating websites, and manually searching for relevant information, is increasingly perceived as effortful and even outdated compared to using conversational AI search platforms.

“I believe that information seeking is simply changing its form. Because when it becomes very easy – that suddenly browsing Google, clicking a link, going to a company’s website, navigating and searching – it suddenly feels quite old-fashioned as a way of searching for information. And that may have limited how much people were willing to do that, compared to getting the information conversationally very quickly ... I can easily imagine that when searching for information becomes easier, people simply do more of it.”

This participant further explained that AI models are designed to keep the conversation going by asking follow-up questions and encouraging further exploration. As a result, generative search becomes more guided and interactive compared to traditional search. Because the process feels easier and more conversational, users may search for information more frequently and engage more deeply within AI-based platforms.

“There is quite a lot of data about this — if you think about Google’s SERP, the basic search view, people might have done two or three searches, but in AI mode people might do four or five searches on the same topic. The model encourages you to continue, because it is built to always ask: ‘can I provide more, would you like more detail, shall we continue this’ — and because it is so easy, you just keep the conversation going.”

Another participant emphasized that increasing reliance on generative search engine responses may reduce click-through rates to firm-owned websites. This suggests that users are increasingly satisfied with AI-generated answers, limiting the need to engage with original sources. As a result, the early stages of the customer journey were described as becoming less visible to firms, with information search and evaluation occurring within AI-mediated environments. This was conceptualized as a “black box,” where brand exposure depends on whether a firm is represented within AI-generated outputs rather than through direct website visits. As the participant explained:

”Most likely, click decline happens because people are satisfied with AI answers and do not continue to company websites. The purchase journey probably involves longer AI conversations before someone visits a company website. The early part of the buying process becomes a “black box.” If your website is not represented in that black box through AI systems, potential customers may never reach your site. That is a significant problem. It also suggests that people may trust AI more than before — maybe even too much.”

According to one participant, the fragmentation was seen to be highly context-dependent: the channel used depends on the product category, purchase complexity, and target audience behaviour. They pointed out that high-involvement B2B purchases (e.g. ERP systems), traditional search or professional networks remain central, whereas consumer products are increasingly researched through peer-driven platforms such as social media.

#### 4.4.2 Visibility and Brand Image Fragmentation Across Third-party Sources

As users were perceived to increasingly shift towards generative search engines for information seeking, interviewees emphasized that firms must ensure their brands are visible within AI-generated responses to remain competitive. In addition, the accuracy and timeliness of the information presented were highlighted as key concerns, given that AI systems may draw on outdated or inconsistent sources.

“First of all, it is crucial to be visible there, but also to make sure that the information on generative search engines are as up to date and correct as well, that the information wouldn’t be pulled from somewhere really far back.”

Another participant explained that visibility is highly important as it influences how users perceive and interpret a brand. This was seen important especially in the early stage of the buying journey, where individuals are still gathering information and exploring options. Being visible was described as creating associations of expertise, “leaving a trace” in the user’s mind of a brand as a knowledgeable and relevant actor. This early cognitive positioning was described to increase the likelihood that the brand will later be considered in a decision-making situation.

This participant further explained that especially in recommendation or comparison search contexts, AI systems typically mention only a limited number of options, brands in this case. As visibility is highly selective, brands that are not among the few mentioned may not be considered at all, being left out of competition. In essence, visibility fosters familiarity and trust, whereas absence may result in that the brand is not considered at all.

“If you look at it, AI engines rarely recommend a very large number of companies. Whether you are searching in the decision-making stage for concrete companies to recommend or comparing options, they typically suggest only a few recommendations.”

“The phase where a brand gets cited in relation to topics customers are interested in or discussing is extremely important. Because that is where the brand leaves a trace in people’s minds as being an expert in that area, which can positively influence the purchase decision later on. Or help the brand reach the top three in the final comparison before a decision-maker makes the purchase. These things are absolutely critical.”

Interviews also highlighted emerging inequalities in visibility within generative search environments. A recurring pattern in the data was that well-established brands tend to dominate AI-generated responses, making it more difficult for smaller firms to appear in relevant queries. This concentration of visibility was seen to reinforce existing hierarchies in credibility and recognition, as brands with stronger digital footprints are more likely to be represented in AI outputs. A participant attributed this advantage to the greater resources of larger firms, which have enabled them to build extensive digital presence over time through content production, media visibility, and third-party references.

“Because as a large company you have had the resources to produce huge amounts of information and PR articles, to do your media work, build relationships, and get your paid reviews, native reviews and everything like that — so that you have been able to do the work that now produces results. So within that model, it is much more unlikely that a small actor would somehow suddenly overtake a larger one ... small players are in trouble”

This dynamic was further linked to challenges in internationalization. The participant noted that entering new markets becomes particularly difficult when a brand lacks an established digital presence in that specific context, as generative search engines rely on existing signals of visibility and recognition. In contrast, brands that are already well known or directly searched for were seen to benefit from stronger positioning, as users can bypass AI-mediated discovery altogether.

“It would always be easiest if the brand was already being searched for directly. Then you would not need to enter through that kind of generative AI content, but you could go directly through the existing perception that ‘they are the best at this’ and ‘that’s who I want to buy from.’”

All interviewees shared a common view that generative search engines heavily prioritize third-party sources when forming and presenting brand-related responses, rather than relying primarily on brand-owned content. The sources were described to be for instance news media, social media, and discussion forums. However, the findings suggest that source selection is not entirely random. According to one participant, AI models demonstrate a form of contextual sensitivity in how they retrieve information. For example, when users search for health-related or institutional information, the models were described as prioritizing official sources, such as national healthcare guidelines or government websites, rather than user-generated forums. Similarly, in queries related to public authorities, such as immigration, healthcare systems, or police matters, the models were perceived to recognize and retrieve official country-level websites. In contrast, when queries concern controversial topics or opinion-based discussions, the systems may retrieve content from a wider range of perspectives, including discussion forums. For commercial comparison queries (e.g., why one

electricity company is better than another), the models may rely on customer surveys, promotional comparisons, or reputation-based materials.

Despite these observations, the underlying logic of source prioritization was generally unclear, described that it is not transparent how generative AI systems determine which sources to prioritize or cite in brand-related queries. Participants also noted that certain sources appear to dominate in AI-generated responses and that the prominence of specific sources may shift over time without clear explanation. Therefore, firms cannot reliably predict which sources will influence the responses. Nevertheless, participants offered several different opinions and speculations regarding the logic of source selection.

One participant described that if information about a brand is found only on its own website, it may not carry sufficient weight for AI-systems. They further speculated that third-party sources may be seen as more neutral than company-owned content by AI-systems, especially in the context of experience-based or consumer-oriented prompts. They speculated that AI-systems may “understand” the structural bias that brands have a natural incentive to present themselves positively and therefore may treat external sources as more objective.

Most of the participants emphasized a reason that specific third-party sources are perceived highly authoritative; particularly large, established news media, certain types of public relations practices, and widely discussed public forums. For example, established news media are seen as highly authoritative, as these websites have strong reputations, many incoming links from other sites, and clear editorial processes. As they are widely cited and referenced across the web, AI systems learn to treat them as reliable sources. Thus, if a major news outlet publishes about a brand, AI systems are more likely to consider that information trustworthy. Public forums, on the other hand, was described to gain authority through repetition. If various users repeatedly say similar things about a brand, AI systems may interpret this as a form of consensus. Even if individual comments are subjective, consistent repetition strengthens that narrative in the data.

A recurring observation about how generative search engines retrieve information was that their logic can sometimes appear contradictory. While these systems are expected to rely on reliable sources, anonymous discussion forums such as Reddit - which are not usually considered highly reliable due to user anonymity - were often described as highly visible and influential sources in AI-generated responses. A few participants noted that Reddit had at times been the most cited source in AI-generated outputs; however, source prominence appears dynamic, with different references dominating at different points in time.

While most interviewees were unable to explain the reasons behind this phenomenon, one participant offered a potential explanation. According to the interviewee, Reddit incorporates built-in credibility signals, such as karma points, which may function as indicators of user trustworthiness. As a result, content written by individual users may appear in AI-generated responses even if it is not widely supported by other users, meaning that a single account may potentially have an excessive level of influence.

“Reddit is interesting in that sense because if you want to write there, you need to have karma points. You only get those karma points if you’ve written content that other users have liked. If you have high karma points, then Reddit sees you as a trustworthy user. And you can’t buy that - you can’t just create an account and suddenly be seen as a credible user. You have to earn it over time. Of course, you can always write whatever you want there, but if you’re just some anonymous user without karma points, then it’s visible that you don’t have credibility, and you’re not necessarily considered trustworthy.”

Findings also revealed that AI models appear to surface different types of content depending on which external data sources these systems are allowed to access and integrate. According to this participant, AI models have partnerships with platforms (e.g., with LinkedIn, Reddit, Instagram), influencing what kinds of third-party content are retrievable and prioritized by AI systems.

“AI models make certain agreements with different parties about whose data they are allowed to use. And that then influences somewhat what the model favours and what it uses. If you have ChatGPT, which has a deal with LinkedIn, they are able to use LinkedIn’s data. But if you have a deal with Instagram or Reddit or someone else, then you are in a way pulling from their data.

So that affects quite a lot. The different AI models can very well lift up different things, depending on what data they have had access to and what they are allowed to use. Where they are able to retrieve it from.”

Another relevant concern related to brand image was that whether the systems prioritize negative or positive information. One participant described that while it might be assumed that AI would favour the dominant narrative, for example, presenting mostly positive content if it outweighs negative mentions, the operational principles behind such prioritization are not transparent. They described generative AI systems as “black boxes,” meaning that their internal decision-making logic is not publicly visible. Although technical research attempts to reverse-engineer aspects of model behaviour, companies do not disclose their source code or ranking mechanisms, as these are considered as trade secrets. It was also suggested that even developers may not fully understand all emergent patterns in model behaviour.

“That is not really known — they do not actually explain how they function. It is said that it is like a “black box,” meaning that the operational logic is not visible. There are attempts to conduct certain kinds of technical research into how something works or what is in the source code, but it has not been fully opened, because those are their trade secrets. And it may also be that they themselves do not always fully know how and why they work the way they do. There is very little information about the logic by which they operate, or why they prefer something and why they do not prefer something. At this moment, it is still quite mysterious.”

The interviewee continued to explain that brand representation in generative search engines has evolved alongside the developments of AI models. They described that when early versions of AI models such as ChatGPT first came out, the original model only used existing, pre-trained dataset available at the time of training. As a result, any information published after the model’s release did not influence its outputs. Therefore, brand representations in these early systems were largely static and based on historical information, not considering new information. Later on, this approach has evolved. Newer versions, for instance ChatGPT-5 and Google’s generative search models increasingly work based on “grounding”. This means that instead of generating responses from pre-trained data, models now retrieve and integrate external, real-time information to support and update their answers. This shift fundamentally changes the implications for brands, as firms were described to have greater potential to influence how they are represented in generative search outputs.

They further emphasized that some AI-platforms such as ChatGPT is currently developing its own integrated payment system, enabling users to complete purchases directly within the AI interface. As a result, the need to visit company websites may decrease even further, since users no longer need to leave the generative search platforms to finalize a purchase. The participant noted that this change can further dilute the strategic meaning of brand image, highlighting the previously discussed divergence where brand image becomes less influential for certain firms and critically important to others. They explained that strong brand image can become critical in a context where the firm aims to reach a position where users do not feel the need to make comparisons between brands and instead already prefer and select that specific brand before engaging with the AI platform, gaining competitive advantage in this emerging environment from a strong brand and its image.

#### 4.4.3 Reduced Managerial Control Over Brand Image

During the interviews, the prominence of third-party content in generative search engines emerged as the most frequently expressed concern among digital strategists. Participants perceived this development as posing a significant reputational risk, as it makes brand image increasingly difficult for firms to control. One interviewee described that in some cases this could result in “a load of nonsense” appearing in AI-generated responses. This opacity creates strategic uncertainty. Firms

cannot reliably predict whether positive digital presence will outweigh isolated negative narratives in AI-generated outputs, making brand management more complex and uncertain.

Digital strategists noted that AI systems also may present irrelevant or outdated information if it remains accessible online, if the original source is considered credible by the AI model. For instance, past negative publicity, such as legal cases or public controversies, certain narratives about a brand may resurface and shape brand image if the content previously received significant attention, regardless of their current relevance or accuracy.

“If there has at some point been something negative that received attention, it may rise up there, and incorrect interpretations may emerge because it received a lot of attention at that time, even if it has been fixed.”

Furthermore, the findings suggest that firms have limited ability to mitigate the presence of such information. One participant highlighted that content published by external actors, particularly media outlets, is typically not removable, even when it is perceived as outdated or reputationally harmful. This creates a persistent challenge for brand image management in AI-mediated environments:

“And then there is also the very difficult question of what you do if there is a lot of bad press about you out there. Because media outlets do not remove old articles just because a company says they are a bit embarrassing and asks, “Could you take this down?”

“But especially in all kinds of comparison situations — “recommend me this” and so on — if you appear negatively there, like “this company or this brand has had these kinds of challenges, problems, or legal cases,” whatever it may be, you cannot really escape those there.

The participants also mentioned that the tendency of hallucination suggests a new layer of reputational vulnerability for brands. As a result, users may form perceptions about a brand based on misleading information, distorting or misrepresenting brand image.

“And of course they hallucinate — they invent things. Quite often I notice myself when searching for information: why did you say that when it is not true? And then it says, “Ah, sorry, you are correct.””

One interviewee described an example that illustrated the limitations of generative AI systems in producing accurate factual information. During an event, participants were asked to search for information about EU countries using generative AI. When the same prompt was entered into the system, the response incorrectly referred to the United Kingdom as an EU country. When participants pointed out the mistake, the system acknowledged the correction. The example highlighted how generative AI can produce responses that appear credible but may contain factual inaccuracies, emphasizing the need for users to critically evaluate AI-generated information.

Another participant described that the central challenge with generative search engines presenting incorrect information, potentially distorting firms' brand image, was that the information is presented in a confident and authoritative tone. This creates a psychological impression of certainty for users. They described that interacting with AI can feel powerful, as systems appears to "have complete knowledge" and provide clear, immediate answers without visible hesitation. However, the confidence of the output does not reflect factual accuracy or contextual nuance, as according to the interviewee, these systems generate responses based on probabilistic predictions or likely word sequences.

"AI presents responses confidently. Psychologically, it feels powerful to have an assistant that seems 'having complete knowledge'. But AI does not search for truth — it predicts probabilities. Humans should remain in the loop for important decisions."

An interviewee described a case in which a brand was repeatedly described in negative terms by generative AI, regardless the prompts used. This was found to stem from a single, strongly negative news article published several years earlier. Although the information was outdated, the article still appeared prominently in AI-generated responses because the source was considered highly credible by the AI system. This case illustrated how a single external source can, by the participant's words, "override what the brand itself says about itself", influencing brand image across multiple contexts, and how the control of brand image is shifting from brands' owned channels to third-party sources.

Another significant risk related to generative search engines and brand image was illustrated through an example in which an AI system presented a social media post intended for entertainment as factual information in its response. This case demonstrates how AI systems may misinterpret context and, as a result, amplify misleading or reputationally harmful content. A participant described a trend on X (formerly Twitter), where users posted images of three company logos or CEOs side by side with captions such as: "Remove the fraud from this picture" or "Which one is the scammer? Remove the scammer." These posts were originally intended as humor. However, this content had ended up in AI generated responses, identifying one of the companies or individuals as a "fraud" or "scammer" in a factual tone, despite the original content being satirical.

This participant also emphasized the role of discussion forums, particularly Reddit. As noted in the previous subsection, individual Reddit users may impose an excessive influence on the information that appears in AI-generated responses. As mentioned, most of the interviewees noted that Reddit has recently emerged as the most frequently referenced sources in such outputs. This is a significant threat for firms' brand image because the information presented in AI-generated responses may increasingly

reflect the subjective opinions and experiences of individual users, presented as facts in the responses. Consequently, user-generated content may influence how brands are interpreted by audiences, potentially strengthening particular narratives about a brand.

A further issue identified by an interviewee was that generative AI systems continuously adapt their responses based on users' prior behaviour such as search history and content preferences. While traditional search engines have also utilized algorithmic personalization, the participant perceived AI-generated responses as potentially more interpretative and less neutral in tone, making the responses amplified. From a brand image perspective, this raises the concern that brand representation may become increasingly filtered and users may be exposed with certain types of narratives, for instance positive, critical, political, or otherwise, AI systems may continue to surface similar perspectives. As a result, brand-related information is selectively presented, shaping users' perceptions over time. This can lead to increasingly narrow and biased brand interpretations, as individuals are exposed to limited and reinforcing narratives rather than a balanced view. Furthermore, brand image may become more fragmented and polarized across audiences.

“It also constantly shapes itself according to the user's history — what kind of content they like, what they search for more — it adapts continuously. Google or traditional search engines have of course also had algorithms that learn behavior to some extent, but the content has maybe been more neutral. AI responses can become colored in the same way as social media — if you always click democratic content, you get more democratic content; if you click something else, you get more of that. It has become more exaggerated.”

Building on this, another participant highlighted that increasing memory capabilities of generative AI systems deepen this personalization by enabling responses to incorporate user-specific context across interactions. This was seen to shift the logic of information presentation from being primarily shaped by companies toward being increasingly constructed around the individual user. As a result, brand-related information is not only filtered but also contextually framed in ways that are unique to each user. From a brand image perspective, this suggests that representations of a brand may vary significantly between individuals, as the same brand can be interpreted through different personalized lenses. This further complicates firms' ability to manage a consistent brand image, as the presentation of the brand becomes increasingly dependent on user-specific factors rather than centrally controlled messaging.

“It generates a kind of reality that looks different for each user — it is personalized for that individual. Especially now that the models have increased their memory capacity, they are able to remember things. Even if you have separate conversations, the system can suddenly refer back to something. For example, ChatGPT might say, “This is relevant

to you because you work in a digital marketing agency,” and you might react like, “Wow — how do you suddenly remember something like that?” Even if you were just searching for shoes.

So as the memory increases, the experience becomes more and more shaped according to the individual user. The experience of the internet used to look more like the companies behind it — it was company-shaped. Now it is increasingly personalized to you.”

Overall, the findings indicate a fundamental shift in how brand image is formed and managed in AI-mediated search environments, reducing firms’ direct control and increasing uncertainty due to third-party influence, personalization, and opaque processes. These changes challenge the effectiveness of traditional brand management approaches and highlight the need for firms to rethink how they build visibility and credibility across a more complex digital ecosystem. Building on this, the following section examines the strategic responses proposed by digital strategists.

#### **4.5 Managerial Responses – From SEO to GEO**

The fourth theme examines the strategic responses suggested by digital strategists for managing brand image in an increasingly AI-mediated digital environment. It addresses the managerial responses to the previously outlined emerging threats while also presents opportunities identified by digital strategists.

Several participants emphasized that many practices traditionally associated with search engine optimization (SEO), such as organizing content around thematic clusters, remain relevant in the context of generative search engines. It was further explained that while traditional SEO primarily focuses on ranking at the top of search results, generative search places greater emphasis on the quality and credibility of content. The practices of optimizing digital content so that it is recognized and referenced in AI-generated responses can be described as Generative Engine Optimization (GEO). The fundamental objective of both approaches is similar: to ensure that content can be discovered in search results, although the platforms through which this occurs differ. Although GEO practices are still evolving, the impacts reflect growing managerial awareness of the need to adapt branding strategies to generative search environments.

Digital strategists perceived that there is a pronounced gap between the growing strategic relevance of generative search environments and firms’ actual readiness to respond to these changes in a brand-conscious manner. One participant noted that firms may remain unaware of how this phenomenon may affect their business, reflecting limited preparedness and uncertainty. Furthermore, another participant noted that some organizations do not yet take these developments seriously, overlooking the need to adapt their communication and reputation management practices accordingly. At the same

time, several participants observed that Generative Engine Optimization (GEO) has increasingly begun to appear in discussions with their clients, indicating growing awareness of the issue.

#### 4.5.1 Gaining Visibility in Generative Search Engines

All digital strategists emphasized that in increasingly AI-driven search environments, the primary priority is to build a clear, strong, and well-defined brand image. Participants highlighted that the logic of brand visibility is shifting, requiring firms to rethink how their brand is expressed and recognized in these environments.

One participant observed that visual branding loses some of its impact in AI-driven contexts. Traditional brand-building elements, such as visual identity, design, tone, and multimedia expression, become less prominent when brand-related information is mediated through text-based AI outputs. In this context, brand expression becomes more simplified, and the nuanced, emotional, and experiential aspects of branding are more difficult to convey. This indicates a shift from visually driven brand communication toward content-based representation, where the ability to produce clear, structured, and interpretable information becomes increasingly central to how brands are understood in AI-mediated search environments

Building on this, recurring theme in the interviews was that as larger brands often dominate digital visibility due to their greater content volume distributed across multiple channels, smaller brands shouldn't aim to compete on the same scale, and rather focus on clearly defined niche topics and areas of expertise. They described that by building strong authority around a specific niche, AI systems may increasingly recognize these brands as key sources within that domain. This highlights the growing importance of clear brand positioning discussed earlier, as niche specialization may enable smaller brands to strengthen their visibility in generative search results, ensure positive representation, and shape intended brand image within targeted areas. This requires carefully defining the brand's core and clarifying its target audience. One participant stated that the most critical and challenging question remains: "who does the brand aim to be relevant for?"

"Small brands can reach a strong position, but they usually cannot compete in the same way as large brands. This becomes a strategic question. Often, small brands should not compete using the same methods as large brands. Instead, it is about differentiation — what makes you unique ... and for whom? Then you might identify a specific term or niche that you can "own." Even with smaller volumes of content, you can build a strong foundation around that niche so that AI recognizes you as the recommended company in that specific area ... competing directly on volume against large companies is rarely a winning strategy. So – It goes back to brand image and positioning."

“Who do we want to be relevant for – that is the most difficult and most important question.”

Although most of the participants considered traditional SEO practices to remain relevant, one participant emphasized that their effectiveness is diminishing in the context of generative search environments. According to this view, earlier SEO strategies were largely based on producing high volumes of generic, keyword-optimized content to increase visibility and attract website traffic. However, as generative AI systems increasingly synthesize and present information directly within their interfaces, often without clearly attributing sources, the visibility of the original content creator is reduced. As a result, the participant argued that generic informational content may no longer generate meaningful business value or contribute to brand visibility, as similar content is widely available and easily replicated.

Building on this, the participant highlighted a fundamental shift in content strategy. Rather than competing on shared keywords, firms are increasingly advised to focus on producing unique, proprietary content that cannot be easily replicated by others. In this context, value is derived less from attracting traffic to owned platforms and more from contributing distinctive insights that differentiate the brand within AI-mediated information environments. This suggests that generative search alters the logic of digital visibility, shifting the emphasis from volume-based optimization toward content uniqueness and informational exclusivity, with important implications for how firms manage and communicate their brand image online.

Although interviewees noted that smaller brands should not aim to compete with larger firms on content volume, most emphasized that smaller brands still need to develop a broader digital footprint to gain visibility in generative search engines. One participant suggested that brands should be active in social media, public discussions, third-party review sites, and participate in industry competitions or rankings to gain positive visibility. These actions were described to support building a broader and more credible digital presence.

”Do social media. Try to start conversations on conversation platforms. Try to get reviews about the brand. Participate in competitions where the brand can get some kind of label like “best in X” or similar. And also in that way, through this, broader web presence is gained. Even small brands can succeed in that.”

One participant added to this viewpoint that there is no single platform or channel that guarantees visibility in generative search environments. Instead, they suggested that firms must critically assess which channels are most relevant to their specific objectives, target audiences, and industry context – where does the meaningful engagement occur and what aligns with the brand’s goals.

“Regarding the importance of different channels — I would guess that you just have to study and analyze what works there. What would in some way be relevant. Not all companies should immediately go to Reddit, and not all companies should produce content heavily on LinkedIn. It really depends on what you want to achieve.”

One participant further emphasized that smaller brands can increase their likelihood of being included in AI-generated syntheses by producing website content in a question–answer format. This structure aligns with the conversational nature of generative search engines, some which process and synthesize information in response to user prompts. Content presented in this format was perceived as easier for AI systems to interpret and incorporate into generated responses, thereby potentially improving visibility for smaller brands.

#### 4.5.2 Managing Negative or Inaccurate Brand Representations

When asked, “*what kinds of ways are there to react to a situation where an AI answer produces incorrect or negative information about a brand – what can be done?*”, digital strategists described a set of emerging practices designed to maintain or improve brand image in the AI-driven generative search environments.

All interviewees pointed out that the first thing to do is to analyze where the wrong or negative information comes from. One participant highlighted the importance of remaining alert to emerging publicity and if unfavourable content arises, rather than ignoring negative mentions, companies should proactively address them, whether through clarification, correction, or apology where appropriate. Timely engagement can help prevent escalation and, in some cases, transform a potentially damaging situation into an opportunity to demonstrate transparency and accountability.

“I would at least start by finding out what the source is. If it is something negative, trying to find out who is spreading that content and why. You have to stay alert. If bad publicity appears, you need to be able to react quickly, address it, and turn it — through apology or response — into your own advantage, at least so that it does not escalate further.”

One participant highlighted that brands cannot “escape” negative narratives risen from unfavourable media coverage, as past PR issues cannot simply be removed upon request from the third-party media. Therefore, it is strategically important for firms to encourage and build positive third-party content about their brand. Such content increases the likelihood that AI systems will present the brand in a favourable and balanced way. This viewpoint was supported by another participant, stating that in these situations, a sustainable response involves gradually reshaping the unfavoured narrative through consistent content production and strategic communication efforts:

“I cannot think of anything that would fix it instantly — unless you start building some kind of campaign. Producing a strong volume of new content from a new angle that gradually shifts or dilutes the negative narrative.”

Beyond addressing external sources, all participants highlighted the importance of evaluating the brand’s own existing website content to identify outdated, contradictory, or low-quality information that could unintentionally be surfaced by generative search systems. They noted a common issue that over time, corporate websites often have built up fragmented content structures such as multiple redesigns, unremoved legacy pages, forgotten redirects, and outdated PDF documents. In some cases, several different versions of similar content may coexist within the same domain. These outdated materials were described to create a fragmented digital footprint that generative AI systems may draw its information from. To address this issue, interviewees suggested that ongoing content governance, including systematic CMS clean-up, removal of outdated files, and structured redirection practices, becomes strategically important. Therefore, firms must ensure that the data environment from which AI systems learn and retrieve information reflects their current positioning.

“The pages may have accumulated over the years into quite a mess and there might be, at worst, several different versions. The website may have gone through redesigns or a few renewals, and everything has remained there, and some individual pages have been left there, that haven’t then been remembered to be deleted or redirected or anything else ... so yes, certainly that kind of cleaning is probably very timely for many, from the perspective that they ensure the information is correct”

Furthermore, inaccuracies in AI-generated responses were described as potentially stemming from technical issues on company websites. For example, restricted access, poor site structure, or inaccessible content, may prevent AI models from retrieving accurate information. Furthermore, unclear messaging, weak positioning, or poorly structured content can lead to misinterpretation. Therefore, firms must ensure both technical accessibility and clear, strategically positioned communication. Inaccurate AI-generated representations may reveal gaps, inconsistencies, or weaknesses in the brand’s communication strategy. This finding aligns with the broader pattern across interviews: the rise of generative AI increases the need for stronger brand clarity, sharper positioning, and more deliberate, high-quality communication.

”One reason could certainly be that if the AI cannot properly read the site, there may also be technical challenges. Since they are machines that crawl websites and search for information, if they cannot access it — for example if it is behind portals, logins, or lead forms that they cannot reach — then the good information will naturally not end up anywhere ... Usually in those situations, if something has been wrong, it has been the company’s own fault in the sense that it has been presented in the wrong way. For example, the text may not have been accessible, or the content may not have been understandable, so it could have been interpreted in that way.”

When discussing whether the language of brand-related content plays a significant role in how generative AI systems retrieve and synthesize brand-related information, the interviewees expressed nuanced and partly divergent views regarding the underlying logic. A clear point of agreement was that language-related content inconsistencies pose a significant practical challenge, potentially leading to inaccurate brand representations in generative search outputs.

One participant approached this topic from a content and management perspective, emphasizing that firms often maintain multiple language versions of their websites without sufficient resources to ensure consistent updates, resulting in asymmetries in content accuracy. Consequently, some language versions were described to remain outdated while others are regularly updated, increasing the risk that generative AI systems retrieve and incorporate inaccurate or outdated information into their responses from less frequently maintained language versions into their responses. In this sense, language was consistently linked to content quality and reliability, emphasizing the importance of maintaining up-to-date and aligned content across language versions, particularly in relation to target markets.

In contrast to the emphasis of maintaining consistency across all language versions, another participant questioned the necessity of equal resource allocation across languages. Instead, they argued that firms should adopt a more selective and market-driven approach, prioritizing content updates in the languages most relevant to their core markets. From this perspective, ensuring accuracy and quality in key markets was considered more critical than maintaining uniform consistency across all language versions.

While the first two perspectives position language as strategically relevant, either as a source of content inconsistency or as a factor guiding resource prioritization, one participant adopted a technical perspective, arguing that language itself does not fundamentally influence how generative AI systems operate. From this standpoint, large language models process information across languages fluidly, meaning that language does not act as a constraint on retrieval or synthesis. Instead, AI systems are viewed as capable of integrating information from multiple linguistic sources irrespective of the user's query language, while source selection may still be shaped by the geographic or market context. This suggests that while generative AI systems are technically multilingual, their outputs may vary depending on the language of the prompt and the contextual framing of the query. Therefore, this participant added controversy about whether language matters and how it should be approached on content level, compared to other participants.

“The language doesn’t really matter. If we conduct research on a Finnish company in the Finnish market, then yes, it prefers Finnish sources. But it may use the English-language content of a Finnish website just as much as the Finnish-language content. And it might also fetch the information from some German website and bring it. But there is clearly that kind of preference depending on in the name of which country, so to speak, you conduct the research. But that is completely natural, because for those language models, language does not mean anything – it is just data that it tries to predict.”

Building on the discussion of language-related differences and content consistency, the findings further emphasize the importance of aligning communication strategies with specific market contexts, particularly in international settings. One participant highlighted that language should not be viewed only as a technical feature of content, but as part of a broader strategic approach to positioning the brand within its target market. This perspective connects to earlier observations regarding visibility inequalities, where smaller or less-established brands were found to face greater challenges in appearing in AI-generated responses. These challenges were perceived to intensify in international contexts, where firms often enter new markets with limited brand recognition and operate in a “challenger” position. In such situations, general brand messaging, typically effective in well-established home markets, was considered insufficient for achieving visibility and differentiation.

Instead, this participant emphasized the need for context-specific and strategically differentiated communication, ensuring that brand messaging clearly conveys relevance within the competitive and cultural environment of each market. They noted that messaging should “*stand out, capture attention and stay memorable*”. At the website level, this was described as requiring adaptation across language versions, rather than maintaining identical content globally. In practice, this may involve tailoring messaging, value propositions, and content structures to reflect the expectations, needs, and competitive dynamics of each target market.

Overall, the findings suggest that managing brand image in AI-driven search environments requires both active response to negative information and continuous improvement of firms’ own content. Inaccuracies in AI-generated outputs are often linked to the quality, structure, and accessibility of available information, highlighting the importance of clear and well-maintained digital content. Language was mostly seen as a potential source of inaccuracy in generative AI outputs, as differences in multilingual content can result in uneven or misleading representations, even though AI systems themselves are capable of processing multiple languages effectively.

#### 4.5.3 Perceived Managerial Opportunities

Although many reflections focused on emerging risks, digital strategists also revealed several opportunities that generative search engines may create for brand image management.

A participant stated that generative search engines create new paths for discovery, particularly for smaller and less-established brands in markets where no single brand controls majority of the digital visibility. In such cases, generative search systems may offer increased visibility for brands that succeed in aligning their content with the topics and queries most relevant to their audiences.

Building on this, another participant emphasized that generative search may temporarily lower traditional barriers to visibility. Whereas search engine optimization (SEO) has historically been perceived as a highly competitive domain dominated by large budgets and established players, generative search was seen to introduce a “*window of opportunity to stand out and gain visibility*”, enabling smaller firms to compete more effectively. In this environment, distinctive positioning, clear brand identity, and consistent communication were highlighted as key drivers of visibility, rather than financial resources alone.

Although it was seen by some participants that smaller brands should not necessarily aim to compete directly with larger brands, this interviewee offered a contrasting view, arguing that generative search may also act as a “leveller of the playing field”, meaning that smaller or more niche brands may appear alongside larger competitors. Strong emotional attachment, enthusiastic communities, or a distinctive brand angle were described as factors that could increase visibility in generative search engine responses, even for less established brands.

Building on this optimistic view, another participant further emphasized that generative search engines may increase polarization between brands that strategically invest in high-quality, contextually relevant content and those that do not. Firms that consistently invest in meaningful content production and understand how to optimize visibility in AI-mediated environments are likely to strengthen their brand image through visibility and reputation over time. This creates opportunities to outperform competitors who treat content as a secondary or fragmented activity.

“I would guess that there will be this kind of polarization — those who truly invest in it will become stronger. And they will have the opportunity to outperform competitors who have perhaps invested more narrowly in content production. On the other hand, if someone just pushes out a huge amount of content to their own website without proper context or real relevance behind it, it may be that in the short term they gain some kind of advantage.”

Building on the previous discussion of managing negative or inaccurate brand representations, one participant emphasized that undesirable AI-generated outputs should be viewed as reflections of the underlying digital information environment. From this perspective, AI systems were described as largely data-driven and neutral in their operation, drawing on and synthesizing the information

available online without intentional bias. Consequently, AI-generated responses can function as a diagnostic indicator of how a brand is currently represented and perceived across digital sources.

This viewpoint suggests that inaccuracies in AI-generated outputs may reveal inconsistencies between intended brand positioning and the information that is publicly accessible, including third-party content such as media coverage or online discussions. As a result, generative search engines can provide firms with valuable insights into potential gaps, inconsistencies, or negative narratives surrounding their brand.

“The systems are unbiased ... if there is incorrect information and it presents the brand in an inaccurate light, then you need to conduct an analysis of why. If we are being represented in this way by the model, is it actually true? Is this how our customers see us? Does our website give this kind of impression about us? Because the model itself does not have any intention — it may hallucinate to some extent, but it is not trying to defame anyone. It takes the data, analyzes the data, and outputs the data.”

Aligning with this viewpoint, another participant suggested that generative search engines can be used as a proactive tool for brand development. Rather than viewing negative or critical AI-generated responses entirely as a threat to brand image, they suggested that such outputs may provide valuable insights into how the brand is perceived online. In this sense, generative AI can reveal existing associations, criticisms, or dominant narratives surrounding a brand that firms might otherwise overlook.

They described that by actively prompting AI systems with questions such as what information is available about the brand, whether any negative associations exist, and which themes dominate the brand-related discussions, firms can gain insight into the brand’s perceived image. In this sense, generative AI functions as a “*brand sparring partner*”, enabling reflective evaluation of what the brand is known for, which topics receive attention, and which strategically important themes remain underrepresented.

In response to limited brand visibility in generative search environments, one participant highlighted a potential positive implication, suggesting that such constraints may encourage firms to strengthen their investment in brand-building activities. Rather than relying on visibility gained through AI-mediated search, companies may be prompted to place greater emphasis on long-term brand development and alternative channels of engagement. From this perspective, reduced visibility in generative search can act as a catalyst for more deliberate and sustained brand-building efforts beyond search-based discovery.

A further opportunity was referred to the early stage of adoption. Digital strategists suggested that because many organisations have not yet adapted their branding or content practices to the logic of generative search, companies that move early may benefit from acting early by establishing their presence and visibility before competitors. Early action was seen as particularly beneficial for building topic authority and gaining initial recognition among generative search outputs. Digital strategists perceived this as a chance to shape brand image more proactively by ensuring that AI-generated summaries reflect preferred attributes and consistent brand meanings.

Building on this, one participant highlighted a potential opportunity arising from the anticipated evolution of generative search environments. Rather than remaining limited to chat-based interfaces, future systems were expected to become more integrated and operationally comprehensive, enabling users to complete entire tasks from information retrieval to decision-making within a single environment. This development toward increasingly agentic systems, where generative models function as autonomous intermediaries, was seen to create new opportunities for firms to engage with users more directly throughout the decision-making process. As generative systems assume a more central role in mediating brand-related information, they may offer firms enhanced possibilities to influence how their brand is represented and experienced across multiple stages of the customer journey.

Taken together, the findings highlight a clear shift in managerial responses from traditional search engine optimization toward more holistic and adaptive approaches to brand image management in AI-mediated environments. While many SEO practices remain partially relevant, they are increasingly complemented by emerging GEO practices that prioritize content quality, contextual relevance, and inclusion in AI-generated responses rather than rankings alone. At the same time, the findings reveal a notable gap between the growing strategic importance of generative search and firms' current level of preparedness, suggesting that many organizations have yet to fully integrate these developments into their branding and communication strategies. Across the subsections, a consistent pattern emerges: effective brand image management increasingly depends on clear positioning, niche relevance, and a broad digital presence across multiple channels, combined with ongoing content governance and proactive reputation management. Thus, the following chapter draws the findings together into a synthesis.

#### **4.6 Synthesis of the Findings**

Taken together, the findings provide a comprehensive view of how digital strategists perceive the influence of generative search engines on brand image from a managerial perspective.

First, regarding the strategic importance of brand image, the findings confirm that brand image remains a critical asset in hyperconnected and global business environments. It functions as a source of differentiation, trust, and long-term competitive advantage. However, its importance is also increasingly context-dependent and, in some cases polarized, as platform-driven environments and standardized offerings may reduce the relevance of brand image in certain contexts while increasing it in others.

Second, in relation to the role of digital visibility and traditional search engines, the findings highlight that search engines have historically functioned as key intermediaries shaping brand image by determining visibility and guiding users toward firm-controlled websites. While participants differed in whether search engines directly shape brand image or primarily act as gateways, a shared understanding emerged that visibility is a precondition for brand image formation, with websites remaining the central space for controlled brand communication.

Third, addressing how generative search engines influence brand image, the findings show that generative AI transforms search engines from gateways to brand-related information into active sites of brand representation, where information is synthesized from multiple sources and presented directly to users. This shift reduces firms' ability to control brand narratives, increases dependence on third-party content, and introduces new dynamics of algorithmic mediation, personalization, and opacity. Consequently, brand image becomes more selective, fragmented, and context-dependent, while visibility may become concentrated among established actors with stronger digital footprints. As users increasingly rely on generative search engines for information search, strategic brand image management becomes increasingly important in AI-mediated digital environments.

Fourth, concerning strategic responses, the findings show that firms are beginning to adapt by moving from traditional SEO toward more holistic approaches, including Generative Engine Optimization (GEO). Effective responses emphasize clear positioning, niche relevance, high-quality content, and active reputation management, alongside continuous content governance. At the same time, generative search creates new opportunities, such as early-mover advantages, enhanced discovery for niche brands, and the use of AI outputs as diagnostic tools for evaluating brand perception.

Overall, the findings suggest a transition toward a co-created and AI-mediated brand image, where outcomes are shaped through the interaction of firm strategies, third-party content, and algorithmic processes. This shift requires firms to rethink brand management as a continuous, multi-channel, and adaptive process in increasingly complex digital environments. Building on these insights, the following chapter synthesizes the study's conclusions by situating the findings within existing

literature and outlining their theoretical and managerial implications, as well as discusses the study's limitations and implications for future research.

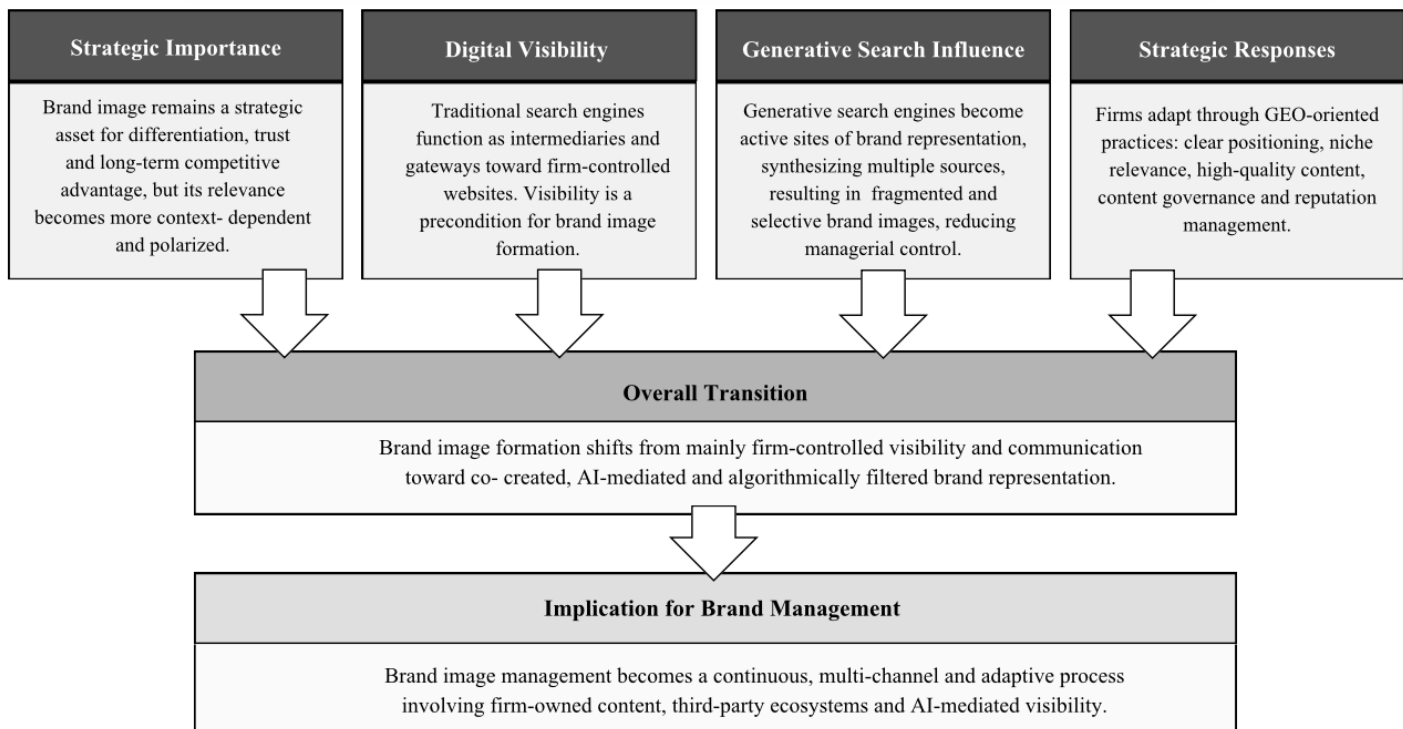


Figure 5: Synthesis of the Findings

## 5 Conclusions

This chapter presents the key findings of the study and interprets them in relation to the existing literature and the integrative conceptual framework developed in this research. The theoretical contribution section examines how generative search engines influence brand image and its management, and in line with Whetten's (1989, 491) view of theoretical contribution, it evaluates how the findings extend and challenge prior research of the phenomenon. The managerial implications section translates the findings into practical insights for managers, outlining how firms can adapt their brand image management practices in response to the changing logic of search and AI-generated information environments. Finally, the chapter discusses the limitations of the study and suggests direction for future research.

Before turning to these sections, the study's overall conclusion can be summarized as follows. This study examined how digital strategists perceive the influence of generative search engines on brand image from a managerial perspective. Overall, generative search engines are perceived as both amplifiers and disruptors of brand image. While the core principles of brand image as a strategic asset remain intact, the mechanisms through which brand meaning is constructed have shifted toward increasingly indirect, data-driven, and third-party-influenced processes. As a result, managing brand image is no longer primarily about controlling firm-owned touchpoints, but about navigating a complex, AI-mediated information ecosystem. The following sections synthesize these insights in relation to the four research objectives and directly address the research question.

### 5.1 Theoretical Contributions

The theoretical contribution of this study varies across domains. In areas with established literature—such as brand image, digital visibility, and traditional search engines—the findings primarily confirm and refine existing theory, highlighting their continued relevance while adding nuance through a more context-dependent and managerial perspective. In contrast, the study makes a stronger contribution in the context of generative search engines, where prior research remains limited.

Addressing the first objective—examining the significance of brand image as a strategic asset in today's increasingly interconnected and global business environment—the findings largely align with established brand image literature while also offering important extensions. Consistent with prior research (e.g., Keller 1993; Aaker 1991, 115-118), brand image was perceived to enhance trust, reduce perceived risk, and influence decision-making, confirming its role as a key driver of competitive advantage and long-term success. The findings also reinforce the cumulative and long-

term nature of brand image development, emphasizing the importance of consistent and sustained strategic efforts, as highlighted in earlier studies (Keller & Lehmann 2006, 741-742; Srivastava & Kamdar 2009, 85; Kato & Tsuda 2018, 1368-1369; Aaker 1991, 115-118). Aligning with the established theories, digital strategists consistently emphasized that strong brand image cannot be built through isolated actions, but requires sustained and coherent strategic effort over time.

However, this study extends existing literature by viewing that the strategic importance of brand image is increasingly context-dependent, especially in global and digital environments. While most participants viewed brand image as a central asset across both B2B and B2C contexts—supporting prior research that highlights its broad relevance—the findings reveal a more nuanced reality. The findings highlight a polarization effect: brand image becomes increasingly critical in contexts where trust, differentiation, and symbolic value are central, while its importance may become diluted or secondary in certain digital contexts, such as some platform-based marketplaces, as decision-making is driven more by product attributes, price, and platform visibility than by brand identity. This extends prior theory by suggesting that the strategic importance of brand image shifts from a broadly universal strategic asset toward a more context-sensitive and dynamically valued construct in contemporary global digital business environments.

Addressing the second objective—examining how digital visibility and traditional search engines have influenced brand image and its management in digital environments—both the literature and the findings converge on a central insight: digital visibility serves as a foundational driver of brand image, with search engines acting as key gatekeepers that shape how and whether brands are encountered. Consistent with prior research (Dou et al. 2010, 262-264; Tarazona-Montoya et al. 2024, 2843-2844), search engines shape brand image by determining what information is visible and in what context. Empirically, visibility was perceived as the first point of contact, influencing initial impressions and credibility.

However, the findings introduce important nuance. While some strategists viewed search engines as directly shaping brand image through rankings and visibility signals, others perceived them primarily as gateways to firm-controlled channels, where brand image is ultimately formed. This extends existing literature by showing that the influence of search engines is context-dependent, rather than uniformly direct.

At the same time, the findings highlight continuity despite technological change. Search engine optimization was generally perceived to remain central to managing visibility, shaping how and where brands appear. This supports prior research on SEO (Momen et al. 2019, 6-7; Ahmad et al.

2024). However, the findings also reveal a notable tension. While SEO remains important, one participant argued that its effectiveness is diminishing, particularly regarding volume-based, keyword-driven strategies. In this view, generic content no longer generates meaningful visibility or competitive advantage, as it is easily replicated and increasingly absorbed into AI-generated outputs. This contradiction suggests an emerging shift from traditional SEO toward more advanced approaches, such as generative engine optimization (GEO). Rather than competing through scalable content volume, firms are increasingly required to produce distinctive, high-value content that can influence how they are represented within AI-mediated search environments.

Furthermore, the study advances existing literature by showing that visibility management is also meaning management. Through content strategies, firms influence which associations become linked to the brand. At the same time, consistent with prior research, firm control remains conditional on visibility: even though websites enable controlled brand communication, their impact depends on being discoverable. Taken together, the findings confirm the role of search engines as visibility gatekeepers while extending theory by introducing a more nuanced managerial perspective and highlighting the strategic role of visibility in shaping brand meaning.

Addressing the third objective—to explore how AI-driven generative search engines are influencing brand image—existing literature provided a foundation for understanding how generative search engines operate, yet its integration within brand image theory was recognized to be limited. By synthesizing established theoretical perspectives, this study reasoned the underlying logic of the phenomenon, as well as developed an integrative conceptual framework that explains how generative search engines influence brand image through interconnected layers of inputs, mediation, mechanisms, and outputs (sections 2.3.2 and 2.4). The findings demonstrate how these theoretically identified processes unfold in practice extending the underexplored phenomenon.

First, the findings confirm that generative search engines significantly reshape brand visibility dynamics, reflecting a transformation in both the input and mediation layers of the conceptual framework. In line with prior research suggesting that AI-generated responses reduce the need to access external websites (Aggarwal et al. 2024, 25), participants consistently described a decline in organic website traffic as users were seen to increasingly rely on AI-generated summaries. This reduces the role of firm-owned channels as primary points of brand exposure, shifting visibility from website-based interactions toward inclusion within AI-generated responses. At the same time, visibility becomes more selective, as AI systems tend to present only a limited number of brands, reinforcing the importance of being represented within these outputs.

Second, the findings highlight a fundamental shift in brand representation, further extending the mediation layer of the conceptual framework while also reflecting changes in the input layer. Existing literature suggests that generative search engines rely heavily on third-party sources when synthesizing information (Chen et al. 2025). The empirical results strongly support this view, showing that brand representations are increasingly constructed from external content such as news media, social media, and discussion forums, rather than from brand-owned sources. As a result, the input layer becomes more fragmented and externally driven, while brand image becomes more dependent on how AI systems interpret and combine information from diverse sources within the mediation and mechanisms layer. This process was perceived as opaque and difficult to predict, with findings describing generative AI systems as “black boxes” where the logic of source selection and prioritization remains unclear. Consequently, brand representations vary, increasing the risk of fragmented and inconsistent brand images.

Importantly, similar to existing literature, the findings also reveal the critical tension between transparency and trust. Despite the opacity of these processes, AI-generated outputs are often perceived generally credible and trustworthy, consistent with prior research (McKay 2024, 4; Chen et al. 2025). This suggests that users may rely on AI-generated representations even when the underlying logic remains unclear, amplifying the potential influence of these systems on brand image. However, the findings extend prior research by showing that this trust and reliance are not uniform. Search behaviour appears to be generationally and contextually fragmented, where younger users may rely more on generative search engines, while older users were seen continue to rely more on traditional search engines.

At the same time, the findings point to inconsistencies in how sources are prioritized. While existing literature suggests that generative AI systems favour authoritative third-party sources (Chen et al. 2025), most of the participants described that anonymous discussion forum Reddit has been recognized as the most cited reference in AI-generated responses in the past, creating contradictory insights, further reinforcing the unpredictability of brand representation in these environments. The findings further extend existing literature, indicating that content retrieval is also shaped by platform partnerships.

Third, the findings indicate a substantial reduction in managerial control over brand image. While prior research highlights the growing influence of third-party content in digital environments (Chen et al. 2025), the results show that generative search engines amplify this dynamic by prioritizing external sources and limiting firms’ ability to influence how their brand is presented. Participants

emphasized that firms cannot fully control which sources are used, how information is framed, or whether outdated or negative content resurfaces in AI-generated responses, which reflect the mechanism layer of the conceptual framework. This introduces new reputational risks, including the persistence of past negative narratives, the amplification of misleading or incorrect information, and the influence of subjective user-generated content presented as factual.

In addition, the findings extend theoretical understanding by highlighting the role of personalization and algorithmic adaptation in shaping brand image. While traditional search engines already incorporate some level of personalization, generative AI systems were perceived to produce more interpretive and user-specific outputs. As a result, brand representations, reflecting the output layer, may differ significantly across individuals, leading to increasingly fragmented and potentially polarized brand images. This suggests that brand image is no longer only collectively constructed, but also individually tailored, complicating firms' ability to maintain a consistent brand identity.

Taken together, the findings confirm and concretize the mechanisms identified in the literature and the conceptual framework, while highlighting their practical implications. Generative search engines influence brand image by shifting it from a process driven by firm-controlled communication and user navigation toward one increasingly mediated by AI-driven synthesis, selective visibility, and third-party influence. In this environment, brand image is constructed through algorithmically generated representations that combine multiple sources into a single narrative, often perceived as credible despite potential inaccuracies.

The fourth objective the study explores the strategic implications related to managing brand image in this emerging context. These are discussed in the following section.

## **5.2 Managerial Implications**

Existing literature views that firms cannot control when and how digital content is displayed in generative search outputs, indicating the lack of control over how brands are represented (Aggarwal 2024, 25). To address this issue, findings present several managerial implications, addressing the fourth objective of this study, to explore the strategic implications related to managing brand image in this emerging digital environment.

First, the findings emphasize that firms must reconsider how brand visibility is achieved and managed. Firms need to ensure that their brand is represented within AI-generated responses, making visibility within these environments a central strategic priority. Importantly, firms should ensure that brands are the representations reflect the intended brand image. This requires moving beyond

traditional search engine optimization (SEO) toward practices aligned with Generative Engine Optimization (GEO).

Second, the findings highlight the growing importance of clear positioning and niche relevance, particularly for smaller or less-established brands. Firms are advised to focus on building strong authority within clearly defined domains, enabling AI systems to recognize them as relevant sources in specific contexts. This implies that firms must make strategic choices regarding their target audiences, core topics, and areas of differentiation.

Third, the results underline the need for active management of third-party content and reputation, as generative AI systems heavily rely on external sources. Firms cannot fully control such content, but they can influence it over time by generating positive third-party visibility and responding proactively to negative publicity. Continuous monitoring and rapid response to reputational risks become essential capabilities.

Fourth, the findings demonstrate that firms must invest in content governance. Inaccuracies in AI-generated responses were frequently linked to outdated, fragmented, or inaccessible content. This highlights the importance of maintaining consistent, up-to-date, and technically accessible content across digital platforms, especially multilingual websites, ensuring that the information available to AI systems accurately reflects their intended brand image.

Fifth, the findings suggest that generative search engines can be used as a diagnostic and strategic tool. By actively querying AI systems, organizations can gain insights into how their brand is currently represented across the digital ecosystem and use this information to refine their communication strategies.

Finally, the findings point to the importance of early adaptation and strategic readiness. As the findings suggest, many organizations have not yet fully responded to this phenomenon, and firms that proactively adjust their branding and content strategies may benefit from early-mover advantages. This observation is further supported by the data collection process of this study, during which access to brand managers proved limited. Some potential participants indicated that they did not possess sufficient knowledge or familiarity with the topic to provide informed insights.

Overall, the findings suggest that managing brand image in generative search environments requires a shift from channel-specific optimization toward an adaptive approach, where firms actively shape their broader digital footprint, engage with third-party narratives, and continuously align their content with evolving AI-mediated information ecosystems.

### 5.3 Limitations and Implications for Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings.

First, the study is based on a small qualitative sample, which limits the generalizability of the results. While the aim was not statistical generalization but to provide in-depth, contextually grounded insights, the findings should be understood as indicative rather than universally applicable. They reflect patterns and mechanisms identified through a limited number of expert perspectives and may not represent all industries or geographical contexts. Instead, the study offers a foundation for future research to test and extend these insights in broader settings.

Second, the characteristics of the sample introduces limitations related to representativeness. Although the study adopts an international business perspective, all participants were connected to Finnish firms, with a notable proportion representing similar organizational contexts. This may have influenced the perspectives presented. Future research would benefit from more geographically and organizationally diverse samples.

Third, the data collection process itself revealed an important limitation that also reflects the nature of the phenomenon. Access to brand managers proved challenging, as several potential participants were either unavailable or unable to take a clear position on the topic. While this can be seen as a limitation, it simultaneously highlights an important insight: organizational understanding of generative search engines remains limited, and firms are not yet fully equipped to address their implications. In this sense, the limitation also underscores the relevance and timeliness of the research.

Fourth, the rapidly evolving nature of the phenomenon constitutes a limitation, as the findings are temporally and contextually bounded and may become outdated as technology and professional understanding continue to develop.

Fifth, the study adopts a broad perspective across both B2B and B2C contexts. While this supports a general understanding of the phenomenon, it may overlook important context-specific differences. Future research could benefit from focusing more narrowly on specific industries or distinguishing more clearly between B2B and B2C environments.

Finally, while themes related to established concepts such as brand image and traditional search engines reached saturation relatively quickly, discussions on generative search engines remained more diverse and evolving. This reflects the novelty of the phenomenon and suggests that additional data could provide further insights.

Despite these limitations, this study provides valuable groundwork for future research by identifying key dynamics, tensions, and managerial challenges at the intersection of generative search and brand image. It highlights underexplored connections and emphasizes the need for further research on how organizations adapt their brand management practices in AI-driven digital environments.

## 6 Summary

This chapter presents the summary of the study by outlining its background, aim, research design, key findings, and main contributions.

This study examined how generative search engines influence brand image from a managerial perspective, drawing on insights from digital strategists, defined as professionals working at the intersection of brand management and AI-driven business strategy.

The research was motivated by the evolving shift from traditional search engines to generative search engines, which can be seen to increasingly shape brand image through AI-generated summaries rather than firm-controlled channels. This was seen to reduce managerial control over brand representation and creates risks related to third-party content, inaccuracies, and opaque source selection. Despite growing managerial interest and the increasing relevance of this phenomenon, existing research remains limited in explaining how generative search engines influence brand image from a managerial perspective.

In response, the study addressed the research question *“How do digital strategists perceive the influence of generative search engines on brand image from a managerial perspective?”*.

To achieve the aim of the study, four objectives were developed to support a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon: **(1)** to examine the strategic role of brand image, **(2)** to understand the role of traditional search engines and digital visibility, **(3)** to analyze the influence of generative search engines, and **(4)** to explore the managerial implications of this shift.

By combining established literature on brand image, digital visibility, and search engines with emerging research on generative search engines, the study developed an integrative conceptual framework that explains how generative search engines influence brand image through four interconnected layers: input, mediation, mechanisms, and output. This integrative conceptual framework guided the empirical analysis.

The empirical research was conducted using a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews. This method enabled the collection of in-depth, experience-based insights into an emerging and complex phenomenon. The findings were analyzed thematically, combining theory-driven categories with insights that emerged from the data.

The findings indicate that generative search engines fundamentally influence brand image and its management. First, these systems reduce the visibility and influence of firm-controlled channels by

providing direct, AI-generated responses, which limits firms' ability to guide audiences to their own platforms. Second, brand image was seen being increasingly shaped by third-party content, as generative systems rely heavily on external sources when constructing responses. Third, AI-driven synthesis introduces a new layer of mediation, where information is combined, interpreted, and presented in ways that firms cannot fully control and that may not accurately reflect the intended brand image. As a result, brand representations become more fragmented, dynamic, and difficult to control.

At the same time, the findings highlight that generative search engines are often perceived as objective and trustworthy, which increases their influence on how brand-related information is interpreted. This reinforces the role of AI systems as active intermediaries in brand image formation rather than neutral information providers. Consequently, brand image is increasingly co-created through the interaction of firm strategies, third-party content, and algorithmic processes.

From a managerial perspective, the study suggests that brand management is shifting from a relatively controlled and channel-specific activity toward a continuous, adaptive process in complex digital ecosystems. Traditional practices such as search engine optimization remain relevant but are no longer sufficient on their own. Instead, firms must increasingly focus on managing their presence across broader information ecosystems, including third-party platforms and AI-mediated environments. This includes monitoring AI-generated representations, addressing inaccuracies, and developing strategies to influence how brands are interpreted within generative systems.

Overall, the study contributes to existing literature by extending understanding of how generative search engines influence brand image and its management. It highlights a fundamental shift from firm-controlled communication toward AI-mediated and co-created brand image formation. In doing so, it provides both theoretical and practical insights into how firms can navigate and manage brand image in rapidly evolving digital environments.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1 Explanation of the use of AI

Generative artificial intelligence was used to a limited extent to support the thesis process, within the guidelines of Turku School of Economics. Artificial intelligence has not replaced the researcher's own thinking, argumentation, or analysis. The researcher is fully responsible for the content and conclusions of the work. Artificial intelligence was used in a secure and ethical manner, and no personal data, or other identifiable information was processed in public AI services. A detailed declaration of how AI has been utilized in this study is provided below.

#### ChatGPT (ChatGPT-5.3)

In this thesis, ChatGPT was primarily used as a supportive tool for idea development and language enhancement. During the early stages of writing, it was used to help structure and synthesise loosely structured drafts and notes, converting them into more coherent textual forms, without altering the underlying meaning.

ChatGPT supported the writing process by refining language and improving the overall academic tone of the text, given that English is not the author's first language. This included paraphrasing sentences and suggesting alternative wordings. When necessary, it was also used to assist in translating selected quotations from interview transcripts from Finnish into English. However, to ensure data privacy, full interview transcripts were not uploaded to the system.

Typical prompts included requests such as "give synonyms for [specific word]" and "rewrite this sentence in a more formal academic style".

Importantly, all core ideas and interpretations presented in this thesis are the author's own. ChatGPT was not used to generate new content, but it was used to enhance author-produced text. Furthermore, all outputs were critically reviewed and edited by the author.

#### Scopus AI (<https://www.scopus.com/pages/home#scopus-ai>)

The AI-based tool Scopus AI was used to support the literature search process. Specifically, it was utilised to identify relevant academic sources by formulating queries such as "find research on [specific statement or topic]." This enabled a more efficient exploration of existing research and helped locate pertinent articles for further review.

The tool was used as an aid for source discovery, and all identified literature was independently evaluated and selected by the author based on its relevance and academic quality.

**AI-based transcription service** (<https://transcribe.utu.fi>)

UTU Transcribe, and AI-based transcription service provided by University of Turku was used to transcribe audio-recordings into text. The university states that uploaded files are not shared with third parties or used for any purposes beyond transcription, and that all files are deleted once the transcription process is completed.

## Appendix 2 Interview consent form



Tutkimustiedote

1 (2)

2022

### **TIEDOTE TUTKIMUKSESTA / DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY**

#### **Tutkimuksen nimi / Name of the research**

**The Influence of Generative Search Engines on Brand Image:  
Managerial Perspectives from Digital Strategists**

#### **Osallistumisen vapaaehtoisuus / Voluntary consent**

Tähän tutkimukseen osallistuminen on vapaaehtoista. Voitte kieltäytyä osallistumasta tutkimukseen tai peruuttaa suostumuksenne syytä ilmoittamatta, milloin tahansa tutkimuksen aikana ilman, että siitä aiheutuu Teille minkäänlaisia kielteisiä seuraamuksia. Jos päätätte peruuttaa suostumuksenne, peruutukseen mennessä jo kerättyä aineistoa käytetään tutkimustarkoitukseen anonymisoituna ja luottamuksellisesti.

Lukekaa rauhassa tämä tiedote. Jos Teillä on kysyttävää, voitte olla yhteydessä tutkijaan, jonka yhteystiedot löytyvät asiakirjan lopusta. Jos päätätte osallistua tutkimukseen, Teitä pyydetään allekirjoittamaan oheinen suostumus.

Participation in this research is voluntary. You can withdraw from the research or cancel your participation at any time without assigning a reason for this decision. Withdrawing or cancelling your participation does not result in any negative consequences. In case you decide to withdraw your consent, the data collected until that point will be used for the purpose of this study in an anonymized and confidential form.

Please, read this description of research with care. If you have any questions, you can be in contact with the researcher. The contact details are provided at the end of this document. If you decide to participate in this study, please sign the attached consent form.

#### **Tutkimuksen toteuttaja / Responsible researcher**

Tämän tutkimuksen toteuttamisesta vastaa Turun yliopiston kauppakorkeakoulun kansainvälisen liiketoiminnan pääaineopiskelija Pinja Kaakinen.

Tutkimuksen rekisterinpitäjä on Pinja Kaakinen, joka vastaa tutkimuksen yhteydessä tapahtuvan henkilötietojen käsittelyn lainmukaisuudesta. Tieteellisessä tutkimuksessa henkilötietojen käsittely perustuu yliopistolaisissa annettuun tehtävään ja sillä toteutetaan yleistä etua.

The responsible researcher of this study is Pinja Kaakinen as a Master's student with International Business major at the Turku School of Economics at the University of Turku.

Pinja Kaakinen operates as the keeper of the register, and thereof is responsible of the lawful processing of the personal information gathered within the research. In scientific research the processing of personal data is based on the societal task of universities defined in the university law and it progresses public good.

**Tutkimusmenetelmä / The research method**

Tutkimus on laadullinen haastattelututkimus, kesto noin 60 minuuttia. Tutkimuksen tavoitteena on selvittää, miten osallistujat ("digital strategists") näkevät generatiivisten hakukoneiden vaikutukset yritysten brändi-imagoon.

Haastateltavan luvalla tutkimushaastattelut tallennetaan sekä ääni- että tekstitiedostona.

The study is a qualitative interview study, with a duration of approximately 60 minutes. The aim of the study is to examine how participants ("digital strategists") perceive the impact of generative search engines on companies' brand image.

With the permission of the interviewee, the interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed to text.

**Tietojen luottamuksellisuus ja tietosuojat / Confidentiality and data privacy**

Tutkimuksessa henkilöllisyytenne on ainoastaan tutkijan tiedossa, ja tutkija on pro gradu-tutkielman tekijänä salassapitovelvollinen. Kaikkia Teistä kerättäviä tietoja käsitellään luottamuksellisesti.

Tutkimusrekisteriin tallennetaan vain tutkimuksen tarkoituksen kannalta välttämättömiä henkilötietoja. Tutkija ei anna teidän nimeänne tai yhteystietojanne ulkopuolisille. Kaikkia Teistä kerättäviä tietoja käsitellään luottamuksellisesti. Tutkimusrekisteriin tallennetaan vain tutkimuksen tarkoituksen kannalta välttämättömiä henkilötietoja.

In this study, your identity will be known only to the researcher, who, as the author of the Master's thesis, is bound by confidentiality. All data collected about you will be treated confidentially.

Only personal data necessary for the purpose of the study will be stored in the research register. The researcher will not disclose your name or contact details to third parties. All data collected about you will be handled confidentially, and only personal data essential for the purposes of the study will be recorded in the research register.

## SUOSTUMUS HAASTATTELUTKIMUKSEEN

Minua on pyydetty osallistumaan edellä mainittuun tutkimukseen.

Olen perehtynyt tutkimustiedotteeseen ja saanut riittävästi tietoa tutkimuksesta ja sen yhteydessä suoritettavasta tietojen keräämisestä, käsittelystä ja luovuttamisesta.

Tutkimuksen sisältö on kerrottu minulle myös suullisesti ja olen saanut riittävän vastauksen kaikkiin tutkimusta koskeviin kysymyksiini.

Minulla on ollut riittävästi aikaa harkita tutkimukseen osallistumista.

Ymmärrän, että tähän tutkimukseen osallistuminen on vapaaehtoista. Minulla on oikeus, milloin tahansa tutkimuksen aikana ja syytä ilmoittamatta, keskeyttää tutkimukseen osallistuminen. Suostumuksen peruuttamisesta ei aiheudu minulle kielteisiä seuraamuksia. Olen tietoinen siitä, että suostumuksen peruuttamiseen mennessä kerättyjä tietoja käytetään osana tutkimusaineistoa, anonymisoituna ja luottamuksellisesti. Ymmärrän, että minuun voidaan olla yhteydessä jatkotutkimusten osalta.

***Allekirjoituksellani vahvistan, että osallistun tässä tutkimustiedotteessa kuvattuun tutkimukseen ja suostun vapaaehtoisesti haastateltavaksi.***

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 Allekirjoitus

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 Päiväys

## SUOSTUMUKSEN VASTAANOTTAJA

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 Pinja Kaakinen

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 Päiväys

*Alkuperäinen allekirjoitettu asiakirja jää tutkimusryhmän arkistoon. Suostumusta osallistua tutkimukseen säilytetään tietoturvallisesti niin kauan kuin aineisto on tunnistellisessa muodossa.*

### **CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN AN INTERVIEW STUDY**

I have been asked to participate in the above-mentioned study. I have familiarized myself with the study information sheet and have received sufficient information about the study at the collection, processing, and disclosure of data related to it.

The content of the study has also been explained to me verbally, and I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions concerning the study.

I have had sufficient time to consider my participation in the study.

I understand that participation in this study is voluntary. I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time during the research without giving any reason. Withdrawing consent will not result in any negative consequences for me. I am aware that data collected up to the point of withdrawal may be used as part of the research material in an anonymized and confidential manner. I understand that I may be contacted regarding follow-up studies.

***By signing below, I confirm that I agree to participate in the study described in this information sheet and voluntarily consent to being interviewed.***

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Signature*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Date*

### **RECIPIENT OF CONSENT**

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Pinja Kaakinen*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Date*

*The original signed document will be retained in the research group's archive. Consent to participate in the study will be stored securely for as long as the data remains in identifiable form.*

## Appendix 3 Interview guide

The Influence of Generative Search Engines on Brand Image:  
A Managerial Perspective from Digital Strategists

Taustoitus:

- Missä yrityksessä työskentelet, kerro roolistasi
- Miten kuvailisit kokemuksiasi brändityöskentelystä?
- Millainen käytännön kokemus sinulla on tekoälytyökaluista/generatiivisista hakukoneista (Gemini, Perplexity, Copilot...)?

### 1. Brändi-imagon strateginen merkitys kansainvälisessä liiketoiminnassa:

*(Brändi-imagon määritelmä: ”sidosryhmien muodostama verkosto positiivisia ja negatiivisia assosiaatioita*

*brändiä kohtaan”).* Tässä yhteydessä voidaan puhua sekä B2B että B2C brändeistä.

→ Taustaoletus: digitaalinen ympäristö mahdollistaa kansainvälisen tavoitavuuden

- Miten näet brändi-imagon vaikuttavan yritysten kilpailukykyyn digitaalisessa ympäristössä, jossa yleisöt tavoitetaan yli maaraajojen?
- Millaisia strategisia toimenpiteitä yritys voi käyttää rakentaakseen/ylläpitääkseen johdonmukaista brändi-imagoa eri markkinoilla?

### 2. Miten digitaalinen näkyvyys ja perinteiset hakukoneet (esim. Google) vaikuttavat brändi-imagon muodostumiseen:

- Miten arvioit hakukoneiden (kuten Google) vaikuttavan siihen, millaisia mielikuvia kuluttajat muodostavat brändeistä?
- Miten SEO-strategioita voidaan hyödyntää ohjaamaan brändin näkyvyyttä, löydettävyyttä ja tulkita hakukoneissa?

### 3. Miten generatiiviset hakukoneet (Perplexity, Gemini, Copilot...) muuttavat brändi-imagon rakentumista ja hallintaa verkossa:

- Miten arvioit generatiivisten hakukoneiden – ja niiden käyttämien kolmansien osapuolten sisältöjen -

vaikuttavan siihen, miten brändit löydetään ja tulkitaan verkossa?

→ *Onko jokin tilanne jäänyt erityisesti mieleesi, jossa kolmansien osapuolten sisältö (some-postaukset, uutisartikkelit...) on päätyntä osaksi generatiivisen haun tuottamaa vastausta?*

- Millaisia toimenpiteitä brändit voisivat tehdä parantaakseen mahdollisuuksiaan saada korrektia ja ajankohtaista näkyvyyttä generatiivisissa hakukoneissa?

#### 4. Miten tekoälyn tuomiin muutoksiin voitaisiin reagoida; näkemys mahdollisuuksista/haasteista

- Millaisia mahdollisuuksia näet generatiivisten hakukoneiden tarjoavan brändin näkyvyyden, tunnettuuden tai maineen vahvistamisen kehityksessä?
- Mitkä riskit/haasteet näet keskeisinä brändi-imagon kannalta, kun näkyvyys määräytyy AI:n tuottamien vastausten kautta?  
→ *Onko mieleesi jäänyt tilannetta, jossa AI-vastaus vaikutti brändiin epäedullisesti?*
- Mitä keinoja on reagoida tilanteeseen, jossa AI-vastaus tuottaa virheellistä/negatiivista tietoa brändistä?

(Extra) Tulevaisuuden näkymät:

- Miten arvioit generatiivisen haun kehittyvän seuraavien 2-5 vuoden aikana, ja millaista uutta osaamista markkinoijilta/bränditiimeiltä vaaditaan tulevaisuudessa?

Onko jotain muuta, mikä on mielestäsi tärkeää huomioida brändin ja generatiivisten hakukoneiden suhteessa?

Background:

- Which company do you work for? Please describe your role.
- How would you describe your experience with brand-related work?
- What kind of practical experience do you have with AI tools/generative search engines (Gemini, Perplexity, Copilot, etc.)?

#### 1. The Strategic Importance of Brand Image in International Business:

*(Definition of brand image: “a network of positive and negative associations toward a brand formed by stakeholders.” This applies to both B2B and B2C brands.)*

→ Underlying assumption: the digital environment enables international reach

- How do you see brand image influencing companies’ competitiveness in a digital environment where audiences are reached across national borders?
- What strategic actions can companies take to build and maintain a consistent brand image across different markets?

#### 2. How Digital Visibility and Traditional Search Engines (e.g., Google) Influence Brand Image Formation:

- How do you assess the impact of search engines (such as Google) on the perceptions consumers form about brands?
- How can SEO strategies be utilized to guide a brand’s visibility, discoverability, and interpretation in search engines?

#### 3. How Generative Search Engines (Perplexity, Gemini, Copilot, etc.) Are Changing the Formation and Management of Brand Image Online:

- How do you assess the impact of generative search engines—and the third-party content they use—on how brands are discovered and interpreted online?

→ Has there been a particular situation that stands out where third-party content (e.g., social media posts, news articles) became part of a generative search response?

- What actions could brands take to improve their chances of achieving accurate and up-to-date visibility in generative search engines?

#### **4. Responding to Changes Brought by AI: Opportunities and Challenges:**

- What opportunities do you see generative search engines offering for strengthening brand visibility, awareness, or reputation?

- What risks or challenges do you consider most significant for brand image when visibility is determined by AI-generated responses?

→ Do you recall a situation where an AI-generated response affected a brand negatively?

- What measures can be taken in situations where AI-generated responses produce incorrect or negative information about a brand?

(Optional) Future Outlook:

- How do you expect generative search to evolve over the next 2–5 years, and what new skills will be required from marketers/brand teams in the future?

- Is there anything else you consider important regarding the relationship between brands and generative search engines?

## Appendix 4 Data management plan

### Research data

Research data type	Contains personal details/information	I will gather/produce the data myself	Someone else has gathered/produced the data	Other notes
Interviews	x	x		

### Processing personal data in research

The researcher complies with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Finnish Data Protection Act. For data that contains personal details, the researcher has prepared a Data Protection Notice for research participants and determined the controller for the research data.

- The researcher prepared a Data Protection Notice and provided it to all research participants prior to data collection
- The controller for the personal data is the researcher themselves

### Permissions and rights related to the use of data

All interview participants were asked for permission to use their responses for research purposes and to record the interviews. Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to the interviews. Consent was provided in written form via email and confirmed verbally at the beginning of each interview. Participants were informed that anonymized quotations are used in the thesis.

### Storing the data during the research process

During the research process, all data will be stored securely:

- On the researcher's personal drive

### Documenting the data and metadata

Throughout the research process, the data were systematically documented and organized. Interview transcripts and analytic notes were stored in clearly labelled folders. No personal or identifiable information was included in the files, ensuring compliance with ethical and data protection standards. Documentation practices ensured traceability of analytic decisions while maintaining participant anonymity.

### Data arrangement and integrity

- The researcher will keep the original data files separate from the data used in the research process, so that they can always revert back to the original, if need be.
- The researcher will plan before starting the research how they will name the different data versions and will adhere to the plan consistently.
- The researcher recognises the life span of the data from the beginning of the research and is already prepared for situations, where the data can alter unnoticed, for example while recording, transcribing, downloading, or in data conversions from one file format to another, etc.

**Metadata**

- The researcher will not store my data into a public archive/repository, and therefore will not need to create any metadata. ☒

**Data after completing the research**

After completion of the thesis, all personal data including audio recordings, interview transcripts, consent forms, and any files that could directly or indirectly identify participants will be permanently deleted. However, summary file related to the thesis findings will be retained for a maximum of five years for academic reference purposes. This file will not contain any personal or identifiable information and will be stored securely in the researcher's personal cloud storage.