



Reframing SME Branding Practices through Generative AI-Based Brand Atmosphere Co-Production in West Bandung Regency

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Abstract

This article discusses a branding project for a small-medium food brand with relatively low revenues and low costs in producing marketing tools such as promotional videos. The main challenge was how to help the brand owner, the client, visualize the video's atmosphere before the costly production process began. In the first discussion, the brand owner understood the idea in general, but still found it difficult to imagine how it would look once produced. The storyboard helped explain the direction, but it could not fully show the heat of the flame, the texture of the food, the cooking rhythm, or the feeling expected in the final video.

To address this challenge, generative artificial intelligence (AI) was used as a supporting tool during the pre-production phase. Rather than replacing designers or producing a final product, AI facilitated the creation of several visual previews for client discussions before actual production. This project employed a research-through-design methodology. Materials used included the client brief, concept notes, storyboards, AI-generated image previews, selected visuals for discussion, and the final video, which was produced and directed by professional human designers. Throughout the process, AI contributed by transforming abstract concepts into more tangible and communicative visual representations. The team and client can compare product focus and overall mood before shooting. However, AI output still has limitations. Some visuals appear too smooth and textureless, too dramatic and unrealistic, or simply don't align with the brand's identity.

This article introduces the concept of an AI-mediated co-production zone, defined as an interim space between conceptualization and production where AI assists designers and clients in negotiating visual direction. Despite the AI-powered results, it's clear that critical decisions can only be realized in human hands. This means that the articulation of cultural truth, business feasibility, relevance to brand voice, and final execution cannot be left entirely to AI, as it lacks the capabilities. The findings also suggest that generative AI can support SME branding if used carefully in the design process, as fabricated designs are often unprofessional and far from detailed. The primary value isn't in creating the final visual, but in how a system can easily help designers, clients, and teams see, compare, and discuss the possibilities of various brand directions before the start of costly and expensive production.

Keywords: generative AI, SME branding, brand atmosphere, visual storytelling, pre-production, research through design.

INTRODUCTION

Generative artificial intelligence has penetrated the field of visual communication design more rapidly than professional guidelines, design courses, bootcamps, or theoretical knowledge can keep pace with. Industrial designers, students, and marketing teams are already using AI to build simple aesthetics such as mood boards, create visual references, test campaign ideas, develop storyboard guidelines, and envision visual direction early on. This brings, and even creates, new



opportunities, but also new risks and uncertainties. AI can accelerate exploration, but polished results can make design ideas appear more imperfect than they actually are [1], [2].

Therefore, the key question is not only whether AI should be used in design and replace humans, but where it fits within the workflow. This is particularly important in branding and creating visual storytelling. In this field, visual choices are more than just decoration. Branding requires consistency, identity, tone, and strategy. Visual storytelling relies on atmosphere, sequence, rhythm, movement, and clear emotion [4], [7], [14]. If AI is used without a clear purpose, the process may offer many visual options but lack a strong conceptual direction.

Previous research has examined AI in terms of creativity, automation, co-creation, and collaboration with humans [3], [9], [10]. However, the stages between idea generation and production of the final product have not been extensively studied. This stage is crucial because a concept may already exist, but lacks a clear visual. At this point, the design goal remains uncertain. The designer may know the desired mood, but the client, production team, or other stakeholders may perceive it differently. In branding, this gap can cause visual shifts, lead to reactive choices, and weaken the story before production.

This article addresses the root of this problem by proposing a new framework for AI-powered co-production for branding and visual storytelling. However, in this approach, generative AI is used as a tool to support the pre-production process, primarily to demonstrate atmosphere and perspective angles, test visual direction, and align mood with the design outlined in moodboards before final production. AI is not viewed as an author or a substitute for designers in terms of execution or technical matters. Rather, AI is part of a human designer-led process in which judgment is essential for defining problems, selecting outputs, interpreting meaning, addressing ethical and aesthetic considerations, and making final decisions [4], [5].

This article offers three key and worthwhile contributions. First, it highlights the time-sensitive stage in the branding workflow where crucial design processes can be lost between storyboarding and production due to time constraints. Second, it describes an area of co-production where AI can assist with keywording early visual ideas without taking over authority more quickly. Third, this article suggests a teaching model for visual communication design, encouraging students and professionals to view AI as a rapid pre-production tool rather than a shortcut to finished designs. AI cannot be the production of visual output. A designer's way of thinking involves the ability to formulate problems, resolve ambiguity, compare alternatives, and make reflective decisions in uncertain situations [4], [5]. In AI-assisted design, these abilities become even more important and certainly fast on a low budget as the desired character of medium-sized enterprises. Generative systems can generate in many visual options, but still they cannot independently decide whether a visual direction is same page with the brand, culturally appropriate, narrative clear, or strategically meaningful.

A posthuman perspective helps us see AI as part of a multifaceted creative process. In current design practice, the work is shaped not only by the designer, but also by prompts, data, software, visual references, clients, and production tools [6].



However, while creativity is divided into many methods, approaches, and supporting tools, human responsibility remains with the designer, who is able to establish strategies, review results, reject what doesn't work, and take responsibility for the final outcome. There is a distinction between brand identity and brand atmosphere. Brand identity refers to the elements and strategic direction that make a brand easily recognizable, consistent, and distinctly distinctive in the eyes of the audience. Brand atmosphere is the impression the audience feels when viewing or experiencing a brand. This impression can arise from atmosphere, lighting, texture, color, and visual tone [7]. Generative AI can help explore these atmospheres quickly, for example by making choices about mood, lighting, and visual style. However, brand identity still requires human decisions to maintain the brand's character, consistency, and strategic direction [10], [11].

Theoretical Position

Design science cannot be reduced or limited to visual output and raw products alone. The key to success in this discipline lies in a designer's ability to frame problems, translate ambiguity into concrete terms, generate appropriate visual suggestions, evaluate alternatives, and make reflective decisions under uncertain conditions, both ethically and aesthetically [4], [5]. In AI-assisted design processes, these natural competencies become more important, not less so. Generative systems can generate visual options, but they do not independently determine whether a direction is consistent with a brand's framing, which must be clearly tailored to various contexts, such as culturally, narratively coherent, or strategically and audience-relevant.

A post-human perspective helps understand AI as an active element in the creative ecology. However, the involvement of AI in the design process does not necessarily make it the owner of the idea or the primary author of the resulting work. Contemporary design is believed to emerge from the relationships among designers, interface values, instructions, data sets, references, software, clients, and production tools [6]. However, distributed creativity should not be equated with authorless or anonymous creativity. Human designers still consciously and rationally determine strategic frameworks, reject haphazard output without adequate research, and assume responsibility for the final product.

In branding and visual storytelling, a distinction is needed between brand identity and brand atmosphere. Identity relates to the strategic system that tangibly makes a brand recognizable and coherent, while atmosphere refers to the sensory and affective qualities that make the brand experientially authentic [7]. Generative AI is particularly useful for creating atmospheres because it can quickly visualize tone, lighting, texture, and mood. However, a brand's identity still relies on human framing, research, continuity, and ethical interpretive coherence [10], [11].

METHOD

This study uses a research-through-design methodology supported by practice-based experimentation, reflective analysis, and critical literature synthesis. This method is appropriate because the research question concerns a design process, not only the evaluation of a finished artifact. Research-through-design allows processual materials such as briefs, storyboards, mockups, visual previews, and production outputs to be treated as analytical evidence [8].

The case examined in this study is a branding and visual storytelling experiment involving the development of a short promotional video for Jakarta-based MSME food brands. The project moved through brief clarification, concept narrative development, storyboard construction, AI-



assisted speculative previsualization, client approval, and human-led final production. The central concept, From Flame to Finish, framed the food preparation process as a crafted ritual shaped by heat, texture, movement, and visual rhythm.

The unit of analysis consists of processual design artifacts rather than audience survey data. These artifacts include the brand brief, concept narrative, storyboard, AI-assisted pre-shoot mockups, selected client-approved visual previews, and final production output. The analysis focuses on how AI reorganizes the gap between concept and execution by supporting atmospheric exploration and pre-production alignment while keeping strategic control and authorship in human hands.

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Table 1. Processual artifacts examined as primary analytical evidence.

Artifact	Description	Analytical Function
Brand brief	Existing brand context, campaign objective, and visual direction for the promotional video.	Establishes initial constraints and strategic references.
Concept narrative	From Flame to Finish as the central storytelling concept.	Defines atmosphere, tone, and narrative direction.
Storyboard	Scene-by-scene structure covering framing, pacing, lighting intention, and product emphasis.	Stabilizes human-led sequencing before AI-assisted visualization.
AI-assisted pre-shoot mockups	Speculative visual previews generated prior to shooting.	Tests atmosphere, composition, cinematic feel, and tonal options.
Client-approved visual previews	Selected AI-assisted mockups approved before production.	Supports visual negotiation and expectation alignment.
Final production output	Promotional video executed through human-led production.	Confirms AI as pre-production support rather than final authorship.

Source: Author's analysis.

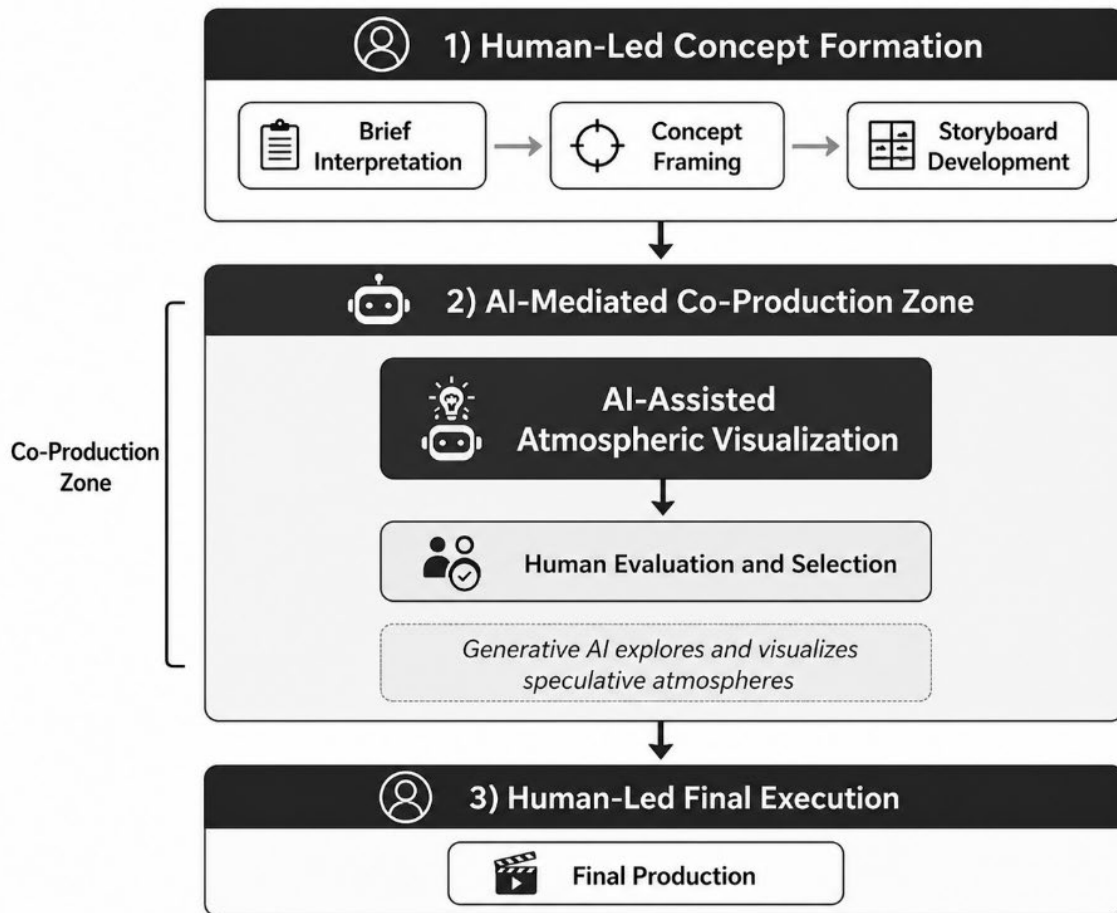


Figure 1. AI-integrated workflow in branding and visual storytelling.
Source: Author's analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Conceptual Risk Zone in Conventional Workflow

In this study, the observed flow is the conventional process of creating a video artifact, which goes through stages from research to brief interpretation, idea generation, storyboard development, preview, approval, handover, and production.

While this process may appear linear, the most vulnerable part lies between the initial concept visualization and pre-production alignment. At this stage, designers may already have a clear narrative direction, but not everyone can envision it in the same way, especially clients who predominantly come from business or management backgrounds who are not visual experts. Mood, tempo, lighting, texture, and composition are often still described verbally, so they don't yet feel like a truly stable visual for collective discussion.

In this industry, this stage can be seen as a conceptual risk zone. At this stage, the meaning of the concept can begin to shift from the designer's initial intent. The client or production team may interpret the storyboard differently, the strategic direction becomes more reactive, and the final production decisions rely too heavily on assumptions.

In branding and the visual storytelling process, this gap is crucial and critical because atmosphere is central to how a brand experience is perceived by the brand owner and ultimately by the audience or user. The weakness of conventional processes stems not from a lack of ideas, but from the time-limited mechanisms for making those ideas appear communicable, ethically testable, and negotiable before production, which is time-consuming and expensive, not suitable for small and medium-sized businesses.

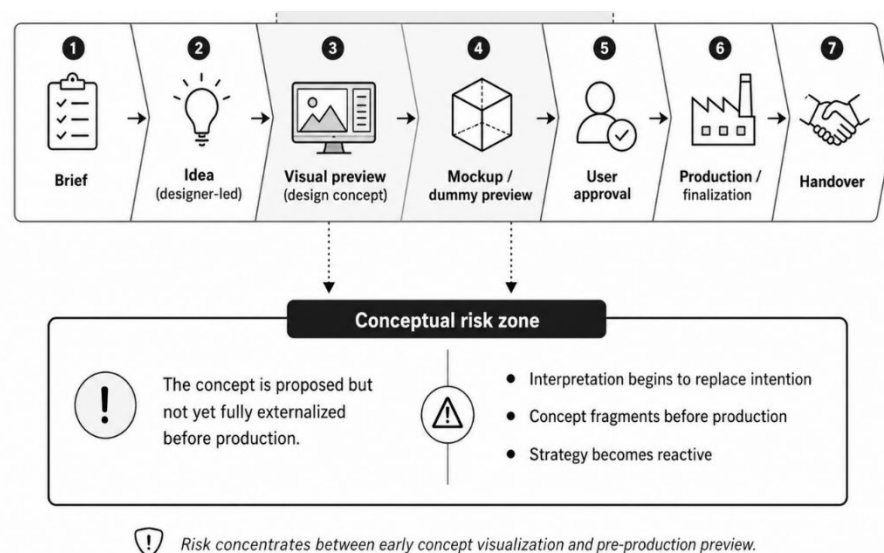


Figure 2. Conceptual risk zone between concept visualization and production.

Source: Author's analysis.

AI-Mediated Co-Production Zone

The proposed framework places generative AI more prominently in the stage between concept formation and pre-production planning. In this co-production space, AI is not used to generate the final product, but rather to help generate visual possibilities, tone, and atmosphere before production begins. This role is particularly important when a brand concept relies heavily on mood, texture, tempo, and sensory impressions. These elements are often difficult to describe solely through text or storyboards, particularly when building a brand character in a business context [9], [10].

In this project, the AI-driven case study relied on the brand identity agreed upon with the client or business owner, existing visual references, and the "From Flame to Finish" narrative concept. The kitchen was treated as the center stage, and the preparation process was visualized as a transformation rather than a routine cooking. By transforming the storyline narrative into a speculative visual preview in the form of a storyboard, AI helped make the concept more conversational and discussable. However, the framework is deliberately and clearly limited: AI supports only visual negotiation, while narrative logic, strategic consistency, and final execution remain under the human designer's control.



Figure 3. Brand brief and narrative direction used to anchor the experiment.

Source: Author's analysis.

Speculative Visual Prototyping and Human-Led Production

Once the storyboards are developed, generative AI is used to create speculative preliminary visuals. These visuals are not considered the final product, but rather experimental material prior to production. Through these previews, the team can more concretely assess possible atmospheres, textures, lighting, pacing, and compositions before shooting begins.

Some of the images deemed most suitable are then further developed into short, moving previews. The goal is to aid pre-production communication, particularly in discussing cinematic rhythms and sensory emphasis that are difficult to convey through text or storyboards alone. This way, production decisions can be more clearly discussed before time, effort, and costs are allocated.

However, it's clear that the value of AI previews remains highly dependent on human curation. Some AI outputs came close to the intended visual direction, while others appeared too generic, overly polished, or difficult to translate into real production conditions. Therefore, the final production still emphasizes the role of the designer and human team, particularly in the representation of texture, detail, and clarity of other product communications. Lighting must be adjusted to the location conditions, food texture must follow the actual cooking process, where it is clear that in the real process the texture will definitely change, and the camera position must be adjusted based on space limitations, production equipment and talent capabilities.

This comparison shows that AI works best as an early visual guide. It can provide images that help the team imagine possible directions, but it does not replace the human creative process or decide the final result. The final artifacts still depend on human judgment, especially when they are expected to support the brand and future business needs.

A. AI-generated speculative prototyping



B. AI-assisted preview and human-centric production

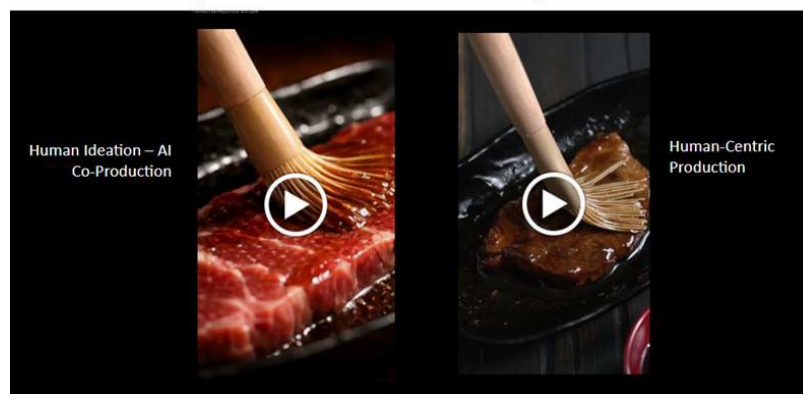


Figure 4. AI-assisted speculative visual prototyping and human-centric production.
Source: Author's analysis.



Table 2. Analytical comparison between AI-assisted preview and final production.

Aspect	AI-Assisted Preview	Final Human-Centric Production	Analytical Observation
Lighting	Cinematic, intensified, and often idealized.	Controlled but constrained by actual set conditions.	AI amplified atmospheric expectation rather than material reality.
Texture	Smooth, enhanced, and visually persuasive.	Variable, tactile, and shaped by real cooking conditions.	Human production reintroduced material contingency.
Composition	Optimized focal framing and stylized balance.	Adjusted to camera position, timing, and food behavior.	Human judgment remained necessary for feasibility.
Mood	Dramatic and atmospherically heightened.	Grounded, embodied, yet still stylized.	AI supported tonal exploration without fixing the final result.
Function	Speculative visualization and alignment tool.	Executed visual communication output.	AI informed direction rather than replacing production.

Source: Author's analysis.

AI as a Pre-Production Intensifier

This experiment clearly demonstrates that the use of generative AI is most useful and beneficial when deployed in the pre-production stage, not as the final author of the work, but as a partner seeking alternative options. In this case, AI still cannot replace human-led design execution. Its primary role is still very limited, namely, to make the concept atmosphere appear more expeditious and communicative in the early stages of the production process.



The use of AI in this process is not only technical in nature, but also related to how the design process is discussed and developed. AI can help broaden the discussion of options and accelerate the thinking process in the pre-production stage, allowing the team, client, or business owner to preview several possible visual directions before committing actual production resources, which would undoubtedly be costly. This not only speeds up the process. More importantly, it makes ideas that are unclear in communication easier to discuss because the possibilities can be seen, compared, and evaluated. However, this preview cannot be used as direct output for public consumption as a production result, as it often results in a very superficial quality, and the visual balance appears less than ideal.

The comparison on research shows that using this AI previews and human-led production should not be placed on the same level. AI is useful only as a supporting tool to open up possible directions before high-cost production begins.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study clearly illustrate that AI need not be positioned as the final designer or designer. Its role is strictly limited to serving as a co-producer within the team, reviewing visual alternatives in terms of feasibility before production begins. Clearly, AI can accelerate initial exploration, but it cannot replace aesthetic values, human sense, texture and taste, context, or responsibility. Ultimately, the final decision must remain with the designer.

The creation of an AI-mediated co-production zone suggests that placing AI in a controlled part of the workflow, between concept and execution, is particularly wise for low-budget MSMEs in the design process. In this zone, AI is useful as a preview tool, not as the final product; it cannot even be the final product. This study is limited to a single MSME branding case with a limited budget and other MSME characteristics, so future research would be ideal for testing this framework in other design fields, team settings, and client-based projects.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI (if any)

During the preparation of this manuscript, generative AI tools were used to support language refinement, structural organization, and pre-production visualization analysis. Following the use of these tools, the authors carefully reviewed, edited, and validated the content to ensure accuracy, academic integrity, and consistency with the research argument. The authors assume full responsibility for the final content of this publication.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS (if any)

The authors would like to express their appreciation to Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia and all collaborators include student and client who involved in the branding and visual storytelling experiment that informed this study.

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