

When AI Speaks for Brands Exploring How Gen-Z Negotiates Authenticity in AI-Generated Marketing Communication

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Abstract

The use of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) in marketing communications raises questions of authenticity, particularly for Generation Z, who have grown up and are deeply engaged with the digital world. Using an exploratory qualitative approach, this study analyzes how Generation Z understands and negotiates authenticity in AI-based marketing communications by interviewing 25 informants, whose data was then analyzed using thematic analysis. The results show that Generation Z is relatively open to the presence of AI in marketing content, but this acceptance is conditional and not absolute. The authenticity of a message is judged not by who created it, but by the presence or absence of a human touch, the brand's transparency regarding AI use, and the message's alignment with the brand's identity. Consumer trust and emotional connection are also fostered when AI is used appropriately without undermining the brand's distinctive personality. This suggests that the authenticity of AI-based marketing communication is shaped by how consumers interpret the use of technology within the context of brand communication.

Keywords:

Authenticity; Artificial Intelligence; Marketing Communication; Generation Z, Transparency.

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INTRODUCTION

Advances in Artificial Intelligence (AI), particularly generative AI, have transformed the way brands produce and deliver marketing communications. This technology enables companies to generate text, images, videos, and promotional content more quickly and tailor messages to the characteristics of their audience. One of the most significant innovations is the application of artificial intelligence (AI) in marketing communication strategies (Adinta et al., 2025). However, the use of AI in the creative process also raises questions about how consumers perceive messages that involve technology, particularly in relation to a brand's identity, values, and character.

One issue that has emerged is the authenticity of marketing communications. Consumers may form different judgments when they learn that a message was created by AI, particularly in the case of messages containing emotional elements. Kirk and Givi (2025) show that emotional messages known to have been created by AI can reduce positive word-of-mouth and consumer loyalty. This effect is weaker when AI merely assists in editing human-written content or is used for factual messages. This suggests that authenticity is not only related to who produces the message but also to human involvement, the nature of the message, and its alignment with brand values.

Generation Z is a relevant group to study because they have grown up alongside the internet, social media, and digital technology. The intensity of their interaction with various types of content has made them accustomed to both receiving and evaluating information from diverse sources. Their familiarity with technology does not mean, however, that they accept AI-generated content without scrutiny. Generation Z can be more selective in determining whether a message is considered credible, convincing, and aligned with their character. In other words, the credibility of an information source reflects the audience's perception when considering whether that source can be trusted (Marsanda et al. 2024). Therefore, they serve as relevant informants for understanding how the authenticity of AI-based marketing communication is interpreted.

Previous research has yielded mixed results. Kirk and Givi (2025) found that the use of AI in certain marketing messages can reduce positive word-of-mouth and loyalty through perceptions of authenticity. Conversely, Kirkby et al. (2023) found that AI labels do not always make text perceived as less authentic and do not negatively impact consumer attitudes toward the brand. These differences suggest that the impact of AI on authenticity is contextual and can be influenced by the type of message, transparency, and the role of AI in the creative process.

Nevertheless, previous research has largely focused on measuring consumer responses through experimental approaches. Such approaches have not fully explained how consumers construct and negotiate the meaning of authenticity based on their own experiences. In fact, authenticity is a multidimensional assessment that can be shaped by various consumer considerations, such as connectedness, integrity, genuineness, legitimacy, and alignment with the consumption context (Nunes et al., 2021). Therefore, this study explores how Generation Z interprets and negotiates authenticity in AI-generated or AI-assisted marketing communications, taking into account human involvement, transparency regarding AI use, alignment with brand identity, and trust in the message

LITERATURE REVIEW

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H1: Hypothesis 1, etc.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with an exploratory design to understand how Generation Z (those born between 1997 and 2012) perceives and makes decisions regarding authenticity in marketing communications created or supported by Artificial Intelligence (AI). The study employs a qualitative approach because its primary objective is to understand the preferences, perspectives, and meanings attributed by the informants, rather than to measure relationships between variables. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with individuals who are part of Generation Z, actively use social media or digital platforms, have interacted with advertisements or marketing content from brands, and have experience discovering or learning how AI is used in the creation of marketing communications. Informants were selected using the Purposive sampling, in which the characteristics of informants are carefully considered in accordance with the research focus (Malterud et al., 2016). To ensure that informants truly had experience relevant to the topics of authenticity and the use of AI in marketing communication, screening questions were administered prior to the interviews. Data analysis was conducted using a reflective thematic analysis approach to identify and understand patterns of meaning in the interview results systematically. To ensure reliability, source triangulation and member checking were employed, which involved verifying the researcher's interpretations through follow-up consultations with the informants.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on interviews with 25 Generation Z respondents, several patterns were identified that illustrate how the respondents view authenticity in artificial intelligence (AI)-based marketing communications. The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, grouping the respondents' answers based on similarities in meaning and their relevance to the research focus.

Gen Z's Perceptions of AI-Based Marketing Communication

The interview results revealed that the majority of informants no longer view the use of AI in marketing content as something unfamiliar, given that their daily activities involve interacting with various digital platforms. About 75% of informants expressed interest in AI-based marketing content, while the remaining 25% showed less interest. However, this interest does not mean that informants automatically accept all AI-generated content. Based on the responses collected, respondents tend to be more interested if the content is deemed engaging, relevant, creative, and aligned with the audience's characteristics and needs. Conversely, content that feels forced or out of sync with the brand's identity receives less attention. This trend indicates that Generation Z's acceptance of AI in marketing content is determined more by how the technology is applied than by its mere presence. These findings reinforce the perspective of (Kirk & Givi, 2025). That the use of generative AI can influence consumer responses to marketing content, including interest in and engagement with the messages conveyed. Most respondents were able to recognize the use of AI in marketing content. Nevertheless, as AI is increasingly viewed as a common component of marketing activities, it is important to examine how Gen Z consumers' purchasing behavior is influenced by artificial intelligence (AI) and ad personalization (Simanjuntak & Chaniago, 2025)

Human Involvement in Shaping Authenticity

Based on the interview results, human involvement emerged as the element most frequently mentioned by informants when defining authentic communication. Most informants felt that marketing content felt more genuine when it still contained human ideas, experiences, or a human touch. Content generated entirely by AI was considered less personal, especially when used to convey emotionally charged messages. A number of informants also distinguished between AI that merely serves as a tool and AI that takes over the entire content creation process. The use of AI as a tool is still considered acceptable as long as the final result continues to represent human thought and character. This is in line with (Kirk & Givi, 2025) which indicates that the use of AI in marketing communications can influence consumers' perceptions of authenticity, particularly when the generated messages relate to emotional aspects. Nevertheless, while the use of AI is

becoming increasingly common in marketing communications, human involvement remains one of the factors that recipients consider when assessing the authenticity of a message. (Suhendri et al., 2026)

Transparency in AI Use

The topic of transparency arose when informants explained their attitudes toward brands that utilize AI in the content creation process. Most informants stated that they value brands more highly when they are open about their use of this technology. For them, this openness allows consumers to be aware of AI's involvement in content creation, enabling them to base their evaluations on complete information. Informants also do not necessarily view the use of AI as a problem, as long as brands do not attempt to hide it. This pattern of responses indicates that transparency is closely linked to how consumers build trust in a brand. Consumers reported feeling more comfortable when brands honestly disclose their use of AI, compared to when the technology is used but the content is presented as if it were created entirely by humans. This aligns with the findings of a study (Shin & Ahsan, 2026) This indicates that transparency regarding the use of AI can influence consumers' level of trust and their evaluation of content generated by this technology. (Kirkby et al., 2023) also found that disclosing the use of AI in brand communications does not automatically reduce perceptions of authenticity. This supports the informants' view that AI remains acceptable as long as companies are open about its use.

Brand Identity, Trust, and Emotional Connections

Interviewees not only paid attention to the type of technology used but also examined whether the messages conveyed remained consistent with the brand's identity. If AI-generated content maintains the brand's established communication style, values, and character, respondents tend to continue viewing it as aligned with the brand. Conversely, overly drastic changes in communication style can raise doubts about the authenticity of the message. A similar trend is evident in the process of building trust. Respondents tend to trust the brand more when AI is used appropriately, the information provided remains relevant, and the brand maintains an open attitude. Regarding emotional connections, respondents reported feeling a closer connection to content that incorporates human experiences and perspectives. Messages that seem too perfect, rigid, or feel machine-generated are considered less effective at fostering that connection. This pattern of responses confirms that trust and emotional connections are shaped not only by the use of AI itself, but also by a brand's ability to maintain its human touch and the character that consumers have come to recognize over time. This is consistent with Research shows that transparency in the use of AI can be one of the factors influencing consumer trust in AI-generated information (Shin & Ahsan, 2026).

Brand Identity Consistency as the Foundation of Authenticity

Brand identity consistency is a key consideration for informants in determining whether a communication can still be considered authentic. The informants' responses indicate that they do not automatically deem a communication inauthentic simply because it involves AI. Their focus is more on the message's content and its alignment with the brand's character. As long as the communication feels honest, relevant, and does not deviate from the brand's established values or style, the use of AI remains reasonably acceptable. Conversely, when the communication comes across as too generic, uniform, or fails to reflect the brand's character, informants tend to question its authenticity. The analysis results indicate that, for Generation Z in this study, authenticity is more closely related to the alignment between the message conveyed and the brand's identity than to who or what created the message. The use of AI in brand communication can remain acceptable when the technology supports the delivery of the message without compromising the brand's inherent character (Kirkby et al., 2023).

CONCLUSIONS

This study shows that Generation Z is fairly open to the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in marketing communications, but their acceptance is conditional. Perceptions of authenticity are determined not only by the use of AI, but also by human involvement, transparency regarding AI use, trust, and the alignment of communications with the brand's identity. The use of AI as a tool remains acceptable as long as the resulting communication retains a human touch and reflects the brand's character and values.

Consistency in brand identity is a key consideration for Generation Z when evaluating the authenticity of AI-based marketing communication. Transparency regarding AI usage also plays a role in building trust, as consumers can understand the content creation process and form their own judgments. Thus, the authenticity of AI-based marketing communication is contextual and is not automatically lost due to the use of technology. The use of AI in marketing communication must be balanced, maintaining human involvement, transparency, and brand identity consistency so that the relationship between the brand and consumers retains an authentic and personal character.

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