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AI-Generated vs Human-Created Social Media Content: A Study of Consumer Trust and Purchase Intention among Gen Z

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Abstract - The rapid advancement of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) has fundamentally transformed content creation and distribution strategies across social media platforms. Brands increasingly deploy AI tools to generate product visuals, captions, advertisements, and promotional videos, optimizing efficiency, scalability, and personalized consumer communication. However, the proliferation of automated content raises critical questions regarding authenticity, credibility, and brand loyalty. This study examines consumer perceptions of AI-generated versus human-created social media content, focusing specifically on how content origin influences consumer trust and purchase intention among Generation Z. Adopting a quantitative research design, primary data will be gathered from digitally engaged Gen Z consumers using a structured questionnaire. Respondents will evaluate paired examples of AI-generated and human-created branded content to measure perceived authenticity and trustworthiness. The collected data will be analyzed using appropriate descriptive and inferential statistical techniques to test hypotheses, identify variable relationships, and determine significant differences between human and AI content performance. The study anticipates revealing whether Gen Z consumers prioritize human involvement and perceived authenticity when making purchasing decisions in digital environments. Ultimately, the findings will contribute to the emerging literature on Generative AI, social media marketing, and digital consumer behavior. Practically, the study offers actionable insights for marketers seeking to integrate Generative AI into social media workflows while maintaining brand credibility, consumer trust, and commercial effectiveness when targeting younger demographics.

Keywords: Generative Artificial Intelligence, Social Media Marketing, AI-Generated Content, Consumer Trust, Purchase Intention, Generation Z, Digital Marketing

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1. INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms have become important channels through which consumers discover products, evaluate brands, and interact with marketing messages. Generative artificial intelligence (AI) enables brands to create written copy, images, videos, and promotional content at scale. Although these tools may improve speed and efficiency, they also raise questions about authenticity, credibility, emotional connection, and consumer trust.

In social media marketing, the perceived source of a message can influence how audiences interpret it. Human-created content may be viewed as more personal or emotionally authentic, while AI-generated content may be valued for speed, consistency, and creative variation. These responses are unlikely to be identical across every consumer or product category. This study examines reported attitudes toward both forms of content and considers whether perceptions of AI's communication effectiveness are associated with willingness to purchase products promoted through AI-generated content.

The survey collected 66 responses. Unlike the paired-advertisement experiment described in the submitted abstract, the questionnaire used self-reported opinions and did not show matched AI-generated and human-created advertisements. The findings therefore represent respondents' perceptions and associations, not a controlled test of causal differences.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Authenticity and AI authorship

Authenticity is an important consideration in marketing communications that depend on storytelling, identity, and emotional connection. Research by Kirk and Givi (2025) examines the AI-authorship effect and reports that perceived AI authorship can reduce positive consumer responses to emotional marketing communications, with perceived authenticity playing an explanatory role. This suggests that a message's perceived creator may matter in addition to its surface quality.

2.2 Disclosure and consumer responses

Consumer reactions to AI disclosure can involve competing considerations. Shi and Jiang (2026) discuss how disclosure can signal novelty while also raising concerns about authenticity. Le et al. (2026) examine transparency about AI's role in advertising creation, suggesting that the clarity of the disclosure context may shape consumer responses. These findings caution against assuming that AI disclosure will always improve or always damage brand perceptions.

2.3 Advertising appeal and context

Chen et al. (2024) investigate consumer attitudes toward AI-generated advertisements and the role of appeal type. Their work indicates that responses may depend on the type of message and the role attributed to AI. Functional or task-focused messages may be evaluated differently from communications relying heavily on social connection or emotional appeal. Consequently, marketers should assess AI content in context rather than assume that one approach will be effective for every product.

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2.4 Research gap

The literature points to authenticity, disclosure, and message context as relevant to consumer reactions to AI-generated advertising. This study adds exploratory survey evidence on social-media users' reported exposure to AI content, perceived genuineness and emotional connection, trust-related attitudes, and conditional purchase intention. Because the study is not an experiment using paired advertisements, it does not establish whether content origin alone causes changes in trust or purchase intention.

3. OBJECTIVES

- To examine perceptions of genuineness, emotional connection, and persuasive impact in human-created content.
- To assess trust-related attitudes toward AI-generated social media content.
- To measure stated willingness to consider purchasing a product promoted through AI-generated content when the advertisement appears credible.
- To explore the association between perceived AI communication effectiveness and conditional purchase intention.

Research questions: (1) How familiar are respondents with AI-generated social media content? (2) Do they report stronger genuineness and emotional connection for human-created content? (3) How willing are they to consider purchasing through a credible AI-generated advertisement? (4) Is perceived AI communication effectiveness associated with conditional purchase intention?

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Design, sample and instrument

The study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional online survey design. The dataset contained 66 responses. Convenience sampling was used. The questionnaire covered age, gender, occupation, social-media use, platform preference, exposure to AI-generated content, perceived ability to distinguish AI from human-created content, exposure to AI advertisements, and the perceived effect of brand AI use. Ten statements were rated on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

4.2 Analysis

Frequencies and percentages were calculated for categorical responses. For each Likert statement, the mean, standard deviation, agreement (ratings 4–5), neutral responses (rating 3), and disagreement (ratings 1–2) were summarised. Exploratory Spearman rank correlations were calculated between conditional purchase intention and selected perception statements. Correlations indicate association and do not demonstrate causality.

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4.3 Limitations and ethics

The sample is small and convenience-based, and it is not exclusively composed of Gen Z respondents. Responses are self-reported and may reflect differences in how participants understand AI-generated content. No paired advertising stimuli were used, and trust and purchase intention were measured with individual statements rather than validated multi-item scales. Findings should therefore be interpreted as exploratory. No respondents or data points were added or fabricated.

5. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

5.1 Respondent profile

Variable	Category	n	%
Age	18 - 21	43	65.2%
Age	22 -25	10	15.2%
Age	Below 18	6	9.1%
Age	26 - 29	4	6.1%
Age	30 and above	3	4.5%
Gender	Male	34	51.5%
Gender	Female	32	48.5%
Occupation	Student	48	72.7%
Occupation	Employed	14	21.2%
Occupation	Self - employed	4	6.1%

The sample comprised 34 men (51.5%) and 32 women (48.5%). Students were the largest occupational group (48; 72.7%), followed by employed respondents (14; 21.2%) and self-employed respondents (4; 6.1%). The largest age group was 18–21 years (43; 65.2%). The sample therefore primarily reflects young adults and students, rather than a representative sample of all Gen Z consumers.

5.2 Social-media use and AI awareness

Measure	Response	n	%
Most-used platform	Instagram	56	84.8%
Most-used platform	YouTube	8	12.1%
Most-used platform	Other	1	1.5%
Most-used platform	Facebook	1	1.5%
Daily social-media use	More than 4 hours daily	24	36.4%
Daily social-media use	1–2 hours daily	20	30.3%
Daily social-media use	3–4 hours daily	18	27.3%

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Daily social-media use	Less than once a day	4	6.1%
Encountered AI content	Yes	54	81.8%
Encountered AI content	No	8	12.1%
Encountered AI content	Maybe	4	6.1%
Can distinguish AI from human content	Often	27	40.9%
Can distinguish AI from human content	Always	25	37.9%
Can distinguish AI from human content	Sometimes	12	18.2%
Can distinguish AI from human content	Never	1	1.5%
Can distinguish AI from human content	Rarely	1	1.5%
Seen AI-generated promotional content	Yes	57	86.4%
Seen AI-generated promotional content	Not sure	5	7.6%
Seen AI-generated promotional content	No	4	6.1%
Brand AI use affects perception	Somewhat positively	26	39.4%
Brand AI use affects perception	No effect	19	28.8%
Brand AI use affects perception	Somewhat negatively	10	15.2%
Brand AI use affects perception	Very positively	7	10.6%
Brand AI use affects perception	Very negatively	4	6.1%

Instagram was the most frequently used platform (56; 84.8%). More than four-fifths of respondents reported encountering AI-generated content (81.8%), and 86.4% reported seeing an AI-generated product advertisement or promotional post. On their own ability to distinguish AI-generated from human-created content, 78.8% selected “Always” or “Often”; this reflects self-assessment rather than verified detection accuracy.

Half of respondents (50.0%) said knowing that a brand uses AI affected their perception positively. A further 28.8% reported no effect, while 21.2% reported a negative effect. The

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distribution suggests that AI use is not automatically viewed negatively, although reactions are mixed.

5.3 Likert-scale perceptions

Item	Statement	Mean	SD	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
L1	Human-created social media content feels more genuine than AI-generated content.	3.82	1.23	65.2%	16.7%	18.2%
L2	AI-generated social media content can be as creative and engaging as human-created content.	2.95	1.27	30.3%	36.4%	33.3%
L3	I find it easier to emotionally connect with human-created social media content.	3.74	1.30	59.1%	22.7%	18.2%
L4	AI-generated social media content can effectively communicate a brand's message.	3.03	1.26	36.4%	33.3%	30.3%
L5	I am more likely to trust an advertisement when I believe it was created by a human.	3.59	1.31	60.6%	18.2%	21.2%
L6	The quality and accuracy of social	3.42	1.31	45.5%	34.8%	19.7%

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	media content matter more to me than whether it was created by AI or a human.					
L7	Knowing that an advertisement was generated using AI would influence my perception of the brand.	3.47	1.26	47.0%	36.4%	16.7%
L8	I would consider purchasing a product promoted through AI-generated content if the advertisement appeared credible.	2.82	1.24	27.3%	36.4%	36.4%
L9	Human-created social media advertisements are more persuasive than AI-generated advertisements.	3.59	1.16	59.1%	22.7%	18.2%
L10	I believe brands can use AI-generated content without negatively affecting consumer trust.	3.39	1.36	51.5%	21.2%	27.3%

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The highest mean was for the statement that human-created social media content feels more genuine than AI-generated content (M = 3.82, SD = 1.23); 65.2% agreed or strongly agreed. The statement about easier emotional connection with human-created content also scored relatively highly (M = 3.74, SD = 1.31), with 59.1% agreement. In addition, 59.1% agreed that human-created social media advertisements are more persuasive than AI-generated advertisements (M = 3.59, SD = 1.16).

Views on AI's creative and communication capabilities were more mixed. The mean for AI-generated content being as creative and engaging as human-created content was 2.95. The mean for AI's ability to communicate a brand message effectively was 3.03. For conditional purchase intention—considering a product promoted through AI-generated content if the advertisement appeared credible—the mean was 2.82. Only 27.3% agreed, while 36.4% disagreed and 36.4% were neutral. This indicates limited expressed willingness in this sample, rather than evidence of actual purchase behaviour.

Meanwhile, 51.5% agreed that brands can use AI-generated content without negatively affecting consumer trust (M = 3.39). Taken together, respondents appear to distinguish between accepting AI as a tool brands may use and preferring human-created content for genuineness or emotional connection.

5.4 Exploratory correlations

Perception item associated with conditional purchase intention	Spearman's ρ	p
AI-generated social media content can effectively communicate a brand's message.	0.403	< .001
Human-created social media content feels more genuine than AI-generated content.	0.262	0.033
Human-created social media advertisements are more persuasive than AI-generated advertisements.	0.307	0.012

Perceived effectiveness of AI-generated content in communicating a brand message was positively associated with conditional purchase intention ($\rho = .403$, $p < .001$). The human-genuineness item ($\rho = .262$, $p = .033$) and human-advertisement persuasiveness item ($\rho = .307$, $p = .012$) also showed positive associations with conditional purchase intention. These exploratory tests are unadjusted for multiple comparisons and should be interpreted cautiously. They do not establish causal relationships.

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6. SUGGESTIONS

The results show high reported exposure to AI-generated content and AI-generated promotional posts, but familiarity does not mean that consumers automatically prefer AI-generated advertising. Respondents reported relatively strong agreement that human-created content feels genuine, supports emotional connection, and is more persuasive. This pattern is consistent with research that identifies perceived authenticity as an important factor in responses to AI-authored emotional marketing communications (Kirk & Givi, 2025).

At the same time, the survey does not indicate blanket rejection of AI. Half of respondents said brand AI use affected their perception positively, and just over half agreed that brands can use AI without harming consumer trust. These mixed responses align with literature suggesting that the impact of AI disclosure and AI authorship depends on how the technology is used and communicated (Chen et al., 2024; Shi & Jiang, 2026; Le et al., 2026).

Conditional purchase intention was comparatively low, with fewer than three in ten respondents agreeing that they would consider purchasing a product promoted through AI-generated content even if the advertisement appeared credible. The positive correlation between perceived AI communication effectiveness and conditional purchase intention suggests that consumers who view AI as capable of communicating a brand message may be more open to purchasing. Because the questionnaire was not an experiment and did not measure actual purchases, the result should be treated as an exploratory relationship.

7. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

- Use AI as a support for content production, while retaining human review of brand voice, emotional tone, accuracy, and relevance.
- Prioritise credible product information and useful communication instead of relying on novelty alone.
- Explain AI's role in content creation clearly where appropriate; transparency should be meaningful and should not be treated as a guarantee of trust.
- Review AI outputs for factual errors, unnatural visuals, tone mismatch, and inconsistencies with brand identity.
- Test content with the target audience. Future campaigns can compare matched AI-assisted and human-created versions for the same product before drawing conclusions about performance.

8. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study is limited by its sample size (n = 66), convenience sampling, self-reported measures, and inclusion of some respondents outside typical Gen Z age bands. The questionnaire did not expose participants to matched AI-generated and human-created advertisements, so it cannot isolate the effect of creator identity from content quality or other factors. Single-item measures may not capture all dimensions of trust or purchase intention, and the exploratory correlations were not adjusted for multiple testing.

Future studies should recruit a larger and more balanced Gen Z sample, define whether content is AI-generated or AI-assisted, and use matched advertisements for the same product.

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Experiments could vary the creator label while holding content constant and measure authenticity, trust, brand attitude, and purchase intention with validated scales. Studies could also compare functional and emotional product categories and test different AI disclosure formats.

9. CONCLUSION

This survey of 66 respondents found widespread reported exposure to AI-generated social media content alongside stronger perceptions of genuineness, emotional connection, and persuasiveness for human-created content. Conditional purchase intention toward products promoted through AI-generated content was relatively low, but respondents who considered AI effective at communicating a brand message tended to report greater willingness to consider purchasing. The findings suggest that familiarity with AI is not the same as complete consumer trust. For marketers, the challenge is to combine AI-enabled efficiency with credible information, human judgement, and authentic communication. Because the study is exploratory and based on a small convenience sample, its findings should not be generalised to all Gen Z consumers.

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