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THE AUTHENTICITY THRESHOLD IN GENERATIVE AI MARKETING: EXPLORING WHEN CONSUMERS ACCEPT, QUESTION, OR REJECT AI-CREATED BRAND STORIES, CONTENT, AND PERSUASIVE

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Abstract

Generative artificial intelligence has rapidly entered brand communication, yet consumer responses remain divided between curiosity, convenience, skepticism, and resistance. This qualitative study explored when consumers accept, question, or reject AI-created brand stories, social-media content, and persuasive communication, and it introduced the concept of an authenticity threshold to explain these judgments. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 digitally active consumers who varied in age, occupation, platform use, and familiarity with generative AI, and the transcripts were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The analysis was sensitized by brand authenticity research, the Persuasion Knowledge Model, source credibility, mind perception, and algorithm-aversion research. Six themes emerged. Participants accepted AI that performed supportive, factual, or low-symbolic tasks while accountable human oversight remained visible; they began to question content when authorship, disclosure, motive, or emotional sincerity became ambiguous; and they rejected AI that simulated lived experience, fabricated relational intimacy, or substituted for human creative and moral responsibility in identity-relevant communication. Transparency alone did not determine authenticity judgments; the appropriateness, materiality, and governance of AI involvement also mattered. The study contributes an empirically grounded three-zone authenticity-threshold framework, a risk-based action model for brand managers, and directions for future research.

Keywords: Generative AI; Brand Authenticity; AI Disclosure; Consumer Trust; Marketing Communication

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Research

Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) has moved from experimental technology to a practical marketing infrastructure capable of producing advertising copy, social-media captions, product descriptions, synthetic imagery, video, personalized messages, and brand narratives at unprecedented speed and scale. For firms, these systems promise lower production costs, rapid iteration, localization, and continuous content generation. For consumers, however, the same efficiencies alter a long-standing assumption underlying

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persuasive communication: that a brand story, emotional appeal, or relational message expresses human intention. Recent marketing evidence shows that the source of authorship can shape reactions even when the surface-level message remains unchanged. Brüns and Meißner (2024) found that using GenAI for social-media content can reduce perceived brand authenticity and produce less favourable attitudinal and behavioural responses, particularly when AI appears to replace human creators. Kirk and Givi (2024) similarly identify an AI-authorship effect in emotional marketing communications, where AI authorship lowers perceived authenticity and can reduce loyalty and positive word of mouth. Yet the effect is not universal. AI-authored factual messages are often judged less harshly, and AI used for editing or support can be more acceptable than full automation (Kirk & Givi, 2024).

Earlier work on AI-disclosed brand voice also found that disclosure does not automatically damage brand attitudes in every communication context (Kirkby et al., 2023). These mixed findings suggest that consumer response is not adequately captured by a simple human-versus-AI distinction. Instead, consumers appear to evaluate the symbolic importance of the message, the expected level of human involvement, the credibility of the source, and the perceived honesty of disclosure. As AI becomes embedded in brand storytelling and persuasive communication, understanding where consumers draw the boundary between legitimate technological assistance and perceived inauthenticity has become a central marketing problem (Grigsby et al., 2025; Balaban & Phua, 2026).

1.2 Problem Statement

Existing studies increasingly document negative consumer reactions to AI-generated marketing, but they do not yet provide a sufficiently integrated explanation of when such reactions emerge, weaken, or reverse. Some evidence indicates that AI disclosure lowers trust and advertising evaluations, especially in service and influencer contexts where credibility and personal experience are central (Grigsby et al., 2025; Balaban & Phua, 2026). Other studies show that clear role transparency may improve perceptions of the ad-creation process, while simple AI labels can be ineffective or even counterproductive (Le et al., 2026; IAB, 2026). The inconsistency implies that disclosure, authenticity, and trust operate conditionally rather than independently. Research also tends to isolate single formats such as social-media posts, service advertisements, or brand voice, leaving limited understanding of how consumers compare AI involvement across stories, emotional appeals, factual communication, personalized persuasion, and synthetic visuals (Brüns & Meißner, 2024; Kirk & Givi, 2024). Consequently, managers lack a practical boundary model indicating when AI remains below an acceptable authenticity threshold and when it crosses into communication perceived as hollow, deceptive, or relationally inappropriate. This study addresses that gap by examining the authenticity threshold, a consumer-defined boundary shaped by message type, human oversight, disclosure quality, brand expectations, and perceived persuasive intent, through consumers' own accounts.

1.3 Research Questions

RQ1. How do consumers judge the authenticity of AI-assisted and AI-generated marketing communication?

RQ2. Under what conditions do consumers accept AI-created brand stories and persuasive content without substantial loss of trust?

RQ3. Which cues and boundary conditions move consumer responses from acceptance to questioning or rejection?

RQ4. How do disclosure, message emotionality, human oversight, source credibility, and source type shape perceived authenticity in consumers' accounts?

RQ5. How can these insights be integrated into an authenticity-threshold framework that guides responsible brand use of generative AI?

1.4 Research Objectives

RO1. To explore how consumers conceptualize and judge authenticity in AI-assisted and AI-generated marketing communication.

RO2. To identify the conditions under which consumers accept, question, or reject AI-created brand content.

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RO3. To examine how consumers interpret the effects of disclosure, emotionality, source credibility, source type, and visible human involvement on trust and authenticity judgments.
RO4. To integrate the findings into an authenticity-threshold framework linking message, process, source, and consumer factors.
RO5. To derive practical recommendations for responsible human-AI brand communication and to outline directions for future research.

1.5 Significance of the Study

The study is significant because it reframes the marketing debate from whether brands should use GenAI to where, how, and to what extent AI involvement remains acceptable to consumers. The authenticity-threshold perspective adopted in this study links several research streams that are often treated separately: brand authenticity, algorithm aversion, persuasion knowledge, source credibility, disclosure transparency, and human-AI collaboration. This integration is valuable because contemporary brand communication is rarely purely human or purely automated; it is increasingly produced through hybrid workflows in which people prompt, edit, approve, personalize, and distribute machine-generated material. Practically, the findings can help brand managers distinguish low-risk uses, such as factual drafting or translation, from high-risk uses involving identity, empathy, testimony, emotional storytelling, or claims of personal experience. The study also responds to growing industry attention to materiality-based AI disclosure. The IAB (2026) argues that not every AI use requires identical labelling and recommends a risk-based approach that considers how AI changes consumer understanding. By focusing on consumer meaning rather than technology alone, the study offers a basis for decisions about creative oversight, disclosure language, influencer communication, customer relationship management, and brand governance. It is particularly relevant for emerging markets, where rapid adoption may coexist with uneven AI literacy, institutional guidance, and trust in digital information (Rehmat et al., 2025a, 2025b).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study was informed by four complementary perspectives. First, brand authenticity theory explains why consumers value communications perceived as sincere, consistent with brand identity, and connected to genuine human intention. AI authorship can threaten this perception when the message appears simulated rather than experienced (Brüns & Meißner, 2024). Second, the Persuasion Knowledge Model proposes that consumers interpret and cope with persuasive attempts by inferring how and why a message was produced; disclosure of AI may therefore activate scrutiny of motives and tactics rather than producing a uniform response (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Third, source credibility theory emphasizes expertise, trustworthiness, and source appropriateness. In AI-mediated communication, credibility depends not only on whether a source is competent but also on whether AI use is suitable for the communicative task (Grigsby et al., 2025). Fourth, mind-perception and algorithm-aversion perspectives clarify why consumers react differently when AI appears to substitute for human agency in contexts requiring emotion, moral responsibility, or lived experience (Dietvorst et al., 2015; Waytz et al., 2010). Together, these theories suggest that authenticity is not a fixed property of content. It is an inference produced from the relationship among message, source, process, disclosure, and expected human involvement. The authenticity threshold was therefore conceptualized as the point at which perceived technological substitution becomes inconsistent with the human meaning consumers expect from a brand interaction.

2.2 Generative AI and the Reconfiguration of Brand Authorship

GenAI complicates the conventional idea of authorship because marketing outputs can be co-produced through multiple degrees of human involvement. A campaign may be fully generated from a prompt, lightly edited by AI, substantially rewritten by a human, or generated by AI from human strategic direction. Consumers often lack visibility into these distinctions, yet research suggests that the degree of substitution matters. Brüns and Meißner (2024) show that negative reactions are attenuated when AI assists rather than replaces humans, indicating that consumers may tolerate automation when human creative responsibility remains credible. Kirk and Givi (2024) similarly find that the AI-authorship penalty decreases when AI merely edits an emotional communication rather than originates it. These findings align with broader human-AI

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collaboration research, which emphasizes complementarity rather than wholesale substitution. Khan et al. (2026) describe human-AI co-entrepreneurship as a negotiated arrangement in which agency, trust, and stakeholder roles shape adoption, while Ashraf et al. (2026) emphasize continuing human agency in AI-supported decision processes. The relevance for marketing is that authorship is becoming layered: consumers may accept AI as a production tool yet resist its positioning as the originator of sentiment, purpose, or personal voice. Thus, the meaningful distinction is not only whether AI was used, but whether consumers believe the brand retained intentional human authorship over the parts of communication where intention matters most.

2.3 Brand Authenticity, Human Intention, and Emotional Communication

Authenticity is especially vulnerable when communication asks consumers to believe that a brand understands, feels, remembers, or cares. Emotional appeals, apology messages, founder stories, purpose statements, and community narratives derive persuasive force from perceived intentionality and sincerity. Kirk and Givi (2024) demonstrate that emotional marketing messages attributed to AI are evaluated less favorably because they are seen as less authentic and can trigger moral disgust. Their results also show that the penalty weakens for factual communication, supporting the idea that emotionality increases expectations of human authorship. In influencer marketing, authenticity is similarly central because audiences infer that recommendations reflect the influencer's own experience and voice. Balaban and Phua (2026) find that AI-generated influencer advertising can reduce brand credibility, attitudes, and purchase intentions, particularly when AI origin is recognized. Narrative scholarship reinforces the importance of linguistic choices and stylistic devices in digital marketing because consumers interpret not only message content but also the perceived voice behind it (N. U. Rehman et al., 2026). Research on AI-driven emotional support among undergraduate students in Pakistan likewise treats the emotional side of human-AI interaction as consequential for users (Noor et al., 2026). Accordingly, the authenticity threshold is likely to be stricter for emotionally symbolic messages than for utilitarian information. Consumers may readily accept AI-generated specifications, summaries, or routine service information while rejecting AI-generated grief, gratitude, moral positioning, or personal testimony that appears to imitate human experience without possessing it.

2.4 AI Disclosure, Transparency, and Persuasion Knowledge

Transparency is frequently proposed as the remedy for consumer concern, yet disclosure research produces mixed results. In service advertising, AI disclosure can lower trust and ad attitudes, particularly when consumers perceive the content as less credible or less suitable for an intangible offering (Grigsby et al., 2025). Balaban and Phua (2026) similarly show that disclosure improves recognition of AI origin but may reduce brand credibility and purchase intentions in influencer advertising. By contrast, earlier research on brand voice found no automatic authenticity penalty merely from identifying text as AI-generated (Kirkby et al., 2023). More recent work suggests that the quality of disclosure matters. Le et al. (2026) report that clearer disclosure of AI's specific role can improve perceived credibility of the creation process and advertising attitudes. However, explanatory labels are not a universal solution; highly specific or beneficiary-framed explanations can fail to improve reactions in realistic social-media settings (Weber et al., 2026). These results are consistent with persuasion-knowledge logic: a label does not merely inform; it changes the consumer's interpretation of intent. A vague label may raise suspicion, while an informative statement can clarify responsibility. The emerging implication is that consumers evaluate whether disclosure is material, comprehensible, and proportional to AI's actual role. Transparency supports authenticity when it reduces ambiguity without appearing defensive, manipulative, or designed to normalize excessive automation.

2.5 Source Credibility, AI Literacy, and Contextual Trust

Consumer response to AI-created marketing also depends on source and audience characteristics. A hotel, government body, influencer, luxury brand, local retailer, and financial service provider do not carry identical expectations of authenticity. Balaban and Phua (2026) show that source type influences how disclosure affects recognition and evaluation. Trust is also shaped by users' prior attitudes toward AI and their ability to interpret machine-generated information. Rehmat et al. (2025b), studying human-centred explainable AI in an emerging-market context, show that trust among non-technical users depends on intelligibility and confidence rather than technical performance alone. Lim et al. (2026) likewise demonstrate that responsible human-AI interaction is shaped by digital competence, critical evaluation, and contextual

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support. Research on AI-assisted investing, fintech, project decisions, and digital markets similarly emphasizes the importance of credibility, human oversight, and information evaluation in technology-mediated decisions (Naz et al., 2026; Qazi et al., 2026; Siddiqui et al., 2026). Research on AI-enabled search experiences similarly links information credibility and brand trust to purchase intention (Abrar et al., 2026). These cross-domain findings are relevant to marketing because consumers increasingly encounter AI in environments where the cost of misplaced trust varies. The authenticity threshold is therefore likely to be context sensitive: consumers may tolerate experimentation in entertainment or low-risk retail but demand stronger evidence of human accountability in health, finance, education, political communication, or relationship-oriented services.

2.6 Human-AI Collaboration versus Human Replacement

A consistent pattern across emerging GenAI research is that hybridization is often more acceptable than substitution. The distinction matters because consumers may value efficiency while still expecting human judgment, accountability, and creative ownership. Brüns and Meißner (2024) directly show that negative brand responses diminish when AI assists humans rather than replaces them. Similar dynamics appear beyond marketing. M. V. U. Rehman et al. (2026) describe developers' strategies for validating LLM-generated software artifacts, Mannan et al. (2026) highlight the importance of human assurance in AI-augmented security practices, and M. B. Khan et al. (2026) discuss AI-enabled operational systems in which technology augments rather than eliminates human responsibility. Even apparently unrelated qualitative work on organizational transformation, access to finance, and technology integration reinforces a broader methodological insight: people interpret technologies through lived institutional expectations and role relationships rather than technical capability alone (Ashraf et al., 2025; Yaseen et al., 2026). In marketing, visible human oversight can function as an authenticity safeguard. It signals that a person or team remains responsible for factual accuracy, tone, ethical boundaries, cultural interpretation, and the final persuasive claim. The authenticity threshold is therefore more likely to be crossed when AI use is perceived as replacing precisely the human contribution that gives the message moral, emotional, or relational legitimacy.

2.7 The Authenticity Threshold: Acceptance, Questioning, and Rejection

The authenticity threshold that sensitized this study organizes consumer response into three interpretive zones rather than a binary favourable-unfavourable outcome. In the acceptance zone, AI use is perceived as instrumentally appropriate, proportionate, and compatible with the message. Typical examples include translation, formatting, ideation, factual summaries, product descriptions, or image enhancement where no claim of human experience is central. In the questioning zone, consumers notice ambiguity about authorship, disclosure, or motive. They may not reject the brand, but they scrutinize whether the message reflects real people, whether synthetic elements are misleading, and whether the brand is hiding labour substitution or manipulating emotional cues. In the rejection zone, AI use violates an expected human role. This may occur when synthetic testimonials imitate lived experience, automated apologies simulate remorse, influencers present AI-generated recommendations as personal opinions, or brands use synthetic people to imply communities or experiences that do not exist. The threshold is thus movable rather than fixed. It shifts with message emotionality, perceived stakes, brand category, consumer AI attitudes, prior trust, and disclosure quality. This framework helps reconcile studies showing both negative disclosure effects and cases of neutral or positive transparency effects (Kirkby et al., 2023; Grigsby et al., 2025; Le et al., 2026).

2.8 Gaps in Existing Research

Despite rapid growth in GenAI marketing scholarship, five gaps remain. First, most studies manipulate one communication format at a time, limiting understanding of how consumers compare brand stories, influencer posts, advertisements, product information, personalized messages, and synthetic visuals. Second, experimental studies often identify average effects without fully explaining how consumers verbally reason about acceptable versus unacceptable AI involvement. Third, disclosure is usually treated as present or absent, even though current practice varies from minimal labels to detailed role explanations and regulatory signals (Le et al., 2026; IAB, 2026). Fourth, emerging-market perspectives remain limited, although research on explainable AI, fintech, education, organizational adoption, and household decision-making shows that technological skepticism, institutional trust, and digital literacy are context dependent (Rehmat et al., 2025b;

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M. Khan et al., 2026; Naz et al., 2026). Finally, qualitative studies across unrelated domains—from SME finance to youth development, software engineering, biotechnology, and Industry 4.0—demonstrate the value of contextual interpretation when technologies or institutions reshape human judgment (Ashraf et al., 2025; Raza & John, 2026a, 2026b; Mumtaz et al., 2026; Murawwat et al., 2026; Yaseen et al., 2026). Marketing research needs similar attention to meaning making. This study addressed these gaps through a qualitative authenticity-threshold approach that complements existing experiments by identifying how consumers themselves describe the boundary between acceptable assistance and unacceptable simulation.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative, interpretive approach to explore how consumers judge the authenticity of AI-created brand stories, content, and persuasive communication. The authenticity-threshold concept, drawn from brand authenticity theory, the Persuasion Knowledge Model, source credibility, mind perception, and algorithm-aversion research, served as a sensitizing device rather than a fixed coding frame. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with real consumers, and the transcripts were analysed through reflexive thematic analysis. The sections that follow describe the research design, sampling, data collection, data analysis, ethical procedures, and participant profiles.

3.1 Research Design

The study used an interpretive qualitative design to understand why consumer responses to AI-created marketing shift across acceptance, questioning, and rejection. Brand authenticity theory, the Persuasion Knowledge Model, source credibility, mind perception, and algorithm-aversion research were treated as complementary lenses that informed the interview guide and the interpretation of the data, while the themes themselves were developed from participants' accounts. Reflexive thematic analysis was selected because it supports the interpretation of patterned meaning across a dataset and acknowledges the active role of the researcher in theme development (Braun et al., 2022; Byrne, 2022).

3.2 Sampling Strategy

Purposive maximum-variation sampling was used to recruit 24 digitally active consumers who encountered branded social-media content at least several times per week. Variation was sought in age, gender, occupation, platform use, AI familiarity, and purchasing categories. The sample included both frequent GenAI users and consumers with limited direct use so that acceptance was not conflated with technical familiarity. Purposeful selection is consistent with qualitative studies that prioritize information-rich cases and contextual diversity (Ashraf et al., 2025; Rehmat et al., 2025a).

3.3 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews of approximately 40-60 minutes were conducted with each participant. Participants were shown a small set of contrasting marketing stimuli, including human-created content, disclosed AI-assisted content, disclosed fully AI-generated content, emotional brand storytelling, factual product communication, and influencer-style persuasion. Open-ended questions probed perceived authenticity, trust, disclosure expectations, acceptable AI roles, emotional appropriateness, and rejection triggers. This design preserved comparability across participants while allowing unanticipated concerns to emerge, as in prior qualitative studies of AI and technology-mediated experiences (Abrar & Amjad, 2026; Rehmat et al., 2025a).

3.4 Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analysed through reflexive thematic analysis. The researchers first familiarized themselves with the data, generated initial codes, developed candidate themes, reviewed the patterns against the full dataset, refined theme boundaries, and produced an interpretive narrative. Coding was primarily inductive, and the authenticity-threshold concept was used as a sensitizing rather than constraining device. Braun et al. (2022) and Byrne (2022) support this flexible but systematic process, while Hole (2024) emphasizes transparent interpretation, reflexivity, and caution against treating thematic analysis as a mechanical coding procedure.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Voluntary informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were told that the research concerned reactions to AI-mediated marketing. Participants were free to withdraw without penalty. Names

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and identifying information were removed from the transcripts, recordings were stored securely, and participant identifiers (P1-P24) were used in place of names. Because the study involved persuasion and synthetic media, participants were debriefed about which stimuli were AI-generated or simulated. Ethical handling followed participant-centred practices used in contemporary qualitative technology research (Rehmat et al., 2025a; Ashraf et al., 2025).

3.6 Participant Profiles

Table 1 presents the individual participant profiles. The profiles show the maximum variation achieved across age, consumer segment, platform use, generative-AI familiarity, and exposure to digital marketing.

Table 1

Individual Participant Profiles

Participant ID	Consumer Segment	Age Range	Typical Platforms	GenAI Familiarity	Marketing Exposure	Profile / Contribution to Sample
P1	University student	18-24	Instagram, TikTok, YouTube	High	High	Digitally native consumer with frequent exposure to creator-led and AI-assisted branded content
P2	University student	18-24	TikTok, Instagram, YouTube	Moderate	High	Offered a perspective on authenticity in short-form persuasive and influencer-style content
P3	Final-year student / intern	18-24	Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube	Moderate	High	Linked student and early-career perspectives on professional and lifestyle brands
P4	Early-career consumer	18-24	Instagram, TikTok, X	Low-Moderate	High	Offered a less technically experienced but highly exposed social-media perspective
P5	Young professional	25-34	Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube	High	High	Represented the views of frequent GenAI users on AI-assisted brand communication
P6	Young professional	25-34	LinkedIn, YouTube, Instagram	Moderate-High	High	Contributed views on trust in informative, professional, and product-oriented AI marketing
P7	Young professional / entrepreneur	25-34	Instagram, LinkedIn, Facebook	High	Very high	Offered a commercially aware perspective on AI efficiency, persuasion, and disclosure
P8	Young professional	25-34	YouTube, Instagram, TikTok	Moderate	High	Contributed views on authenticity in entertainment-rich and emotionally framed campaigns
P9	Mid-career consumer	35-44	Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn	Moderate	Moderate	Offered a balanced view of AI across factual and

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Participant ID	Consumer Segment	Age Range	Typical Platforms	GenAI Familiarity	Marketing Exposure	Profile / Contribution to Sample
						relational brand messages
P10	Mid-career consumer	35-44	Facebook, YouTube, Instagram	Low-Moderate	Moderate	Raised credibility concerns from the standpoint of limited direct GenAI use
P11	Mid-career professional	35-44	LinkedIn, YouTube, Facebook	High	Moderate	Provided an informed view of AI utility while evaluating brand accountability
P12	Mid-career consumer	35-44	Facebook, Instagram, YouTube	Mixed	High	Contributed views on personalization, sponsored content, and AI disclosure
P13	Established consumer	45-54	Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp	Low	Moderate	Voiced skepticism toward synthetic storytelling and source ambiguity
P14	Established professional	45-54	LinkedIn, Facebook, YouTube	Moderate	Moderate	Assessed credibility and human oversight in professional brand communication
P15	Established consumer	45-54	Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube	Low-Moderate	Moderate	Provided a trust-focused perspective on emotional and family-oriented brand stories
P16	Established consumer	45-54	YouTube, Facebook, news apps	Moderate	High	Reflected on repeated AI exposure across advertising and information environments
P17	Older digitally active consumer	55+	Facebook, YouTube, news apps	Low	Moderate	Discussed authenticity expectations for which human authorship and credibility were especially salient
P18	Older digitally active consumer	55+	YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp	Low	Moderate	Compared practical AI-generated content with emotional persuasion
P19	Older professional / retiree	55+	Facebook, LinkedIn, news apps	Low-Moderate	Moderate	Offered a perspective shaped by lower AI familiarity but established brand relationships
P20	Older digitally	55+	Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp	Mixed	Moderate	Reflected on whether transparent disclosure

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Participant ID	Consumer Segment	Age Range	Typical Platforms	GenAI Familiarity	Marketing Exposure	Profile / Contribution to Sample
	active consumer					reduced or intensified skepticism
P21	Marketing-aware consumer	22-45	Instagram, LinkedIn, TikTok, YouTube	High	Very high	Provided informed judgments on AI-generated copy, targeting, and disclosure practices
P22	Creative-industry consumer	22-45	Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Pinterest	High	Very high	Discussed expectations of originality, creativity, authorship, and aesthetic authenticity
P23	Technology-aware consumer	22-45	LinkedIn, X, YouTube, Reddit	Very high	Very high	Contributed technical awareness, provenance cues, and tolerance for human-AI co-creation
P24	Brand/communication-aware consumer	22-45	Multi-platform	High	Very high	Provided a strategic perspective on persuasion, trust, emotional fit, and acceptable AI roles

4. Results and Discussion

Six themes emerged from the reflexive thematic analysis of the interview data. Each theme is presented below with its interpretation and is discussed in relation to the literature reviewed in Section 2. Consistent with the analytic approach, the themes reflect patterned meaning across the dataset rather than the views of any single participant, and no verbatim quotations are included. Together, the themes explain the logic of the authenticity threshold and the conditions under which participants accepted, questioned, or rejected AI-created brand communication.

4.1 Theme 1: AI Is More Acceptable When It Behaves Like a Tool, not a Persona

The first theme was that participants accepted AI most readily when its role was functional, bounded, and instrumentally useful. In this zone, AI supported tasks such as grammar correction, translation, image resizing, product descriptions, idea generation, summarization, or variant creation. Participants regarded these activities as making no claim to human emotion or lived experience and therefore as creating limited conflict with authenticity expectations. This distinction corresponds with evidence that AI editing produces weaker negative reactions than AI authorship of emotional communication (Kirk & Givi, 2024). It also aligns with findings that consumer resistance decreases when GenAI is framed as assisting rather than replacing human content creators (Brüns & Meißner, 2024). Participants' reasoning was not that all machine involvement was authentic, but that authenticity was preserved when a human remained responsible for what the communication meant. Visible human oversight was therefore important even when it was not operationally necessary. Participants indicated that a brand could use AI extensively in production and still be perceived as authentic if people selected the idea, verified the facts, approved the tone, and stood behind the claim. This theme defines the lower-risk side of the authenticity threshold: automation was accepted when it increased efficiency without pretending to possess the human qualities on which the persuasive message depended.

4.2 Theme 2: Emotional and Identity-Laden Stories Raise the Expected Need for Human Authorship

The second theme was that the authenticity threshold became stricter as communication became more emotional, identity-relevant, or morally expressive. Participants viewed a factual explanation of delivery times as useful regardless of whether AI drafted it. A founder story, apology, tribute, social-purpose statement, or message of gratitude was different because its persuasive value depended on assumed human feeling and

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accountability. Participants tended to interpret fully generated emotional storytelling as a category error: the system could imitate the language of care without experiencing care. The AI-authorship effect documented by Kirk and Givi (2024) supports this distinction, showing stronger penalties for emotional than factual communications. Influencer contexts intensified the problem because audiences often follow creators precisely for perceived personal voice and lived experience; AI-generated influencer advertising can consequently undermine credibility and purchase intention (Balaban & Phua, 2026). The threshold was also shaped by brand positioning. Heritage, artisanal, luxury, purpose-driven, and community-oriented brands often sell human provenance alongside functional value, which made undisclosed or excessive automation potentially more damaging. Rejection therefore did not arise simply because content was synthetic. It arose when AI was perceived to occupy the very role that participants believed should belong to a person whose intention, memory, taste, or moral commitment gave the message meaning.

4.3 Theme 3: Disclosure Functions as a Credibility Test Rather Than an Automatic Source of Trust

The third theme was that disclosure did not automatically resolve authenticity concerns; instead, it triggered a credibility test. Participants could appreciate honesty while simultaneously updating their evaluation downward after learning that a message was machine generated. This dual response helps explain why some studies find negative consequences of AI disclosure while others find neutral or beneficial outcomes. In service advertising, disclosure can reduce trust and ad attitudes (Grigsby et al., 2025), while influencer disclosures can reduce brand credibility and purchase intentions (Balaban & Phua, 2026). Yet research on role transparency suggests that explaining what AI actually did may strengthen the credibility of the creation process (Le et al., 2026). In the interviews, participants responded to disclosure by asking three questions: What did AI do? Why was it used? Who remains responsible? A minimal AI label answered only the first question partially and tended to heighten uncertainty. A more precise statement, such as AI-assisted visualization, human-written copy, or an AI-generated draft reviewed by the brand team, was seen as preserving agency boundaries. However, over-explaining could appear strategic or defensive. The authenticity threshold therefore depended on proportional transparency: disclosure needed to be specific enough to prevent deception, but not so generic or promotional that it became another persuasive tactic.

4.4 Theme 4: Suspicion Emerges from Source-Message Mismatch, Not Only from AI Detection

The fourth theme was that participants began questioning authenticity when they perceived a mismatch between the communication and the source's expected capabilities, history, or voice. Detection of AI-like language, such as perfectly polished phrasing, generic emotional intensity, visual inconsistency, excessive personalization, or sudden shifts in brand tone, functioned as a cue, but suspicion was broader than technical detection. Participants questioned content even when they could not prove that AI was used. What mattered was a felt incongruence: the message seemed too generic for an intimate brand, too personal for an automated service, too emotionally fluent for a routine corporate interaction, or too visually idealized to represent a real customer experience. This interpretation connects authenticity to source credibility and brand consistency. Kirkby et al. (2023) show that AI disclosure does not necessarily damage brand voice, suggesting that consumers can accept synthetic authorship when the voice remains credible and contextually appropriate. Research on explainable AI likewise suggests that trust depends on comprehensibility and meaningful confidence signals rather than mere system performance (Rehmat et al., 2025b). The questioning zone was therefore a state of unresolved attribution. Participants had not rejected the brand, but the burden shifted to the brand to clarify authorship, verify claims, and demonstrate that AI use was compatible with its established identity and relationship with the audience.

4.5 Theme 5: Simulated Experience and Hidden Substitution Create the Strongest Rejection Risk

The fifth theme identified the strongest boundary violations. Participants rejected AI-created persuasion when it fabricated or implied human experiences that never occurred, especially when such simulation influenced purchase decisions. Examples included synthetic testimonials presented as real customers, AI-generated influencer endorsements framed as personal recommendations, artificial employee stories, fabricated before-and-after narratives, and emotional apologies with no meaningful human accountability. In these cases, the issue moved beyond aesthetic preference to perceived deception. Persuasion knowledge became highly active because participants interpreted AI not as a production tool but as a

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mechanism for manufacturing social proof or relational intimacy. This pattern is consistent with evidence that AI-generated influencer content is especially vulnerable because authenticity functions as a credibility heuristic (Balaban & Phua, 2026). It also relates to the broader concern that AI systems can alter trust when users cannot identify the origin, accountability, or purpose of generated information. Studies of human-centred explainability and AI-supported decision contexts repeatedly show that confidence depends on perceived transparency and retained human responsibility (Rehmat et al., 2025b; Siddiqui et al., 2026). The rejection zone therefore began where efficiency became impersonation: participants perceived that the brand had substituted synthetic evidence or synthetic feeling for a human reality that the persuasive claim implicitly asked them to trust.

4.6 Theme 6: The Authenticity Threshold Is Personal, Category-Specific, and Dynamic

The sixth theme was that no single authenticity threshold applied to all participants or categories. Attitudes toward AI, digital literacy, age, professional exposure, cultural expectations, perceived risk, and previous brand trust shifted the boundary. Participants familiar with GenAI were more comfortable with production assistance yet more capable of noticing low-quality automation. Less familiar participants reacted strongly to disclosure or, conversely, paid little attention unless they felt deceived. Category risk also mattered. Entertainment and low-stakes retail permitted broader experimentation, whereas finance, health, education, public communication, and other high-trust domains raised expectations of accountability. Cross-domain research supports this contextual view. Human-AI co-learning varies with digital competence and institutional context (Lim et al., 2026); fintech adoption depends on trust under technological skepticism (M. Khan et al., 2026); and AI-assisted household or project decisions remain shaped by human judgment and uncertainty (Naz et al., 2026; Siddiqui et al., 2026). The threshold also appeared to be evolving over time. As AI-generated communication becomes ordinary, consumers may become less concerned with whether AI was used and more concerned with whether the use was appropriate, disclosed when material, and governed by accountable humans. Authenticity may therefore shift from being human-made toward being human-owned and responsibly mediated.

Table 2

Themes, Sub-Themes, and Threshold Positions Emerging from the Interviews

Theme	Core Sub-Themes	Typical Consumer Interpretation	Threshold Position	Managerial Meaning
AI as tool, not persona	Assistance; efficiency; editing; human approval	AI is acceptable when it supports rather than impersonates human intent	Acceptance	Use AI freely for bounded production tasks with accountable review
Emotionality raises human expectation	Empathy; identity; heritage; purpose; lived experience	The more a message claims feeling or meaning, the more human authorship matters	Acceptance -> Questioning	Retain strong human authorship for emotional and identity-based communication
Disclosure as credibility test	Materiality; role clarity; responsibility; motive	A label prompts consumers to evaluate what AI did and who stands behind it	Questioning	Use specific, proportional disclosure rather than vague AI labels
Mismatch creates suspicion	Tone inconsistency; generic voice; uncanny visuals; excessive personalization	Something about the content does not fit the source or relationship	Questioning	Audit brand voice and provenance; clarify unusual synthetic elements
Simulated experience	Fake testimonials; synthetic intimacy;	AI is manufacturing evidence or feelings the	Rejection	Prohibit deceptive simulation of

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triggers rejection	hidden substitution; impersonation	consumer expected to be real		customers, employees, creators, or lived experience
Threshold is dynamic	AI literacy; category risk; culture; prior trust; familiarity	Acceptability depends on consumer and context and changes over time	All zones	Segment policies by message type and risk, not by one universal AI rule

4.7 Synthesis of the Framework

Taken together, the six themes formed a three-zone authenticity-threshold model. The acceptance zone describes circumstances in which AI use was task-appropriate, low in symbolic human meaning, and subordinate to accountable human intent. The questioning zone describes circumstances in which authorship, tonal fit, disclosure, or persuasive motive became ambiguous and participants therefore scrutinized process credibility more closely. The rejection zone describes circumstances in which AI was used to simulate lived experience, fabricate relational evidence, obscure responsibility, or substitute for the human contribution that gives an emotional or moral message legitimacy. The model therefore integrates content characteristics and process characteristics. Content factors include emotionality, personalness, identity relevance, risk, and testimonial value; process factors include the degree of automation, human review, disclosure specificity, source type, and consistency with established brand behaviour. Consumer factors such as AI attitude, literacy, prior brand trust, and cultural expectations shifted the threshold rather than determining it alone. This synthesis helps reconcile apparently contradictory findings in prior studies: AI disclosure may damage evaluations when it reveals inappropriate substitution, while clearer role transparency may improve process credibility when AI's role is considered appropriate (Grigsby et al., 2025; Le et al., 2026). The central managerial question is therefore not simply whether AI was used, but whether AI occupied a role that consumers are likely to expect to remain meaningfully human.

4.8 Discussion of the Findings

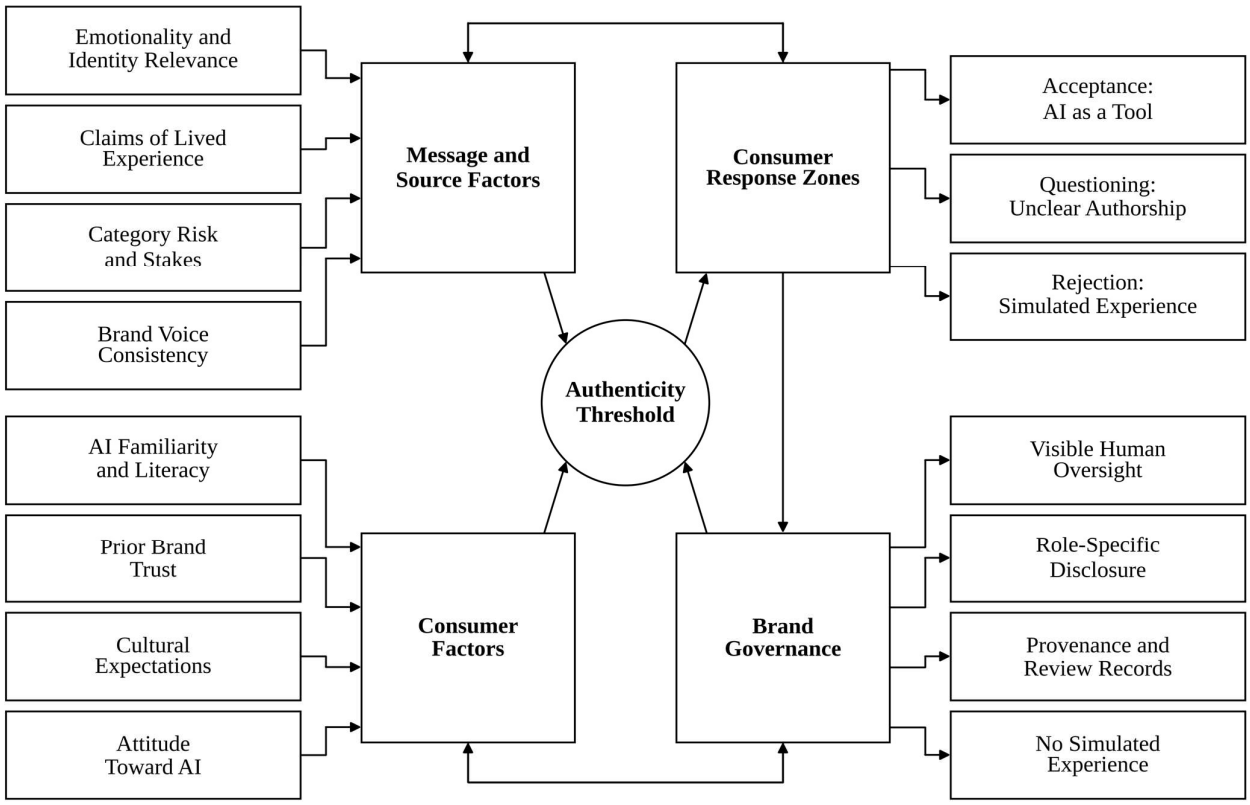
The findings help reconcile a central tension in GenAI marketing: consumers can value efficiency and innovation while resisting communication that appears to counterfeit human intention. The results support the proposition that perceived authenticity is an important mechanism in responses to AI-generated content (Brüns & Meißner, 2024) and that emotional communications are particularly sensitive to AI authorship (Kirk & Givi, 2024). At the same time, the findings do not support treating disclosure as inherently beneficial or harmful. Participants saw disclosure as damaging when it revealed a mismatch between AI use and their expectations, a pattern also reported in service and influencer advertising (Grigsby et al., 2025; Balaban & Phua, 2026), whereas clearer explanations of AI's role strengthened perceptions of process credibility (Le et al., 2026).

This conditionality is consistent with the Persuasion Knowledge Model because consumers evaluate not only message content but also the inferred strategy behind its production (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Conceptually, the study extends authenticity theory by showing that authentic marketing in an AI-rich environment need not require purely human production. Instead, authenticity increasingly depends on truthful provenance, accountable human ownership, consistency with brand identity, and respect for communicative domains in which lived human experience is itself part of the value proposition. This interpretation is compatible with broader human-AI research emphasizing complementary agency, critical literacy, and responsible oversight (Lim et al., 2026; Ashraf et al., 2026). For marketers, the implication is a shift from tool-centred governance toward meaning-centred governance: AI-use decisions should consider what a communication asks consumers to believe about the people, experiences, motives, and relationships behind the brand.

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Figure 1

Action Framework for Managing the Authenticity Threshold in Generative AI Marketing Communication



5. Conclusion, Implications and Future Directions

5.1 Conclusion

Generative AI is transforming marketing not simply because it can create content, but because it changes the perceived relationship between a message and the human intention behind it. This study explored when consumers accept, question, or reject AI-created brand stories, content, and persuasive communication, and it developed the authenticity threshold as an integrative framework to explain their judgments. The findings indicate that participants found AI use most acceptable when it performed bounded, functional, and low-symbolic tasks; it became more questionable when authorship, motive, tonal fit, or disclosure was ambiguous; and it was most vulnerable to rejection when it simulated lived experience, relational intimacy, moral feeling, or personal endorsement without meaningful human grounding. The framework therefore moves beyond a simple assumption that consumers either favour or dislike AI. Instead, it shows that authenticity judgments depend on the appropriateness of AI's role, visible human responsibility, meaningful disclosure, source-message fit, and whether the communication asks consumers to trust something that only a real person or accountable organization could legitimately experience or claim. These results align with existing evidence: negative effects are stronger for emotional authorship and full human replacement, whereas supportive or editing roles are often more acceptable (Brüns & Meißner, 2024; Kirk & Givi, 2024). Disclosure effects are likewise contingent on source, message, and transparency quality (Balaban & Phua, 2026; Le et al., 2026). Accordingly, brands should neither hide material AI involvement nor disclose trivial use indiscriminately; they should preserve truthful human accountability wherever authenticity is part of the persuasive value.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

The study offers four theoretical contributions. First, it conceptualizes authenticity as a threshold judgment rather than a stable evaluation, allowing consumer responses to vary across acceptance, questioning,

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and rejection. Second, it integrates brand authenticity with persuasion knowledge by showing that authenticity judgments depend on inferred production motives and persuasive strategy, not only on message features (Friestad & Wright, 1994; Brüns & Meißner, 2024). Third, it extends source credibility logic through the concept of role appropriateness: an AI system may be technically competent yet remain an unsuitable source for communication that relies on empathy, experience, testimony, or moral responsibility (Grigsby et al., 2025). Fourth, it contributes to human-AI collaboration research by distinguishing technological assistance from symbolic substitution. This distinction is consistent with evidence that hybrid human-AI arrangements can preserve agency when humans retain evaluative control (Lim et al., 2026; Ashraf et al., 2026). Rather than defining authentic marketing as necessarily human-made, the study advances the concept of human-owned authenticity, in which AI may participate extensively while accountable people remain responsible for intention, truthfulness, and relational claims. These contributions provide a basis for further empirical research as generative systems become increasingly routine in brand communication.

5.3 Practical Recommendations

Based on the findings, brands should establish an AI communication policy based on message risk rather than a single organization-wide disclosure rule. Low-risk tasks such as translation, resizing, ideation, or factual drafting can generally use AI with standard human quality control. Medium-risk content—social posts, personalized promotions, synthetic visuals, and influencer support, should receive explicit role review, provenance checks, and disclosure when AI materially changes how a reasonable consumer would understand the content. High-risk communication—testimonials, apologies, founder stories, employee voices, purpose statements, emotionally sensitive messages, and claims of personal experience, should retain substantial human authorship and approval. Brands should never use synthetic people or narratives in ways that imply real experiences that did not occur. Disclosure should answer what AI did and who remains accountable, rather than relying only on vague labels. Creative teams should also test AI-assisted campaigns for tonal mismatch, uncanny imagery, cultural insensitivity, and excessive personalization. Finally, organizations should maintain records of human review for high-impact content and train marketers to distinguish creative efficiency from relational authenticity. These recommendations align with current industry movement toward materiality- and risk-based AI transparency rather than universal labelling (IAB, 2026).

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. It was based on interviews with 24 participants, so the themes reflect their interpretations and cannot be statistically generalized to all consumers. The accounts were collected at a single point in time, and consumer norms may change as AI-created content becomes commonplace; longitudinal work is therefore needed. Participants also responded to a limited set of stimuli, and their reactions may differ for other formats and categories. Future research should test whether the identified zones and boundary conditions hold in other samples. Cross-cultural research should examine whether authenticity thresholds differ between emerging and advanced digital markets, while experiments could test causal effects of message emotionality, source type, disclosure specificity, and degree of human involvement. Future studies should distinguish text, image, video, voice, avatars, and agentic customer interactions because each medium may create different expectations of human presence. Finally, researchers should examine whether repeated, transparent, and responsibly governed AI use can normalize hybrid brand authorship without weakening consumer trust.

Ethical Approval

This study is based entirely on secondary data obtained from published sources, including peer-reviewed journals, industry reports, and regulatory documents. No human participants were involved in the research. Therefore, formal Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was not required. However, all ethical considerations were strictly followed, including proper citation of sources and adherence to academic integrity.

Authors' Contributions

All the authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author/s declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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