
“Made With AI”: The Impact Of Source Labeling On User Perception Of Social Media Ads**Burce Akcan¹, Merve Gencyurek Erdogan^{2*}, G.Senem Gencturk Hizal³**¹ *Department of Advertising, Selcuk University/Faculty of Communication, Konya, Turkiye*² *Department of Radio, Television and Cinema, Ankara Haci Bayram Veli University/Faculty of Communication, Ankara, Turkiye*³ *Department of Public Relations and Publicity, Baskent University/Faculty of Communication, Ankara, Turkiye**1st burce@selcuk.edu.tr; 2nd merve.gencyurek@hbv.edu.tr; 3rd gencturk@baskent.edu.tr***Corresponding Author: merve.gencyurek@hbv.edu.tr*

Abstract— As generative artificial intelligence (AI) becomes increasingly integrated into digital advertising practices, understanding how audiences evaluate AI-generated content compared to human-created designs has gained both theoretical and strategic relevance. This study examines user perceptions of social media post designs produced either by generative AI technologies or by human designers, and investigates how the presence of a “Made with AI” label influences these evaluations. Using a 2 (content source: AI-generated vs. human-generated) × 2 (labeling: labeled vs. unlabeled) experimental design, undergraduate students from five universities in Turkey (N = 388) were exposed to systematically manipulated social media advertisements. Two posts were created exclusively using generative AI tools through prompt-based production, while two were produced by professional designers without AI assistance. Labeling conditions were experimentally varied to distinguish between actual and presented production sources. Participants evaluated the designs across six dimensions: trustworthiness, purchase intention, creativity, visual attractiveness, professionalism, and perceived quality, and also reported their general attitudes toward AI technologies. The results indicate distinct evaluative patterns. AI-generated designs were rated more positively on functional and technical dimensions, including trustworthiness, professionalism, purchase intention, and perceived quality, whereas human-generated designs received higher evaluations in creativity and visual attractiveness. The effect of AI labeling was limited and dimension-specific, influencing perceived quality but not broader affective or aesthetic judgments, and varied depending on the content source. Attitudes toward AI showed consistently positive main effects across all evaluative dimensions but did not significantly moderate the effects of content source or labeling. Overall, the findings suggest that users apply different evaluative logics to algorithmic and human design production, while AI attitudes function as a generalized evaluative orientation rather than a source-specific filter.

Keywords— AI-generated advertising, disclosure effects, generational differences, source labeling

The rapid advancement of generative artificial intelligence (AI) technologies has profoundly reshaped the landscape of digital advertising, not only in terms of content production efficiency but also in the creative logic behind advertisement design. No longer limited to automating routine tasks, AI tools are now capable of producing highly sophisticated visual and textual content that rivals—or in some cases exceeds—human-created media in quality and scale. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook have become saturated with such algorithmically generated visuals, copy, and animations, enabling brands to deploy personalized, dynamic, and visually compelling advertisements at unprecedented speeds and volumes [1].

This technological shift has introduced a new layer of complexity to how users engage with digital content. As users scroll through algorithm-curated feeds filled with hyper-targeted content, the boundary between human and machine-generated media becomes increasingly blurred. In this context, the question of user awareness—whether audiences recognize that content has been produced by AI—and the subsequent psychological consequences of that recognition have emerged as critical concerns not only for marketers and creatives but also for platform regulators and policymakers [2]. At stake is the trust relationship between consumers and the digital environments they inhabit, especially as synthetic content begins to shape consumer attitudes and behaviors in subtle yet powerful ways.

In parallel, the rising demand for transparency regarding AI involvement in content creation has prompted major social media platforms to revise and refine their disclosure policies. Meta, as a dominant player in the digital ecosystem, has established specific guidelines concerning the labeling of AI-generated or AI-altered content. Notably, while still images generated or edited by AI are not universally subject to mandatory labeling, more complex media formats—such as photorealistic videos and synthetic voice recordings—must carry explicit disclosure tags to inform users of their artificial nature [3]. Additionally, Meta’s automated detection systems are programmed to independently identify and tag such content even when the original uploader omits labeling. These evolving policy frameworks reflect a growing institutional recognition of the potential ethical, perceptual, and informational implications of synthetic media. Given these developments, it becomes increasingly important to understand how users cognitively and emotionally respond to AI-labeled content on social platforms—particularly in contexts where visual quality and persuasive intent are central, as in advertising. The present study investigates the impact of source disclosure through the “made with AI” label on user evaluations of social media advertisements. The research focuses on six key perceptual dimensions: trustworthiness, creativity, aesthetic appeal, professionalism, perceived brand quality, and purchase intention. Importantly, the visual content of the advertisements remains constant across conditions, allowing the study to isolate the psychological effects of the AI label itself. The inclusion or absence of this label is hypothesized to influence users’ interpretations through mechanisms related to perceived authenticity, emotional resonance, and attribution of effort—concepts that have been shown to affect brand perception in prior research [4], [5]. In addition, the study considers the moderating role of generational identity, comparing responses among Generations X, Y, and

Z, each of which exhibits distinct levels of digital fluency, trust in automation, and prior exposure to AI-driven content ecosystems [6]. By doing so, the research aims to offer a nuanced perspective on the interplay between technological transparency, user psychology, and demographic segmentation in the digital advertising sphere.

I. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The conceptual underpinnings of this research lie at the intersection of several critical academic domains: source credibility theory, algorithmic content generation, consumer perception in digital environments, and generational psychology. Each of these literatures contributes uniquely to understanding how source labels such as “made with AI” influence audience interpretation, particularly in the context of social media advertising where content is consumed rapidly, often without deep cognitive processing.

A. Source Labeling and Trust Formation

Central to this study is the construct of source labeling, which refers to the explicit disclosure of the origin or mode of production of a message. Rooted in source credibility theory, the notion posits that the trustworthiness, expertise, and perceived intentions of a message source significantly shape the persuasiveness and acceptance of the message itself [7]. In digital spaces, where content is largely user-generated and highly fragmented, source labels act as heuristics—mental shortcuts that help users quickly evaluate content without extensive scrutiny [8].

Labels such as “sponsored,” “promoted,” or “made with AI” are not merely descriptive; they carry implicit communicative value [4]. They frame how content is cognitively processed, influencing whether users perceive it as persuasive, deceptive, objective, or biased. In particular, source labeling functions as a metacommunicative cue—one that shapes the user’s expectations before even engaging with the substantive content. When applied to AI-generated content, such labeling introduces a paradox of transparency. On one side, disclosure may signal ethical responsibility, compliance with platform norms, and a willingness to be honest about the use of non-human agents. It can enhance perceived procedural fairness and signal that the brand is not attempting to mislead the user [4], [9]. On the other hand, however, it can evoke algorithmic skepticism—a growing wariness among users about the increasing reliance on automation in creative industries. This skepticism may lead to assumptions of lower effort, reduced emotional authenticity, or a diminished sense of artistic integrity, thereby affecting the perceived professionalism and credibility of the brand [10], [11], [12].

Furthermore, in fast-paced environments like social media, users may not always consciously register or interpret source labels in rational ways. Instead, dual-process theories of persuasion (e.g., the Elaboration Likelihood Model) suggest that such cues are often processed peripherally, particularly when users are multitasking or passively consuming content. Thus, even subtle labels like “made with AI” can have disproportionate effects on interpretation due to their semiotic weight.

B. AI-Generated Content in Social Media Advertising

The growing use of generative AI in digital advertising has been lauded for its capacity to streamline content production, increase design efficiency, and enable hyper-personalized user experiences [13]. From automated image generation to copywriting and layout optimization, AI offers an unprecedented degree of scalability in campaign execution. Yet, this scalability often comes at the cost of perceived human touch. Visuals produced by AI, while often technically impressive, may lack the nuanced imperfections or subjective creativity that users associate with authentic, human-generated art [14], [15]. This phenomenon aligns with theories of computational creativity and human-machine comparison, which explore the limitations of AI in producing work that resonates emotionally with human audiences. When users become aware that an advertisement was generated by AI—either through labeling or prior knowledge—their interpretive framework shifts. The content is no longer viewed solely in terms of aesthetic appeal or message clarity; instead, users may begin to interrogate its authenticity, originality, and communicative intent [16], [17]. The “made with AI” label, therefore, serves as a trigger for evaluative recalibration, prompting users to re-evaluate the ad’s persuasive legitimacy. Moreover, branding and professionalism cues are particularly vulnerable to these reinterpretations. Even when AI-generated content is visually indistinguishable from human-created work, its artificial origin may be viewed as a signal of lower brand commitment, budget constraints, or a lack of creative depth [18]. This echoes broader concerns about dehumanization in digital branding, where automation is seen as a detachment from values such as empathy, craftsmanship, and cultural insight. Importantly, the effect of AI labeling does not occur in a vacuum—it is moderated by contextual factors such as the platform’s affordances, the ad’s tone and design, and prior user experiences with similar content. As such, understanding the effect of “made with AI” labels requires an integrated analysis of both message features and audience characteristics.

C. Generational Dynamics in the Interpretation of AI Labels

A key premise of this study is that the label “made with AI” does not carry the same interpretive weight across all generational cohorts. Differences in how each generation has encountered and internalized digital technology—shaped by their formative experiences—are likely to influence how algorithmically generated content is perceived, particularly when its artificial origin is made explicit [19]. These generational distinctions are expected to manifest in user responses to AI-labeled advertising, especially in terms of trust, professionalism, creativity, visual appeal, perceived brand quality, and purchase intention. Generation X (born 1965–1980) matured during the analog-to-digital transition and experienced firsthand the early rise of personal computing and the internet. As such, they tend to value originality, creative labor, and human craftsmanship in communication and media [19]. When confronted with content labeled as AI-generated, this group may associate it with reduced human involvement, a loss of emotional nuance, or a decline in brand authenticity. Research on technology use among older adults suggests that while this group is not inherently resistant to digital tools, they are more likely to adopt a critical stance when human-centered values appear to be displaced [20]. In this light, AI disclosure may lead Generation X users to evaluate the content as less trustworthy or professional.

Millennials (Generation Y) (born 1981–1996) came of age during the digital revolution and maintain a hybrid familiarity with both analog and digital cultures. They are generally receptive to automation and personalization, yet increasingly concerned with ethical dimensions of technology—particularly data privacy, transparency, and authenticity in corporate communication [21]. For this group, an AI label can evoke a dual response: it may be appreciated as a gesture of honesty, but also raise doubts about whether automation has replaced creative input as a cost-cutting measure [22]. Their evaluations of AI-labeled ads are likely to be mediated by the overall quality, tone, and perceived sincerity of the content [23], [24]. Generation Z (born 1997–2012) represents the first cohort to grow up in an entirely digital world. Algorithmic systems are not novel to them—they are embedded in their everyday interactions, from curated social media feeds to AI-generated content. This generation is fluent in navigating synthetic environments and often embraces digital tools as extensions of their identity [25]. However, their advanced media literacy also fosters a critical stance toward superficiality and over-automation. As Sani [26] notes, what matters most to Gen Z is not whether a machine was involved, but whether the content resonates emotionally and reflects a sense of human awareness. In this sense, an AI label alone may not deter engagement—but a failure to convey authenticity likely will [27]. Taken together, these generational patterns underscore the interpretive diversity surrounding AI-labeled content. The same disclosure may invite skepticism, indifference, or even appreciation—depending on the generation of the viewer. These nuances form a critical backdrop for understanding how perceptions of AI-generated advertising are shaped not only by the content itself but by the cultural and technological sensibilities of its audience.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study was designed to examine how users evaluate social media post designs produced either by generative AI systems or by human designers, and to determine whether the presence of a “Made with AI” label meaningfully alters these evaluations. As algorithmic content creation becomes increasingly embedded in everyday digital environments, questions surrounding how audiences distinguish between human craftsmanship and machine-generated design—and how disclosure cues shape these perceptions—have become analytically and practically important. Accordingly, the study sought to identify systematic differences in user responses to AI-generated versus human-generated content, to assess the extent to which labeling influences these judgments, and to evaluate how the interaction between the origin of the design and its presentation format informs functional, aesthetic, and persuasive evaluations.

Four stimulus posts were created for the experiment. Two were produced exclusively through generative AI tools by a professional designer who relied solely on text-based prompting; the other two were created by a second professional designer without the use of any AI technologies. To assess the role of labeling, each post was subsequently manipulated to create alternative presentation conditions. In these manipulated versions, human-generated designs were sometimes labeled as “Made with AI,” whereas AI-generated designs were occasionally presented without any label. This structure allowed the study to dissociate the *actual* origin of the design from its *communicated* origin, making it possible to examine how source cues—both true and experimentally altered—contribute to user evaluations. Stimulus materials were systematically coded to preserve experimental traceability. R1 and R4 denoted AI-generated posts, whereas R2 and R3 represented human-generated posts. Each post appeared in an original (O) version, in which it was presented in a manner consistent with its actual origin, and a manipulated (M) version, in which the labeling was altered. This yielded eight total stimuli—R1O, R1M, R2O, R2M, R3O, R3M, R4O, and R4M. These were arranged into four exposure sets (cases): Case 1 presented R1O, R2M, R3O, and R4M; Case 2 presented R1M, R2O, R3M, and R4O; Case 3 consisted of all original versions (R1O, R2O, R3O, R4O); and Case 4 consisted of all manipulated versions (R1M, R2M, R3M, R4M). Each case was distributed via a unique survey link, enabling clean comparisons across labeling, content source, and their combined effects.

The study was conducted with undergraduate students recruited from several major Turkish universities, including Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli University, Selçuk University, Çankaya University, İnönü University, and Istanbul University. Participants

were randomly assigned to one of the four cases and viewed only a single post. After exposure, they evaluated the stimulus on six dimensions central to digital advertising research: perceived trustworthiness, purchase intention, creativity, visual attractiveness, professionalism, and perceived quality. All ratings were captured using ten-point Likert-type scales. Participants also completed a validated measure assessing general attitudes toward AI, standardized to a 0–100 scale, where higher values reflect more favorable orientations toward AI technologies. Data preparation involved merging all stimulus evaluations into a unified dataset, screening for inconsistencies, and recoding stimulus attributes to create analytically coherent variables representing content source and labeling status. Mild scoring adjustments were applied where necessary to ensure comparability across stimuli and response conditions. The analytical strategy proceeded in several stages. Independent samples t-tests were first used to compare evaluations of AI-generated and human-generated designs, followed by parallel analyses contrasting labeled and unlabeled posts. A two-way ANOVA was then conducted to examine the interaction between content source and labeling, thereby assessing whether the influence of labeling differed for AI-generated versus human-generated designs. Finally, a series of OLS regression models tested whether attitudes toward AI predicted evaluation outcomes and whether these associations varied as a function of source or labeling conditions. Together, these procedures provided a comprehensive framework for analyzing how the origin of a design, the information disclosed about that origin, and users' broader orientations toward AI shape the evaluation of digital media content.

A. Theoretical Contributions

This study advances the literature on transparency in AI-mediated advertising by offering three key theoretical contributions that enrich our understanding of user cognition, methodological rigor, and audience segmentation in digital environments. The presence of a “made with AI” label functions not merely as a factual disclosure but as a meta-communicative cue that reshapes the cognitive schema through which users interpret visual advertisements. This framing device has the potential to influence both affective resonance and cognitive elaboration by altering how users assign authorship, intentionality, and emotional depth to the content. Unlike previous research that has focused primarily on textual or chatbot-based interactions, this study extends the scope of AI disclosure effects to include static visual advertising formats—a relatively underexplored domain in the communication sciences.

A second contribution lies in the methodological architecture of the study, particularly its use of randomized within-subject label assignment. Each participant viewed identical visual stimuli, but the presence or absence of AI labeling varied per individual. This procedure offers a high level of internal validity by controlling for visual content biases and isolating the psychological impact of disclosure alone. By decoupling stimulus identity from source labeling, the design enables a clearer attribution of perceptual differences to the label itself—an advance over previous experimental studies that often lacked this degree of content-label separation.

Finally, the study bridges AI transparency with generational psychology, offering insights into how demographic cohorts differentially interpret AI-generated content. By systematically comparing responses from Generations X, Y, and Z—each with distinct digital socialization trajectories and media trust orientations—the research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of audience segmentation in algorithmic advertising. These findings not only refine theoretical models of source credibility and user perception but also provide actionable insights for tailoring AI-enhanced advertising strategies across age-diverse user bases.

III. FINDINGS

A. Comparative Evaluations of AI-Generated and Human-Generated Post Designs

Independent samples t-tests demonstrated systematic and statistically significant differences between AI-generated and human-generated social media post designs across key evaluative dimensions. AI-generated designs obtained higher ratings in perceived trustworthiness ($M = 6.28$ vs. 5.13), $t(386) = 4.77, p < .001$; purchase intention ($M = 5.82$ vs. 4.81), $t(386) = 4.08, p < .001$; and professionalism ($M = 6.32$ vs. 5.17), $t(386) = 4.65, p < .001$. Perceived quality also favored AI-generated designs ($M = 7.25$ vs. 5.39), yielding one of the most pronounced effects, $t(386) = 7.94, p < .001$. Conversely, human-generated designs were rated substantially higher in creativity ($M = 6.70$ vs. 3.57), $t(386) = -12.99, p < .001$, and visual attractiveness ($M = 6.96$ vs. 4.46), $t(386) = -9.91, p < .001$. This pattern indicates a clear bifurcation in evaluative criteria: AI-generated post designs tend to be appraised more favorably on functional, technical, and performance-oriented attributes, whereas human-generated designs retain a marked advantage in domains associated with aesthetic elaboration, expressive depth, and creative distinctiveness. Overall, the findings suggest that user judgments differentiate sharply between algorithmic production and human craftsmanship, with each source conferring distinct perceptual benefits depending on the evaluative dimension.

B. Effects of Labeling on Evaluations of Social Media Post Designs

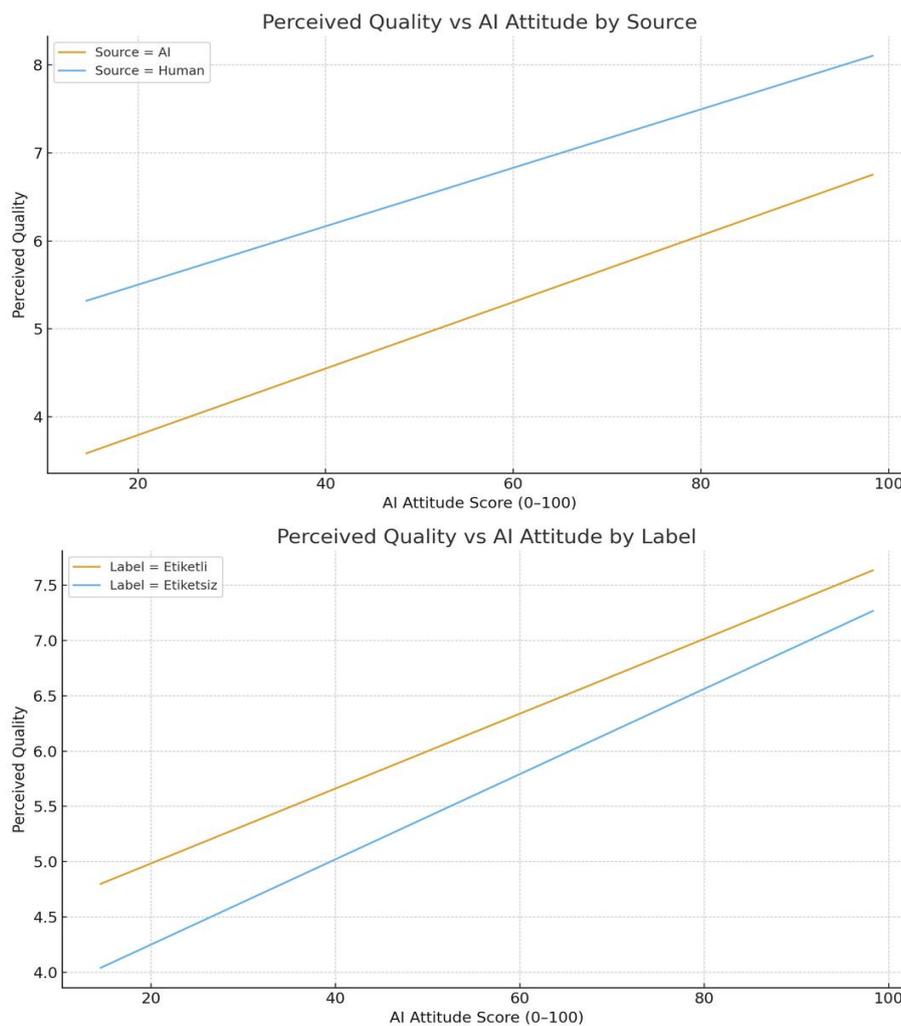
Analyses indicated that the presence of an AI label exerted a highly selective influence on participants' evaluations of social media post designs. No significant differences emerged between labeled and unlabeled posts in perceived trustworthiness, purchase intention, professionalism, creativity, or visual attractiveness, suggesting that labeling alone does not meaningfully alter users' general evaluative judgments across these dimensions (all $p > .12$). However, a significant main effect of labeling was observed for perceived quality, with labeled posts receiving higher evaluations than unlabeled ones, $t(386) \approx 2.37, p < .05$.

This pattern implies that an AI label may serve as a heuristic cue associated with enhanced technical proficiency or production reliability. Importantly, a two-way ANOVA revealed that this labeling effect varied as a function of content source, yielding a significant Source \times Label interaction for perceived quality, $F(1, 384) = 16.57, p < .001$. This interaction suggests that the interpretive weight assigned to an AI label is contingent upon whether the post design is believed to originate from an algorithmic or human creator. Overall, the findings demonstrate that labeling does not operate as a uniform informational cue; instead, its influence is both dimension-specific and source-dependent, shaping perceptions of technical quality while leaving broader affective and aesthetic judgments largely unaffected.

C. The Moderating Role of AI Attitude

As illustrated in the figure, the moderation model assessing whether AI attitude alters evaluations across content source and labeling conditions yielded no significant interaction effects. Moderation analyses showed that attitudes toward AI exerted consistently positive main effects across all evaluative dimensions, whereas no significant interactions emerged with either content source (AI vs. human) or labeling status (labeled vs. unlabeled) (all $p > .36$). Participants with more favorable AI attitudes tended to provide higher evaluations overall, independent of whether the post was AI-generated, human-generated, labeled, or unlabeled. This pattern may suggest that AI attitude operates less as a source-specific moderator and more as a generalized evaluative inclination. Such a tendency could be compatible with theoretical accounts referring to technology-positivity schemas, generalized evaluative bias, or positivity-driven heuristics, which propose that individuals holding more favorable views toward technological innovation may engage with content through a more receptive or optimistic interpretive lens. These mechanisms may help explain why higher AI attitude scores coincided with elevated evaluations across both AI and human content, although the present findings cannot establish causality. Overall, AI attitude appears to function as a broader interpretive orientation that may shape judgments across content types, rather than selectively amplifying responses to AI-specific cues.

TABLE 1



IV. CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to examine how social media users evaluate AI-generated and human-generated advertisement designs and to assess the role of explicit AI source labeling in shaping these evaluations. By systematically disentangling actual production source from presented source information, the findings provide nuanced insights into how algorithmic authorship, disclosure cues, and user dispositions jointly inform perceptual judgments in contemporary digital advertising environments.

The results demonstrate that users apply differentiated evaluative logics when assessing AI-generated and human-generated designs. AI-generated advertisements were evaluated more favorably on functional and performance-oriented dimensions, including trustworthiness, professionalism, purchase intention, and perceived quality. In contrast, human-generated designs retained a clear advantage in creativity and visual attractiveness, suggesting that human authorship continues to be associated with expressive depth, aesthetic nuance, and creative distinctiveness. These findings indicate that user evaluations are not uniformly biased for or against algorithmic production; rather, they reflect a dimension-specific attribution process in which AI and human designers are perceived to excel in different evaluative domains.

With respect to transparency, the findings reveal that the “Made with AI” label does not operate as a generalized disclosure cue affecting all perceptual judgments. Instead, its influence is selective and contingent. While labeling did not significantly alter evaluations of trustworthiness, creativity, visual attractiveness, professionalism, or purchase intention, it exerted a meaningful effect on perceived quality. Moreover, this effect varied depending on the attributed source of the design, as evidenced by a significant Source \times Label interaction. This pattern suggests that AI labeling functions less as a blanket transparency mechanism and more as a heuristic signal related to technical proficiency or production standards, whose interpretive weight depends on whether the content is believed to originate from an algorithmic or human creator.

Importantly, attitudes toward AI emerged as a robust predictor of evaluations across all dimensions, yet did not moderate the effects of content source or labeling. Participants with more favorable orientations toward AI tended to evaluate all advertisements more positively, regardless of whether they were AI-generated or human-generated, labeled or unlabeled. This finding implies that AI attitude functions as a generalized evaluative orientation rather than a source-specific filter, shaping overall receptivity to advertising content without selectively amplifying responses to AI-related cues. Such a pattern aligns with theoretical accounts emphasizing technology-positivity schemas and generalized evaluative bias, while also underscoring the limits of attitudinal moderation in disclosure-based persuasion contexts.

Taken together, the findings contribute to the growing literature on AI-mediated advertising by demonstrating that user perceptions are shaped not solely by the presence of AI, nor solely by transparency practices, but by the interaction between production source, disclosure cues, and audience-level interpretive frameworks. From a practical perspective, the results caution advertisers and platform designers against assuming that AI disclosure will uniformly enhance or undermine ad effectiveness. Instead, the impact of AI labeling appears to be domain-specific and context-dependent, particularly relevant for perceptions of technical quality rather than emotional or aesthetic appeal. As AI-generated content continues to proliferate across social media platforms, understanding these nuanced perceptual dynamics will be critical for developing ethically transparent yet strategically effective advertising practices.

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