Trust in Nonexistent Depicted Persons: AI Disclosure and Dynamic Trust Updating in Brand Social Media Posts Featuring AI-Generated Humans

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Hyper-realistic AI-generated human images are increasingly used in brand social media posts and often appear indistinguishable from photographs of real people. Because such visuals function as credibility cues, audiences may initially treat synthetic individuals as real. This study examines how detailed AI disclosure shapes trust when consumers later learn that a depicted person does not exist. In a between-subjects experiment (N = 402), participants viewed an Instagram-style post featuring an AI-generated woman, with either detailed disclosure or no disclosure. Trust was measured before and after participants were informed that the image was AI-generated, allowing calculation of the change in trust (ΔTrust). Trust declined after the AI origin was revealed, but detailed disclosure mitigated this decline by reducing perceived manipulative intent while increasing perceived syntheticness, which jointly shaped ΔTrust. Age moderated the manipulative-intent pathway, with younger adults showing less negative reactions. These findings suggest that transparency recalibrates rather than simply erodes trust in brand posts featuring AI-generated humans. By focusing on hyper-realistic synthetic-person visuals, the study extends research on AI-mediated communication. Together, these findings indicate that in contexts where visual realism can be technologically constructed, trust is shaped less by perceived visual authenticity and more by the transparency of its origin.

Keywords: AI-generated visuals; disclosure; trust; social media; persuasion knowledge; perceived manipulative intent; syntheticness