ЮБИЛЕЙНА МЕЖДУНАРОДНА НАУЧНО-ПРАКТИЧЕСКА КОНФЕРЕНЦИЯ

ТУРИЗМЪТ В ЕПОХА НА ПРЕХОДИ: ЗНАНИЯ, ПОЛИТИКИ И УСТОЙЧИВИ БИЗНЕС МОДЕЛИ

Сборник с доклади

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THE AUTHENTICITY PARADOX IN THE AGE OF GENERATIVE AI: EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF SYNTHETIC VISUAL CONTENT ON TOURISM DESTINATION BRANDING

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Abstract: This study explores the „Authenticity Paradox" emerging from the incorporation of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) in tourism marketing. As destinations increasingly adopt synthetic visual content to enhance promotional efficiency, a critical tension arises between technological innovation and the traditional consumer demand for „real" travel experiences. Adopting a qualitative approach, the research synthesizes current literature on the Theory of Perceived Authenticity and Source Credibility. The paper analyzes the conceptual shift from human-captured imagery to AI-generated visuals within the context of destination branding. The study identifies that while GenAI offers unprecedented creative flexibility for tourism entrepreneurs, it risks triggering an „uncanny valley" effect, where hyper-perfect synthetic visuals diminish consumer trust. The research proposes that the impact on brand equity depends on the transparency of AI usage and the alignment of synthetic content with the actual physical destination. It offers managerial implications for tourism marketers aiming to balance digital transformation with brand integrity.

Keywords: Generative AI, Destination Branding, Authenticity Paradox, Synthetic Content, Consumer Trust.

Introduction

The rapid evolution of GenAI has initiated a paradigm shift in the global tourism industry. As tourism entrepreneurs and destination marketing organizations seek innovative ways to remain competitive, GenAI tools – capable of producing hyper-realistic synthetic text, images, and videos – have emerged as powerful assets for promotional efficiency. However, this technological leap introduces a fundamental tension known as the „Authenticity Paradox". While GenAI offers unprecedented creative flexibility and cost-reduction for branding, it simultaneously threatens the perceived truthfulness of the travel experience, which remains the cornerstone of consumer trust.

In the context of this paper, *brand integrity* is defined as the critical alignment between the promises made through Marketing communications and the actual reality of the destination. Within the tourism sector, where the „product" is an experiential service that cannot be tested before purchase, brand integrity serves as the primary mediator of consumer confidence. When synthetic visual

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content creates an idealized or „hyper-real“ version of a destination, any discrepancy between the AI-generated imagery and the physical reality can lead to a perceived lack of integrity, subsequently eroding brand equity.

While existing literature predominantly focuses on the quantitative adoption of AI through models like Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)[2], a significant gap remains in understanding the qualitative shift in brand integrity within experiential sectors like tourism. This paper addresses the 'Authenticity Paradox' by exploring the psychological 'Uncanny Valley' of synthetic destination branding – a niche often overlooked in favor of operational efficiency metrics.

The objective of this paper is to explore how synthetic visual content reshapes destination branding strategies. Specifically, it investigates the impact of AI-driven imagery on the consumer’s perception of authenticity. By synthesizing current literature on Source Credibility Theory and the Theory of Perceived Authenticity, this paper presents a conceptual framework for addressing the ethical and strategic challenges of AI integration. Positioned within the broader discourse on business models and market dynamics, the study offers managerial implications for tourism marketers striving to balance digital transformation with the preservation of brand integrity.

The paper is structured to systematically address the complexities of the Authenticity Paradox. First, it establishes a theoretical foundation by synthesizing the Theory of Perceived Authenticity and Source Credibility within the digital tourism landscape. The third section examines the shift toward synthetic visuals from a business model perspective, highlighting the entrepreneurial opportunities and risks associated with Generative marketing. This is followed by a qualitative analysis that explores the tension between transparency and creative illusion in destination branding. Finally, the paper concludes with managerial implications and strategic recommendations, offering a framework for tourism practitioners to integrate GenAI while safeguarding the brand integrity that remains essential to consumer trust in the global travel market.

1. Theoretical Framework: Authenticity and Credibility in Tourism

The theoretical landscape of tourism marketing is currently undergoing a profound transformation as traditional models of technology adoption struggle to account for the nuances of GenAI. Historically, research in this field has been dominated by the TAM, which posits that adoption is driven primarily by perceived usefulness and ease of use (Davis, 1989). However, recent research argues that the TAM framework is increasingly insufficient for evaluating GenAI, as it overlooks the complex socio-psychological dimensions of trust and identity (Mogaji et al., 2024). In the experiential domain of tourism – where the „product“

[2] Originally developed by Fred Davis in 1989, TAM is one of the most influential theories in information systems. It focuses on two primary factors that determine whether a user will adopt a new technology: Perceived Usefulness and Perceived Ease of Use.

is an intangible promise of reality – branding requires a shift from utilitarian metrics toward a deeper understanding of brand integrity and perceived truthfulness (Xu et al., 2024).

1.1. The Theory of Perceived Authenticity

In tourism specialized literature, authenticity has long been recognized as the primary „value“ sought by travelers (MacCannell, 1973; Wang, 1999). Traditionally, this was categorized into *objective authenticity* (the factual reality of an object) and *constructive authenticity* (the social projection of meaning). However, the rise of „AI-thenticity“ challenges these boundaries (Bui et al., 2024). Because travel is a „credence good“ – one that cannot be evaluated until consumed – the visual representation of a destination serves as a surrogate for the experience itself. As Elsawy and Nassar (2025) observe, the integration of synthetic visuals creates a paradox: while GenAI can generate hyper-realistic imagery that enhances a destination's aesthetic appeal, it may simultaneously erode *indexical authenticity*, as consumers increasingly question whether the promotional „promise“ has a physical counterpart in reality.

1.2. Source Credibility in the AI Era

The consumer’s ability to trust these synthetic promises is rooted in Source Credibility Theory, which evaluates a communicator’s perceived expertise and trustworthiness (Hovland et al., 1953). In the digital era, this credibility is no longer solely tied to the human author but to the „algorithmic source.“ Recent studies suggest that the disclosure of AI-generated content plays a pivotal role in maintaining brand integrity; transparency regarding the use of AI can actually mitigate the loss of trust by aligning the brand’s actions with consumer expectations of honesty (Zhang & Prebensen, 2024). Without such transparency, the shift from human-captured photography to algorithmic generation risks a „credibility gap,“ where the brand is perceived as deceptive rather than innovative.

1.3. The Uncanny Valley of Branding

This tension is further complicated by the psychological phenomenon of the uncanny valley. Originally applied to robotics (Mori et al., 2012), this theory suggests that as a non-human entity becomes „too real“ yet remains slightly artificial, it triggers a sense of unease or revulsion in the observer. In the context of tourism branding, this manifests when hyper-perfect, AI-enhanced landscapes exceed the bounds of natural beauty, creating a „perfectly fake“ aesthetic that alienates potential travelers (Wong et al., 2024). This aesthetic repulsion directly counteracts the creative flexibility offered by GenAI, suggesting that for tourism entrepreneurs, the strategic goal is not maximum perfection, but a „believable reality“ that preserves the brand’s perceived integrity.

2. The Shift to Synthetic Visuals: Impact on Tourism Business Models

The integration of GenAI is fundamentally altering the value chain of tourism marketing, moving the industry from traditional „photography-based marketing“ to a paradigm of „generative marketing.“ For small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), such as boutique hotels and local tour operators, this shift offers a significant entrepreneurial advantage by drastically reducing the high costs associated with professional photography, location scouting, and post-production (Xu et al., 2024). By leveraging GenAI, these smaller players can produce high-quality visual assets that were previously the exclusive domain of large corporations with substantial marketing budgets, effectively „democratizing“ aesthetic excellence in the tourism market.

However, this transition introduces critical strategic risks rooted in the credibility gap. While generative marketing allows for rapid content iteration, it risks decoupling the promotional image from the destination's indexical authenticity – the factual, „as-is“ reality of the physical site (Bui et al., 2024). For a business model to remain resilient, it must ensure that the AI-enhanced „promise“ does not lead to service failure upon the tourist's arrival. When SMEs over-rely on synthetic perfection, they risk a collapse of brand integrity, where the disappointment of the physical reality vs. the digital illusion leads to negative reviews and a permanent loss of consumer trust (Zhang & Prebensen, 2024).

Furthermore, the widespread adoption of GenAI creates a market risk of the „commoditization of beauty.“ If every destination, hotel, and attraction uses the same algorithmic tools to generate „perfect“ sunsets and pristine landscapes, visual differentiation becomes impossible. In this saturated market, „perfection“ becomes the baseline, and the brand's unique value proposition is diluted. To succeed, tourism entrepreneurs must pivot their business models away from mere aesthetic appeal and toward human-centric differentiation. Successful models are increasingly integrating „hybrid content“ – mixing synthetic efficiency with raw, user-generated, or „human-verified“ content – to signal honesty and preserve the brand’s competitive edge in an increasingly artificial marketplace (Mogaji et al., 2024).

3. Navigating the Authenticity Paradox: A Qualitative Analysis

The practical application of GenAI in destination branding reveals a delicate trade-off between the creative „illusion“ of perfect marketing and the ethical necessity of transparency. To understand how brand integrity acts as a safety net, the paper examines specific ***real-world implementations***.

3.1. The AI-Influencer and the „Hyper-Real“ Destination

Consider the emergence of AI-generated travel influencers – digital personas that „visit“ and promote real-world destinations. This represents the pinnacle

of transparency vs. illusion trade-off. From a branding perspective, an AI influencer provides a controlled, 24/7 aesthetic that never experiences travel fatigue or bad weather. However, the paradox arises when the influencer's hyper-perfect depiction of a destination (e.g., a secluded beach in Bali) surpasses what is physically possible for a human tourist to experience. If the brand fails to disclose the synthetic nature of the promoter, it creates a credibility gap. When tourists arrive to find crowded shores instead of the influencer's serene, AI-optimized vistas, the perceived lack of integrity leads to immediate brand devaluation. In this case, brand integrity is maintained only if the AI influencer is positioned as a creative mascot rather than a factual witness.

Real-world implementation: A prominent example of this trade-off is Emma, the AI-generated travel influencer launched by the German National Tourist Board (GNTB) in 2024. As a digital ambassador, Emma „travels" through Germany, sharing itineraries and tips across social media. While she offers 24/7 engagement and perfect brand control, her debut sparked significant debate regarding the credibility gap. Critics argued that an AI entity, which lacks the capacity to taste German wine or feel the texture of historic cobblestones, cannot provide the „nuanced commentary" that makes human influencers worth following. This case highlights that for an AI influencer to support brand integrity, they must be positioned as a digital guide or storyteller rather than a surrogate for human lived experience.

3.2. Synthetic Posters and the „Creative License" Boundary

A second case involves destination marketing organizations using AI-generated posters to evoke the feeling of a place rather than documenting its specific geography (similar to the recent „Visit Casper" or „Switzerland Tourism" experiments). In these cases, the use of AI is not intended to deceive, but to inspire. The risk of the uncanny valley is mitigated when the artwork is clearly stylized – moving away from photorealism toward artistic expression. The safety net for these brands lies in the alignment of expectations. If the AI content is framed as an „artistic vision," the brand's integrity remains intact because the consumer does not expect indexical authenticity from a painting or a stylized poster. The failure occurs only when the marketing implies that the synthetic image is a „photograph" of a specific, attainable reality.

Real-world implementation: The use of GenAI for artistic inspiration is exemplified by the Lithuania Travel campaign in 2023. The tourism board has utilized the AI tool Midjourney to create a series of surreal posters reimagining Lithuanian landscapes and iconic landmarks, such as St. Anne's Church, in various artistic styles. By intentionally using a surrealist aesthetic, the campaign avoided the uncanny valley – it did not attempt to pass synthetic images off as real photographs. Instead, it framed AI as a tool for co-creation, inviting potential visitors from key markets like the United Kingdom and Germany to see the country through a „dream-like" lens. Brand integrity remained intact because the

marketing was transparently artistic, aligning consumer expectations with inspiration rather than literal documentation.

3.3. Brand Integrity as the Strategic Safety Net

These examples demonstrate that brand integrity – defined as the alignment between promise and reality – is not about avoiding (Gen)AI, but about managing the disclosure of the source. For tourism entrepreneurs, the safety net is built through transparency. By explicitly labeling synthetic content (e.g., „AI-enhanced for artistic effect"), a brand protects its credibility. This proactive transparency prevents the customer from feeling „tricked," thereby bridges the gap between technological innovation and the human-centric demand for truth. Ultimately, the brands that thrive are those that use GenAI to enhance the dream of travel without compromising the truth of the destination.

Real-world implementation: The campaign titled „Open to Meraviglia" by the Italian Ministry of Tourism provides a cautionary tale of when the safety net fails. Featuring an AI-digitized version of Botticelli's artwork featuring Venus as a as a modern „influencer", the campaign has faced backlash for technical errors and a perceived lack of authentic cultural depth (Francesconi, 2025). In contrast, brands like Qatar Airways (2025) have successfully used their virtual cabin crew, „Sama", to bridge the gap. Sama is explicitly „staff-coded"; she has a clear role and uniform, acting as a functional brand asset rather than a fake traveler. This transparency ensures that the credibility gap is closed, as users understand her purpose is service facilitation and brand storytelling, not authentic human testimony.

4. Managerial Implications and Strategic Recommendations

The integration of GenAI into tourism branding is no longer a matter of technical capability, but of strategic ethics. To navigate the Authenticity Paradox and protect brand integrity, tourism marketers and entrepreneurs must shift from a „content-first" to a „trust-first" approach. Based on the qualitative analysis of current industry trends, the following recommendations are proposed:

Proactive Disclosure and Labeling Strategies: Transparency is the primary tool for closing the credibility gap. Managers should adopt clear labeling protocols for synthetic visuals. When GenAI is used for functional or artistic purposes (e.g., stylized posters or virtual assistants), explicit disclosure (e.g., „AI-enhanced for creative inspiration") prevents the consumer from feeling deceived. Research suggests (Zhang & Prebensen, 2024) that consumers are more forgiving of synthetic content when the brand is honest about its origin, as this aligns with the Source Credibility Theory – the brand is seen as an innovative curator rather than a deceptive actor.

Implementing Hybrid Content Models: To counteract the Uncanny Valley and the commoditization of beauty, tourism brands should adopt a „Hybrid

Content Model.“ This involves balancing AI-generated efficiency with human-captured „raw“ content. For example, a hotel may use GenAI to create high-gloss, inspirational campaign headers, but must supplement these with authentic, unedited User-Generated Content (UGC) or real photography in galleries. This „raw-meets-refined“ aesthetic signals that the brand is grounded in physical reality, satisfying the traveler's demand for indexical authenticity.

Brand Integrity Audits: Before launching a GenAI-driven campaign, marketers have to conduct a „Brand Integrity Audit.“ This process involves a rigorous comparison between the (Gen)AI-generated „marketing promise“ and the actual physical destination or service. If an GenAI tool removes crowds from a landmark or adds non-existent amenities to a resort image, the brand is setting itself up for service failure. Managers must ensure that the synthetic „illusion“ remains a representative enhancement rather than a factual fabrication.

Strategic Differentiation through „Human-First“ Values: As the market becomes saturated with algorithmic perfection, „humanity“ becomes a luxury. Tourism entrepreneurs should use GenAI to handle repetitive operational marketing tasks while reinvesting saved resources into human-centric branding. Highlighting local stories, artisanal experiences, and genuine human interactions provides the differentiation that AI cannot replicate, thereby strengthening the brand's unique value proposition in a digitalized market.

Conclusion

This study has explored the dual nature of GenAI as both a transformative tool for marketing efficiency and a potential threat to the fundamental pillar of tourism: authenticity. By defining and applying the concept of brand integrity, the research highlights that the success of GenAI in tourism branding depends not on the perfection of the technology, but on the transparency of the business model. While the „Authenticity Paradox“ presents a significant challenge, it also offers an opportunity for tourism brands to redefine their relationship with consumers. Moving forward, the most resilient tourism business models will be those that use synthetic innovation to inspire the traveler’s imagination while remaining fiercely committed to the physical truth of the destination.

While this study provides a qualitative foundation for understanding the Authenticity Paradox, it also opens several avenues for *future research*. These are as follows:

Quantitative Validation of the „AI-thenticity“ Framework: Future research should move from qualitative conceptualization to empirical testing, using experimental designs to measure the exact threshold at which (Gen)AI visual perfection triggers the uncanny valley effect in different tourism niches (e.g., luxury vs. budget travel).

Cross-Cultural Perceptions of Synthetic Content: Comparative studies are needed to investigate whether travelers from different cultural backgrounds (e.g.,

Western vs. Eastern markets) have varying levels of tolerance for (Gen)AI-generated imagery and different expectations for brand integrity disclosures.

The Impact of AI Transparency Labels on Conversion Rates: While transparency is hypothesized to protect trust, future longitudinal studies could analyze the actual impact of „AI-generated“ labels on click-through rates and booking conversions in real-world online travel agency environments.

Generative AI and Sustainable Tourism Branding: Research should explore if GenAI can be used to promote sustainable behaviors without creating „greenwashed“ illusions. This includes investigating how synthetic content can represent fragile ecosystems without misleading tourists about the actual environmental state of the destination.

Long-term Effects on Brand Equity and Loyalty: As the novelty of GenAI fades, scholars should examine the long-term impact of synthetic marketing on brand equity. Specifically, if a reliance on AI visuals lead to a „brand dilution“ where destinations lose their unique emotional connection with consumers over time.

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