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Digital Authenticity under Generative AI: Mechanisms of Synthetic Signal Construction and Strategic Legitimacy in Branding

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Abstrak

The diffusion of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) in branding practices challenges a central assumption in authenticity research: that legitimacy derives primarily from indexical continuity between expressive artifacts and experiential origin. As firms increasingly rely on synthetic systems to produce scalable, adaptive, and stylistically coherent brand communications, the structural linkage between expression and embodied authorship becomes attenuated. This article develops a mechanism-based framework to explain how authenticity and strategic legitimacy are reconstructed under conditions of generative intensification. Integrating signaling theory, legitimacy theory, and dynamic capabilities, the analysis conceptualizes authenticity as an emergent property of orchestrated synthetic signal regimes rather than as an intrinsic attribute of origin. The framework specifies a curvilinear relationship between generative AI intensity and perceived authenticity: moderate integration enhances coherence and responsiveness, while uncalibrated intensification risks signal dilution and perceived artificiality. Perceived authenticity mediates the effect of generative intensity on strategic legitimacy, and synthetic signal orchestration capability conditions the threshold at which legitimacy erosion occurs. Contextual salience, including heritage intensity and customer epistemic sensitivity, further shapes these dynamics. By reframing authenticity as governance-dependent under digital abundance, the article extends branding theory and dynamic capabilities scholarship while providing a structured agenda for empirical examination of AI-enabled marketing transformation.

Keywords

digital authenticity; dynamic capabilities; generative ai; signaling theory; strategic legitimacy; synthetic signal orchestration

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1. Introduction

Persistent market volatility has become a structurally embedded condition of contemporary competitive environments rather than a temporary deviation from equilibrium. Accelerated information diffusion, financialization of markets, geopolitical fragmentation, technological discontinuities, and monetary tightening cycles have collectively intensified uncertainty and compressed strategic reaction windows (Baker et al., 2016; Gennaioli et al., 2018; Wenzel, Stanske, & Lieberman, 2021). Unlike episodic crises, persistent volatility generates continuous valuation shifts, sectoral rotations, and expectation reversals that destabilize long-standing assumptions about strategic planning and risk governance. Under such conditions, performance dispersion across firms widens, and exposure asymmetries become amplified rather than absorbed (Bromiley, Rau, & Zhang, 2017; Bhamra, Dani, & Burnard, 2023).

Authenticity has long been treated as a foundational pillar of brand value. Within marketing and consumer research, authenticity is conceptualized as emerging from historical continuity, human intentionality, craftsmanship, and identity coherence (Beverland, 2005; Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Napoli et al., 2014). This body of work implicitly assumes that expressive outputs—brand narratives, visual symbols, and communicative artifacts—derive their legitimacy from experiential grounding. Authenticity, in this view, is anchored in origin.

However, the diffusion of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) introduces a structural decoupling between expression and experiential source. Generative systems produce brand-relevant artifacts—text, imagery, voice, and interaction—through probabilistic recombination of learned patterns rather than through human biographical intentionality (Riemer & Peter, 2024). As firms increasingly integrate GenAI into branding processes (Kumar et al., 2024; Mariani & Dwivedi, 2024), expressive outputs become scalable, adaptive, and style-consistent, yet ontologically detached from lived experience.

This decoupling generates a fundamental theoretical tension. Existing authenticity theory assumes that legitimacy flows from historically grounded origin signals. Yet generative branding practices rely on synthetic signal production, where the expressive artifact no longer guarantees experiential lineage. If authenticity is tied to origin, then synthetic generation should erode legitimacy. Empirically, however, AI-enabled branding does not uniformly diminish brand evaluations. In some contexts, it enhances perceived personalization, consistency, and responsiveness—attributes positively associated with brand strength (Kumar et al., 2024). In other contexts, it produces perceptions of artificiality, manipulation, or detachment, undermining trust (Saura et al., 2024).

The coexistence of these divergent outcomes indicates that authenticity under GenAI cannot be adequately explained as a linear function of technological presence. Rather, it suggests that authenticity must be reconsidered at the level of signal construction and organizational orchestration. The central theoretical problem is therefore not whether AI-generated content is authentic, but through what mechanisms synthetic signals acquire or lose legitimacy.

This article advances a mechanism-based account of digital authenticity under generative AI. Building on signaling theory (Spence, 1973; Connelly et al., 2011), legitimacy theory (Suchman, 1995), and dynamic capabilities (Teece, 2007; Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000), the analysis shifts authenticity from an ontological property of origin to a strategic outcome of signal alignment. In doing so, it proposes that the relationship between AI intensity and brand legitimacy follows a non-linear trajectory. Moderate integration of generative systems can enhance perceived authenticity through increased coherence and personalization, whereas high-intensity reliance may dilute indexical cues of human intentionality, triggering legitimacy erosion.

The argument further specifies the organizational mechanisms that mediate this trajectory. Firms differ in their ability to orchestrate generative outputs, regulate signal density, maintain narrative continuity, and manage attribution transparency. These processes constitute a distinct capability—synthetic signal orchestration—that conditions whether generative scaling results in legitimacy reinforcement or authenticity dilution. This capability perspective integrates exploration–exploitation dynamics (March, 1991) with AI-enabled content production, showing how excessive exploitation of generative efficiency can generate competence traps that undermine symbolic differentiation (Levinthal & March, 1993).

By developing this framework, the article makes three contributions. First, it reconceptualizes authenticity as a function of orchestrated signal regimes rather than historical origin, thereby challenging a central assumption in branding theory. Second, it explicates the non-linear strategic consequences of AI intensification, specifying mechanisms through which synthetic scalability transitions from value creation to legitimacy risk. Third, it identifies boundary conditions—such as heritage salience and industry symbolic intensity—that shape the threshold at which authenticity erosion occurs.

2. Theoretical Foundations

The theoretical problem identified in the introduction requires revisiting three streams of literature that have developed largely in parallel: authenticity in branding, signaling and legitimacy theory, and dynamic capabilities. Each offers partial insight into how value and legitimacy are constructed, yet none fully accounts for the structural decoupling between expression and experiential origin introduced by generative systems. Integrating these literatures makes it possible to specify how authenticity shifts from a property of origin to an outcome of orchestrated signal alignment.

2.1 Authenticity as Origin-Based Legitimacy

Authenticity research in marketing and consumer behavior has consistently treated authenticity as anchored in indexical cues that point to historical continuity and human intentionality. Foundational work distinguishes between indexical authenticity—signals tied to real, traceable origins—and iconic authenticity—signals that symbolically resemble what is culturally coded as authentic (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Subsequent research operationalizes authenticity through dimensions such as sincerity, heritage, craftsmanship, and moral integrity (Beverland, 2005; Napoli et al., 2014; Morhart et al., 2015). Across these formulations, authenticity emerges as a perceptual judgment grounded in the perceived congruence between brand expression and underlying identity.

This literature implicitly assumes that expressive artifacts are causally linked to embodied sources. The persuasive force of authenticity depends on the belief that brand signals are indexically connected to real practices, real histories, or real actors. Even when authenticity is framed as socially constructed, the construction relies on credible referents that anchor symbolic claims in experiential reality. Authenticity thus functions as a legitimacy mechanism: it reduces uncertainty by assuring audiences that the brand's representations correspond to stable and verifiable foundations (Suchman, 1995; Deephouse & Carter, 2005).

The integration of generative systems destabilizes this assumption. When brand narratives, visual content, or interactive responses are produced through probabilistic recombination rather than through direct experiential articulation, the indexical link between expression and origin becomes opaque. The artifact may display stylistic coherence, yet its connection to lived practice is no longer self-evident. Authenticity, under such conditions, cannot be inferred solely from origin cues. The mechanism through which authenticity judgments form must therefore shift from origin verification to signal interpretation.

This shift exposes a theoretical gap. Existing authenticity models explain how stable identity generates credible signals, but they do not explain how legitimacy emerges when signal production is partially detached from experiential grounding. To address this gap, authenticity must be re-specified in terms of signaling processes rather than ontological origin.

A conceptual clarification is required at this stage of the manuscript to visually articulate the ontological transition from origin-based authenticity to governance-based synthetic signal regimes. The framework below formalizes that shift by contrasting the underlying signaling logic, credibility anchors, and interpretive mechanisms across the two regimes. This visual establishes the theoretical discontinuity that motivates the mechanism-based model developed in subsequent sections.

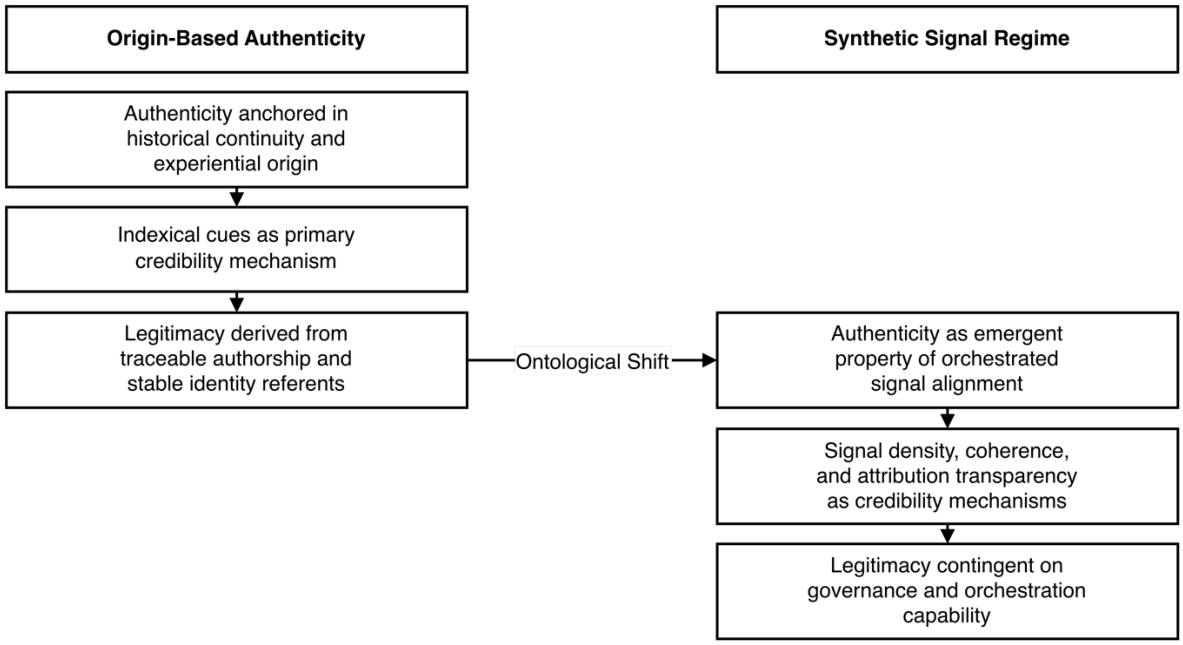

Figure 1. From Origin-Based Authenticity to Synthetic Signal Regimes
Source: Developed by the authors

As illustrated in Figure 1, the framework clarifies the ontological transition that underpins the article's argument. Rather than grounding authenticity in traceable experiential origin, the architecture on the right reframes it as an emergent property of orchestrated synthetic signals. Figure 1 establishes the conceptual discontinuity that necessitates the subsequent mechanism-based explanation of curvilinear authenticity dynamics and capability-conditioned legitimacy outcomes.

2.2 Signaling, Legitimacy, and the Construction of Meaning under Uncertainty

Signaling theory provides a framework for analyzing how actors convey credible information under conditions of asymmetry (Spence, 1973; Connelly et al., 2011). Signals influence audience judgments when they are costly, consistent, and difficult to imitate. In branding contexts, authenticity-related cues function as signals that reduce uncertainty about a firm's underlying qualities. The credibility of these signals traditionally derives from their indexical grounding: historical continuity, artisanal production, or visible human agency increase the perceived cost of imitation and thereby enhance signal reliability.

Legitimacy theory complements this perspective by conceptualizing authenticity as a generalized perception that organizational actions are appropriate within socially constructed systems of norms and values (Suchman, 1995). Legitimacy emerges not from intrinsic qualities but from alignment between signals and shared expectations. When signals consistently align with normative schemas, audiences grant stability and trust.

Generative AI alters the cost structure and density of signaling. Because generative systems enable rapid production of stylistically coherent artifacts at scale, the marginal cost of expressive variation declines. Signal density increases: brands can communicate more frequently, across more touchpoints, and with higher personalization. However, reduced production cost can also weaken traditional credibility markers. If expressive outputs become abundant and easily modifiable, audiences may infer lower commitment or weaker identity grounding.

This dual effect suggests that authenticity judgments depend not only on signal content but on signal regime characteristics: density, coherence, attribution clarity, and perceived human involvement. Under generative conditions, legitimacy is mediated by how audiences interpret the orchestration of synthetic signals. When synthetic production enhances coherence and responsiveness without obscuring attribution, it may strengthen legitimacy. When it produces over-standardization, excessive variability, or ambiguous authorship, it may trigger skepticism.

The implication is that authenticity is not extinguished by synthetic generation; rather, its mechanism shifts. Legitimacy becomes a function of how synthetic signals are aligned, sequenced, and contextualized within broader identity narratives. This interpretation foregrounds the organizational processes that regulate signal construction.

2.3 Dynamic Capabilities and Synthetic Signal Orchestration

To explain how organizations manage this shift, dynamic capabilities theory provides an appropriate lens. Dynamic capabilities refer to the firm's ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competences in response to changing environments (Teece et al., 1997; Teece, 2007). In the context of generative branding, the relevant capability is not merely technological adoption but the orchestration of synthetic signals in ways that preserve identity coherence and legitimacy.

From an exploration–exploitation perspective (March, 1991), generative systems expand exploratory capacity by enabling rapid variation and experimentation in brand expression. Simultaneously, they facilitate exploitation through efficient replication of successful stylistic patterns. However, excessive reliance on exploitation can generate competence traps (Levinthal & March, 1993), where firms over-optimize around scalable templates at the expense of symbolic differentiation. In branding contexts, this dynamic manifests as stylistic homogenization or diminished indexical distinctiveness.

Dynamic capabilities mediate this tension by structuring how generative outputs are integrated into identity narratives. Sensing processes identify shifts in audience expectations regarding transparency and authenticity. Seizing processes determine how generative systems are deployed across touchpoints. Transforming processes recalibrate governance mechanisms, including disclosure policies and human oversight visibility. Together, these routines constitute what can be termed synthetic signal orchestration capability: the firm's capacity to align generative outputs with legitimacy requirements.

Crucially, dynamic capabilities theory implies non-linearity. As generative intensity increases, the marginal benefits of coherence and scalability may initially outweigh legitimacy risks. Beyond a certain threshold, however, declining indexical cues and perceived artificiality may dominate. The transition from legitimacy enhancement to legitimacy erosion is not gradual but contingent on how orchestration routines adapt to signal density and attribution ambiguity.

By integrating authenticity theory, signaling logic, and dynamic capabilities, a conceptual foundation emerges in which authenticity is neither an intrinsic property nor an automatic casualty of synthetic production. It becomes a strategic outcome shaped by how firms configure and govern synthetic signal regimes.

3. Synthetic Signal Construction and Strategic Legitimacy

The integration of generative systems into branding processes alters the structural conditions under which authenticity judgments are formed. As established, authenticity has historically depended on the perceived indexical linkage between expression and experiential origin. Generative systems introduce a condition in which expressive artifacts are scalable, stylistically coherent, and personalized, yet probabilistically generated. This condition does not eliminate signaling processes; rather, it reconfigures their architecture.

The core analytical task is therefore to specify how synthetic signal construction influences perceived authenticity and, through it, strategic legitimacy.

3.1 From Origin Signals to Synthetic Signal Regimes

Under origin-based authenticity, signal credibility derives from traceable referents: craftsmanship, heritage, or visible human authorship. Generative systems weaken direct traceability but increase expressive consistency and adaptive responsiveness. The locus of authenticity shifts from verifying origin to interpreting signal regimes.

A signal regime can be defined as the structured configuration of expressive outputs characterized by their density, coherence, variability, and attribution transparency. Generative systems increase signal density by enabling frequent and personalized brand interactions. At moderate levels, increased density enhances perceived attentiveness and relevance. Consistency across touchpoints reinforces identity coherence, which authenticity research associates with sincerity and integrity (Morhart et al., 2015).

In this phase, synthetic production strengthens perceived authenticity not because it restores indexical origin, but because it improves alignment between brand signals and audience expectations. The mechanism operates through coherence amplification: repeated stylistic alignment reduces interpretive ambiguity and stabilizes brand meaning.

Proposition 1.
Moderate integration of generative AI enhances perceived authenticity by increasing signal coherence and adaptive responsiveness.

However, signal density is not unboundedly beneficial. As generative intensity increases, expressive outputs risk becoming hyper-consistent or stylistically standardized across contexts. The probabilistic recombination process may converge toward dominant stylistic patterns, reducing perceived distinctiveness. When stylistic artifacts appear formulaic or detached from identifiable human agency, audiences may infer strategic manipulation rather than expressive sincerity.

This dynamic introduces a threshold effect. Beyond a certain level of generative intensity, increases in signal density produce diminishing authenticity returns. The interpretive frame shifts from “coherent and responsive” to “automated and impersonal.” Indexical cues decline while algorithmic cues become salient.

The resulting relationship between generative intensity and perceived authenticity is therefore curvilinear.

At this stage of the manuscript, the argument advances from conceptual repositioning to a non-linear mechanism. The following figure formalizes the inverted U-shaped relationship between generative AI intensity and perceived authenticity, clarifying the threshold logic introduced in Proposition 2. The visualization isolates the curvilinear dynamic before additional mediators and moderators are introduced.

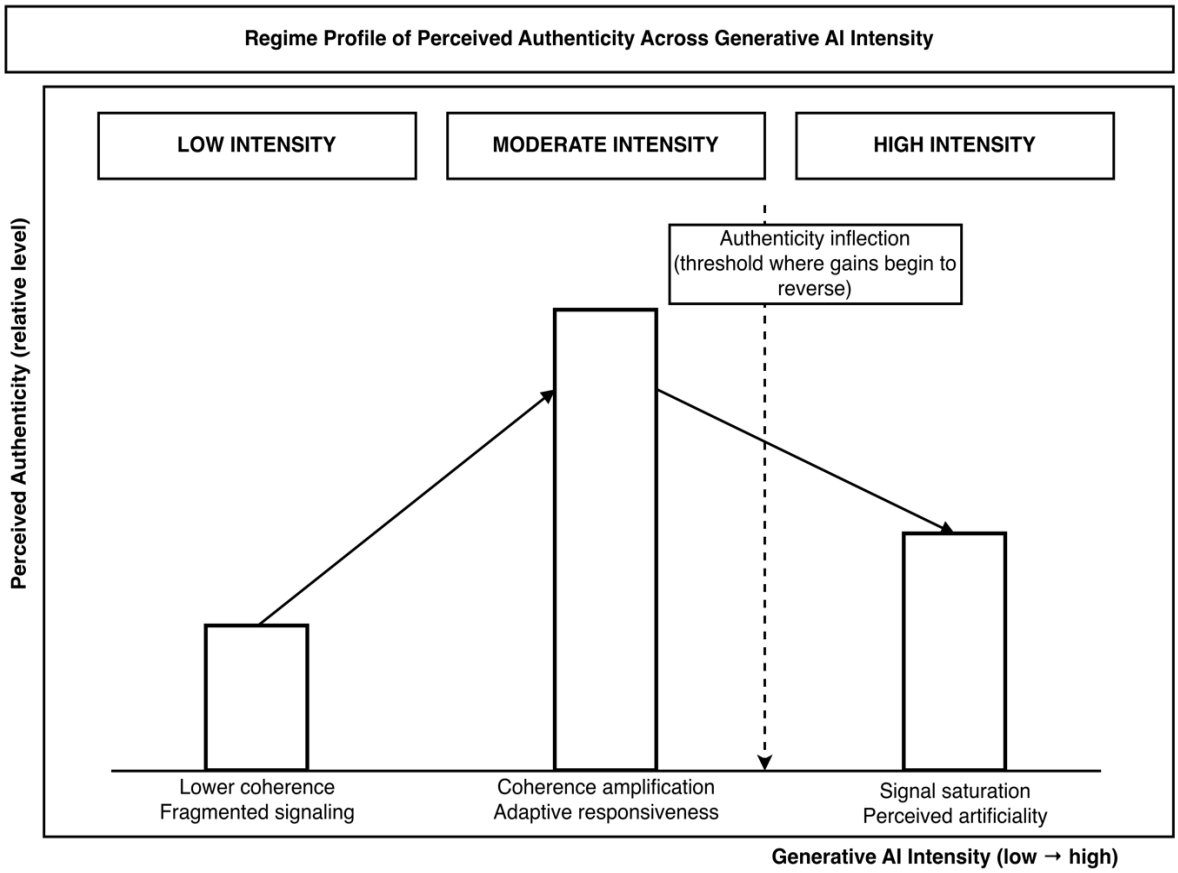

Figure 2. Curvilinear Relationship Between Generative AI Intensity and Perceived Authenticity
Source: Developed by the authors

Figure 2 formalizes the inverted U-shaped relationship proposed in Section 3.1. As generative AI intensity increases, perceived authenticity initially rises due to improved coherence and adaptive responsiveness. Beyond the inflection point, however, escalating signal density and perceived artificiality reduce authenticity evaluations. This non-linear dynamic establishes the threshold logic that underpins subsequent arguments regarding mediation and capability-based moderation.

Proposition 2.
The relationship between generative AI intensity and perceived authenticity follows an inverted U-shaped pattern.

3.2 Authenticity as a Mediator of Strategic Legitimacy

Authenticity influences legitimacy by signaling alignment between organizational identity and stakeholder expectations. Legitimacy theory conceptualizes this alignment as socially constructed but dependent on credible cues (Suchman, 1995). When authenticity perceptions increase, stakeholders interpret brand actions as appropriate and consistent, reinforcing generalized legitimacy.

Under generative conditions, authenticity functions as an interpretive filter between synthetic signal regimes and strategic legitimacy. Improvements in coherence and personalization enhance authenticity perceptions, which in turn strengthen legitimacy judgments. Conversely, perceived artificiality weakens authenticity, thereby undermining legitimacy.

The mediating mechanism is interpretive congruence. Stakeholders evaluate whether expressive artifacts reflect stable identity commitments. Synthetic outputs that appear strategically over-optimized may trigger suspicion regarding opportunism or identity dilution.

Proposition 3.
Perceived authenticity mediates the relationship between generative AI intensity and strategic legitimacy.

The non-linear structure introduced in Proposition 2 thus translates into a non-linear legitimacy trajectory.

3.3 Organizational Mediation: Synthetic Signal Orchestration Capability

The inverted U-shape is not technologically determined; it is organizationally conditioned. Firms vary in their capacity to manage synthetic signal regimes. This capacity derives from dynamic capabilities that structure how generative systems are embedded within branding routines.

Synthetic signal orchestration capability encompasses three interdependent routines. First, sensing routines identify shifts in audience expectations regarding transparency and human involvement. Second, seizing routines determine how generative systems are calibrated across communication contexts. Third, transforming routines adjust governance mechanisms, including disclosure norms and human oversight structures.

The next analytically required element is the structural clarification of synthetic signal orchestration capability before the full integrative model is introduced. This table decomposes the capability into its constitutive routines and specifies how each dimension regulates legitimacy risk under generative intensification. By formalizing the internal architecture of the moderator, the subsequent integrative model becomes conceptually transparent rather than compressed.

Table 1. Dimensions of Synthetic Signal Orchestration Capability

Orchestration Dimension	Generative AI Contextual Challenge	Governance Mechanism	Legitimacy-Relevant Function	Risk if Weak
Sensing	Detecting shifts in audience expectations regarding authenticity, transparency, and human involvement	Monitoring interpretive reactions, tracking authenticity perceptions, scanning normative discourse	Anticipates legitimacy thresholds and recalibrates intensity before authenticity erosion occurs	Delayed response to skepticism; misalignment with evolving authenticity schemas
Seizing	Calibrating deployment of generative systems across brand touchpoints	Selective integration, intensity modulation, contextual adaptation of synthetic outputs	Balances coherence and personalization with identity stability	Over-standardization; indiscriminate scaling; signal saturation
Transforming	Reconfiguring governance structures under increasing signal density	Disclosure policies, visible human oversight, attribution transparency routines	Preserves indexical cues and interpretive credibility under synthetic production	Attribution ambiguity; perceived manipulation; accelerated authenticity decline

Source: Developed by the authors

Table 1 clarifies that synthetic signal orchestration capability is not equivalent to technological adoption. It consists of structured sensing, seizing, and transforming routines that regulate signal density, attribution clarity, and coherence under generative conditions. By specifying governance mechanisms and associated legitimacy risks, Table 1

operationalizes the moderator introduced in Section 3.3 and prepares the analytical ground for the integrative model presented subsequently.

When orchestration capability is strong, firms regulate signal density and maintain attribution clarity. Human oversight is made visible, preserving indexical cues even when production is synthetic. Under such conditions, the threshold at which authenticity declines is shifted upward.

When orchestration capability is weak, generative systems are deployed indiscriminately, producing excessive signal volume or stylistic uniformity. Attribution becomes ambiguous, accelerating authenticity erosion.

Proposition 4.
Synthetic signal orchestration capability positively moderates the relationship between generative AI intensity and perceived authenticity, shifting the inflection point of the inverted U-shaped curve.

3.4 Boundary Conditions

The legitimacy implications of generative intensity are further conditioned by contextual factors.

Industries characterized by high heritage salience—such as luxury, artisanal goods, or cultural products—embed stronger expectations of indexical authenticity. In such contexts, audiences rely heavily on origin cues. The authenticity threshold is therefore lower: synthetic intensification triggers erosion earlier.

By contrast, in digitally native or technology-centric industries, authenticity expectations may emphasize responsiveness and innovation rather than historical continuity. The legitimacy curve flattens and the inflection point shifts.

Similarly, customer epistemic sensitivity—the degree to which audiences scrutinize production processes—affects interpretive reactions. Highly knowledgeable audiences may detect stylistic homogenization more rapidly, accelerating authenticity decline.

Proposition 5.
The inverted U-shaped relationship between generative AI intensity and perceived authenticity is moderated by heritage salience and customer epistemic sensitivity, such that higher salience lowers the authenticity threshold.

3.5 Integrative Model

The relationships developed above converge in a model that conceptualizes generative AI intensity as the initiating condition of a structured signaling transformation. Rather than operating as a direct determinant of legitimacy, generative intensity reshapes the architecture of brand communication by altering signal density and coherence. These regime characteristics constitute the proximal mechanisms through which synthetic production affects audience interpretation.

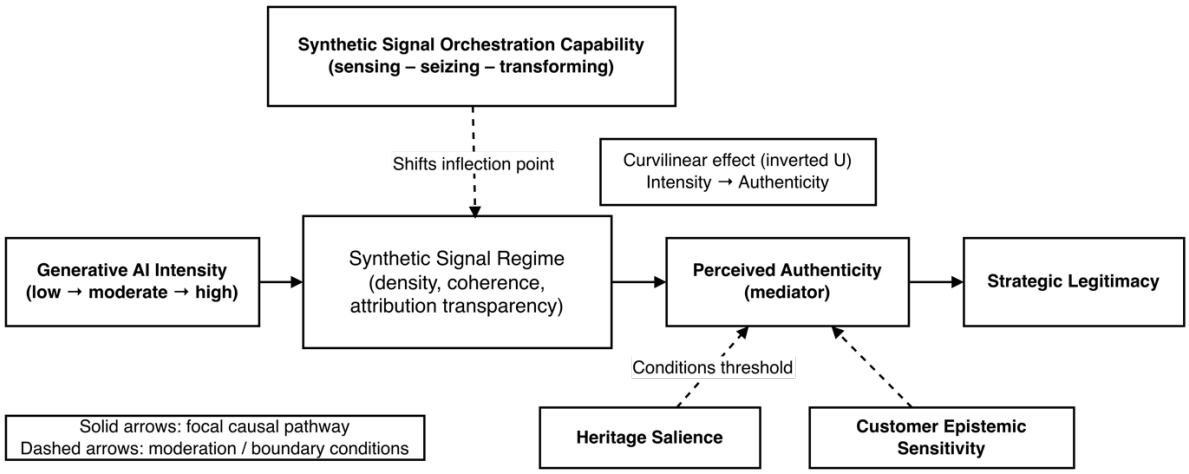

Figure 3. Integrative Model of Synthetic Signal Construction and Strategic Legitimacy
Source: Developed by the authors

Figure 3 consolidates the manuscript's mechanism-based logic into a single moderated mediation architecture. Generative AI intensity reshapes the synthetic signal regime, which influences strategic legitimacy indirectly through perceived authenticity, with the focal non-linearity located in the intensity–authenticity linkage. Synthetic signal orchestration capability shifts the inflection point by governing how synthetic signals are calibrated, while heritage salience and customer epistemic sensitivity condition the audience's tolerance threshold for generative intensification, clarifying why legitimacy outcomes diverge across contexts.

Perceived authenticity occupies a mediating position within this architecture. As signal density increases and stylistic coherence stabilizes, authenticity judgments initially strengthen because audiences infer alignment and attentiveness. However, when density exceeds interpretive tolerance or when coherence transitions into uniformity, signals begin to lose indexical resonance. Authenticity evaluations then deteriorate, translating into declining strategic legitimacy. The causal trajectory is therefore non-linear: legitimacy gains derived from synthetic scalability are contingent on the preservation of interpretive credibility.

This trajectory is not technologically predetermined. It is conditioned by the firm's capacity to orchestrate synthetic signal regimes. Synthetic signal orchestration capability regulates how generative outputs are calibrated, sequenced, and attributed. High orchestration capability shifts the inflection point of authenticity decline by maintaining narrative continuity and visible human oversight. Weak orchestration accelerates the transition from coherence to perceived artificiality.

Contextual salience further shapes these dynamics. In industries where heritage cues carry strong normative weight, audiences rely heavily on indexical authenticity signals, lowering the tolerance for synthetic intensification. In digitally native or innovation-oriented sectors, responsiveness and personalization may partially substitute for origin-based cues, flattening the decline trajectory.

Taken together, the model repositions authenticity as an emergent property of orchestrated synthetic signal regimes rather than as an intrinsic attribute of expressive origin. Strategic legitimacy becomes a downstream consequence of how effectively firms manage the tension between scalability and interpretive credibility under conditions of generative intensification.

4. Discussion

The analysis advanced in this article challenges a deeply embedded assumption in branding scholarship: that authenticity derives primarily from indexical continuity between expression and experiential origin. Foundational work conceptualizes authenticity as grounded in

craftsmanship, heritage, sincerity, and moral integrity (Beverland, 2005; Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014). Even when authenticity is framed as socially constructed (Grayson & Martinec, 2004), its credibility ultimately rests on traceable referents. The underlying premise is that authenticity loses force when origin cues weaken.

The rise of generative systems exposes the limits of this premise. Synthetic signal production decouples expressive artifacts from direct experiential articulation without necessarily eliminating favorable brand evaluations. The persistence—and in some contexts, amplification—of positive evaluations under generative integration suggests that authenticity cannot be reduced to ontological origin. Instead, it must be understood as an interpretive outcome shaped by the structure and governance of signaling regimes.

4.1 Repositioning Authenticity Beyond Origin-Centrism

Authenticity research has historically privileged origin as a credibility anchor. Beverland (2005) argues that authenticity emerges from the deliberate preservation of heritage narratives, while Morhart et al. (2015) emphasize perceived brand sincerity grounded in stable identity. These formulations presume that authenticity erodes as signals become detached from lived practice.

The final analytical element strengthens the theoretical repositioning articulated by systematically distinguishing origin-centric authenticity from governance-based authenticity under generative conditions. Rather than repeating the model, the table below clarifies the conceptual advancement and prevents ambiguity regarding construct redefinition.

Table 2. From Origin-Based Authenticity to Governance-Based Authenticity

Analytical Dimension	Origin-Based Authenticity	Governance-Based (Synthetic) Authenticity	Theoretical Implication
Primary Credibility Anchor	Historical continuity and experiential origin	Structured alignment of synthetic signals	Authenticity shifts from ontological grounding to regime governance
Dominant Signal Type	Indexical cues (craftsmanship, heritage, visible authorship)	Coherence, density regulation, attribution transparency	Signal evaluation depends on orchestration rather than lineage
Scarcity Logic	Scarcity enhances credibility	Abundance requires calibration	Digital abundance alters cost-based signaling assumptions
Role of Human Agency	Direct authorship as authenticity marker	Visible oversight and governance as credibility marker	Human involvement becomes interpretively mediated
Mechanism of Legitimacy	Verification of origin–expression congruence	Interpretive assessment of signal alignment and governance quality	Legitimacy becomes contingent on regime management
Risk of Erosion	Historical inconsistency or moral breach	Signal saturation, attribution ambiguity, over-automation	Legitimacy risk shifts from identity breach to orchestration failure

Source: Developed by the authors

Table 2 clarifies that the manuscript does not merely relabel authenticity but repositions its causal architecture. Whereas origin-based models rely on indexical continuity as a credibility foundation, governance-based authenticity emerges from the calibrated orchestration of synthetic signals under conditions of technological scalability. By making this distinction explicit, Table 2 strengthens the manuscript's theoretical contribution and safeguards against accusations of conceptual inflation.

However, signaling theory suggests that credibility does not inherently depend on origin but on the perceived cost and coherence of signals (Spence, 1973; Connelly et al., 2011). Under generative conditions, cost structures shift rather than disappear. While the marginal production cost of expressive artifacts declines, maintaining coherent alignment across high-density, multi-touchpoint communication requires organizational coordination. Authenticity judgments therefore hinge less on origin verification and more on interpretive coherence across signal streams.

This reframing does not dismiss origin-based authenticity; rather, it specifies its boundary conditions. Origin-centric models assume scarcity of expressive output and visible human authorship as credibility markers. Generative systems increase abundance and automate stylistic recombination, reducing the salience of scarcity. Authenticity consequently becomes less about tracing lineage and more about evaluating signal alignment. This argument extends legitimacy theory (Suchman, 1995) by emphasizing that appropriateness judgments under digital abundance depend on perceived governance rather than on ontological referents alone.

By repositioning authenticity as an emergent property of orchestrated signal regimes, the analysis shifts the explanatory locus from artifact origin to organizational capability. This move responds to calls for updating branding theory under AI-mediated communication environments (Kumar et al., 2024; Riemer & Peter, 2024) and provides a more flexible construct for empirical operationalization.

4.2 Non-Linear Consequences and the Limits of Technological Optimism

A second contribution concerns the non-linear consequences of AI intensification. Much contemporary AI-in-marketing literature emphasizes performance enhancement, personalization, and efficiency gains (Kumar et al., 2024; Mariani & Dwivedi, 2024). These perspectives often imply monotonic improvement as technological integration deepens.

Dynamic capabilities theory and organizational learning scholarship caution against such linear assumptions. March (1991) demonstrates that excessive exploitation can undermine exploratory adaptability, while Levinthal and March (1993) highlight competence traps arising from over-optimization. Extending this logic, generative intensification can initially strengthen authenticity through improved coherence and responsiveness, yet eventually generate homogenization and perceived artificiality. The inverted U-shaped trajectory articulated in this article integrates these learning dynamics with symbolic evaluation processes.

This non-linearity clarifies why empirical findings in AI-driven branding are heterogeneous. Positive outcomes at moderate adoption levels do not generalize indefinitely. Without governance calibration, the very scalability that enhances personalization can erode indexical cues and trigger skepticism. The contribution therefore lies not in asserting that AI harms authenticity, but in specifying the threshold dynamics through which intensification alters legitimacy trajectories.

4.3 Orchestration Capability as a Missing Construct in Authenticity Research

Authenticity scholarship has traditionally examined managerial tactics—heritage storytelling, artisanal cues, or identity alignment—without conceptualizing the meta-capability required to regulate signal regimes under digital conditions. By integrating dynamic capabilities (Teece, 2007; Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000) with signaling logic, the article introduces synthetic signal orchestration capability as a distinct construct.

This construct extends beyond technological competence. It encompasses sensing shifts in audience tolerance, seizing generative affordances selectively, and transforming governance routines to preserve attribution clarity. The argument aligns with research on AI capability building as an organizational process rather than a purely technical adoption

(Ritala et al., 2024). It also resonates with emerging work on corporate digital responsibility, which emphasizes structured governance under algorithmic mediation (Hartley et al., 2024).

By foregrounding orchestration capability, the framework shifts accountability from technology to managerial design. Authenticity erosion is not an inevitable artifact of generative systems; it is a contingent outcome of orchestration quality. This repositioning strengthens theoretical precision and provides a tractable target for empirical measurement.

4.4 Boundary Conditions and Contextual Sensitivity

The discussion further refines authenticity theory by specifying contextual contingencies. Heritage-intensive industries embed strong expectations of indexical continuity. In such contexts, audiences interpret synthetic production through stricter authenticity schemas. This claim is consistent with research demonstrating that authenticity perceptions are sensitive to category norms and cultural expectations (Napoli et al., 2014). Conversely, in digitally native sectors where innovation and responsiveness are valued, generative intensification may not immediately trigger legitimacy penalties.

These boundary conditions reconcile seemingly contradictory findings across sectors. They also prevent conceptual overreach: the proposed non-linear model does not universalize AI effects but situates them within normative contexts.

4.5 Implications for Future Research

The framework offers several empirically testable implications. First, it invites longitudinal studies examining how legitimacy evolves as generative intensity increases, rather than cross-sectional adoption comparisons. Second, it encourages operationalization of signal regime characteristics—density, coherence, and attribution clarity—as mediating variables. Third, it opens inquiry into governance transparency as a moderator, linking authenticity research with digital responsibility scholarship (Saura et al., 2024).

Importantly, the model provides a conceptual vocabulary that enables cumulative research. By distinguishing between generative intensity, signal regime characteristics, orchestration capability, and contextual salience, scholars can examine discrete mechanisms rather than conflating “AI use” with uniform outcomes.

In sum, this discussion advances authenticity theory by challenging origin-centrism, integrating non-linear strategic dynamics, and introducing orchestration capability as a mediating construct under generative conditions. Rather than portraying AI as inherently corrosive or unconditionally beneficial, the analysis reframes authenticity as a governance-dependent outcome within synthetic signal regimes. This shift not only clarifies theoretical tensions but also equips future research with a mechanism-based architecture suitable for rigorous empirical testing.

5. Conclusion

This article has examined how generative AI reshapes the conditions under which authenticity and strategic legitimacy are constructed in branding contexts. Rather than treating generative systems as inherently corrosive or unconditionally beneficial, the analysis has specified the mechanisms through which synthetic signal production alters interpretive judgments. The central argument is that authenticity under generative intensification is not extinguished but reorganized. Its locus shifts from ontological origin to orchestrated signal alignment.

By integrating authenticity theory with signaling logic and dynamic capabilities, the article has advanced three interrelated claims. First, authenticity judgments cannot be fully explained by origin-based referents when expressive artifacts are synthetically generated at scale.

Instead, authenticity emerges from the coherence, density, and attribution structure of signal regimes. Second, the relationship between generative AI intensity and legitimacy is non-linear. Moderate integration may enhance perceived authenticity through coherence and responsiveness, whereas uncalibrated intensification risks eroding indexical resonance and triggering skepticism. Third, these outcomes are contingent on organizational capability. Synthetic signal orchestration capability determines whether generative scalability strengthens or destabilizes legitimacy.

The implications of this repositioning are both theoretical and strategic. Theoretically, the analysis refines authenticity scholarship by distinguishing between origin-based cues and governance-based credibility under digital abundance. It extends dynamic capabilities theory into the symbolic domain, demonstrating how capability calibration shapes not only operational outcomes but interpretive legitimacy trajectories. Strategically, it reframes generative AI deployment as a question of governance design rather than technological adoption alone. The critical managerial challenge is not maximizing generative intensity but calibrating signal regimes within contextual tolerance thresholds.

Several avenues for future research follow from this framework. Empirical work is needed to identify inflection points in the proposed curvilinear relationship and to operationalize signal regime characteristics in measurable terms. Longitudinal designs would be particularly valuable for tracing legitimacy evolution under increasing generative integration. Comparative studies across heritage-intensive and digitally native industries could further clarify boundary conditions. Additionally, experimental research examining attribution transparency and visible human oversight would refine understanding of orchestration capability effects.

The broader contribution lies in demonstrating that synthetic production does not render authenticity obsolete; it transforms the architecture through which authenticity is inferred. As generative systems become embedded in marketing practice, theoretical models that assume stable alignment between expression and experiential origin will require recalibration. The framework proposed here offers one pathway for that recalibration, grounded in mechanism-based reasoning and explicit boundary conditions.

In sum, authenticity in the context of generative AI should not be conceptualized as a casualty of automation nor as an automatic by-product of personalization. It is a contingent outcome of how organizations design, calibrate, and govern synthetic signal regimes under conditions of technological scalability. Understanding this contingency is essential for both advancing branding theory and guiding strategic practice.

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