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Negotiating Digital Authenticity in AI-Assisted MSME Communication: A Case Study of @bandeng_presto_burita

Irene Syebatia Bumi[1*], Tiara Pascanoviera Robaeni[2]
[1,2] Information and Culture Department, Universitas Diponegoro, Semarang, Indonesia

Abstract
The development of generative artificial intelligence (AI) has provided opportunities for micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) to produce digital communication content more easily, particularly for business owners with limited design skills. However, AI-assisted content production also raises concerns about authenticity when generated visuals appear overly artificial or disconnected from actual products. This study examined how an MSME managed and negotiated product authenticity in AI-assisted digital communication. A qualitative case study was conducted on the Instagram account @bandeng_presto_burita. Data were collected through an interview with the MSME owner and observations of the account's social media content. The data were analyzed thematically by examining AI use, product representation, human curation, and authenticity management practices. The findings showed that AI was positioned as a production-support tool rather than a complete replacement for human creativity. The owner sought to preserve product authenticity through human curation and by using the actual product as an authenticity anchor that connected digital representations with the physical product. The study suggests that, from the business owner's perspective, digital communication authenticity among MSMEs is negotiated between technological efficiency and the preservation of business identity and product reality.

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Corresponding Author
irenesbumi@live.undip.ac.id

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Introduction

Social media has become an important space for digital communication activities. Various social media platforms enable users and organizations to interact, disseminate information, and construct representations through digital content (Nabila1 et al., 2024) In the context of MSMEs, social media is also used to introduce products, establish business identities, and support promotional activities. Instagram, for example, is not only used to present visual information but can also support promotional activities and generate audience interest in products or commercial activities (Rangga Pradipta & Lincoln, 2024) Previous research on social media use among small businesses has shown that social media can support the marketing and communication activities of MSMEs despite their relatively limited resources (Chatterjee & Kumar Kar, 2020; Kanth & Prasad, 2023). The development of artificial intelligence (AI), particularly generative AI, has further expanded these opportunities. AI can assist in generating ideas, text, designs, and visuals, enabling business owners without formal design backgrounds to produce digital content more independently. In marketing contexts, AI has increasingly become a technology that supports various communication and content production activities (Kopalle et al., 2022).



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However, these conveniences also create new challenges. Content that relies heavily on AI-generated elements may appear generic, unnatural, or disconnected from the actual product. (Brüns & Meißner, 2024) found that the use of generative AI for social media content creation can diminish perceived brand authenticity. Other studies have also indicated that the use of AI in marketing communication raises concerns regarding perceptions of authenticity and responses to AI-generated communication (Kirk & Givi, 2025; Kirkby et al., 2023).

Authenticity is an important concept in brand communication. It concerns the extent to which a brand's identity, messages, and representations are perceived as consistent with its character and the reality it presents (Napoli et al., 2016) In social media environments, authenticity is also related to how businesses maintain their identity amid increasing demands for rapid and visually oriented content production.

This issue is particularly relevant to MSMEs because some business owners have limited professional design skills. On the one hand, AI provides access to content production technologies. On the other hand, the use of AI may create a gap between digital visuals and the actual product. Therefore, the issue is not simply whether AI is used, but how AI can be used without diminishing the character and authenticity of MSME communication.

This study focuses on the Instagram account @bandeng_presto_burita. Based on the interview, the MSME owner stated that AI helps with the content production process because the owner had no previous experience in formal design training. However, the owner still attempts to prominently display the actual product and does not delegate the entire visual production process to AI.

Based on this context, this study aims to examine the use of AI in MSME digital communication and how the business owner negotiates the convenience offered by technology with the need to maintain authenticity. Specifically, the study addresses three research questions: (1) How is AI used in MSME digital communication production? (2) How is authenticity maintained when AI is used? and (3) How do AI use, human curation, and product representation interact in shaping MSME digital communication.

Methodology

Research Approach and Design

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. This approach was selected because the research focuses on gaining an in-depth understanding of AI use and the process of maintaining authenticity within a specific MSME context.

The research object was the digital communication of the Instagram account @bandeng_presto_burita, while the unit of analysis consisted of communication content related to AI use, product representation, and efforts to maintain the business's character.

Data Collection

Data were collected through two techniques: an interview and observation. An interview was conducted with the MSME owner as the primary informant to obtain information regarding the experience of using AI in content production. Instagram observations were conducted on content published on the @bandeng_presto_burita account from January to July 206. A total of 50 Instagram content items were examined, focusing on product representation, promotional communication, and the presentation of

the MSME's products. Based on visual observation, 39 of the 50 content items (78%) were identified as AI-assisted, while 11 content items (22%) were identified as non-AI-assisted. The identification was based on observable visual characteristics, including unrealistic lighting and backgrounds and visual characteristics commonly associated with generative AI images. Content was selected based on its relevance to the research focus on AI-assisted communication, product representation, and authenticity. The study did not involve a consumer survey or sales data. Therefore, it was not intended to measure the effects of AI use on sales, engagement, loyalty, or consumer perceptions quantitatively.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed thematically through the stages of identifying relevant information, organizing themes, interpreting findings, and establishing relationships among themes. Four main themes were identified from the interview and Instagram observations: AI use, the risk of overly artificial visuals, human curation, and actual product representation. These themes describe the main practices and issues observed in the MSME's AI-assisted content production. To interpret their implications for authenticity, the themes were examined through three analytical areas informed by previous research on brand authenticity and visual authenticity in social media (Maares et al., 2021; Morhart et al., 2015): representation, message consistency with the actual product, and visual representation. The four themes and three analytical areas were therefore not treated as separate or competing frameworks. Rather, the themes served as the empirical categories emerging from the data, while the three analytical areas provided interpretive lenses for examining how authenticity was managed and negotiated. For example, AI use and human curation were examined in relation to identity representation and message consistency, while the risk of overly artificial visuals and actual product representation were particularly relevant to visual representation and consistency with the physical product. These analytical areas were adapted to the context of AI-assisted MSME communication and were used as interpretive lenses rather than quantitative measurement scales.

Results and Discussion

AI as a Tool for Digital Communication Production

The findings indicate that AI is used by the MSME owner as a tool to support the content production process. Its use is associated with limited design skills and the need to produce social media content more efficiently.

The informant stated:

> *"Our MSME association even taught us how to use AI to help us. So AI is very helpful for us, especially for those of us who have never formally learned design. However, I still try to highlight the products I sell in the visuals rather than having everything made entirely by AI."*

This statement reflects two simultaneous positions. First, AI is perceived as a technology that provides MSME owners with greater access to content production. Second, AI is not used as a complete substitute for the creative process. This finding is consistent with studies on AI use in marketing, which indicate that AI technologies can

support various communication and content production activities (Kopalle et al., 2022). In the MSME context, this benefit becomes particularly relevant because technology can help address limitations in production resources and skills.

Thus, in this case, AI is more appropriately understood as a production-support tool. Decisions regarding what should be communicated remain under the control of the business owner.

The Risk of Overly Artificial Visuals

Although AI facilitates the production process, its use does not always produce representations that correspond to the character of the product. The informant described an experience in which AI-assisted visuals could be perceived negatively when the results appeared overly artificial. Some visuals could even appear "somewhat frightening."

This finding indicates a tension between digital aesthetics and product representation. A visual that appears technically attractive does not necessarily correspond to the actual product. This issue is consistent with Brüns and Meißner (2024), who found that the use of generative AI for social media content creation can affect perceptions of brand authenticity. Kirk and Givi (2025) similarly demonstrate that AI-related marketing communication can raise concerns regarding authenticity and perceptions of AI authorship. In the context of @bandeng_presto_burita, however, this does not mean that all AI-assisted content is inauthentic. Rather, the issue concerns the extent to which AI-generated outputs take over the representation of the actual product.

The Actual Product as an *Authenticity Anchor*

One important finding is the tendency of the MSME owner to continue highlighting the actual product in digital content. The actual product functions as a connection between digital representation and physical reality. In this study, this concept is referred to as a product authenticity anchor, namely the actual product that serves as a point of reference when the business owner uses AI to construct visual communication.

The actual product is important because digital communication can involve visual manipulation, whereas the physical product provides a reference that helps maintain consistency between what is presented and what is actually sold. This concept is a conceptual proposition developed from the case findings and the literature on authenticity. Brand authenticity is not solely related to appearance but also to consistency among identity, values, communication, and the experiences represented(Napoli et al., 2016) .

For MSMEs, the actual product can therefore serve as a simple but important element for maintaining the connection between digital communication and business identity.

AI-Assisted Content Production and Human Curation

The findings show that human involvement remained an important part of the content production process. The business owner used AI-assisted tools as production

support rather than relying on AI-generated outputs without further review. Three AI-assisted tools were identified in the content production process: Canva, Gemini, and ChatGPT. These tools were used to support visual and textual aspects of content production, including content development and design.

However, the outputs produced with the assistance of these tools were not used automatically. The business owner selected, reviewed, and adjusted the outputs before incorporating them into digital communication. In particular, the resulting content was evaluated based on its suitability for the actual product and the intended representation of the business. This process allowed the business owner to identify and modify visual elements that appeared overly artificial or did not adequately represent the actual product.

This process can be described as human curation, referring to human involvement in selecting, reviewing, correcting, adapting, and evaluating AI-assisted outputs before they are used in digital communication. Human curation therefore served as a mechanism connecting the efficiency of AI-assisted content production with the need to maintain consistency between digital representations and the actual product.

The findings further indicate that AI supported the content production process, while the business owner retained control over the final content. The business owner determined whether the resulting text and visual elements were appropriate for the intended communication and consistent with the characteristics of the actual product. Thus, the use of AI did not replace the role of the business owner in making decisions about the final representation of the product.

In the context of digital communication, this strategy is important because authenticity is not determined solely by the technology used but also by how the technology is controlled and incorporated into the production process. Previous research on authenticity in social media similarly highlights the importance of identity consistency, truthful representation, and alignment between communication and the character intended to be conveyed (Audrezet et al., 2020; Fouladi et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2021)

Authenticity as a Process of Negotiation

Based on these findings (Campagna et al., 2023) , digital communication authenticity in this case can be understood as a process of negotiation. The MSME owner must simultaneously balance several needs:

1. the need to produce content efficiently;
2. limited design skills;
3. the opportunities provided by AI;
4. the need to maintain business identity; and
5. the need to represent the actual product.

This process results in a position that neither rejects AI entirely nor delegates the entire communication production process to AI. The concept of negotiated digital authenticity proposed in this study represents a conceptual proposition. It describes

authenticity as the outcome of negotiation among technology, business identity, human control, and product representation.

Accordingly, authenticity should not be understood as a condition that can only be achieved through content created without AI. Rather, AI-assisted content can remain authentic when business owners retain control over the message and product representation.

Dimensions of Digital Communication Authenticity

Based on the findings, digital communication authenticity in the @bandeng_presto_burita case can be examined through three dimensions.

1. Identity Authenticity
   Content should continue to represent the character of the business and its products. AI is used to support production, while business identity remains the basis for content-related decisions.
1. Message Authenticity
   Messages should correspond to the actual condition of the product and should not rely entirely on generic language generated by technology. Human control is necessary to ensure that the information remains relevant to the business.
2. Visual Authenticity
   Visual representation is the dimension most vulnerable to alteration through AI use. Therefore, the actual product serves as an important reference to prevent digital visuals from deviating substantially from the product's real appearance.

These three dimensions demonstrate that AI use cannot be separated from the process of human curation. AI provides production capabilities, while humans maintain the consistency of communication with business identity.

Positioning the Findings in Relation to Previous Research

The findings of this study can be positioned within the broader discussion of brand authenticity, social media communication, and the emerging use of artificial intelligence in content production. Previous studies have established that authenticity is an important dimension of brand communication, particularly because audiences evaluate not only what a brand communicates but also whether its communication is perceived as consistent with the identity and reality of the brand. Napoli et al. (2016), for example, conceptualize brand authenticity as a multidimensional construct associated with cues such as quality commitment, heritage, and sincerity. From this perspective, authenticity is not determined solely by the visual attractiveness of communication but by the extent to which communication reflects characteristics that are perceived as genuinely belonging to the brand.

The present findings extend this perspective into an AI-assisted communication context. In the case of @bandeng_presto_burita, authenticity is not treated as the absence

of technological intervention. Instead, it is maintained through the continued involvement of the business owner in determining what should be represented and how the product should appear in digital communication. This suggests that the introduction of AI does not necessarily replace existing authenticity mechanisms. Rather, it introduces an additional layer of decision-making concerning how technological outputs should be selected, modified, and connected to the actual product.

This finding is also related to previous research on authenticity management in social media. Audrezet et al. (2020) demonstrate that social media actors may experience tensions when commercial interests become incorporated into content production and identify authenticity-management strategies through which such tensions can be addressed. Although their study focuses on social media influencers rather than MSMEs, the underlying issue is comparable: digital communication involves a negotiation between external communication objectives and the need to preserve characteristics perceived as authentic. In the present case, this negotiation occurs not primarily between the business owner and commercial sponsors but between the efficiency offered by AI and the owner's responsibility for maintaining the identity and reality of the product.

The findings further contribute to this discussion by identifying human curation as an important mechanism in the negotiation process. Previous research has emphasized the importance of authenticity management in social media, but the present case shows how such management can occur at the level of everyday content production. The business owner does not simply accept AI-generated outputs as final communication products. Instead, AI-generated or AI-assisted materials are evaluated in relation to the actual product and the intended identity of the business. Human intervention therefore becomes a filtering mechanism between technological production and public communication.

This finding is particularly relevant when considering research on generative AI and marketing communication. Brüns and Meißner (2024) found that the use of generative AI in social media content can affect perceptions of brand authenticity. Kirkby et al. (2023) and Kirk and Givi (2025) similarly highlight concerns surrounding AI-generated communication and perceptions of authenticity. These studies indicate that AI can create a tension between production efficiency and the perception that communication is genuine. The present study does not contradict this concern. Instead, it suggests that the relationship between AI and authenticity is not necessarily binary. The relevant issue is how much control is retained by the human communicator and whether AI-generated elements remain connected to the reality of the product.

The role of the actual product in the present case provides an additional perspective. Whereas previous authenticity literature has discussed cues such as sincerity, heritage, quality, and consistency, this study identifies the physical product itself as an important reference point in AI-assisted visual communication. The actual product functions as an authenticity anchor because it provides a concrete basis against which AI-assisted visual representations can be evaluated. When digital visuals are modified or constructed with the assistance of AI, the actual product provides a reference for

determining whether the representation remains sufficiently consistent with what the MSME actually offers.

This finding also complements research concerning visual communication on social media. Instagram is fundamentally visual, meaning that the representation of a product can become an important component of how a business communicates its identity. The use of AI therefore has particular significance for MSMEs whose products are represented primarily through images. A visually attractive representation may increase the aesthetic quality of content, but aesthetic improvement does not necessarily guarantee representational accuracy. In this context, the actual product becomes important not because every digital image must reproduce the physical product identically, but because digital enhancement should not substantially detach the representation from the product being offered.

The findings can therefore be summarized through four points of comparison with previous research. First, existing authenticity research emphasizes consistency and genuineness, while this study demonstrates how such consistency can be actively maintained during AI-assisted production. Second, previous social media research emphasizes authenticity management, while this study identifies human curation as one practical mechanism through which authenticity can be managed. Third, emerging research on generative AI highlights the risk of perceived artificiality, while the present case demonstrates that this risk can be negotiated through human control. Fourth, this study introduces the actual product as an authenticity anchor, extending the discussion of authenticity from abstract brand characteristics toward the relationship between digital representation and physical product reality.

Previous research	Main emphasis	Contribution of the present study
Napoli et al. (2016)	Authenticity cues such as quality, heritage, and sincerity	Extends authenticity discussion into AI-assisted MSME communication
Audrezet et al. (2020)	Authenticity management under social media and commercial pressures	Identifies human curation as an everyday authenticity management mechanism
Brüns and Meißner (2024)	Potential effect of generative AI on perceived authenticity	Shows that AI use and authenticity are not necessarily mutually exclusive

Kirkby et al. (2023)	Perceptions and implications of AI-generated communication	Highlights the importance of human control over AI-assisted outputs
Kirk and Givi (2025)	Authenticity concerns associated with AI in marketing	Provides an MSME-level case of negotiating technological efficiency and authenticity
Present study	AI-assisted MSME communication	Proposes human curation and product authenticity anchor as mechanisms of negotiated digital authenticity

Table 1. Comparison of Previous Research and the Findings of the Present Study

Taken together, the findings suggest that the contribution of this study lies not in establishing whether AI is inherently authentic or inauthentic, but in explaining how authenticity is negotiated when AI becomes part of everyday MSME communication production. AI expands the production capabilities of businesses with limited design resources, but the resulting communication remains dependent on human decisions concerning selection, adaptation, verification, and representation.

Accordingly, the concept of negotiated digital authenticity proposed in this study can be understood as a process rather than a fixed characteristic of content. Authenticity emerges through the interaction between technological assistance, human judgment, business identity, and the physical reality of the product. Within this process, the product authenticity anchor provides a concrete reference that helps prevent AI-assisted communication from becoming disconnected from what the MSME actually produces and sells.

This positioning also clarifies the contribution and boundaries of the study. The findings do not suggest that human curation automatically guarantees audience perceptions of authenticity, nor do they establish that the proposed mechanism applies universally to MSMEs. Rather, the case demonstrates a process through which one MSME attempts to maintain consistency between AI-assisted digital representation and its actual product. Further research involving multiple MSMEs and consumer perspectives is therefore needed to examine whether the mechanisms identified in this case can be observed across different products, business sectors, and forms of AI-assisted communication.

Conceptual Model

The model indicates that the use of AI does not automatically result in authentic communication. Instead, from the perspective of the business owner examined in this study, the relationship between AI-based production efficiency and efforts to maintain authenticity is managed through human curation, verification, and the adjustment of

digital representations to align with the actual product. Accordingly, authenticity in this model is understood as a process of management and negotiation undertaken by the business owner, rather than as a communication outcome that has been demonstrated to be accepted or perceived as authentic by audiences. The relationship between AI and digital communication authenticity can be formulated as follows:

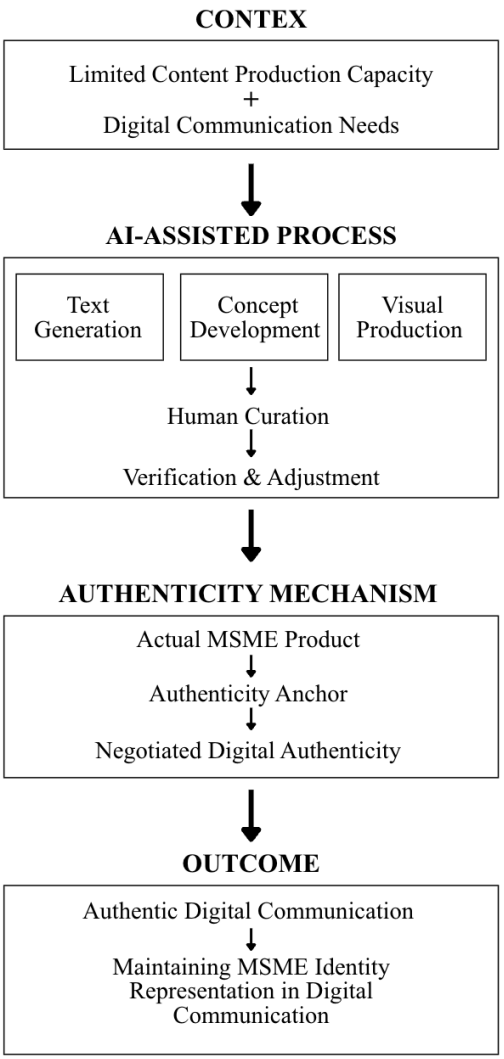


Figure 1. Exploratory Framework of AI-Assisted Content Production and Authenticity Management

The model indicates that AI is not a factor that automatically determines authenticity. Rather, the relationship is mediated by human curation and control.

Based on this model, the study proposes four conceptual propositions:

P1: Limited design capabilities increase the value of AI as an accessible content production tool for MSMEs.

P2: The use of AI does not automatically eliminate communication authenticity; its implications depend on the degree of human control over AI-generated outputs.

P3: The actual product can function as an *authenticity anchor* that maintains the connection between digital representation and the physical product.

P4: Human curation functions as a mechanism connecting the efficiency of AI-assisted production with efforts to maintain digital communication authenticity.

These propositions represent a conceptual development based on a single case study and reflect the perspective of the business owner. Therefore, they are not intended to conclude that audiences perceive the communication as authentic. Further research involving audiences or consumers and a broader range of MSME contexts is needed to examine these propositions.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that AI provides MSMEs with opportunities to produce digital communication more easily, particularly for business owners with limited design skills. However, AI use also creates risks when generated visuals become overly artificial and no longer adequately represent the actual product.

In the case of @bandeng_presto_burita, authenticity is not maintained by avoiding AI but by controlling how it is used. The business owner continues to place the actual product at the center of communication and curates AI-assisted outputs before they are used. These findings suggest that digital communication authenticity can be understood as a process of negotiation among technological efficiency, human control, business identity, and product representation.

This study proposes two conceptual ideas: negotiated digital authenticity and product authenticity anchor. These concepts suggest that AI technology and authenticity do not necessarily exist in opposition. AI can function as a production-support tool as long as humans retain control over the selection, adaptation, and verification of content.

Because this study is based on a single case and one primary informant, its findings are not intended to be generalized to all MSMEs. Future research could examine multiple MSMEs and incorporate consumer perspectives to further investigate how AI use and product representation shape perceptions of authenticity.

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