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Generative AI in digital marketing and consumer trust: Examining the mediating role of perceived authenticity in Saudi Arabia

Mahmoud Mohamed Eldabet [1, 2, *], Abdallah Mohamed Eldabet [3], Sameh Abd-ElMaksoud Mohammad Aboul-Dahab [4, 5], Emad Abdel-Khalek Saber El-Tahan [2, 4]

[1]College of Business, University of Jeddah, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia
[2]Department of Business Administration, Giza Higher Institute for Administrative Sciences, Giza, Egypt
[3]Institute of Public Administration, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia
[4]College of Business, Jouf University, Sakaka, Saudi Arabia
[5]Faculty of Commerce, Kafrelsheikh University, Kafrelsheikh, Egypt

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ABSTRACT

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) has rapidly entered digital marketing in Saudi Arabia, raising important questions about how machine-generated brand communication is processed by consumers. This study examines how generative AI use in digital marketing is associated with consumer trust among Saudi consumers, with perceived authenticity as the central mediating mechanism and purchase intention as the downstream outcome. Using a quantitative, cross-sectional design, data were collected from 322 digitally active Saudi consumers with prior exposure to AI-generated marketing content. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was used to test seven hypotheses, including two mediation paths and two moderation effects. Generative AI usage was negatively associated with perceived authenticity ($\beta = -0.152$, $p = 0.001$); perceived authenticity strongly predicted consumer trust ($\beta = 0.405$, $p < 0.001$), which in turn predicted purchase intention ($\beta = 0.370$, $p < 0.001$). Perceived authenticity partially mediated the relationship between AI use and trust (indirect = −0.061, 95% CI [−0.104, −0.021]), while consumer trust partially mediated the relationship between authenticity and purchase intention (indirect = 0.149, 95% CI [0.092, 0.212]). The proposed moderating effects of digital literacy and consumer skepticism were not statistically supported. The study contributes evidence from an under-researched emerging market by positioning perceived authenticity as a key psychological mechanism through which AI marketing is linked to trust, while acknowledging the modest first-stage explanatory power and the associational nature of the cross-sectional design.

1. Introduction

The proliferation of generative artificial intelligence (AI) across business functions has created profound implications for how organizations design and deliver marketing communications. Tools capable of producing human-quality text, images, and personalized dialogues at scale have moved rapidly from experimental applications into mainstream marketing practice, enabling firms to achieve unprecedented efficiency in content generation, audience targeting, and customer engagement (Rehman and Fareed, 2025). This transformation is particularly salient in Saudi Arabia, where the national Vision 2030 agenda has catalyzed rapid digital adoption, fostering one of the fastest-growing e-commerce markets in the Middle East and a social media penetration rate exceeding 80 percent of the adult population (Abid et al., 2022; Alkhofaily and Noureldin, 2026).

Despite the operational benefits of AI-powered marketing, a fundamental tension has emerged between artificial intelligence and consumer psychology. Marketing communication has historically derived its persuasive power from perceived sincerity, human creativity, and emotional authenticity, qualities that consumers may question when confronted with AI-generated content (Kothari

* Corresponding Author.
Email Address: meldabet@uj.edu.sa (M. M. Eldabet)
https://doi.org/10.21833/ijaas.2026.07.024
Corresponding author's ORCID profile:
https://orcid.org/0009-0002-1360-7410

et al., 2025). When consumers detect, or even suspect, that a brand message originates from an algorithm rather than a person, their assessments of brand genuineness may be compromised, with downstream consequences for trust and commercial behavior. This concern is amplified in digital environments where information asymmetry is high and skepticism towards marketing claims is endemic (Khalfallah and Keller, 2025).

The concept of perceived authenticity, the extent to which consumers regard brand communication as genuine, sincere, and reflective of real values, is central to contemporary consumer behavior theory (AlQahtani, 2025). Research consistently shows that authenticity is associated with trust-related outcomes, including brand loyalty and purchase intention (Busser and Shulga, 2019; Chen et al., 2022). However, the specific role perceived authenticity plays in the association between generative AI use and consumer trust has received limited empirical attention, and there is scarce evidence from the Arab Gulf context.

Saudi Arabia is more than a high-penetration digital market; it is a distinctive cultural setting in which authenticity perceptions are shaped by several institutional and cultural attributes. Saudi consumer culture is characterized by high-context communication, in which meaning is conveyed through relational cues, trust networks, and implicit values alongside explicit message content (Alam and Al Mubarak, 2025).

Islamic ethical norms concerning honesty (sidq) and the avoidance of deception in exchange relations further heighten sensitivity to perceived inauthenticity in marketing communication (Ambak et al., 2025). Decision-making is often socially distributed across family and reference-group networks, so brand evaluations carry social-validation weight beyond purely individual cognition. These attributes suggest that the AI–authenticity dynamic may operate with particular force in Saudi Arabia relative to lower-context, more transactional markets, making the Kingdom a theoretically generative setting for the present inquiry.

Individual-level cognitive characteristics may further shape these relationships. Digital literacy, a consumer's competence in understanding and critically evaluating AI technologies, may modify how AI-generated content is processed and assessed (Abu-Alhaija and Elsawy, 2026). Similarly, consumer skepticism, defined as a predisposition to question the veracity of marketing claims, may intensify adverse reactions to AI content by priming critical cognitive schemas (Khalfallah and Keller, 2025). Whether these traits amplify or attenuate the AI–authenticity association remains an open empirical question.

This study addresses three interrelated research questions: (1) How is generative AI use in digital marketing associated with consumers' perceived authenticity of brand communication? (2) Does perceived authenticity mediate the relationship between generative AI use and consumer trust, and does consumer trust subsequently mediate the path to purchase intention? (3) Do digital literacy and consumer skepticism moderate the relationship between generative AI use and perceived authenticity? Using a quantitative, cross-sectional design with PLS-SEM analysis and a sample of N = 322 digitally active Saudi consumers, this study contributes empirically grounded insights to the expanding literature on AI in marketing while remaining appropriately cautious about causal claims.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature and theoretical foundations and develops the research hypotheses. Section 3 details the methodology. Section 4 presents the empirical results. Section 5 discusses the findings in relation to extant theory and practice. Section 6 concludes with contributions, limitations, and directions for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Generative AI in digital marketing

Generative AI refers to a class of machine learning models, including large language models, diffusion-based image generators, and multimodal systems, that can produce novel, human-like content from natural language prompts. In marketing contexts, these systems are deployed to automate copywriting, generate personalized product recommendations, power conversational chatbots, and create visual advertising assets (Vo et al., 2024). The commercial appeal lies in their capacity to deliver personalization at scale while substantially reducing creative production costs.

Solovjov (2025) examined the impact of AI-generated advertising on brand-related outcomes and found that consumer responses are shaped by whether the AI's provenance is disclosed, with transparency moderating the relationship between AI-generated content and perceived credibility. Similarly, Rehman and Fareed (2025) identified transparency, familiarity, and simplicity as boundary conditions for AI-created products to earn consumer trust. These findings suggest that the strategic deployment of AI in marketing is not uniformly beneficial; the conditions under which it operates critically determine its downstream associations with consumer cognition and behavior.

Within Saudi Arabia's rapidly digitalizing consumer market, AI-powered marketing applications are encountering a population that is simultaneously enthusiastic about digital technology and deeply attentive to relational authenticity in brand interactions (Alam and Al Mubarak, 2025). The combination of high-context communication norms and an emerging-market digital economy creates a setting in which the perceptual costs of inauthenticity may be amplified, yet has received limited empirical attention.

2.2. Perceived authenticity

Perceived authenticity in consumer research reflects the subjective judgement that a brand or its communications are genuine, sincere, and aligned with real human values (Kothari et al., 2025). Drawing on philosophical concepts of genuineness and truth, authenticity in marketing has been operationalized along three dimensions: indexicality (evidence of real-world origin), iconicity (symbolic coherence), and existential authenticity (alignment with personal values and identity) (AlQahtani, 2025; Hasan et al., 2023).

Research in brand communication consistently identifies authenticity as a powerful proximate predictor of favorable consumer outcomes. Busser and Shulga (2019) demonstrated that perceived authenticity in consumer-generated content predicted brand trust and loyalty in hospitality settings. Chen et al. (2022) found that authenticity perceptions mediated the relationship between parasocial interaction and consumer trust in online travel agencies. More recently, Kothari et al. (2025) showed that perceived authenticity in social media advertising is positively related to purchase-related outcomes through enhanced message credibility.

In AI-mediated marketing contexts, the authenticity challenge is distinctive. AI-generated content may be technically indistinguishable from human-created content in terms of surface quality, yet consumers who are aware of, or who suspect, AI provenance may rate such content as less authentic, a pattern Solovjov (2025) describes as the 'authenticity deficit' of machine-generated communication. Vo et al. (2024) further demonstrated that perceived authenticity mediates the relationship between AI-powered application features and value co-creation among young consumers, suggesting that authenticity operates as a psychological gateway through which AI-generated experiences acquire or lose their motivational potency.

2.3. Consumer trust

Consumer trust is broadly understood as a willingness to rely on a partner or institution based on positive expectations about their future behavior (Aldulaimi et al., 2025). In digital marketing, trust encompasses perceptions of a brand's benevolence, reliability, competence, and integrity, all of which are particularly susceptible to disruption when communication channels employ novel, poorly understood technologies (Poulis et al., 2026).

Trust operates as a foundational enabler of commercial relationships. Ambak et al. (2025) confirmed that trust is a central driver of consumer loyalty in digital service environments, mediating the effects of perceived value and relational quality. Khalfallah and Keller (2025) established that consumer trust in virtual influencer marketing is shaped primarily by perceived authenticity and ethical communication, with cross-cultural variation in the strength of these relationships. In contexts where information asymmetry is high, as in AI-generated marketing, trust becomes especially consequential, serving as the mechanism through which uncertainty is resolved, and commercial engagement is sustained (Aldulaimi et al., 2025).

2.4. Purchase intention

Purchase intention, defined as the self-reported likelihood of engaging in a specific purchase behavior, is one of the most widely employed proxies for commercial outcomes in consumer behavior research (Evrianti et al., 2025). It is conceptually situated downstream of affective and cognitive evaluations of brand stimuli, making it sensitive to variations in trust, authenticity perceptions, and attitude formation (Ananda et al., 2025).

The trust–purchase intention pathway is well established in the literature. Evrianti et al. (2025) confirmed that consumer trust fully mediates the relationship between influencer marketing and purchase intention. Poulis et al. (2026) demonstrated that brand authenticity and trust jointly shape purchase intentions in green branding contexts, with trust occupying the more proximal position in the causal chain. Manojprasath et al. (2025) found that perceived authenticity of social media influencers is associated with travel purchase decisions through trust formation. Collectively, these findings support a conceptual architecture in which AI-related perceptions are linked to purchase intention primarily through the sequential pathway of authenticity evaluation and trust formation.

2.5. Digital literacy and consumer skepticism as moderators

Individual-level cognitive characteristics are increasingly recognized as important boundary conditions in the study of digital marketing effectiveness. Helal et al. (2025), for example, demonstrated that service quality moderates the association between digital marketing communications and customer loyalty, illustrating that the strength of digital-marketing associations is systematically conditioned by contextual and individual factors rather than operating uniformly. Digital literacy, encompassing the competencies required to access, evaluate, and create content within digital environments, may similarly shape how consumers interpret AI-generated marketing signals (Abu-Alhaija and Elsawy, 2026). Highly digitally literate consumers may be better able to recognize AI-generated content, potentially strengthening their scrutiny of content authenticity. Conversely, lower literacy may render AI provenance less salient, producing more baseline-like authenticity evaluations (Chavda and Chauhan, 2024).

Consumer skepticism reflects a stable dispositional tendency to doubt and critically evaluate marketing claims (Khalfallah and Keller,

2025). In AI marketing contexts, sceptical consumers may approach AI-generated content with heightened critical awareness, thereby potentially amplifying any adverse association of AI use with perceived authenticity. Alkhofaily and Noureldin (2026) demonstrated that skepticism moderates the relationship between sustainability signals and consumer choices in Saudi Arabia, supporting the theoretical expectation that dispositional doubt shapes how marketing stimuli are processed. The present study extends this logic to the AI–authenticity interface.

2.6. Theoretical framework and hypotheses

This study is grounded in signaling theory, which conceptualizes marketing communications as signals through which firms transmit quality-relevant information to consumers (Septianto et al., 2023). The credibility of a signal, and consequently its association with consumer evaluation, depends on perceived source characteristics, including sincerity and authenticity. In the context of generative AI, the disclosure or perception of AI authorship alters the indexical credibility of the signal: content known or suspected to be machine-generated may be regarded as less authentic precisely because it appears to lack the intentional, value-laden quality associated with human communication (Xu et al., 2021). Building on this framework and the preceding review, the following hypotheses are proposed and tested.

H1: Generative AI usage in digital marketing is negatively associated with consumers' perceived authenticity of brand communication.

The logic of H1 rests on the authenticity-deficit argument: as AI-generated content becomes more prevalent and recognizable, consumers may interpret machine authorship as a signal of artificiality, reducing authenticity evaluations (Solovjov, 2025; Vo et al., 2024). The expected association is directionally negative.

H2: Perceived authenticity is positively associated with consumer trust.

Drawing on extensive empirical evidence that authenticity functions as a trust-building signal (Busser and Shulga, 2019; Chen et al., 2022; Kothari et al., 2025), H2 predicts a strong positive association between authenticity evaluations and consumer trust.

H3: Consumer trust is positively associated with purchase intention.

Consistent with the established trust–intention literature (Ambak et al., 2025; Evrianti et al., 2025), H3 predicts that higher trust is associated with greater purchase likelihood, positioning trust as the proximal driver of commercial outcomes.

H4: Perceived authenticity mediates the negative relationship between generative AI usage and consumer trust.

H4 proposes that the association of AI intensity with trust operates through its prior link with authenticity perceptions. A reduction in perceived authenticity, accompanying higher AI usage, is expected to suppress trust, a sequential negative mediation pathway (Khalfallah and Keller, 2025).

H5: Consumer trust mediates the positive relationship between perceived authenticity and purchase intention.

H5 extends the sequential model by proposing that trust transmits the association of authenticity with purchase intention, consistent with findings by Manojprasath et al. (2025) and Poulis et al. (2026).

H6: Digital literacy moderates the relationship between generative AI usage and perceived authenticity, such that the negative association is stronger among consumers with higher digital literacy.

H7: Consumer skepticism moderates the relationship between generative AI usage and perceived authenticity, such that the negative association is stronger among more skeptical consumers.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study uses a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design. PLS-SEM was selected as the primary analytical technique because of its suitability for complex models involving mediation and moderation, its robustness with non-normal data distributions, and its parsimony with reflective measurement models. PLS-SEM has been productively applied in Saudi Arabian consumer and behavioral research contexts, supporting its appropriateness for the present setting. SmartPLS 4 conventions were applied throughout the analysis. The cross-sectional design supports the identification of associations among constructs but does not permit causal inference; this constraint is addressed transparently in the limitations section and reflected in the interpretive language used throughout the manuscript.

3.2. Sampling and data collection

The target population comprised Saudi consumers aged 18 years and above who were active social media users, engaged in online shopping, and had prior exposure to AI-assisted digital marketing content (e.g., chatbots, personalized AI recommendations, or AI-generated visuals). A non-probability convenience sampling approach was

adopted owing to the absence of a comprehensive sampling frame for this population. Data collection yielded a final sample of N = 322 respondents, which is appropriate for PLS-SEM models of this complexity. The sample should be understood as representing digitally active urban Saudi consumers and is not representative of the broader Saudi population; this limitation is revisited in Section 6.

As shown in Table 1, the sample is relatively young and urban, with 58.1 percent of respondents aged 18–34. Males make up 53.4 percent of the sample, and 50.0 percent hold bachelor's degrees. Riyadh (28.3%) and Jeddah (16.1%) are the most represented cities. These demographics reflect the digitally active urban consumer segment that constitutes the primary audience for AI-driven marketing in the Saudi market.

Table 1: Demographic and background characteristics of respondents (N = 322)

Variable/category	n	%	Notes
Age group			
18–24 years	84	26.1%	
25–34 years	103	32.0%	Largest cohort
35–44 years	71	22.0%	
45–54 years	41	12.7%	
55 years and above	23	7.1%	
Gender			
Male	172	53.4%	
Female	141	43.8%	
Prefer not to say	9	2.8%	
Educational attainment			
High school diploma or below	56	17.4%	
Diploma/associate degree	52	16.1%	
Bachelor's degree	161	50.0%	Modal education level
Master's degree	40	12.4%	
Doctorate	13	4.0%	
Employment status			
Private sector	103	32.0%	
Student	71	22.0%	
Public sector	65	20.2%	
Not currently employed	35	10.9%	
Self-employed	30	9.3%	
Retired	18	5.6%	
Monthly household income (SAR)			
Below 5,000	113	35.1%	
5,000–9,999	92	28.6%	
10,000–14,999	56	17.4%	
15,000–19,999	33	10.2%	
20,000 and above	28	8.7%	
City/region			
Riyadh	91	28.3%	Capital; largest share
Jeddah	52	16.1%	
Dammam/Al-Khobar	34	10.6%	Eastern Province
Makkah	32	9.9%	
Al-Qassim	25	7.8%	
Madinah	18	5.6%	
Other cities	70	21.7%	Hail, Tabuk, Abha, Taif, Jazan, Al-Jouf

All respondents met the screening criteria: age ≥ 18, active social media use, online shopping, and prior exposure to AI-generated digital marketing content

3.3. Measurement instruments

All constructs were operationalized with multi-item reflective scales adapted from prior validated research and anchored on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree). Generative AI in Digital Marketing (GAI) was measured with four items assessing perceived AI usage, personalization, content quality, and exposure frequency. Perceived Authenticity (PA) was initially measured with four items reflecting genuineness, sincerity, realism, and the naturalness of AI-generated communication; following the measurement-model assessment described in Section 4.2, item PA3 was dropped to improve convergent validity, and the construct is reported with three retained items. Consumer Trust (CT) was measured with four items covering reliability, credibility, integrity, and brand confidence. Purchase Intention (PI) was measured with three items. Digital Literacy (DL) and Consumer Skepticism (SK) were each measured with three items. A detailed mapping of all retained items is provided in Table 2.

3.4. Analytical strategy

The analysis proceeded in two stages. The measurement model was evaluated for internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's α and Composite Reliability, CR), convergent validity (Average Variance Extracted, AVE), and discriminant validity (Heterotrait–Monotrait ratios, HTMT, and the Fornell–Larcker criterion). The structural model was assessed using standardized path coefficients, bootstrapped t-statistics (5,000 resamples), R^2 values, and effect sizes (f^2). Mediation was tested using bootstrapped indirect effects with bias-corrected and accelerated (BCa) 95% confidence intervals (Preacher and Hayes, 2008). Moderation was examined using mean-centered product terms for the interaction between GAI and each moderator. Following the reviewer's request to address measurement quality, the model was re-estimated after removing the weakest PA indicator (PA3); the structural results reported below reflect this revised measurement model.

4. Results

4.1. Sample profile

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the sample. The dominant age cohort is 25–34 years (32.0%), followed by 18–24 years (26.1%), confirming that the sample is concentrated among digital natives. The gender distribution is moderately male-skewed (53.4% male; 43.8% female). Half of all respondents hold bachelor's degrees, and private-sector employment is the most common occupational category (32.0%). Monthly household income is predominantly below 10,000 SAR (63.7% combined), reflecting the broader Saudi demographic profile. Geographically, the sample spans all major regions of the Kingdom, with Riyadh contributing the largest share (28.3%).

4.2. Measurement model

An initial assessment of the four-item PA scale revealed weaknesses in indicator quality: factor loadings ranged from 0.670 (PA3) to 0.732 (PA4), inter-item correlations were modest (0.255–0.346),

and the initial AVE of 0.483 fell marginally below the 0.50 convergent-validity threshold. In line with reviewer feedback and standard PLS-SEM practice, the weakest indicator (PA3, loading 0.670) was removed, and the model was re-estimated. The revised three-item PA scale yielded an AVE of 0.515 and a CR of 0.762, both meeting established thresholds; remaining loadings ranged from 0.690 (PA2) to 0.748 (PA4). Cronbach's α for the revised PA scale (0.625) remains within the acceptable range for exploratory research, though the modest internal consistency justifies cautious interpretation of PA-related findings and is explicitly noted in the limitations section.

Table 2: Measurement model — factor loadings, reliability, and convergent validity (N = 322; PA3 removed)

Item	Item description	Loading (λ)	α	CR	AVE
Generative AI in digital marketing (GAI)			0.701	0.817	0.528
GAI1	Perceived use of AI-generated content in brand communication	0.730			
GAI2	AI enables highly personalized marketing messages	0.715			
GAI3	Quality of AI-generated advertising content	0.720			
GAI4	Frequency of encountering AI-generated marketing	0.740			
Perceived authenticity (PA) — revised (3 items)			0.625	0.762	0.515
PA1	AI-generated content feels genuine and sincere	0.712			
PA2	AI-generated marketing reflects the brand's true values	0.690			
PA4	AI marketing communications appear human and natural	0.748			
Consumer trust (CT)			0.697	0.815	0.524
CT1	I trust brands that use AI to communicate with me	0.702			
CT2	AI-driven content increases brand reliability perceptions	0.730			
CT3	I feel confident in the integrity of AI-produced brand messages	0.760			
CT4	AI marketing makes me more credulous of brand claims	0.703			
Purchase intention (PI)			0.641	0.807	0.582
PI1	Likelihood of purchasing after exposure to AI marketing	0.766			
PI2	Willingness to engage further with AI-marketed brands	0.772			
PI3	Intention to recommend AI-driven brands to others	0.751			
Digital literacy (DL)			0.729	0.847	0.649
DL1	Ability to understand and evaluate AI-generated digital content	0.794			
DL2	Proficiency in using and navigating digital platforms	0.832			
DL3	Confidence in distinguishing AI from human-created content	0.791			
Consumer skepticism (SK)			0.649	0.810	0.587
SK1	I tend to question the motives behind AI marketing messages	0.761			
SK2	I doubt that AI marketing content is fully truthful	0.758			
SK3	I am wary of AI-generated brand communication	0.780			

Item PA3 (loading = 0.670) was removed from the original four-item PA scale to improve convergent validity, raising the construct's AVE from 0.483 to 0.515 (above the 0.50 threshold) and CR to 0.762. All retained factor loadings exceed 0.60, supporting indicator reliability. Cronbach's α values meet the 0.60 minimum criterion for exploratory research; CR values exceed the 0.70 benchmark. AVE exceeds the 0.50 convergent-validity threshold for all constructs after the scale revision

Table 2 presents the revised measurement model. All factor loadings exceed the 0.60 threshold. CR values range from 0.762 (PA) to 0.847 (DL), all above the 0.70 benchmark. Cronbach's α ranges from 0.625 (PA) to 0.729 (DL), meeting the 0.60 minimum for exploratory research. AVE meets the 0.50 convergent-validity threshold for all six constructs in the revised model: GAI (0.528), PA (0.515), CT (0.524), PI (0.582), DL (0.649), and SK (0.587). Table 3 presents the discriminant validity assessment using HTMT ratios and the Fornell–Larcker criterion. All HTMT values are below 0.70, well within the conservative 0.85 threshold. The highest HTMT ratio is 0.642 between PA and CT, reflecting the theoretically expected overlap between adjacent constructs in the causal chain while remaining sufficiently below the discriminant-validity threshold. All diagonal √AVE values exceed the corresponding inter-construct correlations, further confirming construct distinctiveness.

Fig. 1 presents the mean scores and standard deviations of all study constructs, providing an overview of respondents' perceptions.

Table 3: Discriminant validity — HTMT ratios and Fornell–Larcker criterion

Construct	Mean	SD	1. GAI	2. PA	3. CT	4. PI	5. DL	6. SK
1. Generative AI in DM (GAI)	3.560	0.583	**0.727**	—	—	—	—	—
2. Perceived authenticity (PA)	3.447	0.501	0.262	**0.718**	—	—	—	—
3. Consumer trust (CT)	3.708	0.512	0.157	0.642	**0.724**	—	—	—
4. Purchase intention (PI)	4.096	0.525	0.137	0.488	0.638	**0.763**	—	—
5. Digital literacy (DL)	3.602	0.572	0.336	0.105	0.190	0.116	**0.805**	—
6. Consumer skepticism (SK)	2.350	0.559	0.101	0.421	0.209	0.287	0.241	**0.766**

Diagonal (bold) = √AVE per the Fornell–Larcker criterion; Off-diagonal values are HTMT ratios; All HTMT values are below 0.70, confirming discriminant validity (conservative threshold < 0.85)

4.3. Structural model and direct effects

Table 4 presents the structural-model results from the revised measurement model. The model explains 3.1% of variance in Perceived Authenticity (R^2 = 0.031), 16.4% in Consumer Trust (R^2 = 0.164), and 20.5% in Purchase Intention (R^2 = 0.205). The first-stage R^2 is small in absolute terms, and this modest explanatory power is interpreted honestly in the discussion: perceived authenticity in AI marketing is shaped by a much broader set of factors, brand heritage, communication tone,

relational history, and cultural values, than are captured by AI-usage intensity alone. The model was re-estimated after the removal of PA3; structural paths were substantively stable (changes < 0.01 in all coefficients), and the values reported below and in Fig. 2 are from the revised three-item PA model.

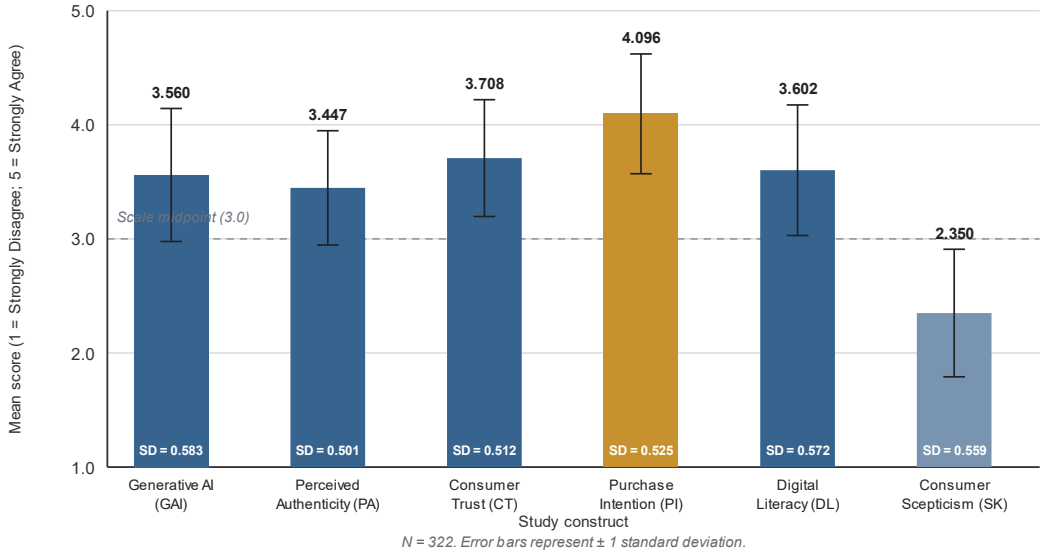

Fig. 1: Descriptive statistics — mean scores and standard deviations of study constructs

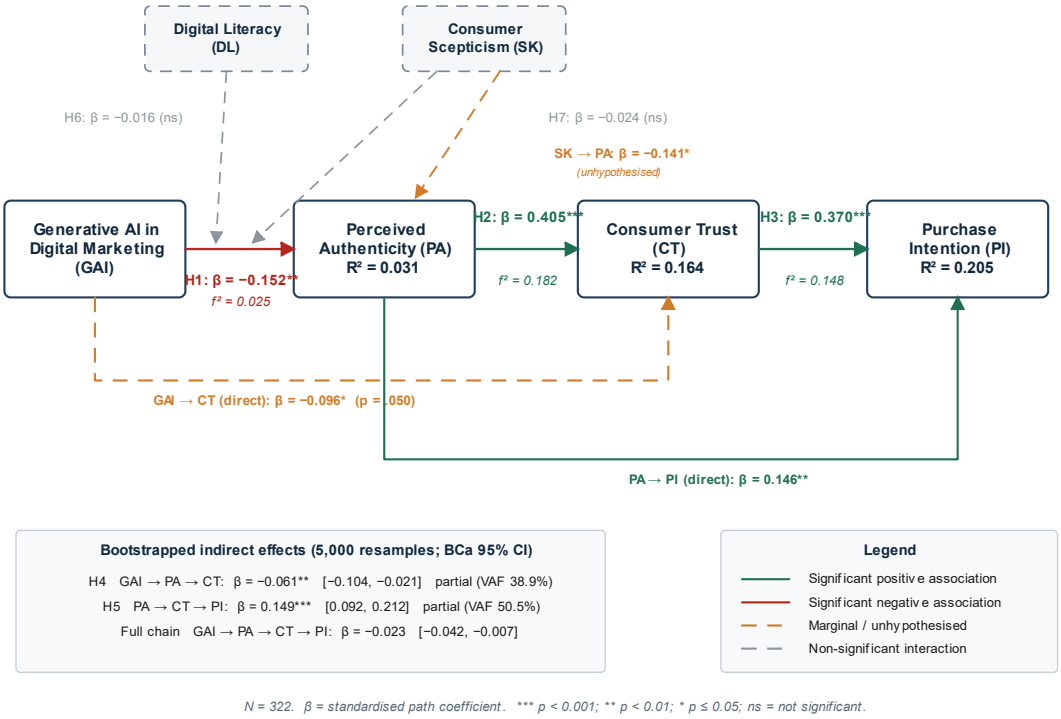

Fig. 2: Structural model results — path coefficients, mediation effects, and explained variance (PLS-SEM)

H1 is supported: generative AI usage is negatively associated with perceived authenticity (β = −0.152, SE = 0.047, t = 3.21, p = 0.001, f^2 = 0.025). As visualized in Fig. 2, this negative path, represented in red, is consistent with the authenticity-deficit argument that higher AI intensity in digital marketing is accompanied by lower authenticity evaluations. The effect size is small (f^2 = 0.025); the result reaches statistical significance at N = 322 but should not be overstated.

H2 is strongly supported: perceived authenticity is positively associated with consumer trust (β = 0.405, SE = 0.053, t = 7.62, p < 0.001, f^2 = 0.182). This is the most robust direct path in the model, with a medium-to-large effect size indicating that authenticity evaluations account for substantial variation in trust. H3 is equally supported: consumer trust is positively associated with purchase intention (β = 0.370, SE = 0.056, t = 6.62, p < 0.001, f^2 = 0.148), confirming a strong proximal trust–intention relationship.

A marginal direct association of GAI with CT was also observed (β = −0.096, t = 1.97, p = 0.050), suggesting that AI marketing has a weak additional suppressive link with trust beyond its indirect path through authenticity. This pattern indicates partial, rather than full, mediation at the first stage of the model. Although H6 and H7 are discussed in Section

4.5, the moderation model also revealed a statistically significant main effect of Consumer Skepticism on Perceived Authenticity (β = −0.141, p = 0.016) that was not part of the original hypothesis set. Skeptical consumers rated AI marketing content as less authentic regardless of the level of AI usage. This unhypothesized association is discussed cautiously in Section 5.

Table 4: Structural-model results — path coefficients and hypothesis testing

H	Structural path	β	SE	t-value	p-value	f^2	Decision
H1	Generative AI → perceived authenticity	−0.152	0.047	3.21	0.001	0.025	Supported
H2	Perceived authenticity → consumer trust	0.405	0.053	7.62	< 0.001	0.182	Supported
H3	Consumer trust → purchase intention	0.370	0.056	6.62	< 0.001	0.148	Supported
H6	DL × GAI → perceived authenticity	−0.016	0.027	0.58	0.560	0.001	Not supported
H7	SK × GAI → perceived authenticity	−0.024	0.025	0.96	0.340	0.002	Not supported

R^2 (PA) = 0.031 — weak first-stage R^2 (see discussion); R^2 (CT) = 0.164 — moderate explanatory power; R^2 (PI) = 0.205 — moderate-to-substantial explanatory power; β = standardized path coefficient; SE = bootstrapped standard error (5,000 resamples); t-values reported as absolute, two-tailed. Effect size f^2 interpretation: small ≥ 0.02, medium ≥ 0.15, large ≥ 0.35. *** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05

4.4. Mediation analysis

Table 5 presents the bootstrapped mediation results. H4 is supported: perceived authenticity partially mediates the relationship between generative AI usage and consumer trust (indirect β = −0.061, 95% BCa CI [−0.104, −0.021]). Since the confidence interval excludes zero, the indirect effect is statistically significant. The Variance Accounted For (VAF) is 38.9%, indicating partial mediation. The mechanism operates as follows: greater AI intensity is associated with lower perceived authenticity, which in turn is linked to reduced consumer trust, a sequential negative pathway consistent with signaling theory. H5 is also supported: consumer trust partially mediates the relationship between perceived authenticity and purchase intention (indirect β = 0.149, 95% BCa CI [0.092, 0.212]). The VAF of 50.5% indicates that trust carries approximately half the total effect of authenticity on purchase intention, confirming that while authenticity is directly linked to purchase intention (β = 0.146, p = 0.010), its influence is substantially channeled through trust formation. The full sequential mediation chain, GAI → PA → CT → PI, yields a small but statistically significant indirect effect (β = −0.023, 95% BCa CI [−0.042, −0.007]).

Table 5: Mediation analysis — bootstrapped indirect effects (5,000 resamples)

H	Mediation path	Direct β	Indirect β	95% CI [LL, UL]	Total effect	Mediation type	Decision
H4	GAI → PA → CT	−0.096*	−0.061**	[−0.104, −0.021]	−0.157	Partial (negative)	Supported
H5	PA → CT → PI	0.146**	0.149***	[0.092, 0.212]	0.295	Partial (positive)	Supported

VAF (H4): PA's mediation of GAI → CT = 38.9% — partial mediation (VAF 20–80%); VAF (H5): CT's mediation of PA → PI = 50.5% — CT carries ~half the total PA → PI effect; Full chain (GAI → PA → CT → PI): β = −0.023, 95% CI [−0.042, −0.007] — sequential mediation supported; Bootstrapped CIs are bias-corrected and accelerated (BCa; Preacher and Hayes, 2008). A CI not containing zero indicates a statistically significant indirect effect. *** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05

4.5. Moderation analysis

Fig. 3 presents the interaction plots for H6 (Digital Literacy) and H7 (Consumer Skepticism). Neither interaction term reached statistical significance. For H6, the interaction coefficient β = −0.016 (SE = 0.027, t = 0.58, p = 0.560) does not indicate that digital literacy amplifies the negative association between AI usage and perceived authenticity. For H7, β = −0.024 (SE = 0.025, t = 0.96, p = 0.340) similarly indicates no significant moderation by consumer skepticism. The near-parallel lines in both panels of Fig. 3 visually confirm the absence of interaction effects: the negative slope of GAI on PA is essentially constant across low, mean, and high levels of both moderators. H6 and H7 are therefore not supported. These should be reported as null findings; the interpretation in Section 5 does not over-claim theoretical importance for the absence of moderation.

5. Discussion

5.1. The AI–authenticity association

The first finding worth highlighting is the support for H1: generative AI usage in digital marketing is negatively associated with perceived authenticity (β = −0.152, p = 0.001). The direction of the association is consistent with Solovjov's (2025) authenticity-deficit argument and extends Vo et al.'s (2024) work by demonstrating the pattern at the aggregate market level rather than in specific platform contexts. At the same time, the effect size (f^2 = 0.025) and the small first-stage R^2 (0.031) require honest interpretation. AI-usage intensity, as captured in this study, accounts for approximately 3% of the variance in authenticity evaluations. This is statistically meaningful at N = 322 but is not, in any practical sense, a dominant determinant of authenticity perceptions. The substantive drivers of perceived authenticity in AI marketing are likely to lie elsewhere, including brand heritage, message tone, prior relational history, and broader cultural and ethical values, and these should be at the center of future work.

It is also important to acknowledge the cross-sectional nature of the design. The terms 'effect' and 'influence' are used sparingly in this manuscript; the more precise language of association and prediction better reflects the evidentiary base. The H1 finding is best read as: among Saudi digitally active consumers, higher reported intensity of AI-generated marketing exposure is accompanied by lower authenticity evaluations, after accounting for measurement error. Establishing the direction of causality would require

experimental or longitudinal designs, which are recommended for future research.

5.2. The trust and purchase-intention chain

The strong positive path from perceived authenticity to consumer trust (β = 0.405, p < 0.001) constitutes the most robust relationship in the model and aligns with a well-established body of literature. Kothari et al. (2025), Busser and Shulga (2019), and Chen et al. (2022) converged on the conclusion that authenticity is among the most powerful proximate determinants of consumer trust in digital environments. The present study confirms this association in an AI-specific context and in the Saudi Arabian market, extending the cross-cultural span of the evidence base (Khalfallah and Keller, 2025).

The trust–purchase-intention path (β = 0.370, p < 0.001) replicates the now well-established trust–behavior link documented across consumer contexts (Ambak et al., 2025; Evrianti et al., 2025; Poulis et al., 2026). The finding that trust explains unique variance in purchase intention over and above direct authenticity effects (direct PA → PI: β = 0.146) underscores trust's role as a necessary psychological bridge between brand evaluation and commercial commitment. This architecture has practical implications for AI marketing strategy: brands that deploy AI without managing trust formation risk achieving awareness and engagement without converting these into purchase decisions.

The elevated mean of Purchase Intention (M = 4.10, SD = 0.53), the highest of all six construct means in Fig. 1, suggests a favorable overall commercial environment among Saudi digital consumers. This pattern should be interpreted alongside the moderate Perceived Authenticity score (M = 3.45) and the low Consumer Skepticism score (M = 2.35), indicating that while authenticity concerns are present, they have not yet substantially suppressed purchase willingness in this sample. This pattern is consistent with Alam and Al Mubarak's (2025) observation that Saudi consumers are positively disposed toward digital brand interactions but sensitive to perceived inauthenticity.

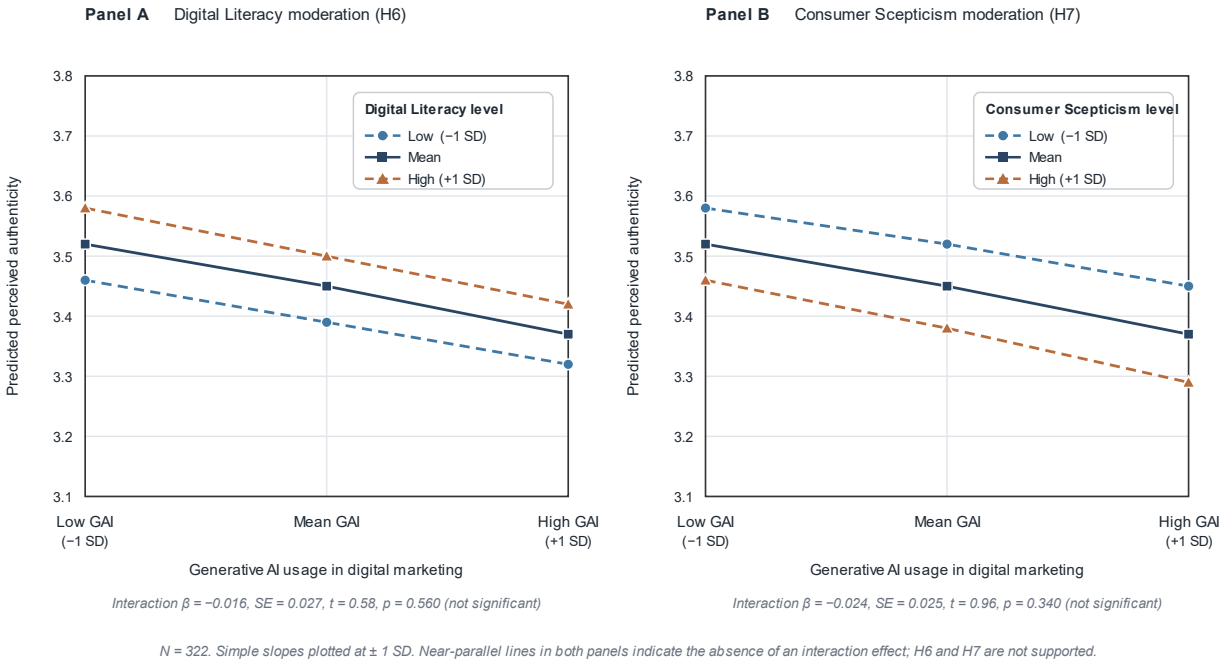

Fig. 3: Moderation analysis — interaction effect plots for Digital Literacy (H6) and Consumer Skepticism (H7)

5.3. Cultural context: Why Saudi Arabia matters

The findings are best interpreted with reference to specific cultural features of the Saudi consumer environment. First, Saudi consumer communication is generally high-context, with significant weight placed on relational warmth, implicit trust cues, and inferred sincerity (Alam and Al Mubarak, 2025). In such an environment, the visible mechanization of brand voice, even when surface fluency is high, may be experienced as an erosion of the relational substrate of commercial communication, consistent with the negative AI–authenticity association observed in this study.

Second, Islamic ethical norms concerning honesty (sidq) and the avoidance of deception in exchange relations elevate the perceived seriousness of inauthentic communication beyond a purely aesthetic preference (Ambak et al., 2025). Consumers operating within this normative framework may interpret AI-generated marketing content not merely as 'cold' or 'generic' but as ethically suspect when AI provenance is undisclosed. This may help explain the consistent negative slope across literacy and skepticism levels in Fig. 3: a relatively uniform ethical sensitivity to perceived inauthenticity, rather than a literacy- or skepticism-dependent reaction.

Third, the socially distributed character of Saudi consumer decision-making, with families, peer networks, and community reference groups shaping purchase choices, gives perceived authenticity a

social-validation function beyond its individual cognitive role. Brands that lose authenticity in this context may face not only a single consumer's withdrawal but a network-level loss of legitimacy. These cultural features collectively reinforce the practical importance of authenticity management in AI-enabled marketing in Saudi Arabia and similar high-context markets. Recent evidence from the Saudi marketing environment (El-Tahan et al., 2026) similarly indicates that marketing strategies attuned to the cultural and ethical expectations of Saudi consumers yield stronger evaluative outcomes than generic communication approaches, consistent with the present findings.

5.4. Mediation mechanisms

The partial mediation findings for H4 and H5 carry important theoretical and practical implications. For H4, the negative indirect pathway (GAI → PA → CT: indirect β = −0.061, VAF = 38.9%) indicates that perceived authenticity is the main mediating channel through which AI usage is linked to trust. Combined with the marginal direct GAI → CT effect, this points to a dual-pathway structure in which AI marketing is linked to lower trust both through authenticity and through a smaller residual route — suggesting that authenticity remediation alone, while necessary, may not fully restore trust when AI usage is high.

For H5, the trust-mediated pathway (PA → CT → PI: indirect β = 0.149, VAF = 50.5%) indicates that approximately half of the association between authenticity and purchase intention is channeled through trust, echoing Manojprasath et al.'s (2025) finding that authenticity is linked to purchase decisions via trust formation in influencer marketing contexts. The statistically significant full-chain sequential mediation (GAI → PA → CT → PI: β = −0.023) demonstrates that the entire hypothesized architecture is empirically coherent, even though individual path coefficients are modest in isolation.

5.5. Non-significant moderation: A null finding

The failure to find significant moderation effects for digital literacy (H6) and consumer skepticism (H7) is best reported as a null finding rather than as a strongly informative theoretical outcome. The near-parallel interaction plots in Fig. 3 indicate that the negative AI–authenticity association operates at a relatively uniform magnitude across consumers' digital competence and critical orientation toward marketing. Several non-mutually-exclusive explanations are plausible.

First, the first-stage path is weak (R^2 = 0.031), and detecting interaction effects on a weak main effect requires considerably more statistical power than the present sample provides. Second, the modest internal consistency of the revised PA scale (α = 0.625) may limit measurement sensitivity to interaction effects. Third, the moderator scales themselves are short (three items each), which constrains their psychometric range. The honest interpretation is therefore that these data are not powered to detect small moderation effects, rather than that no such effects exist. Future research should re-examine these moderators with larger samples, longer scales, and ideally with experimental manipulations.

A secondary observation, the statistically significant direct effect of Consumer Skepticism on Perceived Authenticity (β = −0.141, p = 0.016), should be interpreted with caution, as it was not part of the original hypothesis set. Taken at face value, it indicates that skeptical consumers rate AI marketing content as less authentic regardless of AI-usage intensity. This is consistent with the general literature on dispositional skepticism (Khalfallah and Keller, 2025) but should be replicated in pre-registered studies before being relied upon as a substantive finding.

5.6. Theoretical and practical contributions

Theoretically, this study contributes to the application of signaling theory to AI marketing by positioning perceived authenticity as a central psychological signal-quality channel through which AI usage is linked to trust. The sequential association framework (GAI → PA → CT → PI) provides a parsimonious account of how AI intensity propagates through the consumer decision process. This framework extends prior work on authenticity in influencer marketing (Chavda and Chauhan, 2024; Khalfallah and Keller, 2025) by transposing it to the domain of AI-generated brand communication and by placing the analysis in a distinctive cultural context.

Practically, the findings offer cautious guidance for marketing professionals in Saudi Arabia and comparable emerging markets. Brands deploying generative AI may benefit from mechanisms that preserve authenticity perceptions, including transparent AI disclosure, human editorial oversight of AI outputs, and authentic narrative integration, recognizing that the empirical association between AI usage and authenticity, while modest in magnitude, is real and consistent. The robust role of consumer trust as the commercial gateway to purchase intention further suggests that trust management should be treated as a strategic complement to AI adoption rather than as an afterthought (Rehman and Fareed, 2025).

6. Conclusions

This study set out to examine how generative AI usage in digital marketing is associated with consumer trust, with perceived authenticity as the central mediating mechanism, in the context of Saudi Arabia's rapidly digitalizing consumer landscape. The PLS-SEM results from a sample of 322 Saudi consumers provide empirical support for the core associational chain: generative AI usage is negatively associated with perceived authenticity (H1

supported), which in turn predicts consumer trust (H2 supported) and, sequentially, purchase intention (H3 supported). Both proposed mediation hypotheses are confirmed — perceived authenticity partially mediates the negative AI–trust association (H4), and consumer trust partially mediates the positive authenticity–purchase-intention association (H5). The two moderation hypotheses (H6, H7) are not supported and are reported as null findings that may reflect measurement and power limitations rather than the absence of underlying effects.

The study makes three contributions. First, it provides one of the first PLS-SEM-based examinations of the perceived-authenticity channel in generative-AI marketing within Saudi Arabia, addressing a notable gap in the emerging-market literature. Second, it positions perceived authenticity, rather than privacy concern, information overload, or AI anxiety, as a key mediating construct in the AI–trust relationship, offering a theoretically grounded and practically actionable focus for future inquiry. Third, it situates the analysis within the cultural specifics of the Saudi consumer environment, foregrounding high-context communication, Islamic ethical norms, and socially distributed decision-making as drivers of the observed pattern.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference; the language of association and prediction adopted throughout the manuscript reflects this constraint. Second, the non-probability convenience sample is drawn from digitally active urban consumers and does not represent the broader Saudi population; generalizations to rural, older, or less digitally active groups are not supported by the present data. Third, even after dropping PA3, the PA scale retains modest internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.625$) and a relatively narrow AVE margin (0.515), suggesting that authenticity measurement in AI marketing deserves further scale-development work. Fourth, the very small first-stage R^2 (0.031) underscores that AI-usage intensity is only a minor antecedent of perceived authenticity; brand heritage, communication tone, relational history, and cultural values are likely to play larger roles and should be incorporated into future models. Fifth, single-source self-report data may introduce common-method variance despite the use of mixed-scale anchors and reverse-coded items in the questionnaire.

Future research should pursue at least four directions. (1) Experimental designs in which AI provenance and disclosure are systematically manipulated would establish directionality and test the causal interpretation of the associations observed here. (2) Longitudinal designs that track exposure and perceptions over time would clarify whether the AI–authenticity association strengthens or attenuates with familiarity. (3) Sector-specific replications (e.g., fashion, financial services, healthcare) would probe the boundary conditions of the proposed model. (4) Cross-cultural comparisons between high-context and low-context markets would test whether the Saudi pattern generalizes or is conditioned by cultural communication norms.

List of abbreviations

AI	Artificial intelligence
AVE	Average variance extracted
BCa	Bias-corrected and accelerated (bootstrap confidence interval)
CI	Confidence interval
CR	Composite reliability
CT	Consumer trust
DL	Digital literacy
DM	Digital marketing
f^2	Effect size (Cohen's f^2)
GAI	Generative AI in digital marketing
HTMT	Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio
PA	Perceived authenticity
PI	Purchase intention
PLS-SEM	Partial least squares structural equation modeling
R^2	Coefficient of determination
SAR	Saudi riyal
SD	Standard deviation
SE	Standard error
SK	Consumer skepticism
VAF	Variance accounted for
α	Cronbach's alpha (internal consistency reliability)
β	Standardized path coefficient

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Compliance with ethical standards

Ethical considerations

All procedures performed in this study were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. Informed consent was obtained from all individual respondents prior to participation, and the anonymity and confidentiality of responses were protected throughout the study.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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