

Is AI Just the Latest Version of Makeup?

Let me first start with, as a man, I may not be the right person to speak about this, but it feels like AI may just be the latest version of makeup and/or plastic surgery.

Hear me out.

There's clearly a wide spectrum of how people want to present themselves. Some people want to go completely natural with no makeup. Some people love makeup. Some people love makeup at a high end that maybe dramatically changes how they look. Other people want to change their appearance even more permanently by dyeing their hair or possibly getting plastic surgery.

And I don't think many of us see this as a moral issue. These are personal preferences about how people want to show up in public spaces and look a certain way. It might give them a sense of confidence or comfort. It might simply be their way of saying, "This is how I want to present and represent myself."

I'm wondering if AI is really all that different.

I think many of us have thrown out moral claims about the use of AI. If you use AI, you're being inauthentic. You're not being yourself. You're lying to your audience.

And I think that might be an overly simplistic argument.

Take me as an example. I have horrible grammar and spelling, so I use AI to clean that up and help me present as more professional. I don't want it changing my ideas or making me sound like someone else, but I absolutely want it cleaning me up a bit.

Maybe that's just a little makeup.

Other people may want to use AI to dramatically change the way they're perceived. They may want to sound more intelligent, more professional, funnier, more thoughtful, whatever. Maybe that's more like the plastic surgery end of the spectrum.

And again, I'm not sure that's automatically inauthentic. Someone may alter their appearance pretty significantly, and we don't necessarily say they're being inauthentic. That's how they've chosen to show up in the world. We may have opinions about that choice, but I don't know that I'd say the person is lying simply because they've changed how they present themselves.

So why do we jump there so quickly with AI?

What Do We Even Mean by Authentic?

Maybe part of the problem is that we're throwing around words like "authentic" and "transparent" as if we've all agreed on what they mean.

We haven't.

Even outside of AI, authenticity has a pretty wide spectrum of answers. Some people might look at someone wearing really dramatic makeup and say, "That's not what you actually look like."

That's inauthentic." Someone else may look at the exact same person and say they're being completely authentic because that's how they've chosen to express themselves and show up in the world.

So what does authentic actually mean?

For me, I think it's something like original, personal, the real you. But even as I type that, I realize "the real you" leaves a LOT of room for interpretation.

And maybe I need to be comfortable with that. If I'm willing to give people space to decide how they want to present themselves in real life, even when their choices might feel inauthentic to me, shouldn't I give them some of that same space when they're using AI?

That's admittedly hard for me. Someone else may decide that a thoroughly AI-created version of themselves is how they want to show up. That would probably feel pretty inauthentic to me. But I'm also not sure I should get to make that decision for them.

But Something Changes When We Feel Deceived

This is where I think my own argument starts getting more complicated.

When I read someone's content, I'm not just consuming information. I'm also learning something about that person. If I read enough of your articles, listen to your podcasts, watch your interviews, or follow your posts, eventually I start to feel like I understand something about you. I understand how you think. What you care about. Your sense of humor. Maybe I even start thinking, "I bet we'd have a really interesting conversation if we ever got into a room together."

That's part of what thought leadership and content do. They create connection.

So what happens if I find out that the person I thought I was connecting with wasn't really the person creating any of it?

That's where I think the word **deceived** becomes important.

If AI cleaned up your grammar, I don't feel deceived. If it helped you organize some thoughts, I probably don't feel deceived. But if I thought I was learning how you think and come to find out AI was doing most of the thinking, writing, humor, and storytelling? Yeah, I think I would feel deceived. And honestly, I think I'd be disappointed.

The content itself didn't necessarily change. But my understanding of where it came from did. And I think that matters.

The Problem Is We Can't See the Difference

Maybe this is where my makeup comparison starts to work again.

There's a BIG difference between putting a little blush on your cheeks and dramatically altering your appearance. Think about the people living in the Capitol in *The Hunger Games*. Their appearance has been altered so dramatically that nobody is confused about what they're looking at. Wild hair colors, dramatic makeup, body modifications, even people altering their skin. It's extreme, it's obvious, and within that culture it's accepted and even celebrated.

The problem with AI right now is that we have no real way of knowing where something falls on that spectrum.

Did you put on a little blush? Did you get some plastic surgery? Or am I basically interacting with a wax figure that looks and sounds like you but isn't actually you at all?

Right now, all of that gets lumped together under "AI was used." And I think that's part of why the conversation gets so frustrating.

We don't have a great way to decipher how much AI altered what we're consuming, so instead we make the conversation black and white. Either you hand-typed every word yourself or you "used AI."

That seems like a pretty useless distinction to me.

So Is Disclosure the Answer?

I don't know.

Seriously.

I've seen people suggest that AI-created content should have some sort of disclosure. Maybe a note at the bottom saying AI helped create it. Maybe AI-generated images need a watermark. And maybe that's part of the answer.

But "AI helped me create this" doesn't really tell me anything.

Did AI spell-check it? Did you spend 13 hours going back and forth with AI, challenging ideas, rewriting sections, adding your own experiences, and eventually producing something that represents what you actually think? Or did you type "write me an article about AI and authenticity," copy what came back, and put your name on it?

Those are dramatically different uses of AI, but our current language treats them basically the same.

I don't know that we need some sort of nutrition label telling us that an article is 13% AI, 87% human. I'm not even sure we could accurately measure that if we wanted to. But I do think there's a more interesting discussion here than "AI is inauthentic."

I just don't know exactly what that discussion looks like yet.

Maybe we need better disclosure. Maybe we need a better way to talk about the scale of AI involvement. Maybe we just need some generally accepted norms around when AI usage matters and when it really doesn't. I don't know that "AI helped me create this" gets us very far, but I also don't know what should replace it.

What I do know is that I don't want us to flatten all AI usage into the same thing. Someone using AI to fix their horrible spelling (hi, it's me) isn't necessarily doing the same thing as someone asking AI to create an entire perspective, personality, or body of work for them.

There's a LOT of space between a little blush and the Capitol from *The Hunger Games*. I think our conversations about AI need to leave room for that same kind of spectrum.

I'm genuinely curious where other people are landing on this. What does appropriate AI usage look like to you? What would you actually want someone to disclose? And maybe more importantly, who is already having thoughtful conversations about this that I should be paying attention to?

Because I don't think I've figured this out. But I do think "AI is authentic" versus "AI is inauthentic" is probably the least interesting version of the conversation.

Note: AI helped me create this....