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AI-GENERATED MEDIA AND PUBLIC TRUST: EXPERIMENTAL EVIDENCE FROM LITHUANIA

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Abstract. *The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies is fundamentally reshaping the digital communication landscape. AI now enables the creation of highly realistic synthetic images, videos and voices. While these innovations open new opportunities for creativity, they also blur the boundaries between reality and fabrication, posing challenges to public trust and perceptions of truth.*

This study explores how young people in Lithuania, both local and foreign, perceive, interpret and emotionally respond to AI-generated media, and how such experiences influence their trust in digital information. Using an exploratory qualitative design, the research combined an experimental exposure to authentic and AI-generated media samples (n = 15, aged 14–29) with semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis identified four central themes: reliance on intuition and first impressions; mixed emotional reactions such as curiosity, admiration and anxiety; erosion of baseline trust; and gradual adaptation through reflective verification and collaboration.

Findings show that authenticity judgments are increasingly shaped by emotional resonance, familiarity and contextual cues rather than factual reasoning. Exposure to synthetic media often provokes cognitive fatigue and emotional ambivalence, yet it can also foster critical awareness and the emergence of "networked trust" in which verification becomes a shared social practice. Participants demonstrated both vulnerability to manipulation and growing resilience through peer discussion, emotional regulation and adaptive learning.

The study concludes that trust in the AI era is not a static belief but a dynamic process rebuilt through emotional intelligence, reflection and collective verification. These insights highlight the importance of technological transparency, media education that incorporates emotional literacy and community-based initiatives to strengthen resilience against misinformation in small digital societies such as Lithuania.

Future research should address these questions using quantitative methods to capture broader societal patterns and include older age groups, whose trust dynamics and digital literacy levels may differ from those of youth.

Keywords: *artificial intelligence, AI-generated media, trust, emotional response, media literacy, qualitative research, youth, Lithuania.*

Introduction

In recent years, artificial intelligence (AI) has become one of the most influential forces shaping modern communication and media production. Generative AI systems that create realistic images, videos and voices can convincingly replicate human features and behavior. While these tools offer new opportunities for creativity, education and marketing, they also challenge the foundations of trust, authenticity and truth in information exchange (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2023; Rini, 2025). The spread of deepfakes and other synthetic media has blurred the boundary between reality and fabrication, leading to what scholars describe as an epistemic crisis in digital communication (Chesney & Citron, 2024).

Public trust is central to any functioning information society. When people cannot distinguish between real and manipulated content, skepticism can extend beyond specific sources to digital information in general (Floridi, 2024). This erosion of trust weakens social cohesion, reduces confidence in journalism and amplifies misinformation. Yet, confronting synthetic media can also promote media literacy and critical awareness by motivating fact-checking and verification. Thus, AI-generated media simultaneously undermine and stimulate public trust. Despite growing global attention to AI-generated disinformation, little is known

about how people socially and emotionally perceive such content, especially in smaller digital societies like Lithuania, where media ecosystems are concentrated and institutional trust is fragile. Existing research largely focuses on technological detection rather than human interpretation.

This study addresses that gap by exploring how individuals recognize, evaluate and emotionally respond to AI-generated images and voices. It examines how direct exposure influences their sense of authenticity and trust in digital information, focusing on the reasoning strategies they use, the effects on overall trust, and links to critical thinking and media literacy. By situating the analysis in the Lithuanian context, the study contributes to international debates on the social implications of generative AI and offers insights for educators, policymakers and communication professionals seeking to strengthen resilience against misinformation.

Theoretical background

AI-generated media and the transformation of digital communication

The rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) has fundamentally transformed digital communication by reshaping how information is created, distributed and perceived. Generative AI technologies such as generative adversarial networks (GANs) and diffusion models can now produce highly realistic images, voices, videos that closely imitate reality. These tools have democratized media creation, enabling anyone to generate professional content at low cost, but they have also accelerated the spread of fabricated materials, raising concerns about authenticity, authorship and accountability (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2023; Mirsky & Lee, 2023). Initially praised for fostering creativity in art, marketing and education, generative AI soon revealed a "dual-use dilemma": the same systems that enable innovation can be weaponized for manipulation and deception (Floridi, 2024). Deepfakes exemplify how convincingly AI can imitate reality, producing what scholars describe as an epistemic crisis, when traditional markers of authenticity erode, trust in communication collapses (Chesney & Citron, 2024; Rini, 2025).

Empirical studies show that exposure to synthetic media undermines people's ability to judge credibility and increases skepticism toward news and political communication (Corsi et al., 2023; Möller & Helberger, 2024). Repeated encounters with AI-generated videos foster long-term uncertainty about journalism and public figures, spreading distrust across digital ecosystems (Floridi, 2024; Rini, 2025). This creates a paradox: while digital technologies expand information access, they also fuel fatigue, cynicism and declining confidence in media sources. AI-generated content not only spreads misinformation but reshapes how people define truth and evidence online. From a communication theory perspective, AI blurs the cues such as tone, source, or style that audiences traditionally use to assess credibility. As these cues become artificial, interpretation grows uncertain, and people rely more on emotional or heuristic judgments rather than verifiable evidence (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). This shift reinforces the psychological mechanisms that make misinformation persuasive and complicates ethical questions of digital representation (Floridi, 2024; Rini, 2025). Yet some researchers argue that exposure to synthetic media can enhance resilience by encouraging media literacy, fact-checking and critical engagement (Islam et al., 2024). Thus, AI-generated media represents both a threat and an opportunity: it undermines traditional trust while motivating societies to rethink authenticity and develop new ethical and educational frameworks for truth in the digital age.

In conclusion, generative AI marks a turning point in communication. By blurring the boundary between real and synthetic, it challenges established notions of credibility and truth, reshaping not only how information spreads but how people decide what to believe.

Trust, authenticity and perception in the age of synthetic media

Trust is the foundation of any functioning information system. Public confidence in media depends on people's ability to assess credibility and detect manipulation (Floridi, 2024). As AI-generated media becomes more sophisticated, distinguishing real from artificial content grows increasingly difficult. Visual and contextual cues that once signaled authenticity can now be perfectly replicated. Studies show that even brief exposure to synthetic content reduces trust in both real and fake information, revealing a deeper shift in society's relationship with truth (Rini, 2025; Möller & Helberger, 2024).

Empirical research confirms that AI-generated visuals heighten confusion and weaken belief in journalism (Iqbal & Qureshi, 2024). Most people cannot reliably identify whether media is genuine or computer-made, often judging by intuition or emotion (Arroyo et al., 2024). Such uncertainty leads to "informational disorientation" especially dangerous during crises, when fake videos or audio recordings can fuel fear, anger or sympathy and serve as tools of psychological manipulation. Cognitive studies show that people often rely on emotional cues: familiarity, fluency or affect, rather than analytical reasoning (Arguedas et al., 2023; Javed et al., 2024). This makes audiences vulnerable to AI-generated materials designed to exploit these shortcuts. Trust thus becomes less about factual proof and more about perceived authenticity.

From a social-psychological view, trust online is unstable and emotionally driven (Lewandowsky et al., 2022). Yet, awareness of manipulation can foster resilience. Confronting synthetic media encourages critical evaluation, fact-checking, and the creation of verification tools and educational programs (Islam et al., 2024; Arroyo et al., 2024). Ultimately, the rise of AI-generated media has transformed how people perceive truth. It destabilizes traditional signs of authenticity but also promotes greater critical awareness. Understanding this evolving nature of trust is essential for building media literacy, ethical communication and resilience in an increasingly synthetic information environment.

In conclusion, the rise of AI-generated media has fundamentally transformed how people perceive and evaluate truth in the digital age. As synthetic content blurs the line between real and artificial, traditional cues of authenticity have lost reliability, making trust increasingly fragile and emotionally driven. Yet, this challenge also brings opportunity: awareness of manipulation can strengthen critical thinking, promote media literacy and inspire new ethical and technological strategies to protect truth and integrity in modern information systems.

Media literacy and resilience to disinformation

Media literacy, understood as the ability to access, evaluate and create media messages critically, has become one of the most important tools for strengthening resilience against misinformation and manipulation. It enables individuals not only to question the accuracy of what they see and hear but also to understand how information is produced and shared. In the era of generative artificial intelligence, traditional approaches that focus mainly on verifying sources or detecting false claims are no longer sufficient. People must also understand how AI systems generate synthetic images, videos and voices and how such content can influence perception, trust and emotion (Sergeeva, 2025).

Recent studies show that practical, experience-based education is the most effective way to help people recognize AI-generated content. Participants who created or analyzed deepfakes were significantly better at identifying manipulation and less likely to believe false information (Dhahir et al., 2024; Geissler, 2025). However, focusing too much on deception can make people overly skeptical, leading them to doubt even reliable journalism (Spinde et al., 2024). Media education therefore must balance critical awareness with confidence in trustworthy sources. The importance of media literacy becomes especially clear during crises such as wars, elections or natural disasters, when misinformation spreads quickly. Community-based workshops, where participants collectively analyze synthetic media, have been shown to increase confidence, cooperation and trust within local communities (Dhahir et al., 2024). Moreover, combining critical thinking with practical technological tools such as reverse-image search, metadata analysis or voice verification enhances people's ability to assess authenticity effectively (Sergeeva, 2025).

In conclusion, media literacy in the age of AI is not a fixed skill set but an evolving process of learning, reflection and adaptation. It requires technical understanding, emotional resilience and collective responsibility to maintain trust and ethical communication in a complex, rapidly changing information environment.

Methodology

Research design

This study employed a qualitative exploratory design that combined an experimental exposure phase with semi-structured interviews. The aim was to understand how individuals perceive AI-generated media and how direct exposure to synthetic content affects their sense of authenticity and trust in information. This design was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of participants reasoning, emotions and interpretation processes, factors that cannot be fully captured through quantitative methods. The experiment involved presenting participants with a curated set of media materials, including both authentic and AI-generated images, short video clips and audio recordings. The order of presentation was randomized to avoid bias. Participants were asked to identify which materials they believed to be authentic and which appeared artificial and to explain the reasoning behind their judgments.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit participants representing diverse age groups, education levels and media-consumption habits. The final sample consisted of 15 individuals aged between 14 and 29, all residing in Lithuania at the time of the study. The group included eight females and seven males, reflecting a balanced gender composition. Participants came from varied educational backgrounds: five were secondary-school students, six were university students and four were employed young adults with higher education. All participants were digitally active, regularly engaging with online news, social media and multimedia content. This was established through both recruitment criteria and pre-interview discussions, during which participants described their typical media routines. Most reported using at least two social media platforms daily (most commonly "Instagram", "TikTok", "YouTube") and following news either through online portals or aggregated feeds on social networks. Several participants also mentioned creating or sharing digital content themselves, such as short videos, photos or memes. These behaviors collectively indicated that all participants were experienced and active users of digital media environments.

Seven participants were non-Lithuanian youths currently residing in Lithuania. They were regular visitors of a youth center that served as one of the main recruitment sites for the

study. The remaining eight participants were Lithuanian nationals recruited through community and educational networks. Although the study was not designed as a comparative cross-cultural analysis, the inclusion of both Lithuanian and foreign participants allowed for observing potential cultural and emotional differences in how authenticity and trust are perceived. Participation in the study was voluntary and all individuals provided informed consent before data collection. For underage participants, written parental consent was obtained to ensure ethical participation and compliance with research guidelines. Participants were anonymized using codes (P01–P15) to protect their identities. The study consisted of two stages designed to explore participants' perception and interpretation of AI-generated media. In the first stage, an experimental exposure was conducted. Participants viewed ten media samples: five authentic and five generated using publicly available AI tools such as "DALL·E" and "ElevenLabs". The materials included images of public figures, political scenes and short voice clips imitating familiar newsreaders from around the world. After each item, participants were asked to indicate whether they believed the content was authentic and to briefly explain their reasoning. This stage aimed to capture participants' immediate cognitive and emotional reactions when distinguishing between real and synthetic media. The second stage involved semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 30–40 minutes. These interviews explored in greater depth how participants made authenticity judgments, what cues they relied on, how they felt during the exposure and how such experiences might influence their broader trust in online information.

The interviews were conducted in English, while all experimental materials were provided in participants' native languages to ensure full comprehension and authentic emotional engagement. Lithuanian participants viewed and listened to media samples in Lithuanian, while foreign participants received the same or equivalent materials translated into their respective native languages. With the help of modern artificial intelligence tools, it was possible to prepare high-quality, linguistically accurate materials in each participant's native language, ensuring that meaning, tone and emotional nuance were preserved. This approach ensured that each respondent experienced the stimuli naturally, in the linguistic and cultural context most familiar to them. Presenting materials in participants' native languages minimized cognitive strain related to translation or second-language processing and allowed emotions, judgments and associations to emerge more spontaneously. Using English as the interview language, meanwhile, created a neutral communicative space for discussion across a multicultural sample. This methodological choice enhanced both linguistic accessibility and ecological validity, enabling the study to capture genuine differences in perception and emotional response across cultural backgrounds.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase framework. This method was chosen because it allows for identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning across qualitative data while remaining flexible and grounded in participants' own language. It was particularly suitable for this study, which sought to understand both the cognitive and emotional dimensions of how people experience and evaluate AI-generated media.

The analysis proceeded through the six stages outlined by Braun and Clarke. First, all interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and read multiple times to ensure familiarization with the data. Second, initial codes were generated manually to capture relevant features of participants' reasoning, emotions and descriptions of authenticity judgments.

Coding was conducted using NVivo 14 software, which supported a systematic comparison of recurring ideas across participants. In the third and fourth phases, potential themes were identified, reviewed and refined through iterative reading. The analysis sought to uncover overarching patterns in participants' reasoning strategies, emotional reactions and expressions of uncertainty or confidence. Particular attention was paid to how participants described their thought processes when deciding whether media appeared real and how their perceptions of trust evolved after recognizing synthetic elements. During the fifth and sixth stages, themes were defined and named and illustrative quotations were selected to represent key insights. The analysis also examined the interplay between emotional reactions (such as surprise, skepticism or curiosity) and cognitive judgments, highlighting how these two dimensions jointly shaped participants' sense of trust.

Overall, the thematic analysis revealed nuanced patterns showing that participants' evaluations of authenticity were deeply influenced by intuitive feelings and contextual cues rather than purely factual reasoning. This process-oriented approach provided a coherent framework for connecting micro-level observations from interviews with broader theoretical insights about media trust in the age of artificial intelligence.

Reliability and validity

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were employed throughout the research process. Triangulation was applied by comparing participants' verbal responses from the interview phase with their actual decisions made during the experimental exposure. This allowed for cross-checking between what participants said and what they did, strengthening the internal validity of the interpretations. In this study, triangulation served to verify whether participants stated reasoning matched their observable behavior when identifying authentic and AI-generated content. Consistencies between verbal explanations and practical judgments provided stronger evidence of how individuals truly assessed authenticity and trust.

Although the sample size was relatively small, the purpose of the study was not statistical generalization but analytical depth to capture how individuals construct meaning and negotiate trust when exposed to synthetic media. The aim was to develop rich, contextualized insights rather than numerical representation. To ensure consistency in analysis, all transcripts were coded manually by the researcher using NVivo 14, following the same coding framework derived from Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase model. Codes and themes were refined through repeated reading and reflection, which minimized interpretive bias and improved dependability. To further enhance transparency, detailed notes were kept during the analytical process to document how decisions about theme definition and categorization were made. Reflexivity was also maintained throughout the study. The researcher continuously reflected on personal assumptions and potential influence on interpretation, particularly given the sensitivity of topics related to trust, misinformation and emotional response. This reflexive stance helped to balance subjective understanding with analytical rigor.

Finally, the study achieved a high level of realism by using participants' native languages and familiar digital formats, allowing for genuine emotional and cognitive engagement. This design choice ensured that participants reacted as they naturally would in real online environments, which strengthened the overall credibility of the findings and supported an accurate interpretation of how people perceive authenticity and construct trust in the context of AI-generated media.

Findings and analysis

The study explored how people recognize, feel and react to AI-generated media. The analysis revealed four main themes: (1) decisions based on first impressions, (2) mixed emotional reactions, (3) loss of basic trust and (4) growing awareness/adaptation. Together these themes show that judging what is real online is not only about logic or evidence. It also depends on emotion, context and experience.

First impressions and uncertainty

All fifteen participants reported that their first impressions were based on intuition rather than detailed analysis. [P01] said, "Sometimes I just go with the vibe of the video, not the facts". [P02] added, "It's impossible to know right away, I trust my gut, not my eyes". [P03] explained, "I thought it was real because the voice sounded familiar, only later I noticed the accent was strange". Similarly, [P04] described relying on instinct: "It just felt too perfect, like something was off". [P05] focused on small visual cues: "The skin looked too smooth, that was my clue". [P06] noted fatigue in repeated guessing: "After a few clips, I stopped caring whether it was fake or not". [P07] reflected uncertainty: "It looked real for a moment, but maybe cameras are just better now".

Other respondents confirmed that their judgments were unstable. [P08] said, "I changed my mind twice on the same clip". [P09] added, "At first I said real, then fake, then real again, I can't tell anymore". [P10] summarized this confusion: "You can't be sure even when something looks perfect, it's more about how it feels". Interesting that [P11] reflected on the experience as a learning process: "Now I know my instincts aren't enough". [P12] agreed, "My first reaction is almost always wrong". [P13] linked uncertainty to emotional cues: "If I like the person or topic, I trust it more". [P14] said, "If it looks like a TV broadcast, I assume it's true". Finally, [P15] highlighted timing sensitivity: "The movement rhythm was slightly off, that's what gave it away".

Together, these findings reveal that authenticity judgments in the age of AI are deeply psychological rather than rational. People no longer assess credibility through factual reasoning alone but through emotion, familiarity and embodied perception. This shift signals a profound transformation in how truth itself is experienced: what "feels" real increasingly outweighs what can be proven real. Such intuitive reliance not only exposes the fragility of digital trust but also demonstrates that emotional and sensory cues have become new gatekeepers of belief. In other words, trust in digital media is migrating from evidence-based cognition to emotion-based intuition, reshaping the very foundations of how individuals perceive authenticity in an AI-saturated information world.

Emotional reactions and fatigue

Participants expressed mixed emotional reactions to AI-generated media, combining fascination, anxiety and exhaustion. Many described feeling simultaneously impressed and unsettled. [P01] found the experience "exciting but stressful, I want to know what's true," while [P02] admitted, "It makes me tired; you never know what's real". Their comments capture the tension between curiosity and mental fatigue that accompanies encounters with synthetic content. Similarly, [P03] was intrigued, calling it "scary but kind of brilliant at the same time" and [P04] echoed this duality, describing it as "fascinating but frightening, I couldn't stop

watching". These reflections reveal how AI-generated media evoke both wonder and loss of control, creating a psychological push and pull between attraction and fear.

At the same time, participants expressed frustration toward the deceptive potential of such media. [P05] noted, "It's impressive, but I hate that it can fool people" while [P06] shared a sense of exhaustion, "After a few clips, I just didn't want to decide anymore". This reaction illustrates the phenomenon of cognitive overload: repeated exposure not only confuses perception but drains emotional energy. As [P07] observed, "Now I look for mistakes even where there are none" suggesting that constant vigilance can transform into hyper-skepticism. [P08] described this emotional strain vividly: "Every new clip felt like a test I could fail" and [P09] reinforced it with a feeling of betrayal, "It's like being tricked on purpose". For several participants, fatigue coexisted with attempts to find meaning or adapt. [P10] confessed, "It's exhausting, you can't relax while watching" whereas [P11] tried to remain constructive, "Maybe it's a sign we need to be smarter, not scared". Others oscillated between irritation and curiosity. [P12] emphasized, "It's impressive, but annoying that it can trick people so easily" and [P13] viewed the technology ambivalently "I want to learn how it's made, it's both art and manipulation". [P14] described a growing discomfort "It looks too perfect and that's disturbing" a sentiment that culminated in [P15]'s striking metaphor: "It's fascinating and terrifying, like reality with a glitch".

From an analytical perspective, these reactions suggest that emotional confusion is a key mechanism in the erosion of digital trust. When users feel simultaneously amazed and deceived, their confidence in perception itself becomes fragile. This emotional instability, rather than simple ignorance or lack of skill, may explain why synthetic content can undermine public trust so effectively. Moreover, the fact that participants experienced both curiosity and irritation indicate that emotional engagement can serve as both a risk and a resource: while anxiety leads to fatigue and avoidance, curiosity can motivate learning and adaptation. Therefore, managing emotional responses through education, awareness and collective reflection, may be as crucial to media literacy as technical verification tools.

In sum, the emotional dimension of AI-generated media is central to how people learn to trust or doubt digital information, revealing that the future of trust depends not only on recognizing deception, but on understanding how it feels to be deceived.

Erosion of trust

Exposure to realistic fake content fundamentally changed how participants thought about truth online. Many described a sense of disorientation and doubt that extended beyond the experimental materials to their everyday media consumption. As [P10] reflected, "Now I'll question everything I see online. Even real videos might not be real anymore". This marks what researchers call the erosion of baseline trust the fading assumption that most information is true unless proven otherwise. [P02] echoed this sentiment: "If even experts can be fooled, what chance do we have?". For many, uncertainty became not just a response to deception but a new default mode of perception. Participants described how they attempted to judge authenticity once their basic trust had been shaken. Several admitted that they still relied on superficial signals as indicators of credibility. [P14] confessed, "If the video looks like a TV broadcast, I trust it more, even if something looks off" while [P12] added, "If the logo or caption looks professional, I relax a bit! maybe too much". Such comments show that aesthetic familiarity remains a powerful, if misleading, source of reassurance.

Others tried to base their judgments on visual details or subtle inconsistencies. [P05] said, "The skin was too smooth, that's what gave it away" and [P06] focused on tone: "The lighting

and shadow felt wrong, like someone copied a real person". However, as [P07] observed, "Even when something looks fake, I'm not sure anymore, maybe it's just my phone quality". This uncertainty illustrates how hyperreal visuals collapse the usual distinction between authenticity and imitation, leaving people unsure where truth begins or ends. In several interviews, participants noted that the story's emotional coherence could override factual evidence. [P08] admitted, "The story made sense, so I trusted it" and [P03] added, "If it fits what I already believe, I stop checking". This reliance on narrative consistency demonstrates how emotion and expectation can dominate perception. When synthetic media trigger empathy or moral alignment, analytical reasoning often retreats. Trust, therefore, becomes less a question of verification than of resonance - people believe what feels internally consistent. The cumulative effect of these experiences is not only skepticism toward specific content but a broader collapse of informational confidence. [P02] described feeling "mentally tired of doubting everything" while [P10] said, "It's like I can't switch off the doubt anymore". This permanent vigilance transforms engagement with information into an emotionally draining activity. Even when participants recognized that doubt was rational, they described it as exhausting and isolating.

From a theoretical perspective, these reactions demonstrate that the erosion of trust is not just cognitive but affective. People no longer lose faith because they are deceived once, but because they feel perpetually uncertain. This emotional fatigue corrodes the sense of shared reality that underpins social communication. As trust in institutions weakens, individuals retreat into personal skepticism, which offers control but diminishes collective confidence. Ultimately, the findings reveal that the crisis of digital authenticity is not only about falsehood, it is about emotional exhaustion and loss of epistemic stability. When truth feels fluid, trust can no longer be assumed; it must be constantly reconstructed through awareness, dialogue, and transparent verification. This suggests that rebuilding trust requires more than technical detection tools - it demands cultural adaptation that restores confidence in both human judgment and social institutions.

Adapting and becoming more cautious

Not all reactions were negative. Several participants described the experience as eye-opening, prompting them to adopt more deliberate and reflective habits when engaging with media. [P11] explained, "If I'm not sure, I'll screenshot it and check the source or do a reverse image search" while [P13] shared a similar strategy: "When I hear a perfect voice, I look for another clip from the same person". These practices reflect a shift from passive consumption to active verification. Participants began to treat information as something that must be tested rather than taken for granted. Some respondents emphasized the importance of peer discussion in restoring confidence. [P07] said, "When I see something suspicious, I send it to our group chat; we discuss until someone finds the real version" and [P09] confirmed that collective engagement reduces anxiety: "Talking about it with others made me less anxious. It's not just my problem anymore". For these participants, verification became a social process, where collaboration helped transform uncertainty into reassurance. [P01] added, "It's easier to trust again when we check things together, I don't feel so lost".

Other participants demonstrated growing media awareness and curiosity toward technological tools. [P06] remarked, "I'd learn better if the app told me why it's fake, not just that it's fake" suggesting a desire for educational feedback rather than mere protection. [P12] called for greater transparency in digital platforms: "There should be clear 'AI-generated' or 'verified' labels, not hidden disclaimers". These responses reveal a constructive form of skepticism a willingness to engage critically while demanding systemic support. For some,

adaptation also meant learning from mistakes. [P04] reflected, "I was wrong before, but now I check lighting and reflections" whereas [P05] expressed determination to improve recognition skills: "I try to spot the details that don't match, like the way people blink". [P02] emphasized emotional regulation, noting, "It's easy to panic, but now I stop and think before reacting". These voices illustrate an evolution from emotional response to cognitive control, where reflection becomes a protective mechanism against manipulation.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that exposure to AI-generated content can stimulate not only skepticism but also learning and resilience. Participants moved from passive disbelief to proactive evaluation, transforming confusion into critical awareness. This adaptive behavior reflects a new form of digital literacy - one rooted in collaboration, emotion management and the ability to verify across multiple sources. From an analytical perspective, these accounts suggest that trust does not vanish under the pressure of synthetic media; it reorganizes itself. Instead of being assumed, trust becomes conditional, negotiated and socially distributed. Verification is no longer an individual burden but a shared civic practice, what might be called networked trust. Participants' growing caution signals a maturing digital culture, where awareness of manipulation no longer paralyzes but empowers. In this sense, the challenge of AI-generated content may paradoxically strengthen public resilience: by teaching people how to doubt productively, it helps rebuild trust on a more conscious and collective foundation.

New insights from the data

Beyond the four main themes, the study revealed several additional insights into how people form and negotiate trust in the context of AI-generated media. These observations go beyond surface judgments and show how perception, emotion and self-reflection interact when authenticity becomes uncertain.

First, participants developed an unexpected sensitivity to timing and rhythm rather than to visual detail. Many noticed inconsistencies in breathing, blinking or movement pace before identifying visual flaws. [P15] explained, "The image was perfect, but the movement rhythm was slightly stuck! that's how I knew it was fake". [P07] shared a similar perception: "The person blinked too rarely - it felt robotic". Likewise, [P11] mentioned, "The voice pauses didn't match normal speech". This pattern suggests that audiences are unconsciously developing rhythmic literacy - the ability to detect authenticity through temporal flow rather than visual quality. As AI-generated imagery becomes photorealistic, temporal irregularities may remain one of the last human-readable signals of artificiality.

Second, emotionally charged content significantly influenced participants' critical judgment. Several admitted that stories about war, humanitarian crises or moral injustice made them less analytical. [P03] said, "When it's about attacks or victims, my feelings take over, I check later, not first". [P08] added, "If it's something sad or shocking, I want to believe it's true immediately". [P12] reflected on the same mechanism: "Emotional topics make me forget to doubt". This finding helps explain why manipulated media spreads fastest in emotionally polarized contexts - not because it looks real, but because it feels urgent and morally resonant. Emotion thus functions as both a bridge and a barrier to trust: it draws people closer to content but pushes them further from verification.

Third, participants' responses to being wrong diverged sharply, revealing two distinct psychological paths, learning versus withdrawal. For some, mistakes became a source of insight. [P04] said, "I was wrong about the reflections, so now I check that first" while [P09] reflected, "It's embarrassing to be fooled, but it makes you sharper next time". Others, however, reacted with discouragement. [P02] stated, "If even experts can be fooled, what's the point of trying?" and [P06] echoed this frustration: "No matter how careful you are, AI will always stay one step ahead". These contrasting attitudes indicate that resilience in the digital age depends not only on knowledge but also on emotional self-regulation, the ability to cope with being deceived without giving up the effort to verify. Across all fifteen interviews, participants also demonstrated growing meta-awareness about their

own perception. [P10] observed, "I don't just doubt the media now; I doubt my reactions too" while [P13] concluded, "Maybe trust is not about being sure but about staying alert". Such reflections suggest a broader shift toward reflexive media literacy - a mindset where doubt itself becomes part of responsible information processing.

In summary, these insights deepen our understanding of how people adapt to a synthetic information environment. They show that trust formation is becoming multimodal (based on rhythm and pattern), emotionally mediated (shaped by affect and empathy) and psychologically diverse (varying between resilience and withdrawal). The ability to detect AI-generated content increasingly relies on subtle perception and emotional intelligence, not only on technical expertise. This means that the future of media literacy should move beyond fact-checking to include emotional and perceptual awareness, teaching people not just how to verify but how to feel critically. Ultimately, these findings reveal that while AI challenges traditional trust, it also compels individuals to rediscover human intuition, collaboration and reflection as essential tools for navigating truth in the digital age.

Rebuilding trust and future needs

Many participants emphasized the need for clearer and more transparent systems to help them identify AI-generated or manipulated content. [P12] suggested, "I'd like to see a visible label like 'AI-generated' or 'verified', not hidden somewhere in small text". [P06] shared a similar idea but focused on explanation rather than warning: "If the tool could tell me why it's fake, like the lighting doesn't match, I'd actually learn from it". These comments reveal that people seek not only protection but understanding. They do not want to be shielded passively from falsehood but to engage actively with how authenticity is determined. Several participants pointed out that their confidence increased when content could be verified through multiple perspectives. [P13] explained, "If I find the same scene from another camera, my trust rises immediately" while [P07] added, "If I hear the same voice in different sound settings, I'm more sure it's real". [P11] mentioned a similar pattern: "When different sources show the same moment, I stop doubting". This practice of cross-checking demonstrates that networked verification, comparing several angles, sources or formats, has become a new foundation for digital trust. It replaces blind belief with relational confirmation, showing that truth now exists not in isolation but through connection.

Participants also described how social collaboration strengthens confidence. [P09] said, "Talking about suspicious clips with others makes me less anxious, we figure it out together". [P01] echoed this: "It's easier to believe something when your friends confirm it too". [P04] described how dialogue encourages awareness: "When we discuss what's fake, I notice details I'd normally miss". For [P02], this shared reflection has moral value: "It's not just about being right; it's about protecting each other from being misled". These comments show that rebuilding trust is not only technical but social and ethical, rooted in dialogue, empathy and shared responsibility for truth. Notably, foreign participants in the study appeared more emotionally expressive and personally invested in their reactions to synthetic content than local Lithuanian participants. They often described stronger emotional confusion or moral discomfort when confronted with realistic fakes. This suggests that cultural background and distance from familiar media environments may heighten emotional sensitivity to uncertainty, especially when individuals lack strong local reference points for verification. Emotional attachment, therefore, functioned as both a vulnerability and a motivator for reflection, making these respondents more likely to discuss, compare and seek reassurance through social validation. Some participants also envisioned educational and institutional solutions.

[P05] argued that "schools should teach how AI images are made, not just how to spot fakes". [P10] emphasized the role of transparency from media organizations: "News outlets

should show how they verify videos - that would help people trust them again". [P14] and [P15] both linked trust to system-level clarity, with [P14] noting, "If governments required visible authenticity tags, people would relax" and [P15] adding, "We need digital spaces where authenticity isn't a guessing game". Collectively, these visions illustrate that participants see trust as a shared infrastructure, built jointly by technology, education and community. Overall, the findings indicate that people move through several emotional and cognitive stages when facing AI-generated content, from immediate reactions of curiosity or fear, through confusion and loss of confidence, to eventual adaptation and reflective trust. [P03] summarized this transformation aptly: "At first I doubted everything; now I just check smarter". Trust, in this sense, becomes less about technology itself and more about feeling, context and cooperation.

In addition, the study revealed a clear age-related difference in the ability to recognize AI-generated content. Younger participants generally performed better at identifying synthetic media than older ones. They were more attuned to subtle technical inconsistencies, such as rhythm, lighting or sound mismatches and were quicker to use verification tools like reverse searches or source comparisons. Older participants, by contrast, tended to rely on overall impressions and emotional cues of authenticity, which made it harder for them to distinguish real from artificial material. This suggests that digital literacy and technological confidence are closely linked to age: younger informants, being more accustomed to rapidly evolving media environments, adapt faster to new verification practices, whereas older participants may require clearer educational guidance to maintain confidence in the digital sphere. From an analytical standpoint, these insights suggest that the future of trust will depend on cultivating networked resilience, a combination of emotional awareness, practical verification habits and open communication among users, institutions, platforms. Rather than restoring the naive certainty of the past, people are learning to live with ambiguity in a more informed and collective way. In this evolving landscape, trust is no longer a given; it is a practice, one that merges critical thinking with emotional intelligence and social solidarity. By learning not only what to doubt but how to verify, individuals can remain confident and connected in an increasingly artificial digital world.

Conclusions

This study explored how individuals recognize, interpret and emotionally respond to AI-generated media and how such encounters influence their trust in digital information. By combining experimental exposure with qualitative interviews, the research provided in-depth insight into how people make authenticity judgments in an environment where traditional visual or contextual cues are no longer reliable.

The findings reveal a psychological and emotional transformation in how truth is perceived. Participants increasingly rely on intuition, emotional resonance and social confirmation rather than on factual or technical evidence. Exposure to synthetic media triggered complex emotions: curiosity, admiration, anxiety and fatigue, that deeply shaped their judgments. Emotional confusion emerged as a central mechanism in the erosion of digital trust: when reality feels uncertain, confidence in perception itself becomes unstable. At the same time, the study demonstrated the capacity for adaptive resilience. Participants learned to verify, cross-check and discuss information collectively, creating what this research calls *networked trust*. This process shows that trust does not disappear under the pressure of AI manipulation - it reorganizes into new social, emotional and reflexive forms. Particularly among foreign participants, emotional engagement was more intense; their distance from familiar cultural

references made them more vulnerable to confusion but also more motivated to seek reassurance and dialogue.

Overall, the results highlight that trust in the AI era is not a static belief but a dynamic practice a continuous negotiation between emotion, cognition, collaboration. Rebuilding public confidence in information therefore requires a multidimensional approach:

- Technological transparency, such as visible authenticity labels and open-source verification tools;
- Educational innovation, teaching not only fact-checking but emotional and perceptual literacy;
- Social cooperation, where communities and institutions collectively reinforce credibility through dialogue and shared standards.

Methodologically, the research design and analysis were well aligned. The experimental exposure combined with semi-structured interviews successfully captured both cognitive and affective dimensions of trust. Thematic analysis effectively revealed patterns across participants' reasoning and emotions. The inclusion of both Lithuanian and foreign respondents provided valuable comparative insight into cultural and emotional nuances of perception. The only minor consideration is that future studies could elaborate more explicitly on cross-cultural differences, since the stronger emotional attachment observed among foreign participants emerged inductively during analysis rather than being pre-defined as a research variable. Addressing this aspect in the research design (for example, through comparative sampling or follow-up interviews) would strengthen the explanatory depth of the findings.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the challenge of AI-generated media lies not only in deception but in how people feel about deception. Trust in the digital age is being rebuilt through awareness, emotional intelligence and collaboration, turning uncertainty into an opportunity for collective resilience and critical growth.

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