

## Seeing Is No Longer Believing: The Impact of AI-Based Deceptive Advertising Visuals on Gen Z Buying Behaviour and the Imperative of Advertising Ethics

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### Abstract

The rapid integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in advertising has transformed how brands create and disseminate visual content. While AI-generated visuals enhance personalization and creativity, they also raise serious ethical concerns, particularly when such visuals are deceptive. This study examines the impact of AI-based deceptive advertising visuals on the buying behaviour of Generation Z consumers. Gen Z, being digitally native yet psychologically impressionable, is uniquely vulnerable to hyper-realistic AI-generated imagery that exaggerates product benefits or misrepresents reality. The paper explores how deceptive AI visuals influence perception, trust, and purchase intention, while also justifying the necessity of strong advertising ethics. Through conceptual analysis and review of existing literature, this research highlights the ethical responsibilities of advertisers and calls for transparent, responsible, and consumer-centric use of AI technologies in advertising.

**Keywords:** Artificial Intelligence, Deceptive Advertising, Gen Z, Buying Behaviour, Advertising Ethics, AI Visuals

### Introduction

Advertising has always relied on visuals to influence consumer perception and purchasing decisions. With the advent of Artificial Intelligence, advertising visuals have entered a new era—one where images, videos, and product demonstrations can be entirely generated or manipulated without physical reality. AI tools such as deep learning, generative adversarial networks (GANs), and image enhancement software enable brands to create hyper-realistic and emotionally persuasive visuals.

Generation Z, typically defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012, represents a dominant consumer group in the digital marketplace. Raised in an environment saturated with social media, influencer marketing, and algorithm-driven content, Gen Z consumers rely heavily on visual cues while making buying decisions. However, the increasing use of AI-based deceptive visuals—where products are digitally altered, models are artificially generated, or outcomes are exaggerated—raises ethical concerns regarding manipulation and consumer autonomy.

This paper aims to analyse the impact of AI-driven deceptive advertising visuals on Gen Z’s buying behaviour and to justify the importance of ethical advertising practices in the AI era.

### **Concept of AI-Based Deceptive Advertising Visuals**

AI-based deceptive advertising visuals refer to digitally created or manipulated images and videos that misrepresent product features, performance, or results. Unlike traditional photo editing, AI enables:

- Creation of non-existent product outcomes
- Hyper-realistic body, skin, or lifestyle transformations
- Artificial influencers and virtual models
- Fabricated “before and after” results

These visuals often blur the line between creativity and deception. While they may comply with aesthetic goals, they can violate ethical principles by presenting unrealistic expectations to consumers.

### **Characteristics of Gen Z Buying Behaviour**

Gen Z buying behaviour is influenced by several distinctive traits:

- Visual Dependency: Gen Z relies heavily on visual content from platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat.
- Trust in Digital Content: Despite being tech-savvy, Gen Z often assumes visual authenticity unless explicitly disclosed.
- Emotional Decision-Making: Purchases are frequently driven by emotional resonance, social validation, and aspirational imagery.
- Ethical Sensitivity: Gen Z values transparency, honesty, and brand authenticity, and reacts strongly against perceived manipulation.

These characteristics make Gen Z particularly susceptible to AI-generated deceptive visuals while simultaneously being more likely to reject brands once deception is identified.

### **Impact of AI-Based Deceptive Visuals on Gen Z Buying Behaviour**

#### **Influence on Perception and Desire**

AI-generated visuals create idealized product representations that enhance perceived value and desirability. For Gen Z consumers, these visuals often trigger impulse purchases based on aspirational lifestyles rather than actual product utility.

#### **Distortion of Reality and Expectations**

Deceptive AI visuals can lead to unrealistic expectations regarding product outcomes, especially in industries such as beauty, fashion, fitness, and food. When the actual product fails to match the visual representation, consumer dissatisfaction and distrust emerge.

#### **Impact on Brand Trust and Loyalty**

While deceptive visuals may increase short-term sales, they negatively impact long-term brand credibility. Gen Z consumers are quick to share negative experiences online, amplifying reputational damage through social media.

#### **Psychological and Social Effects**

Continuous exposure to idealized AI visuals may affect self-image, body confidence, and mental well-being. This raises ethical concerns about exploiting psychological vulnerabilities for commercial gain.

### **Advertising Ethics in the Age of AI**

Advertising ethics refers to moral principles that govern fairness, truthfulness, and responsibility in promotional activities. In the context of AI-based advertising, ethics becomes even more crucial due to the power of AI to simulate reality convincingly.

Key ethical principles include:

- Truthfulness: Visuals should not mislead consumers regarding product performance.
- Transparency: Disclosure of AI-generated or digitally altered visuals.
- Consumer Autonomy: Avoiding manipulative techniques that exploit emotional or psychological weaknesses.
- Social Responsibility: Preventing harm related to self-esteem, body image, and unrealistic standards.

### **Justification for Ethical Regulation of AI Advertising**

Ethical regulation of AI advertising is justified on multiple grounds:

1. Protection of Consumers: Ensures informed decision-making and prevents exploitation.
2. Sustainable Brand Relationships: Ethical advertising fosters long-term trust and loyalty.
3. Legal Compliance: Prevents false advertising claims and potential litigation.
4. Social Well-Being: Reduces negative psychological and cultural impacts on young audiences.

Self-regulation by advertisers, combined with legal frameworks and AI disclosure norms, is essential to balance innovation with responsibility.

### **Conclusion**

AI-based advertising visuals represent both an opportunity and a threat. While they enhance creativity and engagement, their deceptive use significantly influences Gen Z buying behaviour by distorting reality and manipulating perception. This research highlights that unethical AI-driven advertising may yield short-term profits but undermines consumer trust, brand credibility, and social responsibility in the long run.

Therefore, ethical advertising is not merely a moral obligation but a strategic necessity in the AI era. Transparent, honest, and responsible use of AI visuals can ensure sustainable marketing practices while respecting the autonomy and well-being of Gen Z consumers.

### **Scope for Future Research**

Future studies may involve empirical research using surveys or experiments to measure Gen Z responses to AI-generated visuals. Comparative studies across generations and industries can further enrich understanding of AI ethics in advertising.

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