How people are using language to stand out in the AI era

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Since the broad adoption of AI chatbots, a bizarre phenomenon has emerged. As polished copy has become easy to generate, people are intentionally adding mistakes to their writing and communication to sound more human. But is it effective – and what are the commercial implications?

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HIGHLIGHTS

01 As AI makes polished copy easy to produce, flawless writing no longer signals effort. And for some readers, it now reads as a red flag

02 Manufactured imperfection or roughness can risk reading as performance, while specific, lived detail and a clear point of view are much harder for AI to replicate

03 As audiences come to expect brands to say where AI sits in their work, openness about it, backed by real editorial process, can help to earn people's trust

DATA

- **42%** of people in the UK are limiting their AI use, with one of the most common reasons for doing so being "a preference to keep doing work the way it is currently done"
- AI homogenises writing styles, reducing the variance in writing complexity by **21–50%**
- Just **28%** UK respondents trust AI-generated content, while **91%** expect brands to disclose AI use in marketing

SCOPE

If you've ever spent hours on a job application, only to send it off and notice a typo in your cover letter, you'll be familiar with a unique feeling of frustration. Something you've poured hours of effort into, that could have a tangible impact on your life, wasted. That one stray letter telling the hiring team that you do not, in fact, have such 'a keen eye for detail'. For as long as word processors and typing have been in common use, typos have become synonymous with sub-par work – a sign the writer hasn't placed enough importance on that particular piece of correspondence, or proofed that piece of copy to be sent out to the public. So why then, in 2026, are some people intentionally adding typos to their job applications or leaving grammatical faux pas in their emails to prospective clients and colleagues? The answer lies in a desire to appear human.

There have been countless stories discussing AI-generated copy and all the tells that come with it. Emdashes have become the most infamous punctuation point, for all the wrong reasons. The "it's not x, it's y" sentence structure has had editors tearing their hair out. Qualifying phrases and rhetorical devices such as "And honestly?" "quietly becoming…" "genuinely…" have become red flags for people as a clear sign that what they're reading has been AI generated. [1][2]In fact, 58% of UK businesses in information and communication are actively using AI and 55% of employees are using it in the workplace or for education. Because of this, artificially generated copy is spreading far and wide. [3] "AI is changing the way we communicate," says Matt Abrahams, a lecturer at Stanford's Graduate School of Business and host of the

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Think Fast, Talk Smart podcast. “It's troubling, because when language homogenises, we lose ways of communicating nuance and detail.” [4]

As this kind of prose has proliferated, people have become increasingly averse to it. 69% of UK bosses actually prefer applications with minor mistakes as reassurance that they weren’t written with AI. [5]Even proximity to ‘AI slop’ can be damaging – 48% of people in the UK would think less of a brand if they noticed its advertising appeared next to poor-quality AI-generated content, with 30% reporting it would have a very negative impact. [6] What's left as a differentiator is unmanufactured humanness. So, how do you find your voice in this current moment without overcorrecting? Do people and brands now have to do extra work to prove they've actually authored a piece of work?

CONTEXT

ALGORITHM AVERSION

The growing prevalence of AI in daily life is being met with scepticism. Britons’ increased familiarity with the technology (now standing at 97% of the population) coincides with a significant uptick in negative attitudes towards it. [7]As of September 2026, 52% of Britons report being pessimistic about the overall impact that AI will have, up from 34% in 2024. [8]While some of this is fear-based – particularly amid conversations of AI-driven human extinction – frustration is also rife regarding the proliferation of AI slop and tools people never asked for. With Google pushing AI-generated answers at the top of search results, online interactions being scraped en masse for LLM training and generative tools being shoehorned into every website and piece of software going, AI has saturated digital life – and people are increasingly choosing to limit or reject it. In fact, 42% of people in the UK are limiting their AI use, with one of the most common reasons for doing so being “a preference to keep doing work the way it is currently done.” [9]

This backlash shows heightened awareness and scrutiny among the British public of AI’s output, with very real commercial implications for brands looking to connect with people. 78% of people globally feel that AI makes advertising feel less authentic and 63% are less likely to buy from a brand using AI-generated ads. [10]These gripes are often associated with visual tells related to AI imagery. Approaching Christmas in 2025, both McDonald’s (in the Netherlands) and Coca-Cola (in a global marketing push) were forced to pull adverts after backlash against their ‘uncanny feel’ and the fact that they took jobs from humans, leading to calls for a boycott. [11][12] “If a brand uses AI without letting people know, they then feel duped and talked down to,” says Kyle Raymond Fitzpatrick, a writer and the founder of *The Trend Report* Substack. “The bait-and-switch here is the digital equivalent of shrinkflation, as businesses assume people are too stupid to notice. That's a poor customer experience.” [13] And as awareness around artificially generated text also grows, people can experience a similar kind of aversion.

“AI has made smooth, competent communication incredibly cheap, and things that once signalled effort, such as perfect copy, immaculate imagery and high production value, don’t necessarily signal the same thing anymore,” says Annabel Hickling-Smith, a creative strategist at Even Dots Creative. [14] So, while LLMs can spit out coherent prose, people’s aversion to it stems partly from its polished impersonality. In fact, people are rejecting AI specifically when a task feels personal, even when it performs just as well. [15] “People can tell something is off when something veers toward a combination of robotic and cliché,” adds Fitzpatrick. “The sensation that writing is talking above your head, instead of with you, results in AI suspicions. [13]

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As AI use becomes more ubiquitous, designers are including more ‘human-touch’ elements in their designs

Ben & Jerry's | YouTube (2020)

THE ATROPHYING OF OUR COMMUNICATION SKILLS

As AI becomes more embedded in personal and professional life, distinctly human skills such as empathy and reading the room are becoming more valuable. “Communication is really about empathy – it's about fostering relationships and trust,” says Abrahams. “It's like a muscle – you have to use it. Communication is the last step in a chain of critical thinking and empathy, and if you short-circuit it, you'll fail to foster deep relationships and feel like a fraud, because you don't have the depth that thinking through hard issues requires.” [4] In short, our modern overreliance on technology is effectively diminishing opportunities to practice these skills – leading to poorer quality communication. In a piece Abrahams wrote for *Time* magazine, he points to how the expansion of digital life drove a roughly 28% drop in the number of words people speak daily between 2005 and 2019. [16] So, offloading even more to AI will only continue to shrink those faculties and flatten our communication styles.

Another recent study published in *Nature* analysed over 880,000 pieces of text across Reddit posts, news articles and academic pieces. It found that AI homogenises writing styles, reducing the variance in writing complexity by 21–50%, emphasising conformity over individuality. [17] This is a nightmare for anyone who wants to differentiate themselves from the crowd – something Hickling-Smith has experienced first-hand. “I so vividly remember a meeting I had three years ago with the C-suite of a multinational brand where they showed us all how to use AI to write a blog,” she says. “[They] happily pronounced they'd never need to engage a copywriter again. They have since engaged many copywriters.” [14]

Presenting humanness with authentic communication is a signal of trust – proof that effort and considered thought have been employed to deliver a message. Idiosyncrasies, foibles and natural nuances all signal the empathy Abrahams refers to. They’re a sign we understand the context and audience and are communicating our message in a way that’s unique to us. “‘Human-sounding’ will inevitably become a style that AI itself can reproduce,” adds Hickling-Smith. “What becomes harder to replicate is specificity: real experiences, strong opinions, particular humour, actual customer stories, people and places.” [14]

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Communication suffers with AI as people start to lack inherent empathy and the skills to speak with one another

Studio YW | Unsplash (2026)

THE ANTI-AI LITERARY COUNTERCULTURE

In an attempt to appear more human, some people are introducing typos into communications, swapping out AI's favoured emdashes and varying sentence length aggressively as stylistic signals that a piece was crafted, not generated. A browser plugin even exists whose sole function is inserting typos into AI-generated emails so recipients read them as human-written. [18] Publications ranging from *The Diplomat*, *Pitchfork*, *Playboy* and *Aeon* are now adding explicit “no AI polish” notes to submission guidelines and encouraging writers to leave in the rough edges of their work, while Substack has introduced AI detection tools to police writers. [19]Brands are also doing the visual equivalent. 73% of designers are deliberately incorporating ‘imperfect’ elements – wonky serifs, hand-drawn touches – specifically to differentiate from AI-generated work. [20] However, as imperfection becomes a recognisable style in its own right, it risks reading as performance rather than proof.

“I’d be cautious about equating ‘imperfect’ with ‘authentic’,” says Hickling-Smith. “Putting grain over an image or telling a copywriter to make the caption sound more casual is no more inherently human than making everything glossy. If the imperfection is manufactured, audiences eventually learn that language too.” [14] This is supported by Fitzpatrick, who argues manufactured imperfection is very ‘pick-me.’ “[It signals] brands lack confidence,” he explains. “Instead of showing their work in very whiny, pick-me, desperate ways, having an unwavering conviction to say: ‘These are our values and we will always uphold them’ enables trust.” [13]

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Abrahams has developed his own TRUST framework for his students at Stanford – a set of rules that can help people find their authentic voice and evoke a sense of humanness. While created specifically with speech in mind, they're useful to consider for the written word, too. It breaks down into five components: a Truthful foundation, grounding messages in specific lived experiences rather than generic platitudes; Real-time processing, where showing your thinking proves a message is being originated on the spot; Utilise tailored, local evidence to demonstrate your niche expertise; Show your unique speaking style (don't overpolish); and Tip off your audience to your personal perspective, so information arrives with a point of view attached. [16] Taken together, the message is that trust comes from evidence of a real person with a real point of view behind the words – something that AI or manufactured humanness can't replace.



Because AI use has become prevalent, the counterculture surrounding it has also strengthened in voice

Substack (2026)

INSIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

LEAD WITH UNIQUENESS

Brands and individuals who can retain authentic, visible humanness in pitches, comms and content have an edge over competitors still optimising for polish. "We're finding clients increasingly want real people instead of perfect stock imagery, and copy with enough personality that you can tell somebody actually had an opinion while writing it," says Hickling-Smith." [14] This notion is seconded by Fitzpatrick: "Develop a clear style, personality, or character – and stick with it," he says. "Install an expert writer who is anti-AI who can quality control all writing." He points to Dr Bronner's and Ben & Jerry's as model examples of brands that "say what they mean and mean what they say." [13] Dr. Bronner's labels have been a distinctive voice for decades, and its owners backed it up by making sure, as Michael Bronner puts it, "the myth of my grandfather matched the actual product." [21]

SPECIFICITY IS THE PREMIUM

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Hyperlocal, personally specific details nobody else could have thought of can help deliver a unique perspective. If a piece of copy could have been written by an LLM given the same brief, it's missing a point of view. Cider brand Strongbow's Refreshing the Nation campaign, created by agency Otherway, shows what the alternative looks like. Its outdoor work placed more than 50 distinct posters in specific regional locations across the UK, each reflecting the local language, while the central film cast people from around the country and, says director Glenn Kitson, “we worked hard to make sure we researched the language and the accents of our people.” [22] The opportunity is to brief for the particular from the start, using what only your people, place or customers can supply, and to treat any copy that could sit under another brand's name as unfinished. “You have to know your audience, and you have to have something deep and critically thought to say in most circumstances to add value,” says Abrahams. [4]

BE OPEN ABOUT WHERE AI SITS

The trust risk for brands is being found out. Research has found that just 28% UK respondents trust AI-generated content, while 91% expect brands to disclose AI use in marketing. [23] The opportunity for brands is to recognise that “human-made" is becoming a claim people expect to be checked. AI detectors have been flagged as ineffective (particularly among non-native English speakers), so any move to support verification needs a real editorial process behind it. Publishing a plain-language AI policy and labelling work could be a good starting point. “Transparency is always the solution,” says Fitzpatrick. [13] In October 2025, US intimates brand Aerie committed to “no AI-generated bodies or people” in its advertising, which became its most popular Instagram post in a year, with post engagement up around 75% over the following two weeks. Its chief marketing officer, Stacey McCormick, framed the pledge as an extension of the brand's 2014 promise to stop retouching images. [24]

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