

# “I Think It’s Exciting and Frightening at the Same Time”: Audience Sentiments Toward the Use and Labeling of Generative AI in Journalism

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## Abstract

This study explores audience sentiments toward generative artificial intelligence (AI) in journalism by analyzing in-depth qualitative interviews with Danish news consumers. Findings show that while the users acknowledge AI’s potential to improve efficiency and writing quality—and are sometimes delighted by the prospects—they emphasize the need for a human journalist in the loop. Many are concerned about AI replacing human journalists; some fear AI’s capacity to produce fake news, biased content, and clickbait, while others find AI annoyingly inappropriate and its writing generic and impersonal. Regarding transparency and labeling, opinions range from seeing it as irrelevant or context-dependent to essential.

## Keywords

generative AI, automated journalism, sentiments, evaluation, affect

The recent development and widespread use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) in newsrooms worldwide has led to a paradigm shift within the journalism industry, rapidly changing the roles and needed skills of journalists (Beckett & Yaseen, 2023). In the wake of the current technological revolution and its potential prospects—first and foremost, production efficiency—the journalism industry is struggling with several unresolved issues (Noain-Sánchez, 2022). Among these, audience considerations are particularly prevalent. As emphasized by Wölker and Powell (2018), audience approval of

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automated journalism is critical in determining the suitedness of the new technology in media production and distribution. Supporting this reasoning, the purpose of our study is to examine the users' evaluations and affect toward AI-generated journalism and the way it is labeled.

While scholarly attention has already been given to the audience's perception of automated algorithmic news (e.g., Jung et al., 2017; Wölker & Powell, 2018; Zheng et al., 2018), as well as the more recent branch of generative AI journalism (Arguedas, 2024; Collao, 2024; Henestrosa et al., 2023), there is a scarcity of research on the audience's attitudes and emotional responses that govern their appraisal of generative AI journalism. In line with the audience turn (Meijer, 2020) as well as the emotional turn (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020) in journalism studies, we argue that understanding the attitudes and emotions of the users toward generative AI journalism is a key aspect in determining how to apply the new technology in ways that resonate with the users and makes them engage with AI-generated content.

A significant factor in this pursuit is transparency by means of labeling AI, which is currently a matter of debate in journalism. In response to recent EU regulations on AI, the European media industry is actively trying to develop standards for AI transparency, as evidenced by initiatives in Sweden (Stenbom et al., 2024). However, explicit criteria for implementing such transparency remain undefined. This highlights a pressing need for deeper insights into users' perceptions of AI labeling.

Accordingly, our study aims to explore the users' attitudes by probing their evaluative arguments and emotional responses to generative AI journalism and its labeling. We do so by conducting qualitative interviews with 31 Danish news readers being exposed to examples of authentic AI-generated journalism. By scrutinizing the users' arguments and emotions, we give new in-depth insights into the audience's attitudes and perceptions. Journalists and the journalism industry can apply such insights to understand, anticipate, and comply with—or counter—different types of audience attitudes and affect toward the use of generative AI.

In contrast to most prior studies on audience reception of automated journalism and generative AI journalism, this study is qualitative, which implies that we analyze a smaller data set deeply rather than measure a larger data set more broadly and quantitatively. The study is conducted in Denmark, which offers a particularly interesting context for exploring audience perceptions of generative AI in journalism. Denmark has long been at the forefront of technological adoption, digital literacy is generally high, and Danish news organizations are actively investing in AI-driven innovation (Schröder et al., 2024, p. 76). These innovations are embedded in a traditionally strong media system that is marked by high levels of public trust and a professional, publicly oriented journalistic tradition, which stands in contrast to more polarized or commercially driven media systems in other parts of the world (e.g., Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Hanitzsch et al., 2018). The findings of this study provide insight into how news consumers in a high-trust, digitally literate society engage with generative AI in journalism. As will be addressed in the literature review, audience responses are influenced by the national context and shaped by broader cultural and media system factors. Nevertheless, the main findings concerning the central role of emotional responses to

generative AI, as well as the importance of clear labeling and transparency, are likely to hold relevance beyond the Danish setting.

## Literature Review

Recent research (Arguedas, 2024; Collao, 2024) has shown that people are less comfortable with AI news than human journalists. As we will see below, there are important cross-national differences, and over time attitudes toward AI in journalism may change as people become more accustomed to AI. Nevertheless, current trends indicate that most people prefer a human in the loop: The less human involvement, the greater the discomfort associated with AI applications in this field (Arguedas, 2024; Morosoli et al., 2024). Furthermore, people are less comfortable with using AI in journalism the closer it comes to core journalistic tasks. People are generally more comfortable with AI writing a news headline, than writing the full text of a news article (Arguedas, 2024; Morosoli et al., 2024). Collao (2024) found that people in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Mexico were less comfortable with AI-generating content, such as text, images, and videos, than with AI being used behind the scenes, for instance, in doing research. Similarly, they found positive attitudes concerning convenience, speed, accuracy, and efficiency, all characteristics that fit within the practical dimensions of techno-optimism (Danaher, 2022).

Further underlining people's skepticism toward the use of AI in journalism, other recent studies have shown that headlines labeled as AI-generated are generally distrusted (Toff & Simon, 2023), perceived as less accurate (Longoni et al., 2022), and decrease people's willingness to share the news items, potentially because the users assume that the headlines have been generated without human supervision (Altay & Gilardy, 2024). Also, Waddell (2018) has found that news attributed to human journalists was seen as more credible than news attributed to machines. They explain this by arguing that in the general public's mind, journalism is seen as a "human job" (Waddell, 2018, p. 248).

Expanding on this line of research, several studies have investigated how the credibility of automated news can be increased, for example, by keeping a human in the loop instead of automating the whole news-making process (Tandoc et al., 2020, van Dalen, 2023; Wölker & Powell, 2018). Jang et al. (2023) showed that news credibility can be enhanced when the collaboration between the automated system and the human journalists is depicted as an equal partnership rather than when human journalists use the automated system as a tool.

Despite general caution regarding the use of AI in journalism, Collao (2024, p. 2) conclude that attitudes toward news automation are seldom black and white but rather a blend of more positive and more negative attitudes ranging from optimistic to critical. The literature distinguishes five factors that make audiences' attitudes toward the use of AI in journalism more positive or negative.

*First*, the writing style of automatically generated news affects its acceptability and credibility. Surprisingly, Wu (2020) and Wölker and Powell (2018) found that automated news was perceived as more credible than human-written news. This

finding can be explained by the specific, somewhat formulaic style of automated news stories, which the audience might perceive as objective or unbiased (Wu, 2020:1020). In line with this argument, it decreases the perception of credibility when AI writes evaluative instead of just informative (Henestrosa et al., 2023). With the recent developments of generative AI, it will, presumably, become even harder to discern human from artificial news writing. This may lead the audience to experience the *uncanny valley effect* (Mori, 1970), the point where AI becomes so human-like that it becomes eerie. This effect was previously observed when artificial voices are used for news reading (Heiselberg et al., 2022).

*Second*, attitudes toward AI in journalism are strongly shaped by people's experiences with AI systems. Research shows that the credibility of automated news is affected by our knowledge of news automation (Jang et al., 2022). Algorithm literacy helps people to understand how algorithms work, which fosters more trust from the users (Shin, 2020). Experimental evidence has shown that algorithm literacy plays an important role in trust in news chatbots (Shin, 2022). The most important source of knowledge about news automation is personal experience and direct interaction with automated systems fulfilling journalistic tasks (Cotter & Reisdorf, 2020). People with higher socio-economic status are generally more knowledgeable about news automation, reinforcing digital inequalities (Cotter & Reisdorf, 2020).

*Third*, popular narratives surrounding advanced technologies shape perceptions about the merits and pitfalls of automation in journalism (Waddell, 2018). These narratives are often centered around hopes and fears about AI's possibilities and threats to humanity (Cave & Dihal, 2019). Concerning the negative attitudes toward the use of generative AI in journalism, some may be caused by general *AI phobia*, that is, the notion of AI "as being dangerous or as being an existential threat to humanity" (Samuel et al., 2024). One aspect of this perceived dire threat is the *Frankenstein Complex*, referring to the dystopian scenario of robots replacing humans and, in the case of journalism, AI replacing human journalists, which is a concern that is found not only within the news audience, but also among journalists (Kim & Kim, 2018), and which is rooted in the uncertainty of how AI will shape the future of journalism. Another related aspect is the so-called *Hollywood Robot Syndrome*, which refers to people's experiences with robots (or AI) in blockbuster movies influencing their perceptions of such technologies. While dystopian sci-fi versions of AI may contribute to negative perceptions, other more sympathetic or human-like portrayals of AI seem to evoke more positive attitudes (Sundar et al., 2016). Shin and Zhou (2024) found that news recommendation systems with anthropomorphic cues lead to more favorable perceptions of their transparency and fairness. Still, there is limited knowledge of how such emotions come into play when audiences experience AI-generated journalism.

*Fourth*, transparency is another important factor affecting attitudes toward news automation. Heiselberg et al. (2022) showed that when news organizations use new technologies to produce journalism, people want to be informed. They found that listeners preferred to be informed when news was read by a neural voice, rather than a human, indicating a desire for transparency about the use of automated systems. When not informed and subsequently discovering this, they felt cheated and insecure.

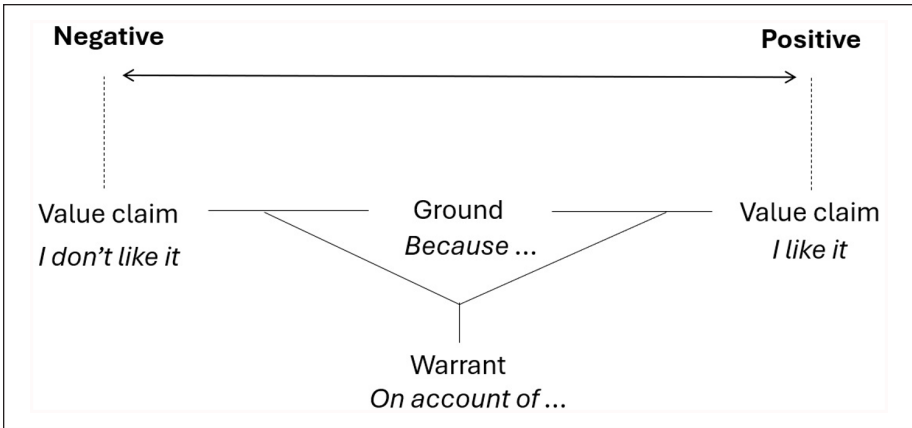
Accordingly, most news audiences insist on some degree of disclosure or labeling when news is (mostly) AI-generated (Arguedas, 2024). How audiences process AI-generated content, including both trustworthy information, misinformation, and inoculation messages against misinformation, is strongly shaped by heuristics. In this context, perceived transparency, along with fairness and accountability, functions as crucial cues (Shin & Akhtar, 2024; Shin et al., 2024). A key driver of perceived transparency is explainability, which plays an essential role in fostering trust in algorithmic journalism. When audiences understand the decision-making processes behind AI-generated content, they are likely to perceive it as fairer, more accurate, and more transparent—ultimately strengthening trust (Shin, 2021). As Rosenfeld and Richardson (2019, p. 678) argue, explainability in human–AI interactions refers to the “ability of the user to understand the agent’s logic.” Thus, explainability goes beyond simply disclosing the use of AI or algorithms in news production. It involves making the underlying logic and decision-making processes of these automated systems accessible and comprehensible to the audience.

*Fifth*, the national (news) context plays a significant role in shaping users’ responses to news automation. In his comprehensive analysis of human–algorithm interactions, Shin (2023, pp. 94–5) addresses how American and Korean users engage with chatbots. Korean users generally exhibited greater trust in algorithms behind the chatbots, focusing mainly on the reliability of the outcomes. In contrast, American users were more skeptical, with a stronger focus on the procedural qualities of the algorithms, such as fairness and accountability. Moreover, societal news trust levels also influence attitudes toward news automation. In Denmark where trust in the news media is generally high, people prefer human journalists selecting news rather than relying on automated systems (van Dalen, 2023). In countries like Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States, people are also skeptical about automated news systems. However, they do not favor human journalists to the same degree, as they often hold low levels of trust in human journalists as well (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2019).

As described above, recent studies have started to explore people’s attitudes toward applying generative AI in journalism. To get a deeper and more systematic understanding of the, at times, conflicting attitudes, we need more knowledge about the reasoning and affiliated emotions behind user attitudes. The literature review also shows that the general perceptions of AI are often shaped by folk beliefs, comparisons with humans or science fictional accounts of technological advancement in the future, and that there is a strong emotional component involved. Still, we know less about how this plays out for AI-generated journalism content and how it relates to positive and negative attitudes. The literature review furthermore highlighted transparency as a tool that can potentially increase the acceptance of generative AI.

### *Evaluations and Articulated Affect*

Journalism and mass media scholars have increasingly turned their interest toward the emotional aspects of audience reception, often with an interdisciplinary approach (Döveling et al., 2011) and from a variety of different theoretical positions (Lünenborg



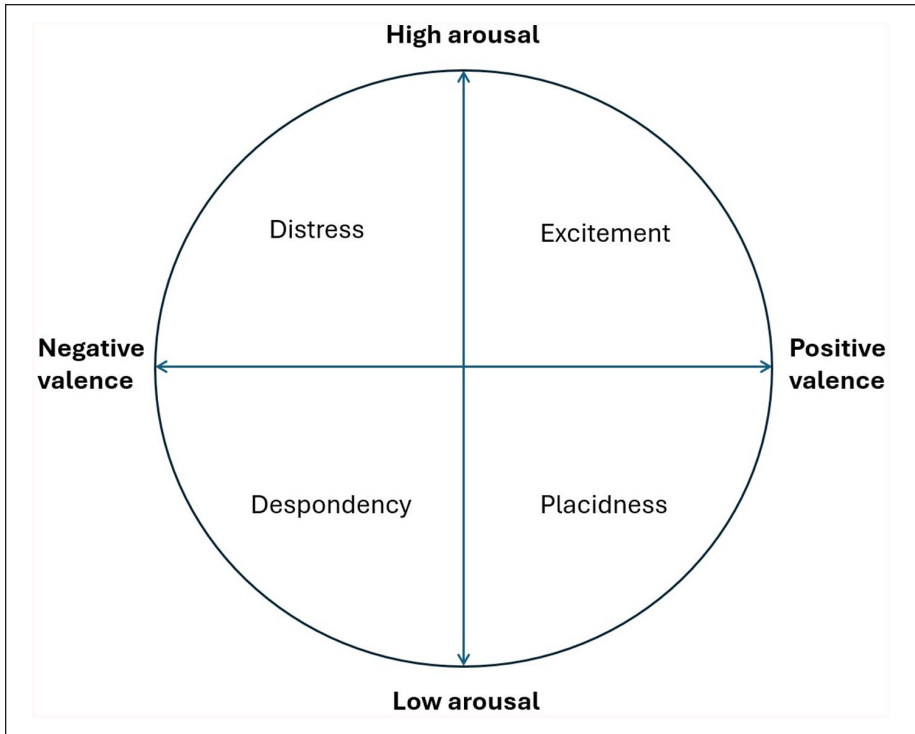
**Figure 1.** The Basic Structure of Evaluative Arguments.

& Maier, 2018; Orgeret, 2020). Following the same path of theoretic and interdisciplinary plurality, our study combines theories on evaluative argumentation, neuropsychological affect and linguistic appraisal. The reason for doing so is a dual perspective on the attitudes of the media users toward generative AI in journalism: We consider the user's *evaluation*, as well as the users' *affect* as *articulated* in their evaluations.

*Evaluations* concern the “judgements about an attitude object” (Breckler & Wiggins, 1989, p. 253) and are used by people to persuade or convince others that something is good or bad, right or wrong, and desirable or undesirable (Carenini & Moore, 2006). At their core, evaluative arguments consist of value claims that assert the worth of something—in our case, the worth of generative AI and its labeling in journalism—and they can, similar to other claims, be backed by support based on warrants (Toulmin, 1958/2003). Basically, evaluative arguments position the users either positively or negatively toward generative AI and its labeling in journalism. Figure 1 illustrates the basic structure of evaluative arguments.

*Affect* deals with “the emotional responses and feelings engendered with an attitude object” (Breckler & Wiggins 1989:253). To study the affect of the audience, we adopt a neuropsychological approach that has recently been advanced by Boyer (2021) and Lekkas et al. (2022) in journalism and mass media studies. This line of research builds on the theoretical assumption that affective states are situated on scales of valence (positive/negative) and arousal (high/low), with the latter being “largely overlooked” (Boyer, 2021, p. 92) in many media studies. We follow this line of thought by applying the circumplex model of affect, initially introduced by Russell (1980), later adjusted by others (Posner et al., 2005; Remington et al., 2000) and adapted to journalism, and media studies by Boyer (2021). Figure 2 illustrates the model in Boyers' version, although slightly modified.

Based on this model, four prototypical types of emotional attitudes toward generative AI journalism and labeling can be expected: People may be (a) *negatively aroused*



**Figure 2.** The Circumplex Model of Affect.

and thus feel, for example, annoyed or afraid, or they may be (b) *positively aroused* and delighted or excited. On the contrary, they may express (c) *a lower level of negative arousal* and feel sad or bored, or (d) *a lower level of positive arousal* and feel satisfied or unworried. Naturally, there is also the option that they are not emotionally involved. Importantly, the model operates on a continuum with fuzzy boundaries between the emotions that reflect that people often do not experience emotions as clear-cut sensations (Posner et al., 2005).

*Articulated* affect refers to the explicit verbal, linguistic cues for emotive valence and arousal. To study these, we draw on linguistic appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005; White, 2002) which deals, in particular, with the language of evaluations, attitudes, and emotions. According to appraisal theory, affect concerns emotional responses prototypically articulated through predicate processes (*I fear, I hate, and I love*), attributions (*I am fearful, I am angry, and I am happy*), nominalizations (*my fear, my anger, and my love*), as well as other linguistic means, that will be addressed in the “Methods” section.

Based on these considerations, we focus our attention on the following research questions (RQs):

**RQ1:** How do the users evaluate (a) generative AI and (b) the labeling of AI in journalism?

**RQ2:** What is the users' articulated affect toward (a) generative AI in journalism and (b) AI labeling?

## **Method and Research Design**

We conducted qualitative interviews with 31 news consumers using the online video research interview (OVRI) method (Heiselberg & Stepińska, 2023), which is a method that uses established video conferencing platforms for qualitative data collection. The participants were selected through purposive sampling to secure a varied selection of participants. Thus, we have ensured that our participant pool is balanced between males and females and includes age differences (all birth decades from the 1940s to the 2000s are represented), residence (all major parts of Denmark are represented), educational background (ranging from high to medium to lower levels of education), work affiliation (from employed to unemployed or retired), and prior experience with and knowledge on AI (from very limited to extensive). While not statistically representative, the sample was constructed to reflect a broad cross-section of Danish news consumers. These differences are intended solely to ensure diversity within the sample and do not serve as analytical variables in the study. This approach allows for the exploration of a wide range of perspectives and supports the analytical generalizability typical of qualitative research (Patton, 2015). In the Danish context, diversity in gender, age, region, education, and employment status is closely linked to variation in news consumption practices. For example, younger individuals tend to prefer digital platforms, while older groups rely more on legacy media. Regional and educational differences also shape media access, trust, and preferences. Thus, including participants across these dimensions helps capture a broad range of news engagement patterns (Olsen et al., 2020).

The interviews were conducted in two waves in the first quarter of 2024 with 1 month between the two waves. There were 19 participants in the first wave and 12 in the second. In both waves, the participants were presented with authentic cases of applied generative AI in journalism before and again during the interview to refresh memory. The cases consisted of authentic examples from different media outlets—both regional (Denmark–Funen), Nordic (Sweden) and international (American) (see Table 1)—and included headlines, summaries, a full article with pictures, and a full article with a bio of an AI author including the AI-generated picture of the artificial author used by the media outlet. The cases were chosen to reflect a variety of scope in applied generative AI in journalistic text production ranging from more limited (headlines and news summaries), to more extensive (co-writing of full articles with pictures) as well as very extensive, and extreme use (generated AI journalists writing full articles). The examples included instances both where AI usage was unlabeled and where the media explicitly labeled it. Regardless of labeling, the participants were informed

**Table 1.** AI-Generated Texts Used in the Interviews.

Wave	Text type	Generated by	Labeling	Media
1	Headlines	ChatGPT (OpenAI)	Not labeled	TV 2 Fyn
	News summary	ChatGPT (OpenAI)	Labeled	Aftonbladet
	Full article with pics	An AI assistant	Labeled	BuzzFeed
	Full article + bio and picture of AI author	Unknown	Not labeled	Sports Illustrated
2	News summaries	ChatGPT (OpenAI)	Labeled	TV 2 Fyn

beforehand that the texts were written with the aid of AI. The participants in the first wave were exposed to all cases, while the participants in the second wave were only exposed to the AI news summaries produced by a local media of which the participants were all regular users. Participants in the first wave tended to be very emotional with regards to the extensive—and more extreme—example from an international media outlet unfamiliar to most of them, potentially influencing their perception of the less extensive use of AI in the other cases. The inclusion of the second wave ensured that we also covered the, potentially, more subdued and positive feelings elicited by the less extensive examples from familiar media. Since the aim of our study is to qualitatively map—rather than quantify—user’s evaluations and affect toward generative AI in journalism, we consider the two-wave approach an appropriate means to ensure that we did not miss important aspects. We will, however, return to the limitations of our method and research design later.

We conducted semi-structured interviews by asking openly and thematically and using follow-up questions to provide more detailed information. We deliberately chose not to probe into the participants’ feelings, which might provoke emotions that may not have been there to begin with. Instead, we asked in an open-ended and exploratory manner.

The purpose of the examples was to ensure that the application of generative AI was as concrete and specific for the participants as possible and to reflect the different types of AI uses within journalism text production that the audience might encounter in real life.

Our analysis strategy consisted of two steps: First, we applied basic argumentation analysis (van Eemeren & Henkemans, 2017), then manual linguistic sentiment and affect analysis (Taboada, 2016; Van Atteveldt et al., 2021). Argumentation theory helped us identify value claims, grounds and warrants. Appraisal theory helped us identify and categorize affect, and the circumplex model helped us position and visually map it systematically based on valence and arousal. For example, a participant argued: “It [the generated AI text] is super boring. I don’t get anything out of it. [. . .] It’s simply too generic and irrelevant to be exciting.” This evaluative argument was coded as a negative value claim on the ground that the AI text is generic and irrelevant. Also, the affective attribution “super boring” was coded as *bored* and positioned in the lower left corner of the affect model, that is, negative valence and low arousal.

Importantly, what we are coding here is the *implicit* feeling of boredom associated with the attributive evaluation that the AI text is boring, that is, we interpret “It is super boring” as *I am super bored*. In our coding of affects, we have first and foremost annotated attributions that express affect, such as *I am annoyed* (or *it is annoying*), *scared (scary)*, *bored (boring)*, *sad*, *satisfied (satisfying)*, or similar variants. While such predicatives are prototypical affect markers, other parts of speech, such as verbs and nouns, and full phrases were also marked if explicitly expressing affect. In addition, we have treated certain evaluative phrases as an increase in experienced arousal level. These include words with a strong positive or negative denotative or connotative value (Taboada, 2016), for example, *it’s excellent/terrible*, as well as evaluative phrases with adverbial graduation, *it’s really good/really bad*. Such graduation can be used to either intensify or tone down evaluations and affect (Kiritchenko & Mohammad, 2017; Taboada, 2016).

We have also included exclamatory and interrogative emotional utterances (Beijer, 2002) in our coding of affect as well as swear words when explicitly emotional, for example: “Why, why do they do this?”, “What the hell!?” In the appendix, we give a more elaborate example of how the articulated affect was coded in praxis.

After the initial coding, we classified the participants’ value claims into positive and negative standpoints and subcategorized them according to their grounds, (implicit) warrants, and topics. That way, we got a systematic overview of the participants’ evaluative arguments. When presenting the overview in our results section, we have condensed the arguments, that is, paraphrased them in short, which is a strategy often used for qualitative approaches to thematic text analysis (Malterud, 2012). Finally, we positioned the argument topics associated with affect within the circumplex model to get a full visual overview and depiction of how the evaluations correlates with affect. In the following section, we present our results and provide analyzed examples to ensure transparency.

## Results

An initial observation is that all participants can see both the positives and negatives of applying AI in journalism. Some participants even express opposite sentiments toward the use of AI, ranging from excitement to fear, within the same sentence:

I think it’s exciting, honestly. It seems like something that will change a lot of things [. . .] but it’s also a bit frightening, right, that machines might take over human jobs. [. . .] It’s exciting and frightening at the same time. (F, 21, W1)

Consequently, participants’ attitudes are not strictly positive or negative; rather, they reflect a nuanced “both–and” perspective, a finding also observed by Collao (2024, p. 29). Accordingly, we investigate the positive and negative *arguments* as well as their affiliated emotions, rather than segregating the participants into positive and negative *users*.

## *Positive Arguments and Affiliated Emotions*

Among the participants, a prerequisite for positive attitudes toward AI is the controlled use of AI-generated content. The acceptability of AI in journalism is contingent on its output being quality-checked by critical and skilled journalists. Otherwise, the participants tend to be displeased, for example:

It's important for me to know and feel that there is actually a person somewhere inside; that there is actually someone who has had a critical approach to it. Basically, I don't like it if there isn't an educated journalist involved. (F, 63, W1).

If such prerequisites are in place, AI has potential practical, economical, qualitative, and ethical benefits, according to the participants. They argue that it is efficient and might make journalism cheaper to buy and deliver news more quickly, which pleases them:

I think it is very clever. It makes it more efficient, so it makes a lot of sense. In the end, it's a matter of whether they can reduce your costs as a user and make it cheaper. They can probably also deliver news faster. (M, 44, W1)

Also, according to the participants, AI might make the journalistic product more readable and enjoyable, if the AI can find more fitting phrases than human journalists, and when it is used for proofreading texts, for example:

If the journalist isn't that good at writing, then the story might become more readable and reader-friendly. If the journalist is supplied with some more cool words or cool phrases than they themselves can come up with, then, I believe, I would jump onboard. (F, 47, W1)

The same with proofreading [...] it will be really good at editing errors which is beneficial for the readers. (M, 23, W1)

Often, the participants shift stance when outlining the positive potentials of AI journalism. Instead of addressing the positives from their own perspective, that is, the perspective of the audience, they tend to see it from the perspective of the journalists or the journalism industry instead—or as well, for example:

I don't know if it's an advantage for me as a user, but I would think that maybe, for journalists, it can be quite a useful tool to make things faster. Of course, if it's checked as well, that it fits and makes sense, then maybe it's a clever tool. (F, 24, W2)

From this vantage point, the users consider AI an efficient tool that may free up time for the journalists by taking care of simple tasks, such as drafting, summarizing, sorting, and gathering info during research. Among journalists, similar arguments are made (Cools & Diakopoulos, 2024; Van Dalen, 2024), so there seems to be an

alignment in attitudes. Also, the most positive users get emotionally *excited* about the practical prospects of AI when they can see similar benefits of applying AI in their own line of work. In that case, they are *unworried* about the prospects of journalists using it as well, for example:

I regard it as an amazing opportunity to save a lot of manual work. As such it's not only a technological improvement, but also a business advantage that may lead to better service for our clients. And yeah, save us some time. So, my attitude is that if it is used properly, artificial intelligence may transform the way we work for the better. I think it's totally fine that AI is used to assist journalists. (M, 53, W1)

It's great for "slave work", that's what AI can be really good at in the future, not just in journalism, but other types of profession as well. It's crazy good that it can take care of all the incredibly boring work. In my opinion that's where it will become a great tool. [. . .] It would be amazing to have it as a sparring partner. (M, 23, W1)

They also get *delighted* or at times *excited* when they feel that the content produced by the AI adds something extra to the reading experience:

I liked it very much [the text from BuzzFeed, co-authored by AI]. I liked that they actively used the bot, and that they used it as a gimmick, because it makes it more fun. It becomes more personal. (F, 44, W1)

These positive sentiments all concern journalism practices. However, the users also argue based on normative considerations. Some participants point out that AI-generated texts might be particularly suited for objective news writing because the AI has a more objective writing style:

I think it is more fact-based, more devoid of emotions. Because journalists they often have opinions that shine through. Artificial intelligence is vacuumed for opinions. (M, 47, W2).

Similar arguments are found regarding clickbait headlines:

Well, perhaps if it is made by a machine, you could avoid those clickbait headlines. [. . .] Because, the machine does the opposite of clickbait headlines it seems, because it tells in a factual way what this news story is about. (M, 45, W1)

While some participants consider the potential capability of an impersonal and factual AI a positive in this respect, the impersonal writing style is also seen as a negative from another vantage point. We will return to these counterarguments when outlining the negative attitudes.

Meanwhile, the positive attitudes of the participants are summarized in Table 2.

## Negative Arguments and Affiliated Emotions

Among the more critical participants, the highlighted practical potentials of applying AI for journalists are often supplied by counterarguments stressing that what might be beneficial for the journalists and the media industry is not beneficial for the audience:

Well, it's clever that you [the journalist] can just push a button and your job is done. That's very smart, but it's not something that I condone. I would rather have the real deal [journalism made by humans instead of AI]. (F, 70, W1)

Also, the participants warn against potential repercussions for the journalists, which are something the participants both feel *worried* and *sad* about:

It worries me that it will get even harder to get a job as a journalist for example. It could be, and it is already difficult. (F, 44, W1)

It's sad that there isn't a human behind that headline. [. . .] because what will happen then? [. . .] I think it's sad for those [journalists] who do not get to think for themselves. (F, 70, W1).

These worries on behalf of the journalists mirror similar worries among the journalists themselves, who are fearful that the “robots” may take over their jobs or make them less meaningful (Møller et al., 2024). Emotionally, several of the participants find the prospect of an AI replacing journalists *eerie*, and the contours of the Frankenstein complex become prominent in their reactions:

It's pretty spooky, if it is not a real person who assesses what's important in a news story. (F, 21, W2)

Furthermore, critical participants find the use of AI irrelevant in text production, given that the journalists themselves should be capable of writing headlines, summaries, and texts. This is one of the most prevalent arguments in the data set, often accompanied by a marked increase in emotional arousal with high levels of *annoyance*:

I don't get it. A journalist must be able to do this just as quick and just as good. Why do they even use artificial intelligence in such instances? I mean, a journalist could write this just as easily. I don't understand why they have used it here. I'm irritated by it [. . .] That's the journalist's job. (F, 65, W1)

Importantly, such criticism seems to reflect a need—among some of the participants—for an explanation of the relevance and the purpose of using AI besides making it a fast and cheap solution for the media. Related to this, the participants stress the importance of journalists sparring with the AI instead of just getting it to “do the job” and copy-pasting the generated content without any further thought:

**Table 2.** Positive Evaluation of Generative AI.

Value claim	Ground	Warrant	Topic
GAI is: Clever/smart/ingenious	<p>Because: It may reduce costs for the media and make journalism cheaper to buy</p> <p>It is a quick and efficient tool—it frees up time for journalists by taking care of simple tasks, such as summarizing the main facts, sorting information, and gathering info during research—and it helps get the news out to the audience faster</p> <p>It may make the journalistic product more readable and enjoyable when the AI can correct errors and find more fitting phrases or when the AI adds something extra to the reading experience</p> <p>It may help limit the use of clickbait</p> <p>The AI may write in an objective, factual, and impartial style</p>	<p>On account of: Journalism is expensive to produce and buy (Time) efficiency is imperative for journalists and audiences alike</p> <p>Journalism should be correct, readable, and enjoyable</p> <p>Clickbait is low-quality journalism</p> <p>News journalism should be objective, factual, and impartial</p>	<p>Considering: The economic aspects of journalism</p> <p>The practical aspects of journalism</p> <p>The qualitative aspects of journalism</p> <p>The normative aspects of journalism</p>

I would appreciate it more if it was used as sparring. I'm not saying that they haven't [. . .], but it almost seems like they have just asked it [the chatbot] to take it [the news story] and make a headline for it, and then they haven't thought much more about it. (M, 34, W1)

In general, though, the participants tend to be less critical when AI is used for headlines and summaries than fully generated texts, which cross the line for the more critical participants:

I find that this is beyond the line if all the content is generated by artificial intelligence. It's okay with the summarizing text or perhaps a headline, but I think it's beyond the limit if the entire text is generated by artificial intelligence. (F, 24, W2)

Concerning the content produced by AI, the more critical participants argue that there are also issues regarding the quality. They find that the generated texts are lifeless because they are too "uniform" (M, 53, W2), "machinelike" (F, 46, W1), "strangely superficial" (F, 51, W1), "clinical and impersonal" (F, 52, W2), and "lacks soul" (F, 70, W1). Emotionally, it makes them bored:

It's super boring. I don't get anything out of it. I don't know if a journalist has been part of it, or the journalist has just asked it [the AI] what's going on. I'm bored and will not read it through. [. . .] It's simply too generic and irrelevant to be exciting. As long as it is used as a tool, it's okay. When it's fully automated, then it gets too generic and boring. (M, 34, W1)

A prevalent theme among the critical participants concerns the ethics of journalism. If AI is unsupervised by human journalists, the participants *fear* that it may spread misinformation and biased content, and they are *annoyed* by the prospect of it potentially reinforcing the use of sensationalism and clickbait based on user behavior:

But if you pull in too much automatically and do not check what comes out for quality then there is a risk that you publish something that is too far from reality. That's what I'm afraid of. (F, 63, W1)

For instance, the built-in bias that may be present in news created with artificial intelligence, both gender biases and race biases and those things [. . .] it doesn't have a chance to reflect upon it like we can, those are the things that worry me. (M, 45, W1)

There might be more of those kinds of headlines [click bait], and I would find that annoying, because there is enough of those as it is. (F, 44, W1)

A related concern revolves around the lack of human and cognitive capabilities, such as the ability to witness reality, think critically, evaluate, and see different perspectives:

Does it even write something true? I don't know if it gets its information from anywhere, and if it checks its sources critically. And then I might worry that it doesn't. (F, 51, W1).

I might worry if it is capable of thinking profoundly enough and see all perspectives. (M, 69, W1)

Contrary to this, other participants worry that the AI becomes so human-like in its writing that it is hard to distinguish machine from man, resulting in non-transparent authorships:

I worry that it could write similar to humans. If you feed it articles and it adapts to them, then it will probably also begin writing like a journalist. And then we have the issue of who has written it? And that worries me a lot considering how it is used. (M, 34, W1)

This worry turns into anxiety—or frustration—when the more critical participants react to the bio of the artificial journalist. This is the point where some participants, especially among the older audience, feel they have walked too far into the uncanny valley:

It's very frightening that you can invent a journalist who's not really there. [. . .] It's almost eerie that it's an artificial person. That's where I draw the line. [. . .] I cannot tolerate this. It's really low. [. . .] It's cheating of the highest degree. [. . .] That shouldn't be part of journalism. Then I don't want to read it anymore. (F, 70, W1)

I think it is a horrible text. It is all fake. What in heaven's name? But it is all fiction. What the hell should you use this for? (F, 63, W1)

It makes no sense to create an utterly crazy human scenario of a human that does not exist, when it's a machine [. . .] I truly think it's ridiculous. (F, 46, W1).

Participants report feeling deceived and misled when AI is used to create an artificial writer. In our data, this more extreme form of anthropomorphism elicits exclusively negative reactions, with no genuinely positive responses observed. The negative attitudes of the participants are summarized in Table 3.

### *Transparency and Labeling*

Concerning the issue of transparency and labeling, the participants can be divided into three groups: *the trustful*, those for whom transparency is not important at all and who prefer no labeling; *the pragmatics*, those for whom transparency is somewhat important, and who argue that labeling is needed some of the time and under specific circumstances; and *the skeptics*, those for whom transparency is very important and who always insist on labeling.

The trustful prefer *not* to be informed if AI has been used because they trust and have full confidence in the media or the editors and journalists who apply the AI.

**Table 3.** Negative Evaluation of Generative AI.

Value claim	Ground	Warrant	Topic
<i>GAI</i> is . . . problematic/disagreeable/unfavorable	<p>Because:                      The journalists should be capable of producing journalism themselves                      It might replace human journalists                      It lacks soul                      Its texts are too generic, uniform, superficial and boring, impersonal, and machinelike                      It may reinforce the use of sensationalism and clickbait</p>	<p>On account of:                      Journalism is a human praxis</p> <p>Journalism should be varied, in-depth, engaging and have a "voice"                      Sensationalism and clickbait are bad journalism</p> <p>Journalism should be independent, critical, evaluative, and provide perspectives                      Journalism should be unbiased                      Journalism should tell the truth</p>	<p>Considering:                      The human aspects of journalism</p> <p>The qualitative aspects of journalism</p> <p>The normative and ethical aspects of journalism</p>

These *unworried* participants are primarily found in wave 2, which consists of regular users of the media who applied the AI in the given case example:

I do not think it is necessary (to declare it) as long as it is from TV 2 Fyn, and when you know it is from them, I do not actually think it matters if it is AI-generated. (M, 17, W2)

I trust that TV 2 FYN uses it [AI] sensibly. (F, 37, W2)

The trustful believe that it is not their task as news users to check whether the generated content is credible; that is the task of the editors and journalists:

I do not need to know that an AI has been used [. . .] I do not feel that it is my task as a reader to be aware that it is written by artificial intelligence or if I can trust it or not. That's the journalists' and the publisher's task. (M, 44, W1).

The pragmatics, on the contrary, argue that labeling should depend on what AI is used for, how it is used, and in which context. When used to spar with or for small tasks, such as generating headlines, no labeling is needed because it may result in information overload:

Well, if they have only used it for the headline, then, perhaps it is too much information [to label it as generated by AI]. But as soon as you begin to write the full text, [. . .] then the readers must know. Headlines, they don't matter. (F, 46, W1)

However, when full texts have been generated by the AI without declaration, the pragmatics argue that it is dishonest: "Well, they lie" (F, 46, W1)—and often react to it with *annoyance* and high emotional arousal: "I think it's way [expletive] over the limit!" (M, 45, W1).

Also, some of the pragmatics argue that although (detailed) labeling may not be needed at all times, there must be some kind of general declaration that AI has been used. Otherwise, they are annoyed:

I think it's lousy [that it is non-transparent that headlines have been AI generated]. I don't know if you need a label every time AI has been used, but it must be declared somewhere (F, 70, W1).

Finally, there are the skeptics, who insist on disclosure all the time. To them, credibility is dependent on full transparency regardless of what AI has been used for. Otherwise, they *worry*:

I think that no matter what, we should be informed that artificial intelligence has been used, because I do not like it when something is not told, then I become suspicious with regards to credibility. (F, 79, W2)

In line with the results in Shin (2022), some of the pragmatics and skeptics argue that transparency should go beyond merely labeling the content as AI-generated. They prefer more elaborate explanations:

It [declaring AI authorship] should be integrated in some form of meta reflections in the article itself. [ . . . ] In general, I believe transparency is an important value, and I know it's a trade-off, because if half the article is about how you made the article, then many readers are lost. So, I know what the issue is with this. But at least some type of notice about it—it could be a box next to the article where the workload between journalist and machine is explained. [ . . . ] It might be a false safety [ . . . ] but at least I would be informed. (M, 45, W1)

A study by Mena (2025) has documented boosted effectiveness of giving explanations rather than merely labeling content when disinformation is concerned. Thus, a similar approach to AI-generated content could be worth pursuing in journalism, as suggested by the participant.

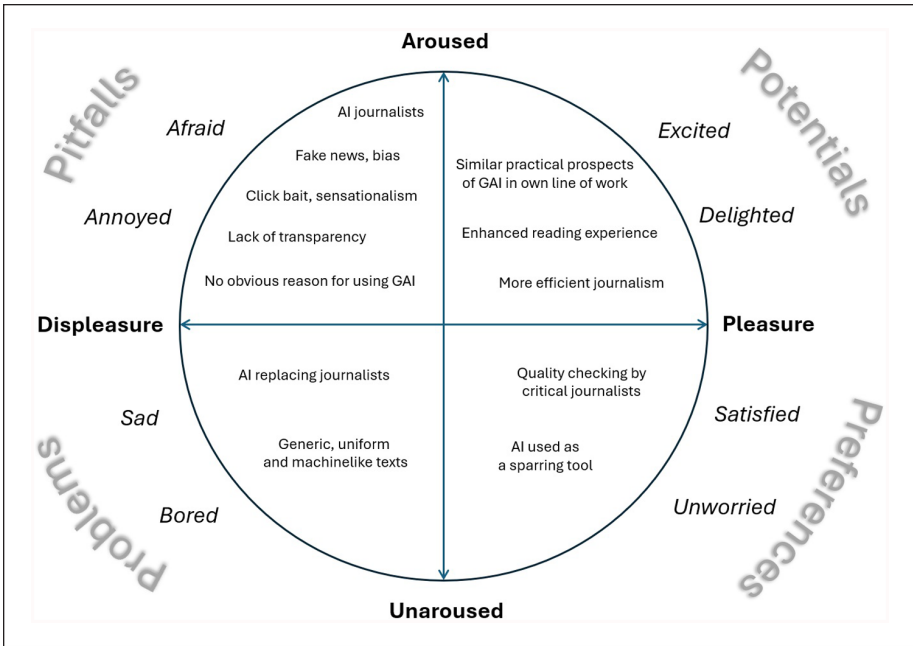
## The Correlation of Evaluation and Affect

Based on our analysis, we have correlated the argument topics and affiliated affect of the participants, and modeled them according to the circumplex model of affect. The result is depicted in Figure 3. When reading the model, it is important to notice that it only covers the argument topics that the users affiliate with emotions.

The upper right-hand corner shows the *potentials* of AI to make the users feel excited or delighted, while the lower right-hand corner shows the *preferences* that make them feel satisfied and unworried. Accordingly, the ideal use of AI, according to the participant's sentiments, is as a sparring tool that makes the text production more efficient and enhances the reading experience while at the same time being adequately quality-checked.

The upper left-hand corner shows the *pitfalls* that make the participants anxious or annoyed, while the lower left-hand corner shows the *problems* that make them feel sad or bored. Considering this, the worst-case scenario is an AI journalist that has fully replaced humans in a non-transparent way and that makes fake and biased news in a sensationalist fashion with clickbait strategies in a uniform and generic writing style. Importantly though, except for the generic writing style, the participants' sentiments toward such a dystopian version of AI are mostly triggered by imagined conceptions of applied AI rather than the concrete examples they have been presented with or other actual experiences with it. Thus, the sentiments are somewhat reminiscent of the Hollywood robot syndrome that builds on fictional accounts of the future—with the appendage that sometimes fiction fits reality.

It should be noted that all but one of the participants in wave 1 reacted negatively and with high arousal to the more extreme case of the artificial journalist generating news texts. In comparison, the participants in wave 2—who were only exposed to AI news summaries from a media they were familiar users of—were generally less



**Figure 3.** Emotional Valence and Arousal.

emotional, although the same negative arguments concerning AI were found here as well. This aligns with the results from the work of Arguedas (2024) that news consumers are more critical of AI writing full texts and conducting more complex journalistic tasks, rather than merely generating headlines and summaries which can be considered routine tasks. Thus, user attitudes and emotions toward AI seem potentially influenced by what AI is used for and the extent of it, as well as the users’ familiarity with the media. However, due to our study’s design, no causal inferences can be drawn, nor is this the intention. Rather, the findings are intended as a conceptual contribution.

**Discussion**

This study explored how a sample of Danish news users reasons about and responds emotionally to the use of generative AI in journalism. Our findings suggest that participants’ mental conception of journalism as an intrinsically human practice influenced their responses. Several participants expressed openness to the potential for AI to support journalism, particularly in terms of economic efficiency, improved productivity and by making texts more readable. At the same time, many voiced concerns about AI fully replacing human journalists. For these participants journalism is a human praxis, and humans have unique capabilities, such as thinking critically, witnessing reality, and perspective-taking, which are indispensable for journalism. These reflections indicate that, for at least a sample of Danish news users,

human involvement may act as a cue for journalistic quality. The idea of AI operating independently in journalism elicited strong negative reactions among several respondents, often described in terms, such as “eerie” or “spooky.” Although our sample does not allow for systematic age comparisons, there was a tendency for older participants to express more critical and emotionally charged views. This observation should be interpreted cautiously, but it may warrant further investigation in studies with larger and more age-diverse samples. While not necessarily grounded in direct experiences with AI, the strong negative responses appeared to be driven by a gut feeling accompanied by strong emotional reactions, such as anxiety, frustration, or sadness. As described in the literature review, such AI phobia is not uncommon when people are confronted with advanced technologies. The opposite reaction would be a sense of awe or fascination about the new technological possibilities. However, such strong positive emotional reactions were mostly limited to when audiences reflected on applications of AI in their own professional life. With regard to the quality of AI-generated writing, participants offered mixed assessments. Some noted that these texts were easier to read, while others found them bland or generic. Importantly, these critiques were often made in reference to a human-authored standard, reaffirming the idea that human journalism remains the benchmark. Although emotional reactions to AI writing were generally less intense than concerns about job displacement, participants still expressed subtle forms of disaffection, such as boredom or lack of engagement. These lower-arousal responses may have been shaped by the study setting, which involved reading texts out of context. Alternatively, they might reflect intrinsic qualities of AI-generated writing, such as its formulaic and often neutral style. Speculatively, it is possible that giving AI-generated texts a more distinct tone of voice or stylistic flair could elicit stronger emotional engagement. However, doing so might also risk triggering a different kind of discomfort, as suggested by the uncanny valley effect. Overall, while these findings are based on a limited, qualitative data set, they contribute to our conceptual understanding of how audiences interpret and emotionally process AI in journalism. Future research with larger and more diverse samples could build on these insights and examine them in different cultural or technological contexts.

As a qualitative contribution to the field, our study has its limitations. First, while efforts were made to include variation in socio-demographic factors, such as age, gender, region, education, AI familiarity, and employment status, we acknowledge that other dimensions—such as technological literacy and political orientation—were not used as selection criteria, and that our limited pool of participants is not fully representative of Danish news consumers. Second, with a relatively small sample size, we cannot conclude that our study shows all variants of emotional arguments regarding AI in journalism. However, we feel confident that they portray some of the most prevalent. Third, exposing respondents to different types of AI usage in the two waves may have had the side effect that the results are not fully consistent. Importantly, though, the two waves ensured that our data covered both the more aroused emotions and the more subdued emotions.

Future research might repeat our study in countries with different media systems and journalistic cultures. Denmark is a country with relatively high levels of trust in the news media and where anti-journalistic rhetoric is less common than in other media systems (Hanitzsch et al., 2018). This might be part of the explanation for why participants in our study were so positive about the role of human journalists in news-making. Previous research suggests that more skepticism about human journalists does not necessarily translate into more positive views about AI (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2019). Still, people who distrust the news might experience less strong emotional reactions when AI replaces journalists than the ones found in this study. In addition, responses to AI might be more positive in other cultural contexts (Shin, 2023).

One area where media systems and cultural contexts could influence results is the demand for transparency. This study has highlighted that there is wide variation in demand for transparency through clearer labeling, as respondents could be divided into trustful, pragmatics, and skeptics. Future research could explore how transparency expectations vary across different cultural and media environments. In countries with higher skepticism toward media institutions, there may be stronger demands for transparency and labeling, as these audiences are less likely to trust that journalists adhered to ethical standards when applying AI. Future quantitative research should also study systematically how individual level characteristics, such as education level, news consumption habits, and prior exposure to AI might play a significant role in shaping audience's transparency demands. Observation studies or experiments could study how specific AI transparency and explainability measures impact audience acceptance, without overloading news users with excessive information.

As news organizations increasingly adopt AI technologies, understanding and responding to audience concerns becomes critical. Rather than treating technological advancement as an end in itself, the integration of AI into journalism should be guided by a continuous dialogue with the audience, attentive to both practical expectations and emotional and ethical sensitivities. Such an approach will help ensure that innovation serves to reinforce, rather than erode, the foundational trust between journalism and its audiences.

## Appendix

### Excerpt From the Affect Analysis.

Participant	Feeling	Cause of emotion	Excerpt
Women, 70, retired	Afraid	<i>Uncanny valley</i>	“It’s <u>very frightening</u> (←↑) that you can invent a journalist who’s not really there. [. . .] It’s <u>almost eerie</u> (←↑) that it’s an artificial person. That’s where I draw the line.” (Commenting on the AI-generated author)
	Sad	<i>Lack of humanity Frankenstein complex</i>	“It’s <u>sad</u> (←↓) that there isn’t a human behind that headline. [. . .] because what will happen then? Normally, it’s this process where something dawns on you when you write, and that’s lost when it is done by a machine. I think it’s <u>sad</u> (←↓) for those who do not get to think themselves.” (Commenting on the AI-generated headlines)
	Annoyed Angry	<i>Lack of transparency (no labeling)</i>	“I think it’s <u>lousy</u> (←↑). I don’t know if you need a label every time AI has been used, but it must be declared somewhere (Commenting on the non-labeling of AI-generated headlines) “I <u>cannot tolerate</u> (←↑) this. It’s <u>really low</u> (←↑). [. . .] Because you give the impression that there is something that’s not there. It’s <u>cheating of the highest degree</u> . (←↑) (Commenting on the AI-generated author)

Note. The arrows signal the position in the circumplex model (negative valence: ←, positive valence: →, low arousal: ↓, and high arousal: ↑). Underscore is used to mark graduation.

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