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The Synthetic Gaze: AI Video Advertising and the Cost of Getting It Wrong

Pre-Stay

Kristian Lupinski

Content Producer, Kastian Media



Drawing on a background in filmmaking, Kristian Lupinski offers a candid, first-person account of experimenting with AI video generation for hospitality marketing and quickly discovering that creative vision and machine output are far from the same thing. The piece raises an unsettling question for the industry: in a race toward synthetic perfection, are hotels optimizing themselves out of the very authenticity that makes a stay worth remembering?

Recently, I spent \$35 on a one-month subscription and \$10 on AI generation tokens on an AI video platform, thinking it would be enough to experiment for an afternoon. The platform gave me 1,000 credits. Each eight-second video generation costs roughly 250 credits. After four attempts, none of the footage was usable, despite detailed explanations and reference images.

Despite a background in filmmaking, where I learned how visual storytelling shapes perception, I expected my expertise to translate to AI-generated video. It didn't. The results felt strange and unnatural, proving that a cinematic idea doesn't automatically become a machine-readable instruction.

This personal experience echoes a broader industry shift. Over the last few months, nearly every hospitality conversation I've had has eventually turned toward AI, new integrations, new platforms, and new promises. It's clear that hospitality advertising is poised to become AI-driven. But therein lies a large problem, which I will come back to.

The impact goes further. AI isn't just helping hospitality marketing anymore; it's starting to influence how people are persuaded in the first place.

For years, hotel marketing relied on some very key fundamentals. Beautiful visuals of the surrounding area created emotional aspiration. Travelers imagined themselves not just staying in a comfortable place, but exploring all the place has to offer. Simply put, people see a place, imagine themselves there, start researching, and eventually decide whether to book. On a side note, there has always been Photoshop, at least since I have been in digital marketing. I would crop a helicopter from one image and drop it into another because the background was better. Both real, just not taken at the same time.

This shift is significant. AI changes both the speed and structure of marketing, especially in video content.

A hotel can now generate dozens of campaign variations in the time it once took to produce a single edit... And not just that, but it can be highly personalized, localized, and, the best part, optimized for any channel you choose.

At first glance, this feels empowering: "Now, I can compete with the big dogs." In some ways, that's true. However, there's another side to this shift that the industry is still underestimating.

The real challenge is the significant risk of losing authenticity and trust if we apply AI-driven advertising carelessly in hospitality.

Perhaps the biggest risk is losing sight of what actually feels honest.

Hospitality already runs on emotion as much as practicality. Hotels are not just selling rooms; they sell anticipation, atmosphere, experience, and ultimately memory.

As promised, here's why this becomes a problem.

The current wave of Gen-AI advertising is producing an incredible amount of content that looks impressive but doesn't really make you feel anything. Every one of these places has perfect sunsets. Perfect buildings. Perfect lighting. Perfect people having perfectly "optimized" experiences. The aesthetic quality is often enough to create excitement, maybe some reshares, but not high enough to create TRUST (Rosli et al., 2025).

And in my opinion, TRUST matters more in hospitality than in almost any other industry. The guest will eventually arrive. A hotel cannot remain purely digital. Reality fulfills the promise.

This is why I argue that the core disruption isn't just AI-generated content itself, but the shift to creating content that targets algorithms rather than people: the Synthetic Gaze.

Traditionally, advertising focused on human emotion and psychological response (human focus). Now, another audience is involved: machines (AI focus).

Being a content creator, I know, and it hurts, because even if you make a really strong piece of content, Algorithms determine visibility (Ferrara, 2026). Sites like YouTube have recommendation engines that shape discovery. LLMs are increasingly mediating search. Many social platforms decide distribution before human audiences even engage, and in many cases, content is now designed as much for this algorithmic interpretation as it is for emotional relatability (Meguellati et al., 2025).

In hotel marketing, we are no longer only competing for human attention. We are now trying to satisfy both algorithms (AI-focused) and audiences (human-focused).

This idea may seem foreign until you see it in practice. For example, a travel video might truly capture the human feeling of a place, but still perform poorly because the algorithm (AI focus) prefers a version that keeps viewers engaged longer. Over time, creative decisions become shaped by what the system rewards (AI focus). Editing is driven by retention metrics, copy is crafted for search visibility, and content focuses more on algorithmic behavior than on creating a human emotional experience.

That's not to say these changes are all negative. Some are genuinely transformative. AI empowers hospitality brands to personalize communication, localize campaigns, and experiment creatively at a scale previously impossible.

The main risk is that AI tools make it tempting to chase high engagement instead of a real connection. Content is perfected for algorithms, but at the cost of authenticity and emotional trust.

A rooftop bar becomes more atmospheric and fantastical than reality can sustain. The ocean becomes unnaturally cinematic. And for me, the biggest issue is that human interactions can become so polished that they stop feeling human.

AI does not suddenly make advertising fake. As I mentioned earlier, I have faked it without AI; the difference is how easy AI makes it.

That changes the thinking and direction of marketing teams. When generating another version costs only a few strokes on the keyboard and a few credits, the natural “this can work” that once existed in production disappears. Continuous iteration becomes possible. Campaigns can be refined over and over again toward high engagement metrics while drifting further from the truth (Ferrara, 2026).

There's an irony here. The more machine-generated or “synthetic” content the market sees, the more valuable genuinely human signals may become.

As travelers become increasingly exposed to machine-generated imagery, they may begin gravitating toward experiences that feel harder to fake. Not perfection, but the subtle imperfections and human details that make something feel authentic.

I have seen so many AI-generated campaigns; they look great, but I can tell you that none have stuck with me. They succeed visually and do fill me with a sense of awe at how far we have come in such a short period, but they fail psychologically.

People are surprisingly sensitive to what feels “off.” We may not always consciously understand why something feels artificial, but we instinctively recognize the absence of authenticity. To borrow Simone's term from the foreword, it's the “uncanny”.

That instinct matters because hospitality is, at its core, deeply human. A stay in a hotel is not experienced like digital media. You experience it in the real world. When you enter, there is the smell of the lobby, or there is the charm of a recommendation from the receptionist, the soft lighting in a corridor at night, the layout and comfort of your home away from home, even for just a night. These are the details that form memory.

AI can generate anticipation for these moments, but can't fully replicate the emotional impact they leave behind.

But authenticity isn't the only hidden cost here. Shifting focus, the financial implications of all this are equally important.

Much of the AI discussion I hear, at least in marketing, is more focused on the creative side rather than the machine infrastructure that enables the outputs.

Every generated image, video, or personalized interaction still has a real cost. Processing power, storage, energy use, it all adds up (PwC, 2025). But most people never really think about that

because the whole experience is designed to feel effortless. You buy credits, click generate, and move on. The problem is that the costs start piling up very quickly once experimentation becomes constant.

My own experience illustrated how quickly experimentation adds up. Four eight-second clips disappeared almost instantly as I tried to understand the prompting. \$10 gone, unusable material that won't see the light of day. Iteration becomes costly.

Ultimately, access to new tools is one thing; knowing how to wield them well is another.

Knowing how to create effective AI-generated advertising is definitely on the rise in emerging professions (PwC, 2025). It requires not only creative instinct but a technical understanding of how these systems interpret language, movement, continuity (this is an extremely hard one to master), mood, lighting, and, most importantly, emotional cues. In some ways, prompting to me feels less like directing and more like negotiating.

Because while this industry (and many others) is racing toward automation, travelers will always be searching for something deeply human on the other side of the screen.

Hospitality now faces a pivotal moment: the industry is becoming more artificial just as travelers increasingly seek authenticity. This tension will define the winners and losers ahead.

The brands that will succeed are those that know when AI-generated enhancements strengthen the story (AI focus), and when the human side of the experience matters more (human focus).

Technology may capture attention instantly, but it is the genuine, lived experiences that leave a lasting impression. The brands that recognize this will ultimately be the ones people remember.

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