AUTHORITY VS. TOPICAL AUTHORITY (RELEVANCY) IN THE WORLD OF AI

MIRCEA-ALEXANDRU ROȘU
Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași
Iași, Romania
mircea.roshu@gmail.com

Abstract
This article examines the distinctions between relevance, authority, and topical authority in SEO, with a focus on how artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping content strategy and ranking dynamics. While topical authority is often treated as a novel ranking factor, the paper argues it is more accurately viewed as a structured extension of relevance rather than a separate algorithmic signal.
Through a two-phase model – relevance filtering followed by authority-based sorting – the article clarifies how search engines evaluate and rank content. It challenges common misconceptions, such as the overemphasis on content quality alone, and underscores the continued importance of external trust signals like backlinks and brand recognition.
The paper also analyzes AI's role in expanding semantic coverage and scaling content production, while highlighting its limitations in generating true authority. The conclusion advocates for a hybrid SEO strategy that leverages AI for relevance optimization while relying on human expertise and relationship-building to earn authority. In an age of automated content, long-term visibility still depends on authentic credibility and experiential knowledge.
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1. INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly evolving industry of Search Engine Optimization (SEO), few terms have garnered as much attention – and confusion – as topical authority. Over the past several years, the phrase has become a mainstay in the SEO discussion, used by marketers, influencers, and course creators alike. It is frequently portrayed as a distinct and critical ranking factor, one that content strategists must urgently master if they aim to have their content show up on the first page of search engines (also referred to as SERPs). However, this widespread enthusiasm for the term has given rise to a conceptual ambiguity that threatens to obscure the actual mechanics behind how search engines evaluate and rank web content. We could even go as far as saying that topical authority has become a buzzword that is generally used

to sell expensive courses to people who want to learn how to write engaging content that search engines will reward with good rankings.

This article critically examines the true nature of topical authority and challenges the notion that it represents a standalone ranking signal. It argues that topical authority is not a new metric, but rather a rebranding of the more established concept of relevance. On their own platform, Google states that: "The most basic signal that information is relevant is when content contains the same keywords as your search query. For example, if those keywords appear in the headings or body text of a webpage, the information might be more relevant". In time the SEO and content industry has broadened the scope of the term to encompass ideas like content depth, topical clustering, and internal linking structures. These elements ultimately serve to enhance a page's or domain's semantic alignment with user queries – i.e., their relevance in the eyes of search algorithms as described in the Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines document provided by Google.

At the same time, the article revisits the concept of authority, which continues to serve as the decisive factor for search rankings once relevance has been established. Authority is primarily constructed through external signals such as backlinks from trusted sources, brand recognition, and user trust indicators (Page *et al.,* 1999). Without authority, even the most semantically aligned content may fail to achieve visibility on competitive search engine results pages (SERPs). This is because search engines do not yet have the capacity to discern between good content and poorly written content, having therefore to rely on these external factors that validate the quality of the information.

The need to clarify these distinctions has become even more important with the proliferation of artificial intelligence (AI) in content creation. AI has significantly accelerated the volume and speed at which digital content is produced, leading to saturated topical clusters and diluted informational ecosystems. While AI models can facilitate keyword targeting and semantic optimization – thereby improving relevance – they cannot independently generate the kinds of authority that search engines continue to reward. In this context, understanding the boundaries between relevance and authority is crucial for developing robust SEO strategies in an AI-driven environment.

Through a combination of theoretical clarification, empirical insights, and strategic recommendations, this article aims to provide SEO practitioners, digital marketers, and researchers with a more coherent framework for understanding how websites are evaluated and ranked. By distinguishing between what search engines recognize as relevant content and what they trust as authoritative, we hope to move beyond industry jargon and toward evidence-based, algorithmically aligned SEO practices.

2. DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

Clear distinctions between key concepts are essential for understanding the workings of modern SEO. Although the terms relevance, authority, and topical authority are often used interchangeably in the industry, they represent distinct operational elements in how search engines evaluate and rank content. Misinterpreting these terms not only leads to flawed strategies but also contributes to the propagation of ineffective SEO practices.

2.1. Relevance

In the context of information retrieval systems like Google Search, relevance refers to the extent to which a webpage's content aligns with the intent behind a user's query (Manning *et al.,* 2008). It is a content-driven metric that determines whether a page should be included in the pool of potentially rankable results. Relevance is assessed through a combination of semantic matching, keyword usage, contextual cues, and increasingly, natural language understanding models such as BERT (Devlin *et al.,* 2019) and MUM (Nayak, 2020).

The most important observation is that a webpage does not need to contain the exact keyword to be considered relevant. Search engines now evaluate semantic proximity, using co-occurrence data, topic modeling, and search intent signals to determine relevance even when keywords are paraphrased or implied. Additionally, backlinks with a keyword-rich anchor text can further reinforce relevance, allowing external sites to "signal" what a page is about.

2.2. Authority

Once a webpage is deemed relevant for a query, the next step in the ranking process involves evaluating its authority. Authority is an extrinsic metric, determined by how trustworthy or credible a source appears in the broader digital ecosystem. The most significant signal of authority remains the quantity and quality of backlinks from other domains (How Google Search Works). Not all links are equal – those from well-established, contextually related websites pass more link equity (also referred to as link juice in the SEO industry).

Factors that influence authority:

- Domain age and reputation: Older domains with a consistent history of accurate content tend to rank better. These also tend to rank for more search queries.
- User behavior metrics: Signals like dwell time, bounce rate, and return visits may serve as indirect proxies for trust. In theory, search engines such as Google look at how the user interacts with a page to judge if the content is a good fit for the search query.
- Mentions in reputable sources: Brand citations and unlinked references can also contribute to authority recognition. As a rule, sites with high reputation transfer more authority to the pages they link out to.

The key takeaway is that authority is built externally and cannot be fabricated solely through on-page optimization.

2.3. Topical authority: a semantic rebranding of relevance

Topical authority is often described as the degree to which a website demonstrates expertise and depth across a subject area. Here are the definitions for topical authority from three well known digital marketing platforms:

Ahrefs: Topical authority is an SEO concept where a website aims to become the go-to authority on one or more topics. Building topical authority is about helping search engines understand a website's topic so that it has better potential to rank for topically related keywords (Sheridan, 2023).

Semrush: Topical authority refers to a website's expertise and credibility on a particular subject. And building it through high-quality content is a powerful way to establish your expertise and credibility on subjects relevant to your business. This helps with earning your target audience's trust, improving your search engine rankings, and possibly driving more conversions (Go, 2024).

SurferSeo: Topical authority in SEO is your website's perceived expertise and reliability about a specific subject. If your site has high topical authority, Google considers it more trustworthy and ranks it higher in search results than sites it considers less credible (Frederick, 2024).

While these descriptions seem to imply a SEO dimension, a closer inspection reveals that topical authority is, in essence, contextualized relevance. For instance, a website that publishes 50 articles on different aspects of machine learning will have higher topical authority for that subject than a general tech site with one machine learning article. However, the site's high topical authority is achieved through layered and interconnected relevance – not through a unique algorithmic mechanism.
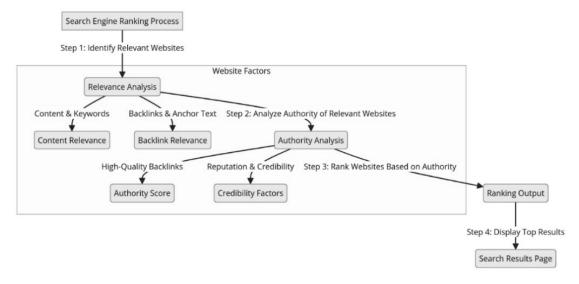
The confusion arises because the industry has begun to treat topical authority as an authority type, when in fact it is a content structuring strategy designed to optimize semantic relationships (DeMott, 2023) and signal topical coverage to search engines. Common implementations include:

- Content hubs or topic clusters – structuring content around main topics that are supported by secondary articles.
- Internal linking strategies – using either silo structures or contextual linking associated with topical clusters so that search engine crawlers have an easier time in discovering related pages and content.
- Semantic keyword mapping - Semantic keywords are words or phrases that are conceptually related to a given keyword or topic (Handley, 2024). In other words, Google doesn't just look for the user's search terms on a page. It tries to match the meaning of the query with the meaning of the page.

While these techniques improve a website's perceived depth and breadth, they function by enhancing relevance signals, not by replacing the need for traditional authority.

3. HOW SEARCH ENGINES ACTUALLY RANK CONTENT

Understanding the actual ranking mechanics used by modern search engines is essential for distinguishing between relevance, authority, and the so-called topical authority. While industry terminology often blends these concepts, search engines operate on a structured, multi-phase system grounded in principles from information retrieval and graph theory (Suzart, 2020). This section outlines the two-stage ranking process and explores how both relevance and authority contribute to final search engine results page (SERP) positions. Figure 1 illustrates how search engine algorithms try to provide the best result for search queries:

Source: created by the author

Figure 1. Search engine ranking process

The initial phase in the ranking pipeline involves identifying all documents that are relevant to a user's search query. This process is executed using a variety of techniques:

Keyword Matching: Though less critical than in earlier SEO eras, exact or partial matches still play a role, particularly in page titles, headers, and anchor text.

Semantic Search Algorithms: With the introduction of models like BERT and MUM, Google has shifted toward intent-based matching, which enables it to understand paraphrased, implied, or contextually related language.

Content Clustering: Pages that belong to a broader semantic topic cluster often benefit from enhanced relevance detection due to internal link signals and co-occurrence of related entities.

If a webpage fails to demonstrate sufficient semantic alignment with the query, it will not appear in the search results, regardless of its authority. In other words, authority has no bearing if relevance is not first established.

3.1. Phase two: authority-based sorting

Once a candidate set of relevant documents has been identified, the second phase begins: ranking these documents by authority. Search engines apply a range of signals to determine which relevant pages are the most trustworthy or influential:

Backlink Analysis: Pages with inbound links from domains that are themselves authoritative are given higher weight in rankings.

Topical Relevance of Linking Domains: Links from sites within the same semantic field contribute more than unrelated or generic domains.

Behavioral Signals: User engagement metrics such as dwell time, bounce rate, and click-through rate may serve as secondary signals, though their role is debated and likely context-dependent.

This two-step process – relevance filtering followed by authority sorting – can be seen as a foundational principle of modern search engine architecture. Relevance is a necessary condition for ranking, but not a sufficient one.

A useful analogy for understanding how authority functions in SEO is drawn from the academic publishing field. In academia, the perceived importance and credibility of a scientific paper are heavily influenced by how often it is cited by other reputable research articles. A paper that consistently receives references from high-impact journals accumulates academic authority, signaling to the broader community that its findings are valuable, trustworthy, and influential.

Similarly, in the domain of search engine optimization, a website's authority is not determined solely by the quality of its content, but by the volume and quality of inbound links it receives from other authoritative websites. Each backlink functions much like a scholarly citation: it is an external validation of the site's relevance, trustworthiness, and importance within its field. Notably, just as not all academic citations carry equal weight – citations from top-tier journals are valued more highly than those from obscure sources – not all backlinks contribute equally to authority. Links from established, high-authority domains in relevant topical niches are weighted far more heavily by search engines than links from unrelated or low-trust sites.

This academic citation model, as shown in Table 1, also illustrates the cumulative nature of authority. A newly published scientific paper, no matter how groundbreaking, will not be immediately recognized as authoritative until it has undergone peer acknowledgment and widespread citation. In parallel, a newly launched website, even with exceptional content, will not rank highly until it builds a network of endorsements – backlinks – that signal its trustworthiness and influence to search engines. Thus, both in academia and SEO, authority is not a

static or intrinsic quality but an emergent property that must be earned over time through external validation.

Table 1. How academic papers and websites gather authority

Academic paper	Website
Grows in authority through citations	Grows in authority through backlinks
Citations from top journals carry more weight	Backlinks from high-authority sites carry more weight
Authority builds slowly over time	Authority builds slowly through link acquisition
Peer acknowledgment is critical	External endorsement via links is critical

Source: created by the author

3.2. The ranking formula in practice

To illustrate this dual-phase approach, consider a hypothetical search for "best noise-cancelling headphones 2025". This keyword is targeted by both amateur and professional publishers as it clearly has commercial intent – the user is looking to buy. Therefore, we will often encounter the following scenario:

Site A is a brand-new blog of a person who is very passionate about music, knows a lot about HiFi equipment, may even have technical knowledge on the subject. The site has a well-written review with the target keyword and supporting semantically related phrases but being new has no backlinks.

Site B has a less in-depth article but is published by a well-known tech site with thousands of backlinks and years of reputation. Publishers like Cnet, New York Times, Wired and others often occupy the first positions in the SERP for search queries like the one being discussed.

Although both are relevant, Site B will almost certainly rank higher due to its higher authority, even if its content is inferior in objective quality. This example illustrates the asymmetry in SEO performance: relevance is necessary to qualify for ranking, but authority is essential to compete for top positions. This is a consistent pattern across most competitive search queries and forms the empirical basis for authority-focused SEO strategies.

3.3. Misinterpretations and overreliance on tools

A major contributor to confusion around SEO strategy stems from widespread reliance on third-party authority metrics such as Domain Authority (DA) from Moz or Domain Rating (DR) from Ahrefs. These metrics were created to mimic the Page Rank Algorithm developed by Google that "determines the relative importance of a page within the World Wide Web. It does so by looking at the quantity and quality of other pages linking to it and then assigning a value to it based on those backlinks" (Ahrefs SEO Glossary). While the page rank metric was publicly available until 2016, the rise in the practice of buying and selling

links in order to influence rankings made Google remove this feature from its suite of tools.

Both DA and DR are heuristic models built to simulate elements of Google's PageRank algorithm, attempting to quantify a domain's relative "strength" based on its backlink profile. However, these scores are calculated using proprietary formulas and incomplete link indexes. As such, they may differ significantly between tools, and neither is directly factored into Google's ranking algorithms. Overemphasizing these numbers can mislead SEO practitioners into prioritizing vanity metrics over actionable signals such as link relevance, link quality, and topical trust.

A critical pitfall arises when website owners pursue backlinks solely to boost DA or DR without considering whether those links are contextually relevant or trustworthy. In Google's framework, a single backlink from a topically authoritative, high-trust site can outweigh dozens of irrelevant or low-quality links, regardless of the linking domains' DA or DR scores. Authority in SEO is context-sensitive, and is evaluated based on thematic relevance, trustworthiness, and natural link profiles – not just raw link quantity or artificial numerical scores.

Furthermore, an overreliance on DA/DR can obscure strategic priorities. For instance, in highly specialized verticals, a site with modest DR but deep topical relevance and strong community trust can outperform a higher-DR generalist site. SEO strategies, therefore, should emphasize earning authoritative endorsements from within the same topical ecosystem, rather than chasing inflated DA/DR metrics detached from the actual search intent and content quality.

Understanding the limitations of third-party metrics allows SEO practitioners to develop strategies grounded in the operational realities of modern search engines. Authority remains indispensable for high rankings, but it must be cultivated through real, topic-relevant, and trust-driven endorsements, not artificially optimized through superficial numeric benchmarks.

4. COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS AND INDUSTRY MYTHS

Despite significant advancements in how search engines retrieve and rank information, persistent misconceptions continue to circulate within the SEO industry. Many of these myths originate from oversimplifications of algorithmic processes, misinterpretations of search engine guidelines, or commercial interests aiming to promote particular services and tools (influencers or agencies trying to sell courses or qualifications). This section critically examines some of the most pervasive myths, particularly those that blur the boundaries between relevance, authority, and topical authority.

4.1. "Content is king" – a misguided doctrine

One of the most enduring myths in SEO is the assertion that "content is king." While high-quality, relevant content is undeniably essential for achieving initial

relevance, it is not, by itself, a guarantee of high search engine rankings (Google Search Central). Numerous empirical studies and practical observations demonstrate that even excellent content will fail to rank competitively if it lacks sufficient authority signals such as backlinks, brand citations, and user trust indicators.

The misunderstanding stems from a failure to recognize that search engines are algorithmic systems, not human readers. Google does not "read" content in a human sense to judge its quality subjectively. Instead, it relies on external signals – primarily link structures and user behavior patterns – to infer a document's authority and importance (Fishkin, 2015). Without these signals, content, no matter how high its intrinsic quality, is unlikely to achieve prominence in competitive search landscapes.

A useful analogy for understanding how search engines evaluate authority – without truly "reading" content – comes from the music industry. Table 2 shows how the workings of the music industry could be compared to the algorithms employed by search engines. Imagine a developer tasked with creating an artificial intelligence (AI) system capable of determining whether a song is "good." One method would be to engineer an advanced AI capable of listening to each track, understanding musical composition, interpreting lyrical depth, and assessing emotional impact. However, designing such an AI would be incredibly complex, subjective, and error-prone, given the nuances of artistic quality.

Table 2. How SEO authority mirrors the music industry

Music industry	Search engines
Building AI to judge music quality is complex and subjective	Building AI to judge content quality is complex and subjective
Sales data serves as a proxy for a song's success	Backlinks serve as a proxy for a page's authority
Popular songs are assumed to have value based on sales	Authoritative pages are assumed to have value based on backlinks
Success is estimated by external validation	Authority is inferred through external trust signals

Source: created by the author

A far simpler and more scalable approach would be to measure *sales data*. If a song sells millions of copies, it is generally assumed to be popular and, by extension, of significant value to listeners. In this model, commercial success serves as a proxy for quality, even if the true artistic merit varies.

Search engines like Google employ a comparable method for assessing web content. Rather than "reading" and judging the subjective quality of each page – an extraordinarily difficult computational problem – Google relies on external authority signals to approximate content quality. Chief among these signals are

backlinks from other reputable websites, which function much like "sales numbers" in the music analogy. A webpage that receives numerous endorsements through backlinks is treated as more valuable, regardless of subjective assessments of its writing, design, or originality.

Thus, just as sales are not a perfect measure of musical artistry but serve as an effective approximation at scale, backlinks and authority metrics serve as scalable proxies for content trustworthiness in the vast ecosystem of web pages. This reality underscores why content alone – no matter how well-written – cannot guarantee high rankings without accompanying external validation.

Just as high sales – not intricate musical analysis – indicate a song's success, backlinks and trust signals – not subjective content evaluation – indicate a webpage's value to search engines.

4.2. Anchor text over-optimization and the risks of manipulation

Another myth is the belief that more keyword-rich anchor text links always yield better rankings. While exact-match anchors can indeed boost relevance for specific keywords, excessive or manipulative use of this tactic can trigger penalties from search engines (Ashbridge, 2023). Google's Penguin algorithm update specifically targeted unnatural link profiles characterized by over-optimized anchor text, resulting in significant ranking penalties for many sites.

Modern SEO best practices advocate for a natural anchor text distribution, mixing branded, generic, partial match, and contextual anchors to reflect organic linking behavior. The goal is not to "game" the system but to build a credible link profile that withstands algorithmic scrutiny.

4.3. The myth of authority without relevance

A further misconception holds that a highly authoritative domain can rank for any topic, regardless of content relevance. While strong domain authority can sometimes provide a competitive advantage in marginal or highly ambiguous queries, relevance remains a prerequisite for ranking consideration. Search engines initially assess *whether* a page's content aligns with a user's query before applying authority as a sorting factor. Without clear topical alignment, even the most authoritative domains will struggle to achieve meaningful visibility for unrelated searches.

Consider, for instance, a highly reputable financial news website, such as Investopedia.com. Its domain possesses substantial authority due to decades of publishing trusted, well-cited financial content. However, if Investopedia were to publish a single, superficial article reviewing the "Top 10 Home Coffee Makers," it would not automatically outrank niche appliance review sites like Wirecutter or The Spruce Eats, both of which have deep topical relevance and established authority within the home appliances and consumer goods space. Despite Investopedia's higher general domain authority, its lack of content depth, topical

cluster support, and audience trust in the home goods vertical would prevent it from easily displacing specialist sites.

This illustrates that authority amplifies relevance but does not substitute for it. Search engines prioritize content that fits a coherent topical ecosystem, where related articles, internal linking structures, and consistent audience engagement reinforce the site's credibility within that subject domain. Thus, effective SEO strategies must develop both relevance and authority simultaneously, ensuring that domain strength is contextually appropriate to the targeted queries. Table 3 highlights common myths in the SEO industry, where minimal entry barriers enable individuals to self-identify as SEO experts, regardless of formal training. The second column shows what actually happens in the SEO race.

Table 3. Dispelling myths

Myth	Reality
High-authority domains can rank for anything	Authority amplifies relevance but cannot replace it
Publishing one article is enough to compete in new topics	Search engines reward topical ecosystems, not isolated content
Strong brands automatically dominate all queries	Content depth, topical clustering, and audience trust are still necessary
Authority overrules content relevance	Relevance is the first filter; authority sorts among relevant candidates

Source: created by the author

Dispelling these persistent myths is critical for aligning SEO strategy with the actual operational principles of modern search engines. Content quality, while necessary, must be complemented by authority-building activities. And most importantly, relevance and authority must be developed in tandem, respecting the nuanced demands of semantic search and trust-based ranking systems.

5. THE ROLE OF AI IN SHAPING RELEVANCE AND AUTHORITY

The rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies has profoundly transformed the digital content landscape, with direct implications for how relevance and authority are constructed in SEO. While AI-driven models have enhanced the speed, scale, and semantic sophistication of content production, they have simultaneously introduced new complexities and risks. Understanding the evolving role of AI is critical for developing strategies that strengthen both relevance and authority in an increasingly automated ecosystem.

5.1. AI's impact on relevance: scale, semantic matching, and saturation

One of AI's most significant contributions to SEO is its ability to generate large volumes of semantically optimized content rapidly. Tools based on large

language models (LLMs), such as OpenAI's GPT series or Google's internal BERT and MUM technologies, enable content creators to produce articles, product descriptions, and blog posts that are finely tuned to capture user intent.

Up to now AI excels at:

- *Semantic keyword coverage*: Ensuring that related terms, entities, and contextual language appear naturally within the text.
- *Content clustering*: Assisting in the rapid creation of topic clusters and pillar content models, thereby enhancing topical relevance.
- *Gap identification*: Highlighting under-served queries and enabling content strategies that fill search intent voids.

However, this scaling of relevance brings about content saturation. As AI makes it easier to flood the internet with surface-level, semantically correct content, achieving mere relevance is no longer a competitive advantage. While semantic relevance remains necessary for inclusion in search results, it is no longer sufficient for competitive rankings. In increasingly saturated topical environments, content must go beyond merely matching user queries; it must also demonstrate depth, originality, and experiential authority to distinguish itself from the vast array of AI-generated and low-effort materials now populating the web.

- *Depth* refers to the comprehensive treatment of a subject. Shallow overviews that briefly touch on a topic are easily replicated by AI and widely available online. By contrast, content that delves into nuanced subtopics, provides detailed breakdowns, offers case studies, and explores complex scenarios is far more likely to signal true expertise. For example, a superficial blog post listing "5 Marketing Tips" would struggle to compete against a detailed 5,000-word guide that explains not only the tips but also their psychological foundations, real-world applications, and potential pitfalls across different industries.
- *Originality* involves contributing new insights, perspectives, or research rather than merely summarizing existing knowledge. Search engines increasingly reward content that brings something novel to the conversation. A generic article on "best smartphones in 2024" would find it difficult to outperform a review based on first-hand testing results, or one that introduces a unique ranking methodology (e.g., battery efficiency under extreme temperature conditions), providing information unavailable elsewhere.
- *Experiential authority* emphasizes content produced by individuals or entities with first-hand, verifiable experience in the subject matter. Google's E-E-A-T framework explicitly prioritizes authors who demonstrate real-world interaction with their topics. For instance, an article titled *"How to Train for a Marathon"* authored by a certified running coach who has completed multiple marathons – and includes personal anecdotes, custom training plans, and images from races – will

rank more favorably than a generic AI-compiled summary sourced from publicly available blogs.

In short, *depth* ensures a comprehensive exploration of the topic, *originality* adds distinctive value to the informational landscape, and *experiential authority* authenticates the credibility of the author and the content itself. These factors are becoming decisive differentiators in environments where basic relevance is abundant but genuine expertise and value are increasingly scarce.

Thus, while AI enables broader and faster relevance coverage, it simultaneously raises the baseline standards for what counts as valuable and distinguishable content in search results.

5.2. AI's limits: authority remains a human-driven asset

Despite AI's strengths in optimizing for relevance, it is fundamentally limited in its ability to generate authority. Search engines continue to rely on external signals – particularly backlinks from reputable, contextually relevant sources – to infer trust and credibility. These endorsements must be earned through human relationships, genuine brand reputation, and editorial discretion.
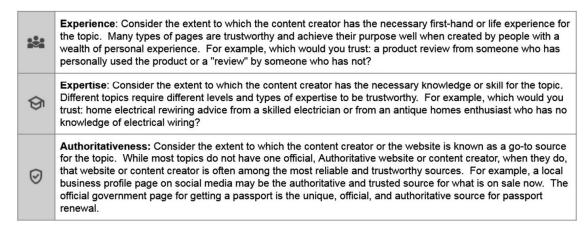
AI cannot autonomously:
- Secure high-quality backlinks from trusted domains.
- Build brand recognition and loyalty among real-world audiences.
- Foster genuine citations in authoritative publications.

Efforts to automate backlink generation often fall into the realm of black-hat SEO and are prone to penalties under search engine quality guidelines. Authority remains an organic, human-centered phenomenon: it is conferred by independent actors, not manufactured at scale through automated content output.

Thus, while AI can amplify a site's relevance footprint, building authority still demands deliberate human effort, including relationship-building, digital PR strategies, thought leadership initiatives, and community engagement.

5.3. Search engines' response: emphasizing E-E-A-T and authenticity

Recognizing the challenges posed by AI-generated content, search engines have adapted by placing greater emphasis on *E-E-A-T* signals: Experience, Expertise, Authoritativeness, and Trustworthiness. Figure 2, as shown in the Google Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines, gives the exact meanings of these terms. These definitions are provided by Google for their human evaluators, to help them determine if a piece of content is indeed valuable. Using this feedback, the search algorithms are improved.

Source: *Google Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines*, available at:
https://services.google.com/fh/files/misc/hsw-sqrg.pdf

Figure 2. E-E-A-T as described by Google

Recent algorithm updates have increasingly prioritized:
- *First-hand expertise*: Content created by individuals with verifiable, direct experience in the subject matter.
- *Credibility of the source*: Preference for recognized authorities within a domain.
- *Original reporting and insights*: Rewarding content that adds new information rather than rehashing existing sources.

AI, while capable of paraphrasing and summarizing existing knowledge, struggles to produce the original thought and subject-matter depth that these signals reward. As a result, human-led contributions are becoming more – not less – critical for achieving sustainable visibility in an AI-influenced search environment.

To sum up, artificial intelligence has noticeably expanded the playing field for relevance by enabling rapid, scalable, and semantically rich content production. However, the construction of authority remains stubbornly resistant to automation, rooted instead in human credibility, trust networks, and external validation. SEO practitioners must therefore adopt a hybrid strategy: leveraging AI for relevance optimization while investing in human-driven authority building efforts to remain competitive in a landscape increasingly shaped by automation and algorithmic scrutiny.

6. CONCLUSION

While the digital marketing ecosystem evolves under the twin pressures of automation and information saturation, the distinctions between *relevance*, *authority*, and *topical authority* become more crucial than ever for sustainable SEO success. This article shows that while relevance serves as the necessary filter that determines inclusion in search engine results, authority remains the decisive

factor in competitive ranking hierarchies. Contrary to recent industry trends that elevate topical authority as a novel concept, it is clear that topical authority is fundamentally an expression of layered relevance, not a standalone metric.

The proliferation of AI technologies has redefined the competitive baseline for semantic relevance, making it easier to produce content that satisfies keyword matching and user intent on a surface level. However, AI cannot independently generate the trust signals, brand loyalty, and authoritative endorsements that are critical for achieving enduring visibility. Authority continues to be a human-driven asset, earned through meaningful engagement, experiential expertise, and genuine contributions to one's topical ecosystem.

SEO practitioners, content strategists, and digital marketers must therefore recalibrate their methodologies. Success in the AI-driven landscape requires a hybrid strategy: harnessing AI for scalable, semantically optimized relevance, while investing human creativity and relationship-building efforts to cultivate true authority. The fusion of these two dimensions – intelligent automation aligned with authentic expertise – will distinguish the ephemeral from the enduring in the evolving search environment.

To sum up, clarity about the operational roles of relevance and authority empowers practitioners to move beyond industry buzzwords and anchor their strategies in the true mechanics of search algorithms. As the digital environment is increasingly shaped by automation, human authenticity, trust, and experiential insight will remain irreplaceable competitive advantages.

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