Human-AI Collaboration in Creative Processes: Can AI Enhance Human Input in Marketing Communication?

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This research aims to understand the current situation in Türkiye regarding artificial intelligence (AI) and human collaboration in the marketing communication field. In-depth interviews were conducted with professionals to investigate the potential of AI to transform habitual practices in business, benefits of adopting AI tools in strategic campaign management, and possible ethical concerns. The thematic analysis revealed six emerging themes: human input, human and AI collaboration, creativity, human touch, competitive advantage and client approach, ethical concerns. The study highlights AI's role in improving efficiency and triggering innovative ideas, while human involvement remains essential for humanizing the outcomes and maintaining ethical standards of the industry.

Keywords: artificial intelligence (AI); marketing communication; creativity; collaboration; ethics

Introduction

Every new technology brings about its own benefits and challenges. Communication history has been through many debates along the way with contrasting opinions of all parties involved including average users, professionals and scholars. Upon general observation, it can be said that these technological developments are either welcomed and hyped or approached skeptically and counteracted. Recently artificial intelligence (AI) has become the hot topic of debates in various fields. In marketing communication, the existing literature generally includes conceptual studies, relying on observations and discussing the current approaches in the ecosystem (Malthouse and Copulsky, 2023). Ethical concerns are also tackled in advertising as Rodgers and Nguyen (2022) suggest

that "intelligent advertising" bears some questionable areas regarding algorithms' possible influence on consumers' attitude and decision-making processes. Qin and Jiang (2019) have reviewed the Chinese advertising market based on their observations and provide insights into key steps where AI technologies intersect with creative processes.

Within the Turkish context, studies are at the flourishing phase, which again focuses on conceptual discussions. To the best knowledge of the authors, there is one research paper examining the usage of AI in public relations sector which conducted in-depth interviews with 19 PR practitioners. In this study, Soldan (2022) inquired their awareness and attitude on the application of AI as well as the tools currently in use and reveals that while the professionals are aware of the technology, they have not adapted AI in their conventional way of practice yet. Since Soldan's study was conducted during the Covid-19 period, there has been an acceleration in AI adoption in the marketing communications sector. Therefore, the current domain must be investigated with this inquiry: How is AI used together with human input in the creative processes of this field? From this point of view, this research aims to explore the extent of AI-human collaboration among marketing communication experts and the potential of AI to transform habitual practices in business. With this aim, following research questions are examined:

RQ1. How do marketing communication experts approach utilizing AI tools?

RQ2. How is AI used together with human input in the creative processes?

RQ3. What is the tendency of brands/clients towards adapting AI into strategic and tactical steps of campaign management according to the experts' experiences?

RQ4. What are the possible ethical issues regarding AI and future implications in marketing communication?

Methodology

From a qualitative approach, the research uses in-depth interview method to obtain expert opinion from advertising, public relations and network agencies. In order to explore AI-human collaboration in marketing communication sector, semi-structured in-depth interviews with experts are conducted. Thematic content analysis was performed on the qualitative data through an inductive open coding system. Researchers studied the interviews repeatedly to identify the themes emerging from the data (Burnard et al., 2008) by building a consensus.

Sample of the study

For identifying the sample, snowball technique is used. As a starting point, eleven experts (7 male, 4 female) were interviewed, which will be followed by referred experts by the participants. It is aimed to complete the sample with 20 participants in different positions including the public relations field. In-depth interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online between February 9 –March 12, 2024. Duration of the interviews vary from 60 to 100 minutes. Participants have minimum ten up to thirty-five years of experience in marketing communications fulfilling various positions from copywriting to media planning (Table 1).

Findings and discussion

Interview questions were developed with the flow of campaign management perspective. Authors have asked the interviewees to describe their habitual practices before and after AI. Once the data was analysed, following themes have prevailed from the interviews: 1) human input, 2) human and AI collaboration, 3) creativity, 4) human touch, 5) competitive advantage and client approach, 6) ethical concerns.

Human input

Human interaction with AI is initiated by providing the first prompt as the human input. Although AI seems to change the way of doing day-to-day business in various ways, most of the striking difference emerges in the research phase. Most of the participants described their first human input in terms of introducing AI tools the context, needs and some data. In this phase, professionals perform a situational analysis to better understand the brand, the market, media and consumer trends, and to get meaningful insights. A participant stated as: "We use ChatGPT to make it read consumer reports. It reads a report for us, summarizes it under the headings we want, filters and gives a meaningful output. We receive suggestions about the target audience according to the results of brand research, sectoral research, target audience habits, media consumption habits." (P2). Another participant also mentioned: "Sometimes the client doesn't have a proper target audience segmentation. AI provides a good start" (P4). Global network agencies in Türkiye have been making use of their in-house AI tools. A participant stated that not only they have been using such tools to get executive summaries of reports but also for debriefing: "We have some agreements with AI tools. We can create our own target audiences on these tools, introduce the brief to the system, have it run a focus group and test whether our initial ideas would work on this audience" (P11).

All interviewees have underlined that AI tools vastly contributed to their jobs by speeding up tasks, saving time from secondary research and leaving more room for strategic decision-making processes. P2 stated that instead of spending a crucial period of time for preliminary research, "a few hours of the day are now devoted to the work we do with AI. AI support given to the entire team provides significant time saving and operational efficiency". P4 similarly said that "it is an incredibly timesaving and mind-opening tool, and it contributes to my perspective by showing me the different angles

that I haven't thought of". It was observed that the habitual practice of "Googling" for secondary research is now perceived as one-dimensional, whereas they have gravitated towards a new behavior of conversing with AI.

Even though most participants expressed that they use AI for research, it does not necessarily mean that they rely only on such tools. The strategists in the sample said that they combine their own/primary research data with AI assisted secondary research output. One said that "since AI cannot do desk research from scratch, it does not provide any strategy support from scratch either. The AI tool cannot know my own data but it can lead me to the strategy once I start feeding it through my prompts" (P4). The other strategist discovered that there are already tools providing relevant data: "I used to upload my own instore research and focus group data, have the AI do the segmentation. AI was detailing the persona for me, which perfectly fits the actual consumer groups. I realized there was no need for this either. It is possible to scan the social media conversation, make segmentation, create personas through an in-house AI tool" (P1). Overall, he uses AI output as input for non-digital research to be conducted later. The formulation given by this participant, who was the most experienced among the interviewees, summarized the research process with the assistance of AI as: "It makes something meaningful when you use all of these together; AI plus formal research plus your gut feeling".

Human and AI collaboration

When participants were asked to explain their experiences with AI, most of them described their relationship with AI as a collaboration. They all speak about AI tools as a part of their team; a team member with varying levels of knowledge and wisdom. P1 said: "When I combine my own research with what it does, a very nice collaboration emerges. It's like we're working together. I don't give it orders". The researchers

understood that prompting the AI does not work in the sense of communicating a command but rather brainstorming with a colleague. P2, founder of a digital brand consulting company who also gives frequent AI trainings described AI as a "14-year-old child who has 250 IQ" and continues: We try to get results from it by giving a brief that is sometimes specific, sometimes simple, and sometimes very to the point. AI does not have the experience to fill those gaps". Another interviewee also defined AI as a child who needs guidance of an adult, "curious but not intelligent enough" (P9). He further discussed the naming of this technology as "artificial intelligence" somehow problematic, arguing that it lacks the life experience and wisdom to be considered as an intelligent body yet. P4 said that she works in collaboration with AI "sometimes like a copywriter who assists me in expressing my ideas in a better way, in some cases like a junior strategist, in some cases like an experienced strategist with whom I do brainstorming".

Creativity

AI tools like ChatGPT can generate creative material built on the brand promise, such as ad copies, taglines and slogans. Even though P2 described the tool as a child, he still refers to it as a teammate: "The creative process is not something that happens in solitude, it can be achieved through mutual conversation, so ChatGPT serves as a teammate. We use its ideas in design and animation as well". P1 also said that these tools work well in creative development and generating ad copies, as well as matching the right influencers with the brand "as long as you describe your brand and your target audience well enough".

A significant finding of the study revealed that AI has not only transformed the creative processes, but also the professional skills triggering new forms of creativity. One participant, formerly a copywriter, now defines herself as an AI artist since she has

created an AI generated video clip of a famous singer in Türkiye. She described her job as follows: "I used to write ad copies, now I write prompts" (P8). In another case, P6, formerly a strategist in advertising agencies, is now an AI consultant and trainer who specializes in change management. "I founded my change management consultancy company a year ago. I am so lucky, because a ground-breaking change has coincided with our lives. This is not a trend; this is something revolutionary."

Although communication agencies are perceived to be first adopters of digital technologies, this seems not to be the case for everyone in terms of AI. P8 pointed out that she has been disappointed by the lack of enthusiasm in some of the well-known agencies, thus deciding to become an independent AI artist. Another copywriter running her awarded agency for ten years in Izmir, openly expressed her disinterest in using AI tools for creative processes (P3). She related this with her client portfolio allocating smaller budgets for campaigns: "My team has not been using even the basic graphic design tools to their full potential because these days we are only asked to provide smaller solutions, I don't think we need AI tools at this point" (P3). Participants in general tend to complain about the quality of creative/artistic works caused by lowered budgets in Türkiye. However, P4 claimed: "For such a long time, TV commercials and digital copies are more or less the same and boring. AI has the potential to bring back the spark of creativity in Turkish advertising market".

Human touch

Participants mostly agree that AI may cause a leap in creativity. Despite the growing fear of AI possibly replacing humans (Jarrahi, 2018), professionals in the field believe that human touch is needed especially on the creative output. According to the participants, AI is highly rational and can process standardized messages on promotional materials and some social media posts, however when it comes to creative

works, AI output does not perform well since it lacks emotional depth. As one participant defined, "It knows emotions, knows what sadness, enthusiasm, fear are. It can convey these on textual ads, but you cannot fully feel them. Human touch is definitely needed there. It is too early to create an emotional narrative through AI" (P1). Another participant supported this claim: "It only knows the concepts like employer brand, employee loyalty... but it has no emotional clue on how these concepts resonate in real life" (P4). P11 also talked about the lack of connection in social media posts: "A human touch is definitely required. You can't just leave it to AI and expect it to create a bond with the consumer. It does not have an emotional reflex, the reflex it gets from social media is not enough for now. First humans, then artificial intelligence".

Competitive advantage and client approach

During the interviews, researchers inquired about client approach towards AI and whether adoption of AI in an agency is communicated to clients as a competitive advantage. Founder of a digital brand consulting company stated that he gains new accounts through AI trainings: "Participants are not always my clients, but they get interested to work with me afterwards" (P2). Similarly, P6 expressed her excitement about the overflowing of prospective clients lately. While clients seem to be fairly excited about this technology, they still expect the agencies to be upfront about the intention of using AI tools. As one participant emphasized, "If we disclose the use of AI after the production stage, they see it as sloppy and lazy" (P1).

Moreover, participants pointed out differences in the capabilities of agencies of different scales. A participant (P2) talked about recent investments in AI technology and stated that "there are some agencies like us who rely on this technology and some others develop their own tools. They will soon get ahead in the sector". The other interviewee (P11) who works in the global network agency supported this claim by exemplifying

their in-house tools. It has been understood that professionals who are resistant to keep up with the sector in terms of AI adoption, "as it happened with digital media and social media in the past" (P1, P5, P7, P11), will face the threat of losing their jobs. P3 confessed her awareness about this risk: "At this rate, we may soon perish".

Ethical concerns

Digital advertising in Türkiye already has blurry fields regarding ethical regulations. In the absence of clear codes and guidelines, ethical considerations fall upon the goodwill and self-regulation of professionals (Misci Kip and Umul Ünsal, 2020). Therefore, ethics of AI are even more overlooked. In terms of originality of the outcome, neither the professionals themselves nor their clients express a mistrust towards AI. Since they perceive their relationship with AI as a collaboration, they believe the final product is the making of their own with the "human touch" in all stages. While global networks attempt to solve copyrighting matter by developing internal tools and code of conduct, others often disbelieve that regulations on AI would be structured in the near future. "Our compliance department frequently provides information and advice. For example, we are not allowed to prepare client presentations using our personal ChatGPT accounts, of course there is no control. There's a lot of grey area. We create storyboards made with AI tools, but there is copyright in that too, but I guess that much is acceptable" said the interviewee in one of the global networks (P11).

Under the ethics theme, one of the participants expressed his strong opinions and concerns on AI and the future it might bring. A chief digital officer and strategic planner in the mainstream news media, he indicated the complexity of the relationship between content, website traffic and digital advertising: "Targeting in advertising has been improved with hyper personalized AI algorithms. When it comes to creative copies, we already have serious issues in terms of manipulation of audio-visual content.

With AI, there is the risk of both news and advertising content becoming a tool of mass propaganda art" (P10). Insight gained from this participant is crucial for having a perspective from publishers which provide ad space and are expected to be gatekeepers. He inquired: "Inspection should be done by humans as usual, and ethical decision should be taken to not publish and condemn if necessary. In the context of media, we are not going to change ethical conditions just because AI is here, the same ethical rules apply". He also emphasized the role of public relations in the new era of AI as the PR professionals should think about their social responsibility on how human input can heal this media ecosystem prone to heavy manipulation.

Concluding Remarks

Aiming to explore the current situation of AI and human collaboration in marketing communications sector in Türkiye, the study sheds light on how professionals adopt –or not adopt – AI tools in their day-to-day business. Since this is ongoing research expanding the Turkish context with more interviews especially from the public relations field, the themes derived so far can be summarized as follows. In-depth interview questions were planned within the flow of campaign management. The initial interaction with the AI starts with providing context, needs, and data in the research phase. Integrating AI in the research process enables tremendous time saving and improves the efficiency. Professionals perceive AI as a teammate, emphasizing the importance of working together. Despite acknowledging the current limitations of AI specifically the lack of in terms of emotional intelligence, professionals appreciate its ability to enhance creativity and strategic thinking. Overall, the study demonstrates that professionals believe human-AI collaboration may yield more innovative and creative outcomes. However, it requires human touch in all phases of campaign management. The research reveals that staying up to date with AI technology is crucial for the

industry to remain competitive and meet client expectations. Furthermore, maintaining ethical standards of the industry is needed. Therefore, the study points out the necessity of further research on ethical considerations and clear guidelines for practitioners in the field. The research implies that attitudinal and behavioural impacts of generative AI on consumers remains an unexplored territory in Türkiye. In this respect, further research is required to understand the consumer viewpoints.

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Tables

No	Profile
P1	Founder of advertising agency, CSO, Brand consultant
P2	Founder of digital brand consulting company, account director
P3	Founder of advertising agency, copywriter
P4	Founder of advertising agency, strategist
P5	Senior advertiser at global advertising network, creative director
P6	Founder of consulting company, AI strategist and trainer, strategist
P7	Founder of advertising agency
P8	Copywriter, AI artist
P9	Digital creative director
P10	Chief digital officer, strategic planner, news media
P11	Chief digital officer, media planning network

Table 1. Participants of the study