

AI induction in Marketing and Advertising! Qualitative insights from practitioners in the UK.

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Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) has become a key player in managing day-to-day operations. AI tools significantly enhance efficiency, but their usage can also be challenging. AI knows no geographical boundaries and is making its presence felt in multiple industries. The UK market, a central hub for marketing and advertising, is a prime example of AI's widespread adoption. Its influence is evident in the operations of marketing and advertising firms in the UK (Jarek and Mazurek, 2019). Chung et al. (2021) highlight the importance of AI in managing business operations and enabling users to make informed decisions. Despite the challenges, there is a sense of hope in the ongoing efforts to bridge the gaps in understanding the day-to-day implications of using AI tools. Moreover, Shankar (2018) and Kediya et al., (2024) also reported that the dual nature of AI which refers to its potential to drive efficiency and its ethical implications is a key consideration, calling for deeper insights into its operational impact, regulatory challenges, and best practices. While earlier studies have mainly focused on technological implementation and adoption from a systems or consumer standpoint, (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Venkatesh et al., 2003) few studies have explored how AI integration is perceived at the juncture of creativity and job restructuring in real-world marketing and advertising settings (Appel et al., 2020; Chatterjee et al., 2023; de Oliveira & Cortimiglia, 2017). Hence, this paper addresses this research gap by exploring the practitioner perspective in a UK context, offering both a theoretical and empirical lens.

Thus, this study investigates how UK-based marketing and advertising practitioners perceive and integrate AI into their professional roles as the extent of AI's influence on these professionals' practices, decision-making, and professional identity remains underexplored. Hence, the research is grounded on the following:

1. The diverse AI tools and technologies utilised by practitioners and their applications across creative, analytical, and operational tasks in the marketing and advertising industries.
2. The practical improvements and benefits AI offers, such as increased efficiency, enhanced personalisation, and deeper customer insights that contribute to improved strategic outcomes.
3. The barriers faced by professionals when adopting AI, including technological complexities, financial costs, and cultural resistance, and evaluate strategies for overcoming these challenges.
4. The darker side and ethical implications of AI adoption, such as the loss of human creativity, over-reliance on automation, data privacy concerns, and the potential displacement of jobs within the industry.

Research Objective

To explore the perceptions and integration of AI by UK-based marketing and advertising practitioners, examining its strategic and operational implications, while identifying the opportunities, challenges, and risks associated with its adoption.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The use of artificial intelligence (AI) in advertising has been examined under the umbrella term of intelligent advertising that refers to “*customer-centered, data-driven, and algorithm-mediated brand communication*” (Li, 2019, p.333) and AI advertising defined as “*brand communication that uses a range of machine functions that learn to carry out tasks with intent to persuade input by humans, machines, or both*” (Rodgers, 2021, p.2). As such, there is a burgeoning stream of research that investigates the generation of intelligent adverts using AI (Wang et al., 2019); and use of AI in the advertising process, consumer insight discovery, advert creation, media planning and buying, and advert impact evaluation (Qin and Jiang, 2019). Despite the increased interest in AI use in advertising,

there is a dearth of research that examines the extent to which advertising agencies and marketers have adopted AI use, the benefits experienced, and the challenges faced. This study responds to calls for more research (Qin and Jiang, 2019; Li, 2019) and fills this gap in the literature by examining AI use in marketing and advertising, the improvements experienced by marketers and advertising agencies after AI adoption for advertising, the challenges and barriers to AI use in marketing and advertising, and the dark side of AI integration with advertising. We draw on the assumptions of the theory of planned behaviour and the task-technology fit theory and extend these theories using insights from the marketing and advertising industry in the United Kingdom..

Theoretical Framework

Theory of Planned Behaviour

The theory of planned behaviour is a widely applied expectancy-value model that explains the relationship between beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviours (Ajzen and Madden, 1986; Ajzen, 1991). The technology acceptance model (TAM) builds on the assumptions of the theory of planned behaviour and examines how technology has been accepted and used (Taylor and Todd, 1995). Hence, TAM examines how attitudes are based on belief structures, perceived usefulness, ease of use, and compatibility (Davis, 1989). We apply the TAM to examine how AI, a technological advancement is accepted and used within the context of advertising within marketing firms and advertising agencies. As such, we examine normative belief structures (peer influence, superiors' influence), control belief structures (self-efficacy, resource facilitating condition), resource facilitating conditions, and technology facilitating conditions of the use of AI in advertising.

Task-Technology Fit Theory

The task-technology fit theory has its roots in the organisational contingency theory (Galbraith, 1973) and argues that technology can only make a positive impact on performance if the technology is crucial, must be utilised, fits the task to be conducted, and is expected to enhance individual performance (Goodhue and Thompson, 1995). Hence, technology use is dependent on the fit with the task and the performance benefits that can be accrued. The tenets of the task-technology fit theory can be extrapolated to higher-order levels such as organizations (Furneaux, 2012). As such, our study extends the assumptions of the task-technology fit to examine the fit between the technology (artificial intelligence), the task to be conducted (advertising), and the context (advertising agencies and marketing departments).

Theory of Planned Behaviour and Task-Technology Fit Theory

Although both TPB and TTF frameworks have been independently applied in technology adoption contexts, their simultaneous application in AI-enabled creative industries remains underexplored. This study offers an original theoretical synthesis by integrating TPB's focus on behavioural intentions with TTF's emphasis on contextual performance fit. We argue that marketing practitioners' adoption of AI is influenced by individual-level beliefs and social norms (TPB) and the perceived congruence between AI tools and specific marketing tasks (TTF). This dual-theory approach not only deepens our understanding of AI integration but also provides practical insights for marketing practitioners and AI developers

Methodology

A qualitative approach was adopted to achieve the research objective, involving semi-structured interviews with eight UK-based marketers and advertising professionals. The participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure they had extensive experience and relevant expertise in marketing and advertising practices, particularly in AI adoption. Participants were selected from both ad-agency and marketing teams, including roles such as Chief creative officer, Director, social media, Co-founder, Managing director, Marketing campaigns manager and Marketing strategy director,, to ensure varied perspectives. The diversity of participants, representing various aspects of the industry, was instrumental in providing a comprehensive and inclusive view of the subject matter. Interview protocols were developed based on past literature on AI in marketing and

advertising. A pre-test was conducted with the industry and domain experts to ensure the instrument's validity. In total, eight in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted over four weeks. Each interview lasted approximately 25-35 minutes and was audio recorded with prior consent from the participants. The final sample size of eight was deemed adequate as thematic saturation was reached by the sixth interview, and subsequent interviews confirmed but did not add new dimensions to the themes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Moreover, thematic analysis was used to identify the key themes, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the data. The coding words and phrases were generated directly from the interview text, utilising “descriptive codes” (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 57) relating to the integration of AI into marketing and advertising work. This was quite a lengthy process necessitating the narrowing down of these categories by reading and then re-reading the transcribed interview scripts and checking for duplication in the coding process. The transcripts were shared with the respective participants for member checking to enhance credibility and trustworthiness.

Findings and analysis

The principles of the thematic analysis technique (Braun and Clarke, 2006) such as coding of data, searching for and refining of themes, and reporting of findings, are applied here. Qualitative data analysis in this study involved the identification and reporting of patterns in a data set, which are then interpreted for their inherent meaning (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Liebenberg et al., 2020; Xu and Zammit, 2020). The step-by-step process of thematic analysis as advocated by Naeem et al., (2023) was followed, including: transcript creation and data familiarisation; keyword identification; code selection; theme development; conceptualisation through the interpretation of keywords, codes, and themes.

The use and integration of AI into advertising and marketing practice:

Our results highlighted widespread usage of AI, especially generative AI in advertising and marketing practice. Improvements through its use include increased speed, efficiency, productivity and the eradication of time spent on less interesting and monotonous tasks. In contrast, the key barriers include not knowing how to use the technology and a feeling of being overburdened and lacking in opportunities for training or time to self-teach. There were also considerable fears about AI reducing workload to the extent that fewer marketers would need to be employed in the future. Senior managers confirm this is the reality; AI is reducing roles and saving employment costs. Additionally, there are concerns about ‘thinking AI’ becoming the norm and infiltrating existing company systems negatively or reducing the need for human intervention. The thematic analysis process led to the identification of four key concepts, linked to the research objectives, i.e. Please refer to **Table 1** below:

Table 1: Concept wise discussion

Concepts	Themes emerged	Quotes	Interpretation
'I don't know what I don't know' - AI types and usage'	Experimentation	"Aspects of strategy: Little bit of data analytics, but not very much at all. Copywriting and I guess the kind of administrative side of pulling together large language documents, which need churning out"	There were varying degrees of AI usage and experimentation among the interviewees. Some expressed embarrassment in their AI usage and a reluctance to accept its role in marketing work (Svensson, 2007) by suggesting the integration was very limited and focussed on menial, non-essential tasks. We have included a selection of quotes from senior advertising and marketing managers to illustrate some key concepts.
'Making efficiencies and getting rid of the boring work'- AI enhanced improvements'	Efficiency and Advancement	"Yeah; cause we're literally taking a job that might take four days. We'll now take one day or a couple of hours will take 15 minutes." "It is very clever being able to deal with images and that sort of stuff...instead of editing it manually which is actually very time-consuming process, whereas AI really speeds that up."	The main themes emerging here reacted to cost and time efficiencies, as well as AI successfully reducing the less interesting, more mundane, repetitive aspects of marketing and advertising tasks.
'Just not knowing how to use it and poor quality' - Challenges and barriers to AI integration'	Challenges	"Overabundance of AI tools requiring time and effort to learn" "The main challenge is around kind of the adoption within the team and kind of resistance to change...people are ready at different times." "With AI you can spot content a mile away particularly the keywords. I mean, I have created a bingo card before Christmas with all the most popular and overused terms for ChatGPT, like 'fostering',	Prominent themes here included the abundant (and growing) number of tools, which require time to become familiar with, as well as reluctance to engage with AI.

		‘transformative’, ‘cutting edge’ and so on.”	
‘Fear of the unknown or the ‘dark side’ – Terminator generation and loss of skills/jobs fears.	Fear	“AI can only learn from what is happening, rather than what is coming up, you know the human instinct is to want to know what is the next big thing and so this is the danger... everyone becomes a predictor of the future, rather than relying on what is being fed and then it becomes the end of the world stuff... like terminator.” “I've got junior designers who have never known anything but the kind of these magic buttons that you just go boom. It's like, oh, I wanted a handbag there. There's a handbag. So, they have no idea how to build that image themselves.”	Emergent themes in respect of AI included generalised fears about the future role of technology, as well as more specific concerns about professional identity, professional skills, and changes to the advertising landscape.

Source: Authors own work

Implications

The findings of this study offer significant implications for marketing and advertising professionals. Adopting AI-driven tools demonstrates its ability to enhance efficiency, workflow automation, and provide deeper insights to focus on strategic decision-making. The study also highlights key barriers to AI adoption, including a lack of training, resistance to change, and concerns about job displacement. To minimize these issues, structured AI training programs, enabling digital literacy to enhance employees' skills, are essential. Proper governance mechanisms can also be implemented to address the ethical concerns related to AI usage. By implementing AI responsibly, firms can better utilize its potential by fostering innovation and ethical standards.

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