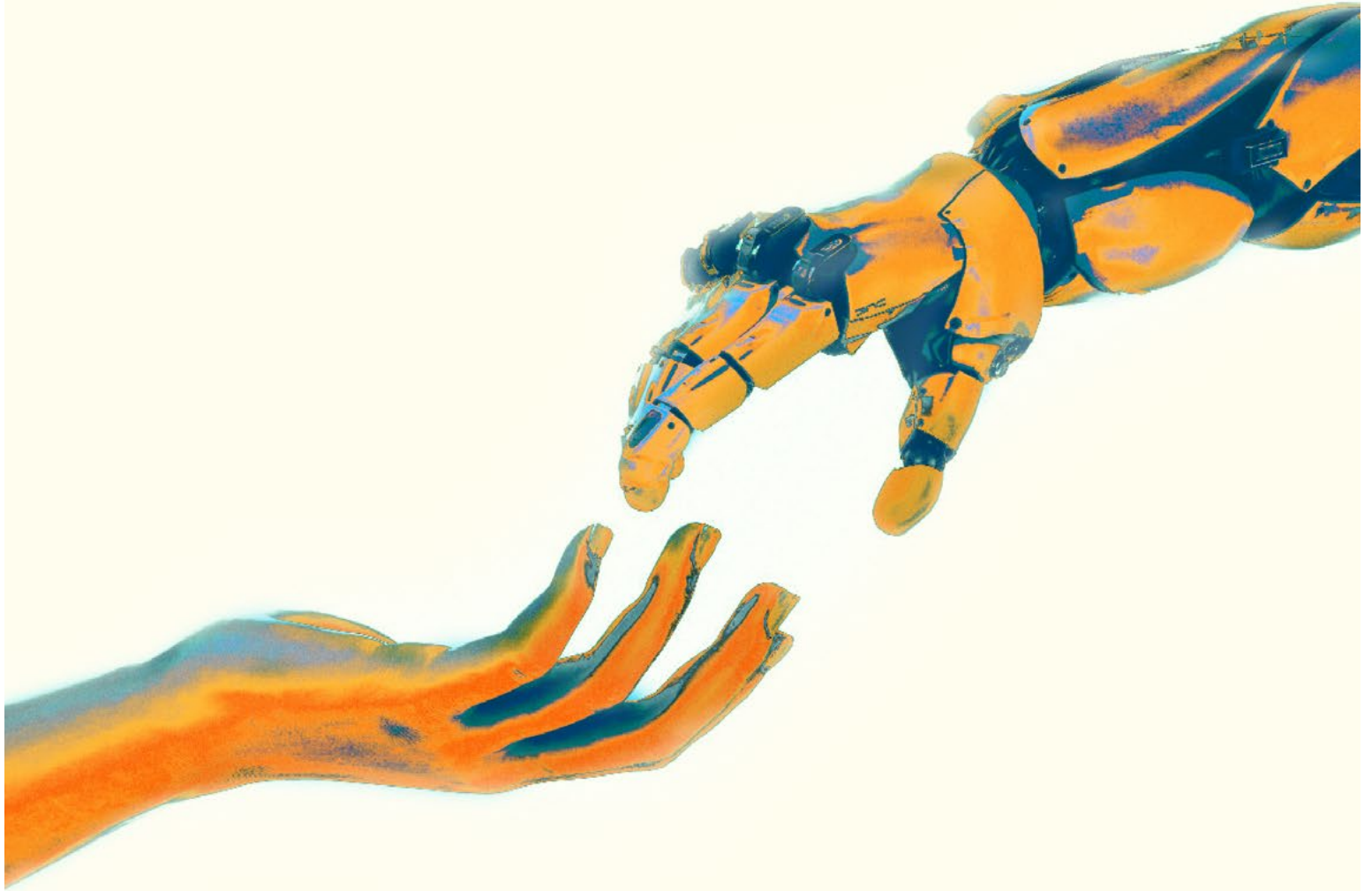


I think therefore I am... in 2026



by Bant Breen

ABSTRACT

Creativity in the communications industry is a bellwether for how society and corporations are thinking about what remains uniquely human and what can be replaced or assisted by artificial intelligence. In this exploration of the changing nature of human agency in the creativity in the marketing and advertising industries, practitioners' attitudes and usage are benchmarked against similar data from 2020 to examine how the communications industry has changed, now that artificial intelligence is being implemented at scale in the communications industry.

Respondents report a significantly higher confidence in understanding of artificial intelligence. There is also a shift in the belief that AI can be as creative as a human, while still maintaining that creativity cannot be replaced by a machine. These conflicting opinions trace to both the changing nature of the core tasks of the creative process in the communications industry, and to the gap in artificial intelligence literacy. There is some evidence to support that addressing AI literacy and education in the fundamentals of AI will lead to users seeing it less as a black box and increase their ability to judge the output. Projecting into the future, respondents and industry leaders envision artificial intelligence as a collaborator, which will assist, rather than replace creative tasks.

"It's precisely these things that we saw as uniquely human that can now be replicated or at least automated... that idea of your agency, your enjoyment, your creativity is really sitting in a different space."

Kate Crawford, Research Professor, University of Southern California (USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism)¹

One of the central debates around the growth of artificial intelligence is what remains uniquely human, and what can be managed more efficiently or more effectively through artificial intelligence (AI). This debate, which first started when Alan Turing first conceived of the possibility of AI, has only sharpened as AI has scaled and proliferated.

The communications industry, comprising marketing and advertising disciplines, is a bellwether to explore this exact question, as it represents the transformation of creative professions. This is a topic I explored as part of my doctoral thesis in 2020, "**I think therefore I am...?** An exploration of artificial intelligence (AI) marketing practitioner perceptions and practices"²

At that time, based on original research representing 526 advertising and marketing professionals from across the United States, the results showed an industry cautiously interested in artificial intelligence and its potential, but woefully unaware and unprepared for the challenges this technological leap forward represented. In 2020, the communication industry had a very clear opinion that creativity remained a uniquely human trait, while more repeatable tasks, like data processing, could be managed more efficiently through artificial intelligence.

At the risk of understatement, the acceleration of the adoption of artificial intelligence since that time has been exponential. With the launch of ChatGPT on November 30, 2022³, the introduction of large language models at scale ushered in the era of generative artificial intelligence, with applications proliferating across nearly every aspect of the communications industry, including image generation, video generation, data processing, market research, writing, editing, and administrative management.

In November 2025, I repeated the research from 2020 to understand how the communications industry has evolved. The research is a robust look at the adoption of artificial intelligence in the communications industry, examining how artificial intelligence is being used, how it is affecting employment, tasks, attitudes, training, ethics and organization structure.

The fieldwork from November 2025 was based on a sample size of 520 compared to the sample size of 526 from February 2020. The sample was also balanced for age, gender, role within the communication industry and years of experience, to fully represent the evolution of the industry and for full comparability.

1. Crawford, Kate and Hayes, Chris (2023, April 20), "Unpacking AI: An Exponential Disruption" [Audio podcast episode], Why Is This Happening?, MSNBC, <https://www.msnbc.com/msnbc-podcast/msnbc-unpacking-ai-exponential-disruption-kate-crawford-podcast-transcript-n1304427>
2. Breen, Timothy Edward Bant (2020), "I think, therefore I am...? An exploration of artificial intelligence (AI) marketing perceptions and practices," Doctoral Thesis, Barcelona, Spain: Blanquerna-Universitat Ramon Llull.
3. Marr, Bernard (2023), "A Short History Of ChatGPT: How We Got To Where We Are Today," Forbes, (Accessed April 23, 2026.) | Available at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bernardmarr/2023/05/19/a-short-history-of-chatgpt-how-we-got-to-where-we-are-today/>.

Fig. 1: Comparative sample representation of age, gender, seniority, role within the communication industry, 2020 Fieldwork versus 2025 Fieldwork

	2020 Fieldwork		2025 Fieldwork	
	Responses	Percentage Distribution	Responses	Percentage Distribution
Male	191	44.1%	199	41.1%
Female	242	55.9%	285	58.9%
Age Less than 30	139	32.5%	166	34.3%
Age 30 Plus	289	67.5%	318	65.7%
Work Experience Less than 5 Years	131	29.6%	161	32.4%
Work Experience 5 - 10 Years	99	22.4%	205	41.2%
Work Experience 10 Years Plus	212	48.0%	131	26.4%

	2020 Fieldwork		2025 Fieldwork	
	Responses	Percentage Distribution	Responses	Percentage Distribution
Marketing department in an enterprise	159	30.6%	189	36.4%
Creative agency	62	11.9%	51	9.8%
Digital agency	44	8.5%	42	8.1%
Media agency	39	7.5%	39	7.5%
Ad tech/mar tech	29	5.6%	33	6.4%
Public relations	53	10.2%	38	7.3%
Digital/Social platform	68	13.1%	44	8.5%
Media publisher	21	4.0%	12	2.3%
Other	44	8.5%	71	13.7%
TOTALS	519	100.0%	519	100.0%

The survey was replicated with adaptations for the evolution of artificial intelligence in the communications industry as required, with nine questions being repeated as is or with minor modifications, three questions being eliminated as no longer relevant, and the addition of five questions to reflect the more advanced implementation of artificial intelligence.

These new topics address which types of artificial intelligence applications are being used and at what frequency, attitudinal statements about artificial intelligence, the impact of artificial intelligence on day-to-day work, skills required to succeed with artificial intelligence in the future, and organizational progress for artificial intelligence implementation.

The research underlines what has been apparent for some time, that the idea of what remains uniquely human is changing quickly with the acceleration of adoption of artificial intelligence. The study of the communications industry represents a unique opportunity to examine the impact of artificial intelligence on creativity in a business context, where expectations of gains in efficiency and effectiveness are weighed against the value of highly subjective concepts that are the hallmark of the marketing and advertising industries.

In 2020, the research showed an industry struggling between luddite and progressive perspectives of AI in marketing and debating how to navigate the coming breakthroughs and challenges. Now that AI implementation is increasing, the communications industry continues to sit at a crossroads. Will artificial intelligence replace traditional advertising creativity, from original insights to all the choices that affect the creation of marketing campaigns? Is artificial intelligence failing to provide value in the creation of marketing campaigns? Or is artificial intelligence an evolved tool that assists and potentially enhances human creativity in the creation of marketing campaigns?

Defining artificial intelligence in 2026

One of the key findings from the study in 2020 was that survey participants could not come to a consensus on a definition for AI. The explanation that received the highest share of responses at 40% was a description focused on machine learning as it applied to specific tasks, but there was no clear shared definition.

In 2026, we have a similar challenge in addressing artificial intelligence in that it has become a portmanteau. With the proliferation of platforms and applications, AI has become a catch-all phrase for any application of the technology, from large-language models (LLMs), chatbots, natural language processors (NLPs), machine-learning (ML), generative AI, agentic applications, up to and including the singularity.

A useful interpretation of “types” of AI has been pioneered by Nvidia’s CEO Jensen Huang, who categorized the key developments in AI through this evolutionary graph, as presented in his keynote at CES 2025. He describes the evolution of AI from Perception, Generative, Agentic, and Physical.⁴ The two terms Generative and Agentic are now in common use.

For the purposes of this study, we asked participants about artificial intelligence broadly when we wanted to probe more general attitudes, future impact, barriers and ethical concerns. When types of applications, frequency of usage, and impact on specific tasks were being discussed, we used terms like “agentic” and specific applications like ChatGPT or Gemini to ensure we were speaking in the vernacular of the respondents.



The proliferation and usage of artificial intelligence

The proliferation of the use of artificial intelligence at scale started with the large language model ChatGPT, which has as of November 2025, 700 million users who use the application at least once a week. ChatGPT also holds the record for the application to reach 100 million users the fastest, reaching that milestone in two months.⁵ Claude.ai, the most prominent service in the agentic space, has most recently surpassed ChatGPT in application downloads, another aspect of artificial intelligence that demonstrates exponential growth.⁶

Increase in investment funding of artificial intelligence demonstrates that the large players are only part of exponential growth. It is estimated that in 2025 artificial intelligence comprised 50% of all available global funding, and of that funding a full 71.1% is directed towards companies outside of OpenAI and Anthropic.⁷

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In terms of broad implementation across corporations, a recent global study from McKinsey & Company,⁸ with a robust sample across 109 markets, reported that 88% of companies have implemented AI in at least one company function, with 51% reporting having implemented AI in at least three functions. When we examine this study specifically for the perspective of AI and marketing, companies are seeing the implementation of AI produce cost savings, at 49% of those surveyed. More importantly companies found that implementation of AI in marketing had the highest impact on revenue, with 67% reporting positive revenue impact.

Multiple sources underline the key point here that the implementation of AI at scale is happening – in terms of daily usage, number of users, rate of growth, increase in funding, and broad corporate implementation. To put this in context of our research, the respondents are dealing with real-time transformation across the communications function and contending with real impacts on their day-to-day work.

4. Huang, Jensen, (2025), "CES 2025: AI Advancing at 'Incredible Pace', NVIDIA CEO Says," <https://blogs.nvidia.com/blog/ces-2025-jensen-huang/>. (Accessed April 23, 2026.) [Available at <https://blogs.nvidia.com/blog/ces-2025-jensen-huang/>].
5. Curry, David, (2026), "ChatGPT Revenue and Usage Statistics," The Business of Apps. (Accessed April 23, 2026.) [Available at <https://www.businessinsider.com/claude-number-1-app-stores-chatgpt-apple-google-ai-2026-3/>].
6. Griffiths, Brent D. and Hoff, Madison, (2026), "Chart shows Claude's dethroning of ChatGPT in app downloads race," Business Insider. (Accessed April 23, 2026.) [Available at <https://www.businessinsider.com/claude-number-1-app-stores-chatgpt-apple-google-ai-2026-3/>].
7. Teare, Gené, (2025), "6 Charts That Show The Big AI Funding Trends Of 2025," Crunchbase. (Accessed April 23, 2026.) [Available at <https://news.crunchbase.com/ai/big-funding-trends-charts-eoy-2025/>].
8. The State of AI in 2025: Agents, innovation, and Transformation. (2025, November 5). McKinsey and Company.

Can creativity be replaced by AI? Contradictory attitudes give an unclear answer.

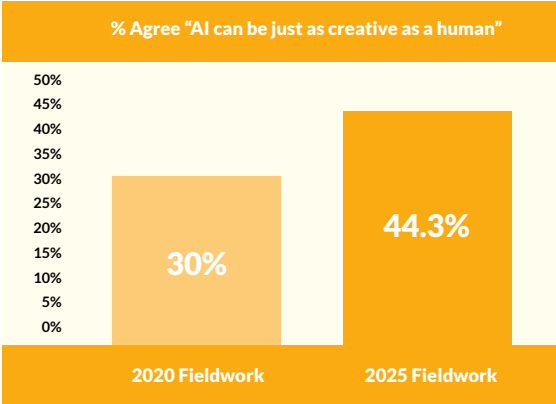
In our 2020 survey, our respondents were very clear – creativity could not be replaced by artificial intelligence. In our survey we asked them: “One of the biggest areas of debate is exactly how creative Artificial Intelligence can be. In your opinion, how “creative” can Artificial Intelligence become?”

The short answer to this question by respondents was a resounding no. Only 30% of those surveyed agreed that AI could be as creative as a human. Respondents that were more open to AI being as creative as a human, in the 40 – 50% range, also assessed their understanding of AI higher on average than the rest of the sample, with a rating of 4/10 vs. 3.3/10. There were indications that, if a respondent believed they understood AI slightly better, they were more likely to believe that AI could be as creative as a human.

In our 2025 survey, we asked this question two different ways because of the importance of this point, and because of the proliferation of AI. We asked attitudinal statements about artificial intelligence, with a strongly agree/agree/neither agree nor disagree/disagree/strongly disagree scale. When we compare similar statements in 2025 vs. 2020, a full 44.3% of respondents strongly agreed/agreed with the statement “AI can be just as creative as a human”, with only 12.4% strongly disagreeing with it. That’s an increase of 48% between the surveys.

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Fig. 2: % Agree AI can be just as creative as a human, 2020 versus 2025 fieldwork.



However, when we asked them to respond to the statement “Creativity can never be replaced by a machine”, 66.3% strongly agreed/agreed with that statement, with only 2.5% strongly disagreeing with that statement.

These contradictory statements sit at the heart of the debate around creativity. To further explore why respondents supported both statements, we need to examine more closely two potential reasons why there is this inherent tension in the attitudes towards AI’s impact on creativity in marketing.

Based on our 2020 data, is there a possibility that respondents who have a self-reported higher understanding of AI are more likely to believe that AI can be as creative as a human? Secondly, is this self-reported understanding based on a level of experience that would support the belief that AI can be as creative as a human?

The other hypothesis we will explore is how AI’s impact on creativity is heterogeneous across the different creative tasks and skills in the communications industry. The central question here is, across those different skills and tasks, what of the creative process is replaced or assisted by artificial intelligence, and what elements of creativity remain uniquely human?

Those two hypotheses will give us an accurate view of the state of creativity now in the communications industry, as well as indications of what the future holds for this bellwether debate on humans and artificial intelligence.

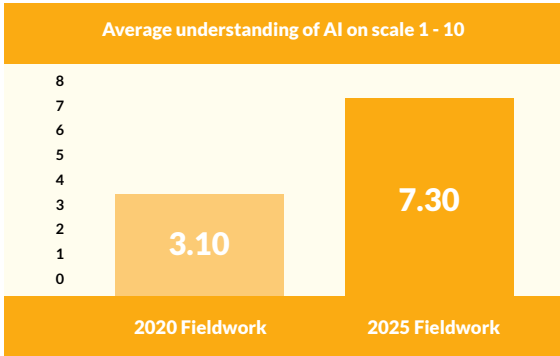
Are respondents' understanding of AI strong enough to have an informed assessment?

One of the hallmarks of the 2020 fieldwork was the limited self-reported understanding of AI. We asked them the following: How would you characterize your understanding of the field of AI (Scale from 0 – 10 No understanding to Excellent understanding)? Most of the respondents fell in the lowest quartile, being in the 3/3.5 range. This score is a clear indication that many respondents were not confident in their knowledge. There were some respondents, 18% of the sample, that characterized their knowledge level as “understand somewhat,” which is a rating of 5. No respondents rated their knowledge above 5. The average of the group was 3.1.

When we replicated this question in the 2025 fieldwork, we see a dramatic shift. The average self-reported understanding of artificial intelligence jumped to 7.3/10, an increase of 234% over the 2020 fieldwork.

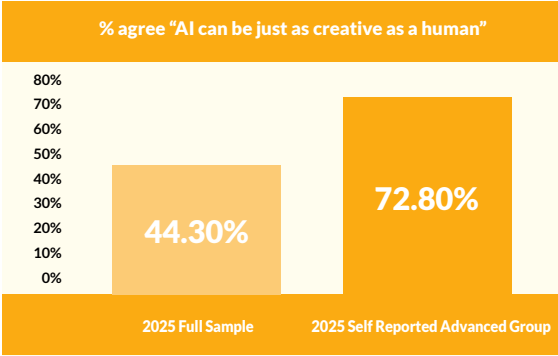
When we replicated this question in the 2025 fieldwork, we see a dramatic shift. The average self-reported understanding of artificial intelligence jumped to 7.3/10, an increase of 234% over the 2020 fieldwork. More strikingly, there is a significant group, 29% of the respondents, who rated their understanding of artificial intelligence as 9 or higher.

Fig. 3: Self-reported understanding of AI on a scale from 0 (no understanding) to 10 (excellent understanding), 2020 versus 2025 fieldwork.



When we examine the self-reported advanced group and their attitudes towards creativity and artificial intelligence, the contradiction in the statements is even more pronounced. Of the total group, 72.8% strongly agree/agree with the statement “AI can be as creative as a human”, a full 64% higher than the entire sample. Interestingly, when we asked whether this same group felt that “Creativity could never be replaced by a machine”, nearly the same amount of the self-reported advanced group strongly agreed/agreed with this statement at 71.5%.

Fig. 4: Self-reported advanced group compared to full sample, 2025 fieldwork, Top 2 box agree “AI can be just as creative as a human”



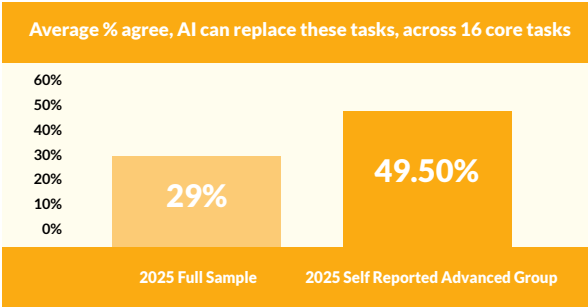
Are these beliefs driven by a greater understanding of artificial intelligence? When digging deeper into this group who consider their understanding of artificial intelligence to be very high, we see some interesting associated behaviours. To gauge the sophistication of their daily usage of AI, we looked at what types of AI they use, how it affects their day-to-day work, and their attitudes.

The self-reported advanced group are by far the most frequent users of ChatGPT and other LLMs, with 75.5% using it multiple times a day. They also report using agentic AI, 43% using it multiple times a day, and 55.6% of this group also reported using embedded AI-assist features, like Microsoft CoPilot, multiple times a day.

This group expresses highly enthusiastic attitudes towards AI completely replacing tasks associated with the communications industry. Across a wide variety of tasks, from data processing, media planning, to creative tasks such as creative production and brainstorming, 49.5% of this group believes that AI could completely replace it. When we compare this to the full survey, this is significantly higher, with an average of only 29% believing that AI could replace the broad range of communications tasks.

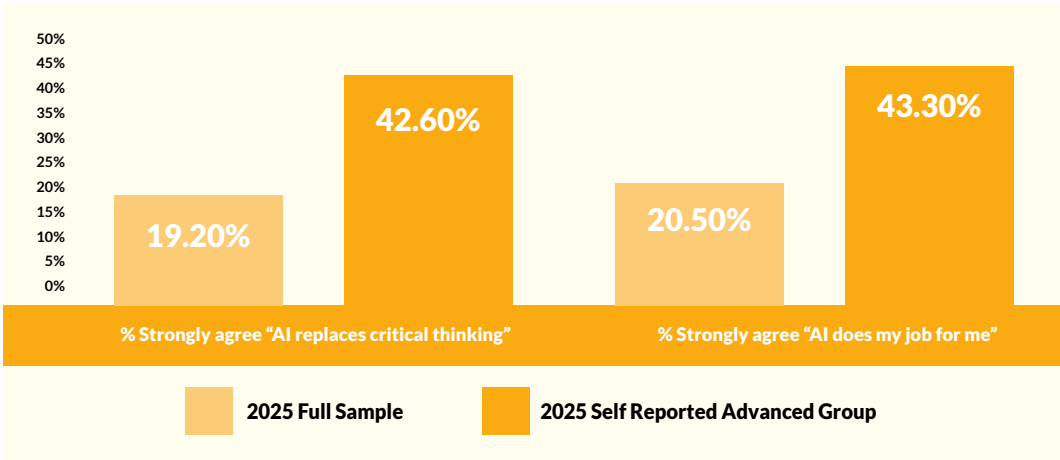
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Fig. 5: Self-reported advanced group compared to full sample, 2025 fieldwork, Average agree “AI could replace this task” across sixteen core communication tasks



Their enthusiasm extends to attitudes and beliefs around AI. The research probed for a variety of attitudes towards AI. The self-reported advanced group’s attitudes towards two statements are particularly revealing. When we asked them to respond to the statement “AI replaces critical thinking”, 42.6% of the group strongly agreed with this statement, compared to the main sample, only 19.2% of which strongly agreed. Another statement we asked was, “AI does my job for me”. Again, 43.3% of the self-reported advanced sample strongly agreed with this statement, compared to only 20.5% of the full sample.

Fig. 6: Self-reported advanced group compared to full sample, 2025 fieldwork, Strongly agree “AI replaces critical thinking” and “AI does my job for me”



Taken together, there is strong evidence to support that the self-reported advanced group is overstating their true understanding of artificial intelligence. We believe that this can be interpreted as a degree of overconfidence or naivete driven by usage of user-friendly platforms, LLMs like ChatGPT or Claude.ai or Microsoft Pilot. This enthusiastic overconfidence can also be seen in other studies.

In a recent robust survey of the link between artificial intelligence literacy and attitudes and beliefs towards artificial intelligence, "Lower Artificial Intelligence Literacy Predicts Greater AI Receptivity"⁹ we see repeated evidence that lower AI literacy is linked to a higher degree of receptivity, enthusiasm, and the capabilities of artificial intelligence. In multiple studies, across multiple populations and geographies, the lower the literacy the more likely the population was to be receptive to artificial intelligence, and with that lower literacy population, there was greater willingness to perform tasks on AI. The study also explored the emotional reaction that artificial intelligence has on those lower literacy populations. For example, "inspiring awe" and being perceived as "magical" was studied, and how that was linked to the willingness to attribute uniquely human attributes to AI. Lower AI literacy predicted greater relative preference for AI (vs. human) task execution when the task was associated with distinctly human attributes.

"When people think about AI executing tasks that are typically associated with requiring distinctly human attributes, those with lower AI literacy are more likely to believe that AI actually possesses these humanlike attributes, leading to greater perceptions of AI as magical and feelings of awe."

"Lower Artificial Intelligence Literacy Predicts Greater AI Receptivity", January 9, 2026

There is substantial evidence, in this survey and in current academic research, to associate the self-reported advanced group to a lower level of artificial intelligence literacy. There is also reason to believe that this group's attitudes towards creativity when it comes to "AI being as creative as a human" traces to that level of AI literacy. However, this doesn't reconcile the contradiction in statements about creativity. Even if we consider the self-reported advanced group's attitudes as lacking critical thought or not truly reflective of a strong understanding of AI, the fact remains that a significant proportion of the study's respondents believe that AI can be as creative as a human. As a next step, we will examine creativity in communications by task, to better understand where these attitudes are originating.

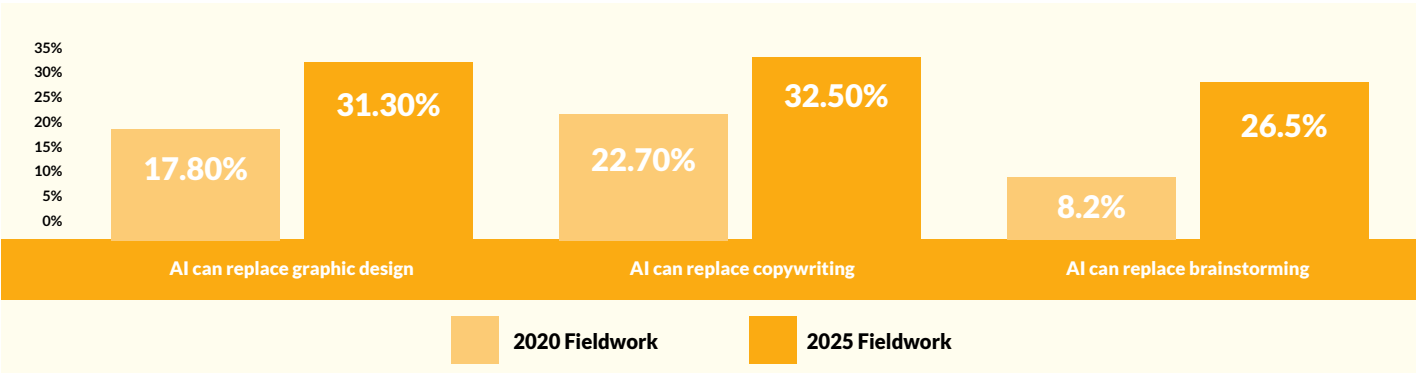
Can all creative skills and tasks be replaced by AI?

In both our 2020 and 2025 fieldwork we asked about specific tasks associated with the communications industry, to probe whether those tasks could be replaced by AI, assisted by AI, or never replaced or assisted by AI.

When we look at the tasks associated with the creative process, we see a significant shift in tasks that could be replaced by AI. In 2020, only 17.8% of respondents believed that graphic design could be replaced by AI. In 2025, that number has nearly doubled, to 31.3% of the sample. Similarly, now 32.5% of respondents believe that copywriting can be replaced by AI, compared to 22.7% in 2020. Most surprising of all is how the respondents thought about brainstorming. In 2020 only 8.2% believed that brainstorming could be replaced by AI, and in our 2025 that group tripled to 26.5%.

When we look at the tasks associated with the creative process, we see a significant shift in tasks that could be replaced by AI. In 2020, only 17.8% of respondents believed that graphic design could be replaced by AI. In 2025, that number has nearly doubled, to 31.3% of the sample.

Fig. 7: Agree AI can replace the specific tasks of graphic design, copywriting and brainstorming, 2020 versus 2025 fieldwork



9. Tully, Stephanie, M., Chiara Longoni, Gil Appel (2025), "Lower Artificial Intelligence Literacy Predicts Greater AI Receptivity," Sage Publications, 89. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/00222429251314491>

We probed further with the group on a qualitative basis, and verbatim responses reveal an interesting story. Based on subjective measures, respondents often are not clear on the differences in types of writing, in that there isn't much distinction between copywriting, text generation, and editing. Similarly, when it comes to creative production, respondents are likely to blur the distinction between photography, video production, and the creation of social or digital posts.

It's clear that there are two factors at work here. The first is the decline of traditional creative tasks being thought the preserve of human agency. This is consistent with the findings regarding lower AI literacy and the ability to attribute uniquely human skills and traits to AI. The second is the erosion of the lines between the specific tasks historically governed by the advertising agency process, from copywriting, to photography, to art direction.

Both these observations are likely driven by how much creative production has been democratized by both large and smaller scale artificial intelligence platforms. At the large scale, key players like Meta now have self-serve artificial intelligence tools that provide design, copy, music, video, so that creators can produce a wide variety of content for their feed.¹⁰ At a smaller scale, there are many free self-serve tools that allow users to create their own illustrations, their own video, and many tools, some embedded in mainstream software, to edit copy. We see this in the study itself, with 40% of respondents using image editing applications or software at least once a week, and 39.4% using video editing applications or software at least once a week.

While it is arguable that democratization of creative production can be a good thing, for example, to encourage access to high-quality creative tools to smaller businesses who would not ordinarily be able to produce these types of advertisements, there's the counterargument that a surfeit of content is creating "slop". AI advertising slop is the term used to describe low-quality AI-generated content designed to entice views, and it's estimated that, at the end of 2025, nearly 21-33% of advertising on YouTube across 20 markets was categorized as AI "slop".¹¹

This calls into question whether AI-generated advertising "slop" is effective from a consumer's point of view. There are several studies that point to the shifting consumer attitudes to AI-generated advertising. One recent study in August 2025 from National Research Group¹² cited that 83% of consumers can tell if an ad has been created using artificial intelligence at least some of the time, 54% say that AI-created advertisements feel impersonal, and 47% say that AI-powered ads feel repetitive.

In the same study, 48% of consumers say the ads they would trust the most would be "Ads made by a human assisted by AI". "Ads made only by a human" ranked at 40%, whereas "Ads made only by AI" dropped to 13%.

As creative skills and tasks are becoming blurred, and as creative production is becoming democratized through scaled AI-driven tools, the industry is entering an era in which the output is less than optimal. The proliferation of AI-created slop, and the corresponding lower level of trust these pieces of content engender in their intended audiences, point to a system that's moving towards less effective advertising.

When we asked respondents an open-ended question about what the future looks like for AI in the marketing and communications industry, one of our respondents had this to say:

"Personally to me, I feel that AI can replace most jobs that involve the marketing and communication industries. As it is able to do simple tasks that are accessible to us as of now. As AI becomes more advanced and able to produce content within seconds. It becomes harder to have a competitive advantage over AI. Eventually, more people start believing in the AI content and starting the second guess what they see."

Male, marketing department, 5 – 10 yrs exp

Lower AI literacy and the proliferation of AI-driven content tools have created an environment in which a significant number of our respondents have found it easier to agree with "AI can be as creative as a human", and that some creative tasks could be replaced by AI. At the same time, this group is almost equally likely to believe that "Creativity can never be replaced by a machine". Looking more closely into what constitutes creativity in that context – the elements of human agency that are irreplaceable by AI – is the next step in our analysis.

10. Altuzarra, Paula, (2025), "Meta AI: What It Is, how it works & creative tools to boost your social media content", Adsmurai. (Accessed April 23, 2026.) [Available at <https://www.adsmurai.com/en/articles/meta-ai-creative-tools>]

11. Curtis, Liam, (2025), "AI Slop Report: The Global Rise of Low-Quality AI Videos", Kapwing. (Accessed April 23, 2026.) [Available at <https://www.kapwing.com/blog/ai-slop-report-the-global-rise-of-low-quality-ai-videos/>]

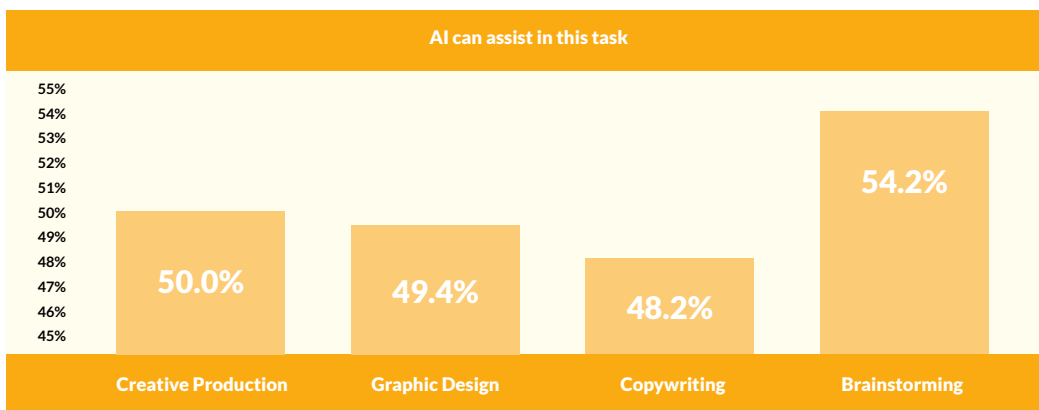
12. Smartly. AI and Advertising: What Consumers Really Expect. October 9, 2025. (Accessed April 23, 2026.) [Available at <https://www.smartly.io/resources/ai-and-advertising-in-2025-what-consumers-really-expect>]

Identifying the element of human agency

Returning to the 2025 fieldwork, when asked whether AI could replace, assist or never replace core tasks in the communications industry, the majority of respondents agreed that nearly every communication task could be assisted by AI, with creative production at 50%, graphic design at 49.4%, copywriting at 48.2%, and brainstorming by far the highest at 54.2%.

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Fig. 8: Agree AI can assist in the creative tasks of graphic design, copywriting and brainstorming, 2025 fieldwork full sample



The respondents were then probed further on what truly could not be replaced by artificial intelligence, specifically: “Now we’d like you to think about the impact of AI on the jobs in your current company. What are the jobs that can never be replaced by AI?” This was designed as an open-ended question to elicit a wider variety of responses. The responses ranged widely from very specific commentary on roles or tasks, to addressing qualities or skills.

When we group these into broader categories, Creative Development as a role and skill set ranks the highest, at 26% of respondents stating that these jobs could not be replaced by AI. Two other groups pertinent to this discussion are Critical Thinking/Originality at 10% and a very frequent term, Emotional Intelligence, at 8% of respondents saying that these jobs/roles/skills/qualities could not replace AI. In their own words:

“I think jobs that are in the arts that are creative and rely on the artists “hand” to give the artwork presence. Can AI paint an entire mural? Absolutely! But can it replace an authentic artist’s hand and style and brain? No.”

Female, digital/social platform, <5 yrs exp.

“Leadership, innovation, and roles that challenge status quo. A creative director that can push against trends won’t be replaced by AI.”

Male, marketing consultant, 10+ yrs exp.

“Final recos without human touch. The nuances of culture, situation analysis and common sense are a human function.”

Female, media agency, 10+ yrs exp.

“The authentic human creative thinking or the creation of authentic stories.”

Female, creative agency, 5-10 yrs exp

There is evidence to support that human agency remains of high value when it comes to the creative process in communications. However, human agency is becoming more specifically defined, either by task or by the quality of input, some of which is subjective and difficult to describe. Based on our findings linking the relationship of AI understanding and literacy to attitudes towards AI and creativity, will an increased emphasis on AI literacy lead to a more clearly defined path of how AI and the creative process in advertising and marketing evolve?

Cracking open the black box: What effect will education and AI literacy in the communications industry have on attitudes towards creativity and AI?

“I think there will be an unintended creative dividend from AI, which is entirely down to psychological factors. If you went to someone who was very experienced marketer or very good inventor, and you said, “Why do you think this will work? They go, trust me, I think I think it’ll work. Based on everything I know, my instincts tell me this will work. This would be considered in business to be completely unacceptable as a basis on which to make a decision. But strangely, when that we replace that person with a black box computerized process, we’re all going to pay attention. Now, that’s a bit odd, isn’t it? We’re completely unwilling to take human recommendation without demanding proof of their working out. You know, you can’t just take something on trust. Weirdly, I don’t ask me why, when the output is from a black box that’s effectively using silicon rather than carbon, we think it’s okay.”¹³

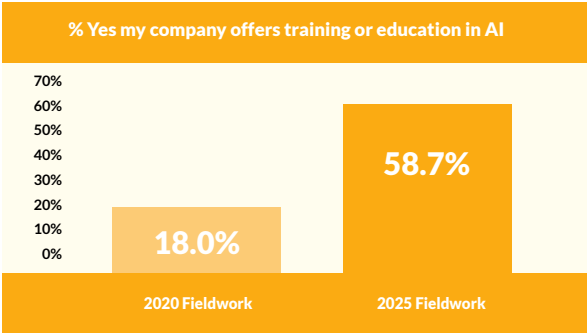
Rory Sutherland, Vice Chairman, Ogilvy UK

Is artificial intelligence in the communications industry still seen as a “black box”, and has the efforts of companies in education for artificial intelligence increased between our studies?

As I outlined in my 2020 doctoral thesis, the communications industry was not taking an active role in educating their employees about artificial intelligence. Although AI was at that time an emerging field, and it is hard to teach something that is being re-invented each day by computer scientists, marketers were not educated on the strategy, execution, and application of artificial intelligence. The thesis study showed that only 18% of respondents say that their company offered training in AI.

In 2025, not unexpectedly, that number has increased, with 58.7% of respondents reporting that their companies offer training in artificial intelligence. However, when you take into consideration the scale and speed of proliferation of AI and going back to the McKinsey & Company report⁸ that cited 88% of companies are implementing AI in at least one function, this number seems low compared to the need for better training.

Fig. 9: Percentage “yes my company offers training or education in AI”, 2020 versus 2025 fieldwork



13. Sutherland, R. The Human Algorithm: Why Real Relationships Matter in a Data Driven World, MadFest London, July 1, 2025. (Accessed April 23, 2026) [Available at https://www.linkedin.com/posts/rorysutherland_the-unintended-creative-dividend-of-ai-ugcPost-7388865607137656832YDlUw]

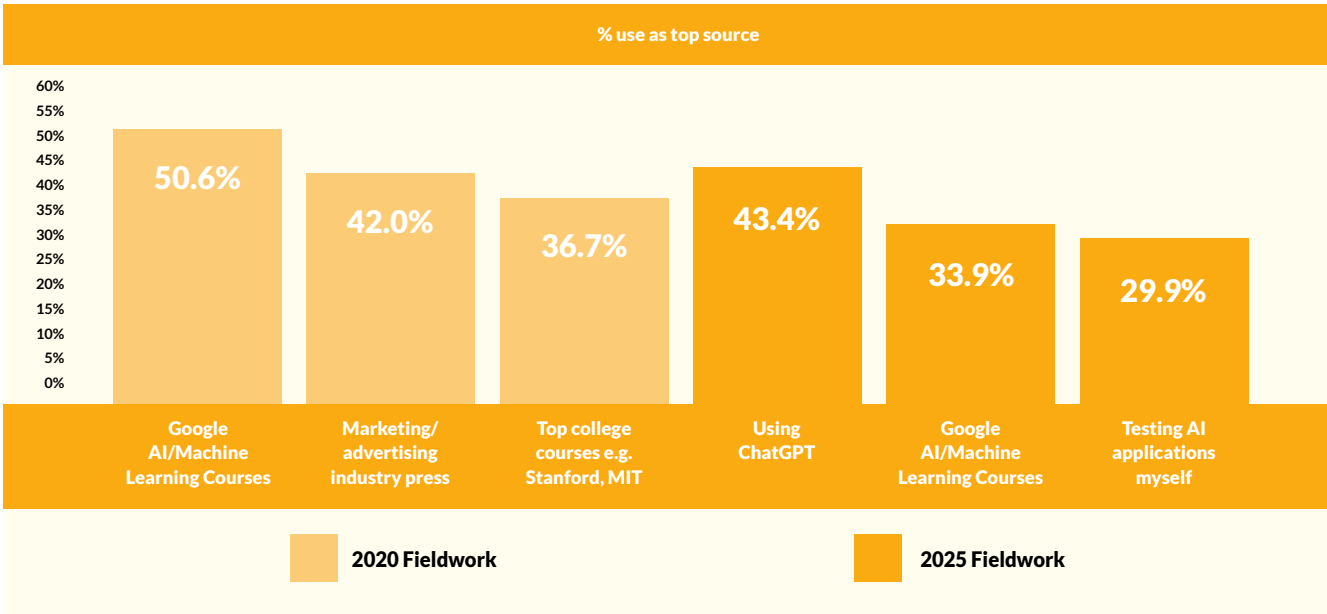
8. The State of AI in 2025: Agents, innovation, and Transformation. (2025, November 5), McKinsey and Company.

To fully understand the literacy and education element of AI in the communications industry, we also asked respondents, “When considering information and education in Artificial Intelligence, which sources would you use? Please choose three sources, based on which sources you think are the most helpful.”

In our original 2020 research, the top three sources for information and education for artificial intelligence were “Google/ AI Machine learning courses” at 50.6% of respondents, “Marketing/communications industry press” at 42%, and “Top university courses e.g. Stanford/MIT” at 36.7%.

In our most recent research, that has changed significantly. The top sources for information and education in 2025 are “Using ChatGPT” at 43.4% of respondents, “Google/AI Machine learning courses” at 33.9%, and lastly “Testing AI applications myself” at 29.9%. The sources of information and education are largely self-directed.

Fig. 10: Top sources for information and education in artificial intelligence, 2020 versus 2025 fieldwork



To probe further, in the 2025 survey we asked respondents, “Thinking about your current role, and the current state of your industry, what skills do you think are most needed for the successful implementation of AI in the future?” This was an open-ended question to allow for a wider range of responses, and the analysis grouped them by theme. The top type of skills that respondents stated were needed for the successful implementation of AI in the future was “AI Fundamentals/Basic training”. This led by a large margin, followed by “Quality assurance/verification/data checking” and “Critical thinking”.

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What is clear is that hands-on experimentation is the primary way the respondents learned about artificial intelligence. What is also clear is that hands-on experience has shown that they lack the skills to understand the fundamentals of artificial intelligence. That leads to a stated need for better skills to understand the quality of what artificial intelligence is providing them, as well as the core skill of critical thinking to judge what they are seeing.

The possible future of the creative process and AI

If AI literacy increases, how will that affect how the creative process is assisted or replaced by AI in the communications industry? One could point to the increase in AI education and information resources between the studies, and argue that AI literacy has increased significantly, but perhaps not in fundamental ways that allow a greater understanding of how AI can be used most effectively. If we look how respondents framed the future skills required for AI to be implemented successfully, one could argue that quality assurance/verification and critical thinking are the building blocks of the creative process.

Industry perspectives widely vary on the topic of AI and creativity, and often from a biased point of view, but there are proponents in the industry that argue for greater AI literacy, with specific guardrails for how to put the contribution of artificial intelligence into proper context.

“AI will democratize opportunity. That’s good news if you’ve got ideas. Suddenly, you’re on the same footing as the big guys. But don’t make the mistake of calling it a tool. It’s a collaborator. It gets you to good – but it can’t go beyond that. It can’t imagine. It can’t be fresh. So don’t fear it, use it. But never let it use you.”

Sir John Hegarty¹⁴

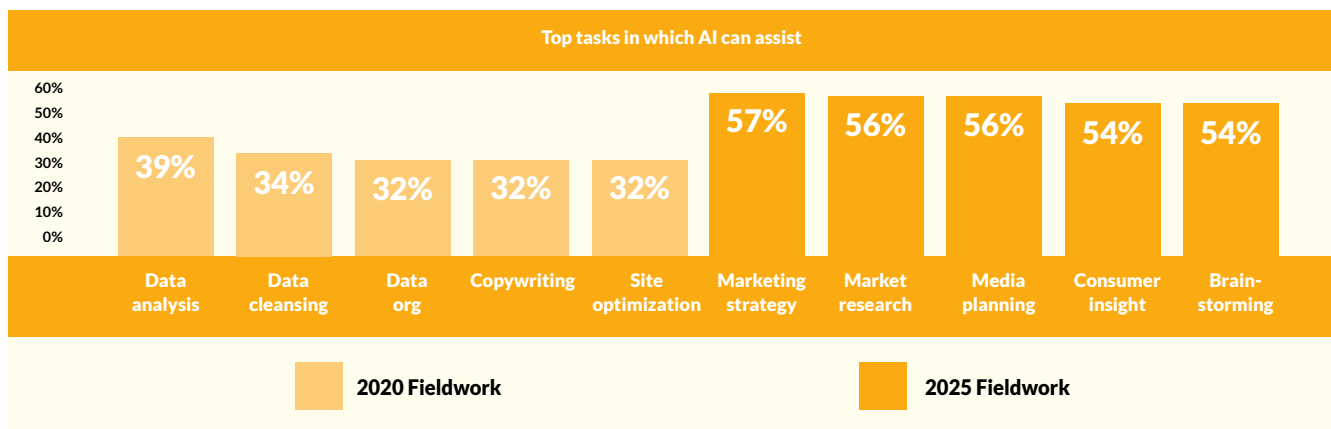
Does the view of AI as a collaborator have any basis in our fieldwork? When we asked which tasks AI could assist, the top answers over the fieldwork have changed remarkably.

In our 2020 data, the top tasks that respondents felt AI could assist in were, in order: Data analysis (39%), Data cleansing (34%), Data organization (32%), Copywriting (32%), and Site Optimization (32%). Nearly all these tasks are tasks that were perceived as rote and easily assisted (or even replaced) by AI.

In our 2025 data, the top tasks for which AI could assist are, in order, Marketing Strategy (57%), Market Research (56%), Media Planning (56%), Consumer Insight (54%), and Brainstorming (54%). It’s remarkable that the top five responses over time do not share a single task, and that the average percentage of respondents who agree that AI could assist in a task has increased by 64%. In our 2020 fieldwork, respondents saw AI as a tool to organize data and to automate repetitive tasks. In 2025, in our opinion, respondents now see AI as a collaborative tool, designed to support more complex thinking and to support the strategic and creative development process.

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Fig. 11: Top tasks % agree AI could assist in these tasks, 2020 versus 2025 fieldwork



14. Hegarty, Sir John. Can't Have a conversation these days without AI rearing its head. LinkedIn, February 2026. (Accessed April 23, 2026.) [Available at https://www.linkedin.com/posts/sir-john-hegarty-a1310a92_cant-have-a-conversation-these-days-without-ugcPost-7420416527104942080-1v3/].

When asked about the future of AI in the marketing and communications industry, our respondents had many differing opinions. However, one respondent reflected this data that we just discussed as follows with a more optimistic view of how AI and creativity would evolve together.

“The future looks like AI becoming the invisible infrastructure that handles execution, personalisation, and analysis at scale, freeing marketers and communicators to focus almost entirely on strategy, creative judgment, growth leadership and the deeply human work of understanding culture and emotion.”

Female, media agency, 10+ yrs exp.

Conclusion

Artificial intelligence is being implemented at scale in the communications industry. Although confidence in understanding is high, the reality of literacy shows a significant delta. This is a significant contributor to opinions that support the notion that AI can be as creative as a human.

There is some evidence to support that addressing AI literacy and education in the fundamentals of AI will lead to users seeing it less as a black box and increase their ability to judge the output.

There remains, however, a growing awareness that “creativity cannot be replaced by a machine”, supported by identifying the skills of originality, the subjective yet powerful human touch, and most of all, emotional intelligence. The hope is that creativity is enhanced by not only better literacy, but by using artificial intelligence as a collaborator. It can get practitioners to good, but the essential creative leap, remains the preserve of human agency.

The French Philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote, “We choose with our hearts and use numbers to justify what we just did.” The most valuable brands differentiate on craft, provenance, storytelling, design and desire, which are all about how someone feels. All these are driven by creativity versus computation.”

Rishad Tobaccowalla, Author, Rethinking Work¹⁵

**For questions,
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15. Tobaccowalla, R. Why Creativity Will Matter More in an AI Age. Substack. February 2026. (Accessed April 23, 2026.) [Available at <https://rishad.substack.com/p/why-creativity-will-matter-more-in>]