

To use or not to use, that is the question
A study of artificial intelligence with
strategic communication professionals in Portugal

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Abstract

The adoption of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is rapidly increasing, reshaping both society and organizational landscapes. This transformative trend has inevitably reached strategic communication professionals, leading to various perceptions about its application in this field. This study explores these perceptions of uses and gratifications, perspectives on the influence of AI, as well as the practices of professionals operating in Portugal in the mentioned areas regarding the integration of AI into the exercise of their professions. The study employed a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews to collect data from communication professionals. The results from 21 interviews indicate a greater awareness of AI integration, especially after the launch of ChatGPT, and automated content generation as one of the biggest uses of AI. Although most respondents expressed favorable inclinations towards AI integration, some reservations persist related to replacing human expertise and creating dependency. The recommendations underline the imperative to train professionals to mitigate AI-related drawbacks, maintain a symbiotic relationship between AI and humans, and uphold ethical standards.

Keywords

Artificial intelligence (AI), strategic communication, perceptions, Portugal

Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is on the rise, and we may currently be in a transformative era, triggered not only by the emergence and democratization of platforms such as ChatGPT (Marketeer, 2023) but also by organizational interest in implementing AI (IBM, 2022). By 2022, around 44% of companies were already interested in investing in AI, a trend that is expected to grow (IBM, 2022).

As Nah et al. (2020) emphasize, a topic of particular interest is the study of AI at its intersection with the study of communication, since AI and automation are currently changing human life, with major implications for the communication field, a situation that cannot be ignored (Jiménez & Ouariachi, 2020). In the field of communication, AI growth is also visible with the “widespread deployment” (Sundar & Liao, 2023, p. 165) of AI tools in its practice. In addition to the advantages associated with AI, there are, however, disadvantages that generate debate and reflection on the crossing between AI and strategic communication (Khanzode & Sarode, 2020). For example, AI platforms can now serve as a source of communication (Sundar & Liao, 2023). It is a role that constitutes the starting point of all traditional communication models, since the identity of a communication source continues to be an integral part of the perception of the content of communication as “information is taken seriously if [...] attributed to respectable sources” (Sundar & Liao, 2023).

In this context and based on the literature review conducted, the research aims to understand the knowledge, uses, gratifications and perceptions of Portuguese professionals in the fields of strategic communication with regard to the presence of AI in their professional performances. Specifically, it is intended to: 1) identify the knowledge of Portuguese communication professionals about AI; 2) understand the uses and gratifications that communication professionals associate with the use of AI in their professional activity; 3) examine the perceptions of communication professionals about the quality of content generated by AI; and 4) explore the perceptions of challenges, trends and projections put forward by Portuguese communication professionals in relation to the presence of AI in their fields of work. Three types of uses of communicative AI are considered: content generation, distribution, and consumption.

The Portuguese case was chosen because: 1) Portugal was, in 2021, the second country in the European Union where companies were using AI the most to support their work; 17.3% of Portuguese companies use these technologies, while the average for member states is around 8% (nine percentage points less than Portugal) (Sousa, 2023); 2) The country has defined its national artificial intelligence strategy, entitled *AI Portugal 2030*, which aims to promote research and innovation in favor of its development and application in fields such as public administration, education, training and business; 3) the Portuguese are positive about the influence of AI, being one of the countries with the most positive views (The Portugal News, 2023).

The theoretical framework of this study is based on a paradigm that can be called the *communicative AI paradigm*, an expanded vision of the Artificial Intelligence-Mediated Communication (AI-MC) paradigm (e.g., Guzman & Lewis, 2020), which establishes that AI is not only a mediator of the human ability to communicate but is itself a communicator and is understood as such by people; on the technological acceptance model (TAM), which postulates that the acceptance of technology is predicted by the users' behavioral intention, which, in turn, is determined by the perception of the technology's usefulness in performing the task and perceived ease of its use (e.g., Davis, 1989; Misra et al., 2023); and on strategic use of the assumptions from the uses and gratifications theory (UGT), such as that individuals use media and technologies to extract benefits (e.g., Xie et al., 2022).

AI at the service of communication

With no official definition yet accepted, most efforts in this direction focus on AI as an extension of human intelligence, i.e., "any technique that allows computers to bring meaning to data in similar ways to a human" (Markiewicz & Zheng, 2020, p. 4). The initial efforts to define it point to this same dimension, related to systems capable of simulating the human capacity to reason, perceive, make decisions, and solve problems (McCarthy, 1963). In fact, a test had already been proposed, the Turing test, which aimed to assess the intelligence of a machine and whether it was equivalent or identical to that of a human (Turing, 1950), which shows that advances in AI have been around for a long time.

AI can be categorized into three distinct groups (Gill, 2016). The first, Narrow AI, incorporates modern systems such as voice recognition, supporting users through machine learning, but does not have the capacity to transfer knowledge between systems (Gill, 2016). Because of this, Narrow AI is associated with other concepts surrounding AI, such as Generative AI. Generative AI is a type of AI that creates artificial relics using existing digital content (Baidoo-Anu & Ansah, 2023), such as text, images, videos. Unlike predictive AI, which focuses on, for example, noticing patterns, Generative AI concentrates on using processed data to create more data, being applied in marketing actions (Santaella & Kaufman, 2024). The other two groups of AI – General AI and Artificial Superintelligence – are theoretical forms of AI (IBM, 2023).

Studies into AI began more than 50 years ago, particularly focused on how machines can emulate human intelligence and capabilities, such as communicating (Guzman & Lewis, 2020). However, AI studies and communication studies have developed along separate paths, conceptualizing technology as a mediator of the human ability to communicate. This separation has led to the distinction of two fields: Human-Computer-Interaction (HCI) and Computer-Mediated-Communication (CMC) (e.g., Sundar & Lee, 2022; Valencia, 2023).

In the context of the development of AI, the concept of Artificial Intelligence-Mediated Communication (AI-MC) is understood as mediated communication among individuals, wherein an intelligent agent acts on behalf of a communicator, altering, enhancing, or generating messages to achieve communication goals (Hancock et al., 2020). Based on this definition, AI-MC intervention is understood in different dimensions (e.g., Guerrero-Sole, 2022; Hancock et al., 2020): magnitude, media type, optimization goal, autonomy, and role orientation. Magnitude is the extent of the changes that AI enacts on messages, with applications ranging from correcting spelling mistakes to creating subtitles for videos or texts from summaries. Media type refers, for example, to the automatic filling of messages while they are still being written. Still in the example of creating messages, the third dimension, optimization goal, assists in this process, presenting oneself as appealing, reliable, witty, authoritative, etc. (Hancock et al., 2020, p. 91). Autonomy is associated with the level to which the AI can operate without supervision from the issuer, such as chatbots or product recommendation systems based on, for example, purchase history. Role orientation refers to the role that the AI system plays in the communication process: sender or receiver. In addition to these roles, AI has also played the role of facilitator or mediator, using, for example, translation systems to facilitate communication between sender and receiver (Hancock et al., 2020, p. 92). A look at the various dimensions of AI-MC indicates that it offers efficiency and automation in communication but can also compromise authenticity. It is therefore important to find a balance between the convenience provided by AI-MC and preserving the authenticity of the communicator.

Nowadays, the two scientific fields of AI and communication have come closer, “bridged by AI technologies designed to function as communicators” (Guzman & Lewis, 2020, p. 71), resulting in the need to combine HCI and CMC in order to address the AI’s role as mediator and communicator (e.g., Sundar & Lee, 2022; Valencia, 2023). In this sense, the AI-MC paradigm should be broadened to encompass how “machine subjects with which people make meaning instead of through which people make meaning” (Guzman & Lewis, 2020, p. 73). The concept of *communicative AI* thus emerges (Guzman & Lewis, 2020), enabling the machine to function as a communicator itself, rather than a mere mediator of human communication. Communicative AI consists of three key aspects (Guzman & Lewis, 2020, p. 81): 1) the functional dimension, through which people make sense of these devices and applications as communicators; 2) the relational dynamic associated with the connection between individuals and technologies; and 3) the metaphysical implications, blurring the boundaries of what is human, machine and communication.

Based on various contributions (e.g., Anantrasirichai & Bull, 2022; Baidoo-Anu & Ansah, 2023; Bhandari, 2020; Sancanin & Penjisevic, 2022), three uses associated with the communicative AI proposal are identified: 1) intelligent content generation; 2) intelligent distribution; 3) intelligent consumption. Intelligent content generation is associated with Generative AI. Intelligent distribution refers to AI systems that recommend content to

users to increase engagement, and the use of tools to share information (e.g., Bhandari, 2020; Sancanin & Penjisevic, 2022), such as news aggregators (Caswell, 2023). Intelligent consumption relates to the use of Natural Language Processing (NLP) and the recognition of patterns and trends (Bhandari, 2020). The identification of these three uses reveals the benefits of technological innovation but also concerns regarding, for example, the bias of the content created. In the field of distribution, AI systems can generate polarization and, in consumption, implicit algorithmic analysis can be used to manipulate behavior, even for political purposes.

Nevertheless, certain advantages of using AI can be highlighted (e.g., Carvalho, 2021; Khanzode & Sarode, 2020). The first is process automation, in which AI can automate repetitive tasks, completing them more quickly and with fewer errors (Carvalho, 2021, p. 23). As a result, the second advantage is improved efficiency and productivity (Khanzode & Sarode, 2020, p. 34). Finally, AI systems are also responsible for improving decision-making by providing insights from analytical data (Khanzode & Sarode, 2020, p. 34). The study by Xie et al. (2022), based on the uses and gratification theory, show that, among the four dimensions of user gratification (utilitarian, technological, hedonic, and social) and user satisfaction with AI-powered chatbots, utilitarian gratification emerged as the strongest influencing factor. The findings suggest that utility is the main aspect to be considered by the creators of AI-powered chatbots. The TAM also highlights the importance of perceived usefulness. Acceptance of technology is a three-stage process in which external factors (wearable devices design features) trigger cognitive responses (perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use) which, in turn, form an affective response (behavioral intention), influencing use behavior of the device. However, the use of AI in the field of communication also faces disadvantages, which poses challenges such as program mismatch, job replacement, lack of creativity, lack of human touch, data dependency, high costs, algorithmic bias, security risks, and lack of trust (Chen & Sundar, 2023; Khanzode & Sarode, 2020).

In the field of communication, specifically, previous scientific contributions corroborate some examples of advantages and disadvantages (e.g., Kaczmarek-Sliwinska, 2019; Ma, 2020; Sundar & Liao, 2023). Ma (2020) advocates that the democratization of AI can lead to the empowerment of individuals who, through AI platforms, can produce high-quality content, and stresses that innovation can mean disruptive forms of communication campaigns. On the other hand, Kaczmarek-Sliwinska (2019) argues that, despite the opportunities, there are risks associated with the dehumanization of content, an observation that is aligned with the ideas of Sundar and Liao (2023), who highlight the need to redefine concepts such as creativity. However, in an investigation into the application of AI in the creative industry, in which the authors include advertising, marketing and journalism, Anantrasirichai and Bull (2022) believe that the maximum benefit will be obtained from AI when its focus is centered on the human being. In other words, when it is designed to augment, rather than replace, human creativity. Furthermore, this benefit,

with a human-centered focus, aligns with the definition of Creative AI, an emerging form of artistic and creative practice that integrates AI and, more recently, machine learning into the creative process. This is achieved through a human-centered approach whereby AI is empowered to creatively enhance the human experience or actively participate and collaborate with creative endeavors in real time (Vear & Poltronieri, 2022).

AI and strategic communication

Zerfass and Huck (2007) understand that organizations have the responsibility to develop technologically, offering opportunities for growth and thus making innovation an important factor for success and increased profits (Osei-Mensah et al., 2023). Confirming the adoption of technological guidance, De Andrade and Tumelero (2022) note that AI has grown in popularity and is now one of the most important tools of technological innovation for organizations looking to improve and transform their product and service offerings. For this reason, many studies have reflected the integration of AI into communication, specifically in the subfields of strategic communication (e.g., Kaczmarek-Sliwinska, 2019; Ma, 2020; Osei-Mensah et al., 2023; Sundar & Liao, 2023; Wind et al., 2019).

For example, Osei-Mensah et al. (2023) analyzed 17 scientific articles and chapters on the application of AI in strategic communication, published between 2017 and 2022. They concluded that most articles focused on the development of marketing communication plans and the creation of AI solutions, such as chatbots. The analysis also showed that the relationship between AI and strategic communication was more present in specific subfields: public relations, marketing communication and political communication.

Regarding marketing communication, Huang and Rust (2021) designed a new paradigm that is made up of the possible applications of AI. The authors thus showed how to incorporate AI into the 4Ps marketing model and marketing analysis processes, being competent in data collection, segmentation, personalization, automation and understanding consumer feedback. Still in the field of marketing communication, Wind et al. (2019) conducted a literature review on the transparent application of AI, creating a manual for using these new tools related to AI. Using techniques that stimulate the perception of usefulness, the authors advocate it is possible to create greater acceptance of these tools.

Perceptions of the use of AI in professional communication

AI has gradually permeated the media and communication industries, and this growing trend has piqued curiosity about the beliefs perceived by professionals in these fields (e.g., Panda et al., 2019; Sebastião, 2020). Sebastião (2020), for example, sought to ascertain the perceptions of communication professionals about the implementation of AI. Based on the European Communication Monitor 2019, which involved 2,689 respondents from 46

European countries, the results showed that the Portuguese are among those who know the least about AI. The results, which in addition to defining AI, focused on the impact and risks of implementing AI in communication, also revealed risks associated with adapting communication to fit the new AI tools. To the same end, Panda et al. (2019) conducted 31 interviews with communication and public relations professionals. In the 13 questions that made up the guide, there were questions that addressed the impacts of implementing AI, as well as questions about projections for the future. The conclusions called for implementation strategies that train communication professionals in the new AI tools. In addition, the results indicated that, although aware of the change and transformation in the field, professionals are skeptical about it (Panda et al., 2019).

Method

Research design and materials' collection

The study used a qualitative method with semi-structured in-depth interviews. The interviews were conducted online for practical reasons. By overcoming issues related to geographical distance and time constraints, we were able to gather a significant number of responses within a short period of time (20-29 October 2023). The interview guide contains 16 questions, organized into four thematic groups, which reflect the specificities of the objectives: communication professionals' knowledge on AI; communication professionals' uses and gratifications of AI, communication professionals' perceptions of the quality of the content produced by AI and communication professionals' perceptions of AI challenges, trends, and projections.

Participants

This study is made up of a group of strategic communication professionals (n=21). The methodological procedures adopted to identify and recruit them was a combined snowball and convenience sampling method (Bryman, 2012). Potential participants were approached either directly by the researchers or by third parties at the request of the researchers, with information on the contextualization of the study and the purpose of the invitation to participate. Once they had given their informed consent, they were interviewed.

An attempt was made to include as many participants as possible in the interviewee groups, which were purposely recruited to ensure a range of potentially contrasting perspectives. Participants were recruited until data saturation was reached, a criterion generally agreed upon in the literature (Bryman, 2016, pp. 416-420, 690).

The panel is made up of more women (14) than men (7) – Table 1. Ten of them work in marketing, two are social media and online platform managers, two are communication managers, one is a media advisor, two are design professionals, one is a public relations professional, one is a branded content specialist, one is an organizational com-

munication specialist and the other is an internal communication specialist. Although management, marketing, public relations, technical communication, political communication, and information/social marketing campaigns are different disciplines, they all form a part of strategic communication (e.g., Hallahan et al., 2007). The areas of activity of the interviewees also coincide with the functions of strategic communication distinguished by Heath et al. (2018) and are part of the research by Werder et al. (2018) who analyzed which topics within strategic communication are most studied.

Gender	Area of activity	Job title
Female	Media relations	Junior Communication Consultant
Female	Branded Content	Branded Content Specialist
Female	Strategic Organizational Communication	Brand and Communications Director
Female	Internal communication	Internal Communications Manager
Female	Design	Designer
Female	Social media manager	Social Media Manager
Female	Social media manager	Social Media Manager
Female	Marketing	Digital Marketing Specialist
Female	Marketing	Digital Manager
Female	Marketing	Search Engine Optimization (SEO) Specialist
Female	Marketing	Content Manager
Female	Marketing	Content Manager
Female	Marketing	Paid Advertising Manager
Female	Public relations	Head of the Communication and External Relations Division
Male	Design	Designer
Male	Marketing	Brand and Communications Director
Male	Marketing	Digital Marketing Manager
Male	Marketing	Digital Marketing Expert
Male	Marketing	Digital Marketer
Male	Communications Manager	Communications Manager
Male	Communications Manager	Communications Manager

Table 1. Panel of interviewees, identified by gender, area of activity and job title

Data analysis

A platform was used to allocate all interviews, in order to facilitate data processing. Framework analysis (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003) was chosen as the basis for the data analysis: the stages of familiarization, coding, framework development and interpretation. This analytical framework is a set of codes organized into categories that have been jointly developed by researchers involved in analysis that can be used to manage and organize

the data (Gale et al., 2013). The framework creates a new structure for the data (rather than the full original accounts given by participants) that is helpful to summarize/reduce it (Gale et al., 2013) in a way that can meet the research objectives. In this sense, the four main dimensions/categories used in this study were: communication professionals' knowledge on AI; communication professionals' uses and gratifications of AI, communication professionals' perceptions of the quality of the content produced by AI and communication professionals' perceptions of AI challenges, trends, and projections. For ease of reading, quotes have been shortened but still include the essence of interviewee's discourse.

Findings

This analysis explores the perceptions of the interviewees – strategic communication professionals – from the point of view of various thematic and theoretical dimensions: 1) knowledge of AI, exploring AI analytically mainly from the perspective of AI as a mere mediator or as a communicator, in order to understand whether the interviewees' AI notions are aligned with the communicative AI paradigm; 2) uses of AI by strategic communication professionals and inherent gratifications (dimension anchored in the UGT). The analysis of the uses of AI is inspired by the subdimensions of TAM – perceived usefulness and ease of use (e.g., Davis, 1989; Misra et al., 2023); 3) quality of the content generated by AI. The evaluation of this quality reflects the perceived usefulness of AI and the perceived use of this use by informants (TAM model); and 4) challenges, trends, and projections regarding the use of AI in strategic communication. All these dimensions are not only inspired by the data analysis but were also the thematic dimensions used to prepare the interview guide.

Communication professional's knowledge of AI

Regarding the definition of AI, the vast majority of interviewees share the notion that it is a technology that mimics human functions, as verified in the literature review (e.g., Markiewicz & Zheng, 2020). In fact, some interviewees even use the term *mimic*, such as a Digital Manager:

I define it as the development of computer systems capable of performing tasks that would normally require human intelligence. It encompasses various techniques and systems that are designed to be able to understand and reason about information, learn from data and make decisions or take actions to achieve specific goals. It alludes to the idea of imitating tasks performed by humans, in my opinion.

Some of the interviewees follow the technical language of the Digital Manager's definition with reference to the data but go further, like one of the Designers who emphasizes the "convergence of codes and algorithms, developed to mimic human reasoning/logical thinking/intelligence". Similarly, one of the Content Managers clarifies that AI is "capable

of combining large volumes of digital data and intelligent algorithms and learning from them”.

In the shorter definitions, the vast majority of interviewees mention the reproduction of human capacity. For example: “competence to create machines that have capabilities similar to those of human beings” (Female, Social Media Manager). Only one person, a Designer, portrays AI as an “intelligence superior to human beings in terms of a quick and effective response”, a perspective linked to human superintelligence (IBM, 2023).

These notions show that the interviewees tend not to understand the AI as a mere mediator of the human ability to communicate (Guzman, 2018; Guzman & Lewis, 2020). The definition of AI by some professionals concretizes the conceptualization of AI as a communicator: “capable of combining large volumes of digital data and intelligent algorithms, learning from them to generate personalized content” (Female, SEO Specialist), “a tool that uses algorithms to analyze and produce data in an automated way” (Female, Internal Communications Manager), “reasoning and planning ability” (Female, Junior Communication Consultant), “simulate certain aspects of human intelligence, such as the ability to reason and learn from experience, relate attributes, solve problems and propose recommendations” (Male, Brand and Communications Director). Some of the interviewees’ opinions seem to focus on Generative AI, since the emphasis is on content creation (e.g., Baidoo-Anu & Ansah, 2023). The Internal Communications Manager explicitly states: “Generative AI, which is what I know.”

Uses and gratifications of using AI in the communication professions

Most interviewees responded positively when asked whether communication professions should commit to implementing AI. The SEO Specialist said:

I believe that professions linked to strategic communication can use AI software to optimize certain tasks more quickly and with less margin for error. For example, in the case of strategic communication, AI can be used to optimize the analysis of data (behavior and interpretation of customer journeys, for example), to create appropriate and personalized conversion strategies – and this in just a few seconds. Basically, I believe in automating communication processes using AI in favor of efficient corporate performance.

The other interviewees generally agreed with this opinion, arguing that the commitment to AI “makes it possible to automate processes, increase efficiency and improve the ability to personalize content” (Male, Digital Marketing Manager). Additionally, it is also mentioned that implementing AI “allows the professional to save time on some tasks (e.g., research) in order to invest it in other more important ones [...] and AI can also be a source of inspiration for more creative work” (Female, Content Manager).

From a more quantitative perspective, a majority of the interviewees – 16 – reported using AI tools. Generally, the informants who use AI are very complimentary about this use. Intelligent content generation, associated with Generative AI, tends to be referred to

as the AI application used in professional tasks. However, there is a wide range of uses for AI. A Content Manager confesses that she uses AI to “research, brainstorming, supporting the creation of certain marketing strategies, supporting the creation of written and visual content”. Another female Content Manager identifies the uses given to AI: “mainly research and translation but I also ask for opinions and ideas for more creative work”. Regarding the perceived ease of use (subdimension of TAM), some informants indicate: “easy to get quick answers and solutions” (Male, Digital Marketer), “easy to create content” (Male, Communication Manager).

The 16 informants who responded positively mentioned different types of gratification associated with their use, the main ones being: time savings, quality of content, greater productivity, ease of understanding a given topic/inspiration and, in the light of TAM, the invocation of perceived usefulness (e.g., Davis, 1989; Misra et al., 2023). For example, one of the Designers discusses the role of AI in unlocking creativity, referring to ChatGPT as “an excellent lever for new ideas”. The Paid Advertising Manager confesses that she “asks for help” whenever she is lacking in creativity. The Digital Marketing Expert mentions that it “allows the professional to free up time and invest in other tasks”. The SEO Specialist goes further, detailing:

As I work in the field of strategic communication, I need to analyze, adapt, and produce appropriate information on a daily basis. In this area, it is essential to save time. That is why ChatGPT helps me interpret certain queries and adjust them quickly to achieve the KPIs (key performance indicators) required (conversion rates, increase in organic searches, SEO content optimization, etc.). By using this AI tool, I can be more efficient and effective in presenting content management proposals according to my target audience, or personas.

The SEO specialist and one of the Designers are not the only ones to mention ChatGPT. In fact, 15 of the 16 interviewees who said they use AI in their profession mentioned ChatGPT as the tool they use. Other frequently used AI tools are Canva and Photoshop Beta. All the mentioned tools are more associated with Generative AI. In addition, the interviewees note that the type of AI use is more associated with content creation rather than distribution or consumption and that the use of AI allows for a more productive and effective pace of work, helping to optimize time and allowing them to focus on more tasks: “I felt a very positive impact on my productivity and it became a very practical way of acquiring knowledge” (Female, Social Media Manager).

Despite this recognition of the usefulness of AI, two interviewees showed greater reservations about the use of AI by communication professionals. For example, the Head of the Communication and External Relations Division explains that AI is a recent tool and, given the characteristics of the professions associated with communication, it may not yet be beneficial:

I think we are still at a very early stage in AI research. The results or content generated by AI should always be subject to human validation and interpretation. Tools like ChatGPT, which are not based on any kind of reasoning or understanding but rather on probabilistic models in which content is generated as the most likely from a typical text, increase the likelihood of generating opinions and content that lack significant news value. The areas of communication have important ethical challenges; it is too important to dive into this adventure, which at first glance seems fascinating, but which has yet to bring credible benefits to the area, especially in terms of credibility.

When it comes to assessing the ethics of AI and its use in the service of communication, the majority say that it is not “cheating”, since “human intervention in the creation process is almost obligatory, as the raw results of AI are often inadequate” (Female, Designer). This is a position shared by many interviewees who see AI as an extension of their work, making it a “tool like any other” (Male, Communication Manager). It should therefore be used in conjunction with the human experience. In addition to ethical issues, one of the interviewees, the Branded Content Specialist, expresses a negative view. She clarifies that AI formats and limits human thought, referring to the issue of creativity, and “does not make room for the specificities that only human discernment can detect” (Female, Branded Content Specialist).

With regard to non-users, two of the five interviewees express that they fear a lack of veracity of the content (Female, Head of the Communication and External Relations Division; Male, Brand and Communications Director). The Branded Content Specialist again mentions the issue of creativity, arguing that the implementation of AI threatens “the DNA of the medium, the brand and the person who built it”. The Paid Advertising Manager emphasizes that the perceived usefulness of AI is not applicable to her work, which “requires analyzing brands on a case-by-case basis”. This position may be associated with the functions most typically associated with AI, and which were also most answered by those who use AI: content creation. Finally, one of the Communication Managers underlines that he does not need it very often and therefore does not use it. Some interviewees take a different view, pointing to AI tools as a way of “inhibiting the development of skills such as originality, creativity and innovation, which must be trained and are increasingly relevant to my profession” (Female, Head of the Communication and External Relations Division). Additionally, the use of AI can occasionally be “lazy, especially when it comes to creative writing and advertising, for example” (Female, Paid Advertising Manager).

Quality of AI-generated content

Most interviewees declare they have already read AI-generated content, contrasting with the six interviewees who mention they have never read this type of content. The interviewees’ assessment of this content differs on two main points. The first point is related to the content’s superficiality and the need for human supervision, as the Digital Marketing Expert says:

It depends on the type of content. If it is a question or a doubt, the AI is very quick to respond, and my assessment is very positive. If it is content that requires the articulation of concepts, for example, my assessment is negative because the AI only relates what it finds in its database.

The other point refers to the reliability and creativity of the content. For example, the Brand and Communications Director characterizes the content as realistic and based on “credible sources”. However, most interviewees point to a lack of creativity or robotization of the content: “I would say you can tell they are automated” (Female, Content Manager).

In fact, the majority of informants agree that AI-generated content lacks creativity, thus having an informative and patterned style that only the *human touch* can change. The SEO Specialist, for example, affirms that AI-generated content “lacks the scrutiny of what is extremely valuable and necessary. In this case, it is essential to humanize the content so that it fits the needs of the consumers/readers in question. No matter how hard the tool tries, it lacks the ability to address issues in specific and empathetic terms.” Creativity is also mentioned as the human touch that is lacking in such content, for example in emotive content, where “creativity can be more limited or align paths that can serve various interests with the same solution. That is, it can give the same answer without considering the specificities of the contexts”. According to the Junior Communication Consultant, “This does not mean that the texts are worse in the first place, especially if they are used as a basis for developing other texts.”

Interviewees also list some benefits of the *machine touch*, such as speed, as the SEO Specialist points out:

Yes, we lack speed in presenting various approaches. No matter how hard I try, I am always going to be slower than ChatGPT, for example, in presenting proposals and different approaches to content management. In just a few seconds, this tool can unlock certain viable shortcuts for building a diversified content management system. What is more, it can present me with alternatives that I had not even considered and which, if worked out properly, could prove very useful.

As well as speed, the interviewees mentioned verifying information, as there is a “human limitation in confirming information quickly and effectively, while AI analyzes countless data per second” (Female, Social Media Manager). AI can also function as a “typo checker, for example” (Female, Branded Content Specialist). In this respect, one interviewee pointed to AI as a tool to support “specific cases, such as someone with dyslexia, AI can be used as a great support for correcting and checking errors” (Male, Digital Marketer)

In contrast, a minority of interviewees do not believe that the touch of the machine can help, either in terms of speed, verifying information or improving content: “I do not believe they need AI for quality work” (Male, Digital Marketing Manager).

Challenges, trends, and projections

The results of the interviews point to three main challenges associated with using AI in communication professions: 1) maintaining originality; 2) ethical issues; and 3) associated costs. Regarding the first challenge, the interviewees point out that it will always be difficult “to create a creative brief” (Female, Paid Advertising Manager) and, if this happens, it will be difficult “to maintain the originality of the content even with so many resources offered by artificial intelligence platforms” (Male, Communication Manager), since the content generated comes from the same database. Concerning the second challenge and ethical issues, “plagiarism and the risk of ending up consuming content that is too similar, without the richness of genuine points of view” (Female, Content Manager) but also “ethics, transparency, and validity” (Male, Brand and Communication Director) and “guaranteeing the credibility of sources” (Female, Head of the Communications and External Relations Division) are also addressed. Finally, some interviewees also mentioned “the costs related to the associated platforms” (Male, Digital Marketing Manager).

Regarding trends, the interviewees agree that AI is going to be increasingly used. The SEO Specialist elaborates on this opinion:

I think that AI will increasingly be part of a communications professional's routine. In fact, I feel that we will all be forced to follow this trend, because it is part of technological evolution. Just as typewriters were replaced by computers and, to adjust to this change, we had to adapt our routines, I believe that AI tools will dictate new steps of evolution and compromise.

Besides agreeing with the increase in use, one of the interviewees fears that it could cause “negative dependency” (Male, Digital Marketer).

The informants generally mention four recommendations: 1) constant revision of content; 2) not centralizing use; 3) not encouraging dependence on AI; and 4) using AI as an extension, not as a substitute. A Communication Manager suggests “Use, but do not trust 100%”, and the Designer advises “To be used with awareness and to review the entire result so as not to have failures”. Only one person does not recommend using AI but, if necessary, “validate with human minds” (Female, Head of the Communication and External Relations Division).

The Head of the Communication and External Relations Division is also the only one who declares it is too early to go ahead with training on AI for communication professionals, arguing that: “It is enough for them to be informed.” The others agree that training is important and inevitable, not only to “use it to its full potential but also for ethical reasons” (Female, Content Manager).

Regarding the future, the interviewees seem generally optimistic, mentioning a “harmonious” relationship (Female, Designer) and the “greater automation of routine tasks, allowing professionals to focus on more strategic and creative activities” (Female, Social Media Manager). Some informants, on the other hand, assess that the relationship could

be “unhealthy because it inhibits creativity” (Female, Head of the Communication and External Relations Division) and that there could be “absorption of some professions” (Male, Communication Manager). One of the interviewees anticipates that the relationship will grow but there will be a need for it to be “regulated [...], due to the numerous conflicts between the right to information and access to information and knowledge, the right to property and issues of authorship” (Male, Brand and Communication Director).

Discussion

The interviewees are able, to a greater or lesser extent, to define AI, distinguishing it as a way of automating tasks and combining data, coming close to definitions arising from scientific contributions (e.g., Markiewicz & Zheng, 2020). Informants highlight AI’s ability to imitate human capabilities and its technical capabilities, presenting definitions of AI that indicate they understand it as a communicator, showing that they do not view it simply as a mediator, as Guzman and Lewis (2020) theorize. Some of the respondents’ definitions seem to concentrate on Generative AI, since the focal point is on intelligent content generation (e.g., Baidoo-Anu & Ansah, 2023).

This result points to evidence that there is a decline in the lack of awareness of AI platforms, as cited in Sebastião’s research (2020). Attention to AI platforms is, however, also growing, accompanied by their exponential use since November 2022, when ChatGPT was launched (e.g., IBM, 2022; Marketeer, 2023).

This last phenomenon may also be helpful to explain opinions about the implementation of AI in strategic communication. The majority of interviewees respond favorably, corroborating Andrade Tumelero’s (2022) idea that AI is one of the most important current tools for an organization’s growth and contradicting previous evidence pointing to a lack of willingness to adopt AI (Sebastião, 2020). However, the favorable opinion is accompanied by reservations associated, for example, with the replacement of the professional and the creation of dependence on AI, which is why a “moderate” use is necessary (Male, Digital Marketing Specialist).

The generation of intelligent content was one of the uses most mentioned by the informants in this study. This practice is in line with the predictions of many experts that project that generative AI will impact the types of competencies that are valued among working professionals (Cardon et al., 2023). The survey of almost 700 business practitioners conducted by Cardon et al. (2023) also showed that business practitioners widely use generative AI.

Only five strategic communication professionals declare that they do not use AI tools in their profession, distancing themselves from previous results which indicate that these professionals, particularly public relations professionals, do not want to use AI (Sebastião, 2020).

Most interviewees who admit they use AI platforms in their profession mention ChatGPT as the one they use, following a growing trend since the platform's creation (Marketeer, 2023). Evidence of this practice can be seen in the academic interest: in less than two months since its launch, there had already been more than 700 scientific articles focused on the implementation of ChatGPT (Rossoni, 2022). Regarding the type of use, participants generally highlight content creation, one of the functions of communicative AI (Sancanin & Penjisevic, 2022). In addition, they mention platforms such as Canva and Photoshop, which are essentially associated with Generative AI, showing a trend that AI systems are being used more for content creation (e.g., Baidoo-Anu & Ansah, 2023).

As for the benefits/gratifications, a majority of the 21 interviewees highlight the increase in "productive pace" (Female, Junior Communication Consultant) and the automation of repetitive tasks, which are among the advantages identified by researchers (Khazode & Sarode, 2020) and this corroborates results presented in previous research (e.g., Fitri et al., 2023; Jiménez & Ouariachi, 2020; Wamba-Taguimdje et al., 2020). According to TAM, perceived usefulness, and ease of use (e.g., Davis, 1989; Misra et al., 2023) can facilitate the acceptance of technology. Exploring the uses and gratifications theory, Xie et al. (2022) also highlight the preponderance of utilitarian gratification.

In terms of ethics, the majority of interviewees agree that professionals should be vigilant and attentive with regard to transparency and verification of information. The lack of trust is mentioned in scientific literature among the disadvantages associated with AI (Chen & Sundar, 2023).

Regarding the evaluation of content generated by AI, most respondents clarify that they had already read this type of content. However, they assess AI-generated content as being robotic and lacking in creativity. This result reinforces the cataloging of the different disadvantages associated with AI (e.g., Khazode & Sarode, 2020; Sundar & Liao, 2023). Regarding the *human touch* that is missing from AI-generated content, the interviewees generally agree that it refers to creativity, which is not cultivated by AI. This aspect is also in line with previous research indicating that AI can dehumanize communication (Kaczmarek-Sliwiska, 2019). Literature has also shown that AI can be a valuable tool in creative industries for enhancing human creativity but that its potential as a creator itself remains limited. For example, Anantrasirichai and Bull (2022) conclude that, in the context of creative industries, maximum benefit from AI will be derived where its focus is human-centric – where it is designed to augment, rather than replace, human creativity.

The challenges involving the use of AI in the profession most indicated by interviewees are consistent with some disadvantages emphasized in the literature: lack of trust and high associated costs (e.g., Chen & Sundar, 2023; Khazode & Sarode, 2020). As for trends, the interviewees agree that AI will be used exponentially, which is to be expected in the process of technological evolution (Female, SEO Specialist). This result coincides with previous findings, which observe that strategic communication professionals are aware of the implementation of AI (e.g., Panda et al., 2019). According to the literature, the adoption

rate of AI for communication activities is still low and knowledge management can help define standards and accelerate the introduction of AI in business communication (Iaia et al., 2024).

Similarly, the need for training in AI platforms advocated in the interviews conducted is also mirrored in research focused on AI applied to strategic communication (e.g., Jiménez & Ouariachi, 2020; Panda et al., 2019). The lack of training may also be at the root of some disadvantages associated with AI, such as program mismatch and lack of trust (Chen & Sundar, 2023; Khanzode & Sarode, 2020). The latter disadvantage is also noted in the interviewees' recommendations, with the encouragement of cautious use, underlining the skepticism of professionals, visible in previous results (Panda et al., 2019). Finally, most interviewees predict that there will be a symbiosis between humans and AI tools in the area of communication, and that AI could be useful in carrying out more routine tasks, as well as in time management. Among the advantages referred to by previous scientific contributions (Khanzode & Sarode, 2020), AI's ability to mitigate time constraints and resource limitations that threaten communication (Pavlik, 2023) is praised. Some interviewees value the emergence of disruptive communication solutions (Osei-Mensah et al., 2023) such as content personalization (Huang & Rust, 2021), with chatbots or sentiment analysis through textual clues.

Conclusions

AI is permeating professional communication, with interviewees recognizing its merit and admitting that they use AI tools mainly to create content. From the results obtained, one main recommendation can be drawn: to invest in training professionals, providing them with knowledge that protects them from the disadvantages associated with the use of AI, and enables them to extract the best potential from AI platforms. The alliance between the machine and the communication professional, regardless of their field of activity, must be the most advantageous for the quality of the professional's results. Other more specific recommendations can be formulated: 1) to encourage the creation of a symbiotic relationship between professionals and AI in order to avoid human dependence on AI and maintain human creativity; 2) to always use AI in a complementary way and not as a substitute, remembering Marshall McLuhan's idea that technologies are extensions of the human being; 3) to cultivate ethical principles associated with the use of AI, given the social responsibility of professions linked to communication; and 4) to anticipate the universalization of AI and equip professionals with the skills to explore this technological, functional and relational advance that will be part of a new reconfiguration.

For future studies, we suggest applying quantitative techniques, such as surveys, to gauge the perceptions of professionals when exposed to content generated by AI. Reception studies can also be relevant to obtain knowledge about the public's perceptions of content made by AI and content made by communication professionals. Given that AI is

developing on a large scale, transnational comparative studies can also help anticipate the needs of communication professionals.

This study has several contributions, enabling an understanding of part of the narrative about AI's performance as a communicator (communicative AI paradigm). On a practical and professional level, it provides insight into the puzzle associated with the perceptions and practices of communication professionals working in Portugal regarding the application of AI in their professional activities and allows recommendations to be drawn. The recommendations for professional training promote a more informed academic and practical debate on how organizations can integrate and manage AI ethically and effectively within strategic communication strategies. At a social level, it provides insight into how professionals in the communication industries – on which all human beings depend – are reacting to and perceiving the introduction of AI, which has effects on the communicational products consumed and on the way communication is done professionally. Finally, at a scientific level, by documenting the practical applications of AI, the research updates knowledge about emerging trends in the field, contributing to the academic literature of strategic communication. In addition, by investigating professionals' attitudes towards AI and its ethical implications, this study contributes to an understanding of the challenges and opportunities the technology presents. In short, this study has the merit of updating the Portuguese case, providing an in-depth analysis that not only enables an understanding of the uses, perceptions and projected evolution of this use but also the ethical and professional challenges associated with AI in strategic communication.

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