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Will potential threats persist? Attitudes and behavioral responses of creative professionals toward GenAI

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Abstract

Introduction. Generative AI brings significant benefits to various fields but also poses potential disruptions to creative work. Empirical research is needed on how creative professionals perceive the impact of GenAI on content creation and how they can overcome stress-related barriers to better use GenAI in their work.

Method. This exploratory study recruited 18 creative workers with varying experiences in using GenAI to identify their perceived value, attitudes, and behavioral responses to GenAI in their work environment.

Analysis. Thematic analysis, supported by a coding scheme that includes horizontal coding and meaning clustering, was used to analyse the interview data.

Results. The findings indicate that creative workers' attitudes toward GenAI evolve based on their actual usage experiences, with different value perceptions, attitudinal and behavioral responses — both negative (e.g., technostress, co-rumination, misrepresentative interactions) and positive (e.g., work autonomy, reshaped creative role) — emerging during the initial exposure, adoption, and adaptation phases. In addition, some contextual factors, such as individual traits, organizational support, and social influence, also play key roles in this process.

Conclusions. The research contribution is to provide insights for various stakeholders and to challenge the '*either/or*' debate of previous research by highlighting the process of self-adaptation of creative professionals to GenAI.

Introduction

A photography work authored by DALL-E2, *Pseudomnesia: the Electrician*, defeated human-created works to win the Sony World Photography Award in the creative photography category. This illustrates how generative AI (GenAI), which generates visual, auditory, and textual content based on textual prompts, continues to challenge the career stability of employees who use creativity as a source of inspiration (Inie et al., 2023). Unlike traditional AI, GenAI technology transcends the limitations of human creativity through multimodal and cognitive interactions (Woodruff et al., 2024), allowing for the creation of AI-based content and knowledge tailored to user needs. This approach enables GenAI to potentially disrupt human creative production and intellectual work while also replacing tedious and repetitive low-end tasks (Noy and Zhang, 2023; Vorobeva et al., 2022). A new study in *Nature* confirms that generative AIs such as GPT-4 and Llama 2 have outperformed humans in terms of mind (Strachan et al., 2024). These developments suggest that the competition between creative professionals and GenAI in content and knowledge creation may have already commenced (Yao et al., 2024).

Whilst resistance to GenAI to support human action and decision-making may be justified in some cases, the benefits of GenAI overall on job performance are well documented (De Freitas et al., 2023). However, there are still a number of creative professionals in the workplace scenario who have a negative or conservative attitude towards the use of GenAI. Therefore, exploring creative professionals' attitudes, experiences, and behaviours when using GenAI in competitive environments is a valuable and contemporary topic. This study attempts to answer the main research question:

> **RQ1.** *How do creative professionals' perceptions of GenAI's challenges and benefits shape their evolving attitudes and behaviours during adoption process?*
> **RQ2.** *What factors lead to successful multi-stage GenAI adoption, and how do they vary at different stages of integrating GenAI into creative workflows?*

By addressing these questions, the research shed light on how creative professionals can overcome resistance to GenAI in content creation, providing stakeholders with richer insights into the complex interactions with GenAI.

Literature review

Previous research has theorized the competitive impact of GenAI on creative workers in the labor market at the macro level (Dwivedi et al., 2023). Despite the compensatory effects of GenAI on creativity, its potential threat to creative tasks—once considered a core human skill—is fuelling tensions between creative professionals and GenAI. This issue spans various creative industries, including copywriting, design, photography, illustration and painting, and video editing (Inie et al., 2023; Rafner et al., 2023; Woodruff et al., 2024). At the meso level, studies have examined how GenAI affects workflow activities. For instance, GenAI has reconfigured news production and traditional film production processes, challenging professionals' views on creative practice and their roles (Gupta et al., 2024; Pavlik, 2023).

Emerging research increasingly examines creative workers' micro-perceptions and behaviours in human-intelligence competition scenarios. On the one hand, some studies have used empirical methods to reveal how GenAI affects workers' specific attitudes. For example, interacting with GenAI can cause cognitive dissonance and a heightened sense of unreality, potentially leading to aversion, especially when GenAI-generated outputs are indistinguishable from those of the professionals themselves (Köbis and Mossink, 2021). Additionally, how GenAI influences employee performance has also received some attention, including creativity, innovative service behaviours, burnout, and turnover intentions, the '*black-box*' between technological stressors and employees' willingness to adopt AI, and GenAI resistance (Bankins et al., 2024; Chang et al., 2024; Li and Huang, 2020; Liang et al., 2022). On the other hand, limited studies have used qualitative interviews to

explore the AI technology stress (i.e., job insecurity, complexity, uncertainty, reliability, and usefulness) among knowledge workers (Kumar et al., 2024), creative professionals' perceptions of GenAI (Inie et al., 2023), its impact on early-career game developers' creative practices, and their resistance to it (Boucher et al., 2024).

While existing research has primarily examined the macro-level impact of GenAI on creative professionals or the micro-level factors influencing adoption and performance, a significant gap remains in understanding how these professionals perceive and use GenAI. Although exploring creators' adoption, utilization, and behavioral responses in human-AI competitive contexts is considered critical (Kshetri et al., 2023; Granulo et al., 2019), few studies address how their perceptions of stress (e.g., GenAI as a threat), attitudes, and behaviours evolve over time. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the impact of GenAI on creative workers through the Value-Attitude-Behavior (VAB) theory (Kim et al., 2024), focusing on the relationship between perceived value, attitude responses (AI awareness), and behavioral outcomes (adaptive vs. maladaptive) in their usage experiences.

Method

Participants

This study employs semi-structured interviews to meticulously capture the varying attitudes and behavioral responses of creative professionals as they interact with GenAI, with a focus on the stress of content creation competition. This method focuses on detailing people's experiences and viewpoints and uncovering the significance they attribute to them in a particular context (Alon and Krtalić, 2024), such as subtle attitudes and responses experienced in approaching and adapting to GenAI.

From April 12 to 22, 2024, 28 initial participants were reached through interpersonal networks and online communities (e.g., Sina Weibo). To capture a wide spectrum of views, the interview pool was composed of 18 creative professionals, selected for their diversity in gender, occupation, experience, and usage. The interviews were conducted via Tencent Meetings and/or face-to-face. Among the participants, 53% were male and 47% were female, with ages ranging from 27 to 40 years and work experience spanning 2 to 10 years.

Tools, procedure, and analysis

The interview primarily focused on our research questions, while participants were also encouraged to discuss topics beyond these, including but not limited to their perceptions of the challenges GenAI poses to their creations, as well as their perceptual changes related to GenAI use, its future development, and their professional growth. Each interview lasted approximately 1 hour and was transcribed into text for coding purposes.

The collected data were analysed using the qualitative analysis software MAXQDA, following a thematic analysis research method (Naeem et al., 2023). This technique included data familiarization, code selection, theme development, and conceptualization. During the coding phase, A two-stage coding scheme was employed: first, horizontal coding was used to examine each participant's individual experiences; then, meanings clustering was conducted to identify and categorize overarching themes and sub-themes across all interviews (Alon and Krtalić, 2024). Two raters performed two independent rounds of coding on the raw textual material, with a third author participating in discussions at the end of each round to enhance coding consistency. The inter-coder reliability was assessed using Cohen's Kappa, which was calculated to be 0.82 for all three coders, indicating a strong level of agreement in the coding process. The dimension stages, aggregate themes, and codes are presented in Figure 1.

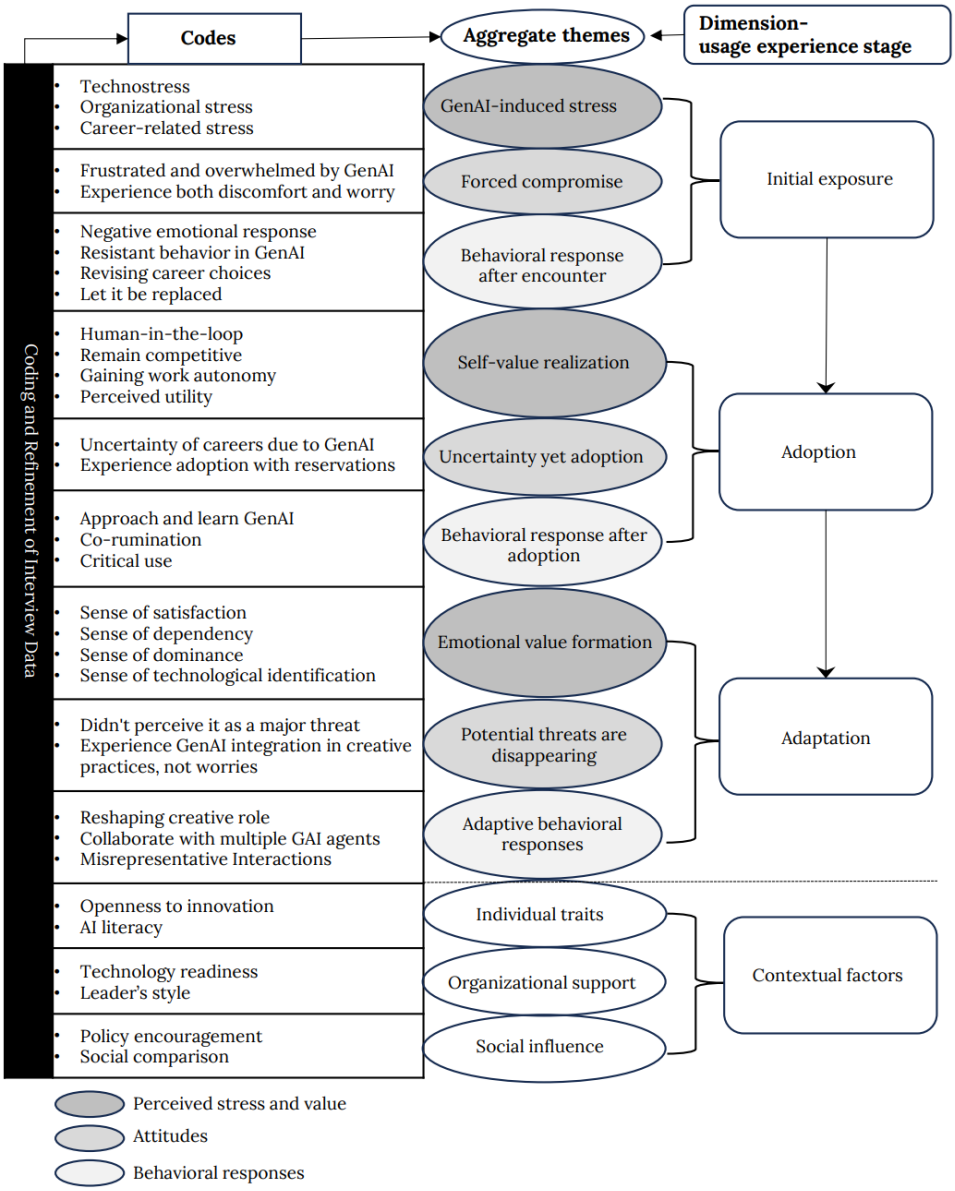

Figure 1. Themes and coding scheme

Findings

Findings are presented according to the twelve identified themes across participants' three usage experience stages.

Perceived stress and value in creative professionals

The coding analysis shows that creative professionals' engagement with GenAI involves initial exposure, adoption, and adaptive use. Figure 2 illustrates how participants' perceived stress and value evolve at different stages.

For participants in the ***initial exposure phase***, GenAI triggered significant stress, largely driven by occupational, technical, and organizational challenges. Occupational stress arises from GenAI lowering the creative threshold for professionals. P8 said, '*Almost anyone can use text-to-image AI to create art, the creative jobs might disappear*'. In addition, most participants reported that their creative occupation was classified as having high exposure to AI (Feltenet al., 2021) and was perceived as particularly vulnerable to AI replacement. While GenAI may be considered 'good

stress,' its technology advantages—such as strong fusion capabilities, anthropomorphic interactions, personalized services, rapid responsiveness, and high-quality content—could still threaten professionals, as inefficient AI might not be seen as a stressor. For example, P9 said, '*Why is AI advancing so rapidly? Because it truly learns from the data you give it, but people might not. It's quite frightening!*' Organizational stress stems from cost reduction and efficiency-driven, results-oriented culture. A marketing creator mentioned, '*For businesses, what once seemed like an impossible triangle (high quality, low cost, and short time) has become achievable with the advent of GenAI. We might not be able to reach it*' (P6).

During the ***adoption phase***, participants conveyed that perceptions of self-value realization, such as remaining competitive, gaining work autonomy, human-in-the-loop (HITL) and perceived utility, helped alleviate the initial three challenging stresses associated with GenAI. Compared to not adopting GenAI, embracing it can lead to greater work autonomy and to enhanced competitiveness (P1, P4, P11, P17). The need for human involvement in bridging GenAI's limitations strengthens the case for adopting GenAI, making it hard to move away from it under content creation stress. Similarly, the attraction of perceived utility seems to have weakened the stress on participants about content creative competition. As one participant noted, '*It's like an invisible assistant; I'm almost forgetting the career stress it caused*'(P10).

When participants enter the ***active adaptation stage***, adjusting and adapting to each other to GenAI will form their emotional value and subjectively enhance their sense of satisfaction, dependence, dominance, and technological identity, further influencing their initial perception of stress. For example, P15, a designer who has been using ChatGPT intermittently since its inception, shared: 'The *way GenAI and I can adapt to each other's needs is satisfying and removes any need for unnecessary concern.*' The sense of dominance stems from the guidance and mastery of the GenAI tool. For example, one participant stated, '*I can take control of GenAI and incorporate my ideas into the creation process to achieve my desired results*'(P7). Technological identity refers to an individual's identification with and sense of belonging to a particular technology. As one puts it,

> *AI, as a new quality productive force, has gradually reshaped the way I work in collaboration with it, and even if there is competitive stress, it is from other peers rather than AI* (P11).

Additionally, some participants acknowledged a growing dependence on GenAI during the adaptation phase, with a high likelihood of path dependency, which exacerbates the pressure to use the technology. For instance, P4 remarked,

> '*Before using ChatGPT, my work efficiency was 100%. After using it, it increased to 150% or even 200%. However, losing ChatGPT's assistance may drop my efficiency to 50% instead of returning to 100%.*'

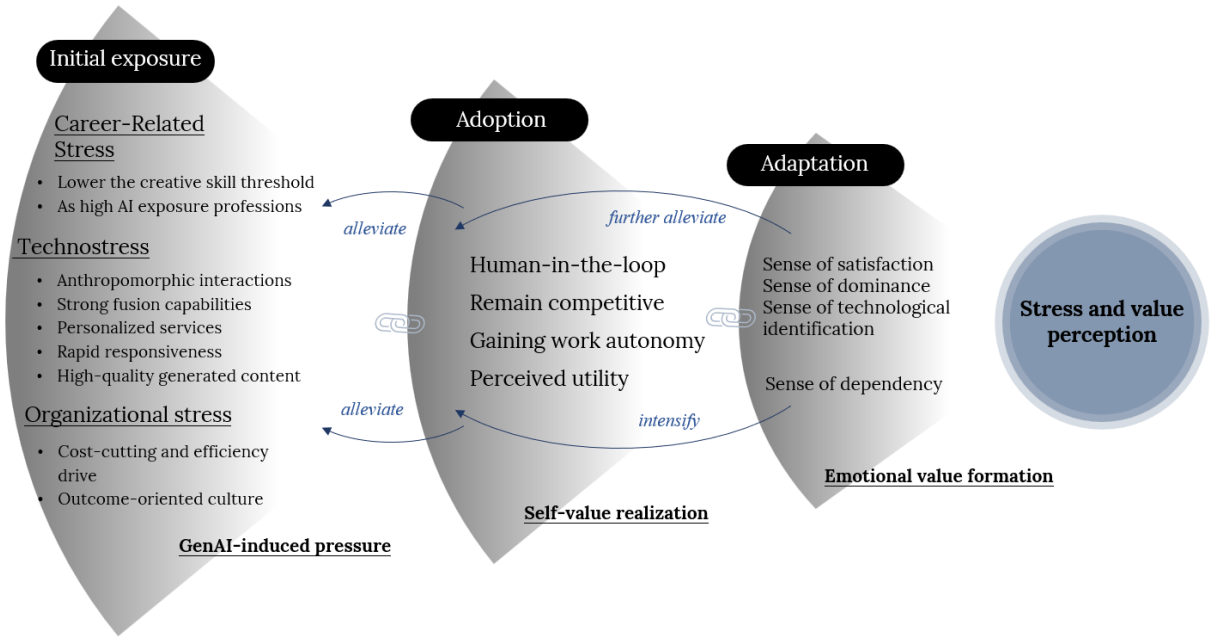

Figure 2. Stress and value perception in creative professionals

Attitudes and behavioral responses towards GenAI in creative professionals

Findings showed that creative professionals' attitudes toward GenAI in their work varied with their perceived value experiences at different stages of interaction. Participants' attitudes toward the use of GenAI may shift from initial worry to moderate concern, and eventually to less worry. These varying attitudes can trigger either positive or negative behavioral responses.

When participants were in the ***initial exposure stage***, they often had a strong negative attitude toward GenAI. At this stage, due to the predominant sense of threat and work stress forced creators in compromise, participants mainly exhibit negative maladaptive responses, including adverse emotional reactions, resistance behaviours, and negative career choices and adjustments. For example, one programmer (P18) expressed concern that the sense of crisis in his profession caused by GenAI led him to either silently or vocally resist it, but this resistance proved ineffective. Participants also conveyed that when they are particularly concerned that AI-generated content might undermine the value and significance of their creativity, they may exhibit resistance by withdrawing, avoiding, or opposing the use of GenAI in their workflow. Job burnout, leaving, and changing jobs were also behavioral responses mentioned repeatedly by participants in this phase. For example, P1 said, '*I used to be a programmer, and I quit because I was very aware of my career prospects. Sooner or later, my job would be replaced by AI.*'

In the ***adoption stage***, the stress of job replacement gradually transforms into a positive driving force for progress. Although creators adopt GenAI in their creative practices, the stress of competition can be activated at any time, causing them to fluctuate between an embracing attitude and concerns about their future careers. At this stage, some respondents take positive and constructive responses to navigate their challenges. They either adopt GenAI to assist with self-improvement and actively follow and recommend GenAI, or they begin to alleviate professional stress by continuously evaluating and critically reflecting on the use of GenAI. For example, the generation of mis/disinformation was identified by several respondents as one of the reasons they view GenAI with less tension. '*I find that ChatGPT often uses strange but plausible logic to arrive at conclusions that only seem correct at first glance*'(P2). Some participants (P2, P5, P12) cope with stress by over-discussing and sharing the negative experiences and flaws of GenAI in online communities, a behavior known as co-rumination (Hu et al., 2023).

The adoption of GenAI will further drive its exploratory and adaptive use (wael AL-khatib, 2023). At the ***adaptation stage***, some participants exhibit adaptive behavioral responses. Reshaping creative roles is notable, such as data analysts need to transition into '*AI model trainers and supervisors*'(P12), program developers perceive themselves no longer as mere '*code workers*' but as '*managers, controllers, and learners*' of the technology (P1), Photojournalism will undergo a role transformation from '*photographers to reporters to verifiers*'(P5). Another response is to collaborate with multiple GAI agents. A game music producer shared how they use AI tools in their workflow,

> *for lyrics, I use ChatGPT and NetEase Tianyin; for composing, Suno generates accompaniments and melodies; for vocals, ACE helps with voice replacement. For a complex music video, I use Kaiber, and for animations, I turn to Runway and Pika* (P9).

Finally, to protect themselves from job displacement as GenAI learns human behavior patterns, some creators deliberately mask their true needs during interactions with the technology. They use misrepresentative interactions to safeguard their job security and professional status. An advertising planner noted, '*I avoid sharing my expertise with ChatGPT because it might surpass my skills and render my role obsolete*'(P13).

Contextual factors in GenAI adaptation use

Participants' use of GenAI for their creative work depended on specific contexts individuals find themselves in, which encompassed three main factors: individual traits, organizational support, and social influence. These contexts may cause participants to linger in or move between different stages.

Findings on the individual traits of participants revealed that AI literacy and openness to innovation strongly influenced their stress, attitudes, and responses to GenAI. Those with higher AI literacy and a positive attitude towards innovation felt less competitive stress and were more excited than worried, demonstrating more positive adaptive coping behaviours. For example, P1, an illustrator, shared, '*I do meet many co-workers who are scared and resistant to it, but I embrace change and continuously adapt GenAI in my work*.'

If participants' individual traits enable them to proactively learn, adopt, and grow with GenAI naturally, then the organization and leadership will need them to do so. For example, P19 recalls her experience with GenAI: '*The company first encouraged independent use, then trained all staff on Midjourney and prompt skills, which I was initially reluctant to learn on my own*.' P14, in a leadership role, stated, '*I have mandated my employees to use AI for creation...*'

Social influence mentioned by participants, such as widespread support and promotion of GenAI in government policy and the media, also affects their engagement with GenAI. One mentioned, '*Government departments and big companies are already using AI; it's only a matter of time before it's everywhere. Embracing GenAI is a smart move*'(P16). Similarly, P17 observed, '*The new AI rules show that everyone's still backing the growth and use of GenAI*.'

Discussion and future research

This ongoing research uses exploratory qualitative methods to preliminarily explore creative professionals' perception and use of GenAI in content creation competitions with a value-attitude-behavior theory. Findings underscore that the transition to GenAI usage involves stages of initial exposure, adoption, and adaptation, highlighting the dynamic nature and self-adjustment of creative professionals. This contrasts with the static, cross-sectional findings on GenAI's impact and adoption. Our findings also address the call by Kshetri et al. (2023) to explore the career impacts of GenAI on creators from psychological, cognitive, and emotional micro-levels. Moreover, the different value perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral changes of creative professionals across the three stages suggest that the exposure effect (Wullenkord et al., 2016) is also present in the human-AI interaction between creative professionals and GenAI. Specifically, perceived stress can

pose a challenge to the effective use of GenAI, while in-depth experience and usage serve as a strategy to reduce the perception of GenAI as a source of stress or threat.

The practical implications of our findings include informing GenAI tool developers about targeting interventions for creative professionals at various stages of the design process. For instance, for creative professionals who are initially exposed to GenAI—those who view it with fear and stress—an ideal effective GenAI product should help them understand its underlying logic from the outset. It should build trust and promote informed engagement, rather than remaining a mysterious black box. As creative professionals become more familiar with and reliant on the tools during the adaptation phase, the GenAI system should help them maintain control over core creative tasks. It should ensure that GenAI not only supports the creative process but also provides creative professionals with greater autonomy in decision-making. Managers should guide employees in understanding GenAI's impact on their careers, enhance algorithmic and AI literacy training, and implement tailored management strategies to help creators adapt to GenAI integration, improving their sense of security and career belonging.

As part of an ongoing study, this paper has two main limitations: the sample does not include a diverse range of occupational levels, missing perspectives such as those from managers, and the findings are based on static self-report data, which could be biased; future research should use observational methods and multi-source data to provide a more objective analysis.

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