

AI VS HUMANS: Who Makes Better Ads?

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Advertising has always been an industry driven by human creativity. But anyone paying attention to the marketing landscape recently has seen a major shift: artificial intelligence is rapidly transforming the way we approach creative work.

At Cannes Lions, the industry-wide conversation was clear: AI isn't just the latest buzz, but a transformative force reshaping the advertising process. And with tech companies such as Google, Meta and TikTok having increasing presence at the event, the question on everyone's mind was whether we are moving from a creative industry to a purely tech industry.

DIVIDED OPINIONS AMONG MARKETERS

Senior marketers and creative teams seem sharply divided. Some view AI as a new partner, an enhancement tool to refine visuals, automate voice-overs, or polish creative execution. Others, however, see AI as an existential threat, envisioning a future where the entire advertising process, from initial brainstorm to final video, is fully automated. It's not just tech futurists speculating; it's industry veterans genuinely worried about their roles becoming obsolete.

For those of us deeply invested in consumer behaviour research, this is a fascinating moment. Can AI truly replicate, or even surpass, human creativity? And crucially, how will audiences respond to ads made entirely by algorithms?

PUTTING IT TO THE TEST: AI VERSUS HUMAN-MADE BILLBOARDS

To explore these questions, DVJ Insights recently collaborated with Talpa Media to test the impact of AI-generated ads versus traditional ads. We focused specifically on billboards, those short, simple "this program is sponsored by" spots on television. Billboards are ideal candidates for early AI adoption: they're concise, require minimal narrative complexity, and primarily serve to reinforce brand recognition.

The study involved over 1,000 respondents who each viewed a set of four billboards—two human-created and two AI-generated. Importantly, respondents were not informed that some of the billboards were AI-generated. Each billboard was evaluated on measures including brand recall, likeability, relevance, credibility, and perceived creativity.

Crucially, the research showed virtually no significant difference in how viewers perceived the two types of ads. AI-generated billboards matched their human counterparts on every major measure, from brand recall to emotional resonance. Interestingly, about a third of respondents who viewed an AI-generated billboard felt that it had been created by AI. But here's the catch: the exact same proportion, around one third, said the same about the human-made billboards. This suggests that viewers are not reliably able to distinguish between AI- and human-created content. In other words, our ability to "spot the bot" might be far more limited than we think.

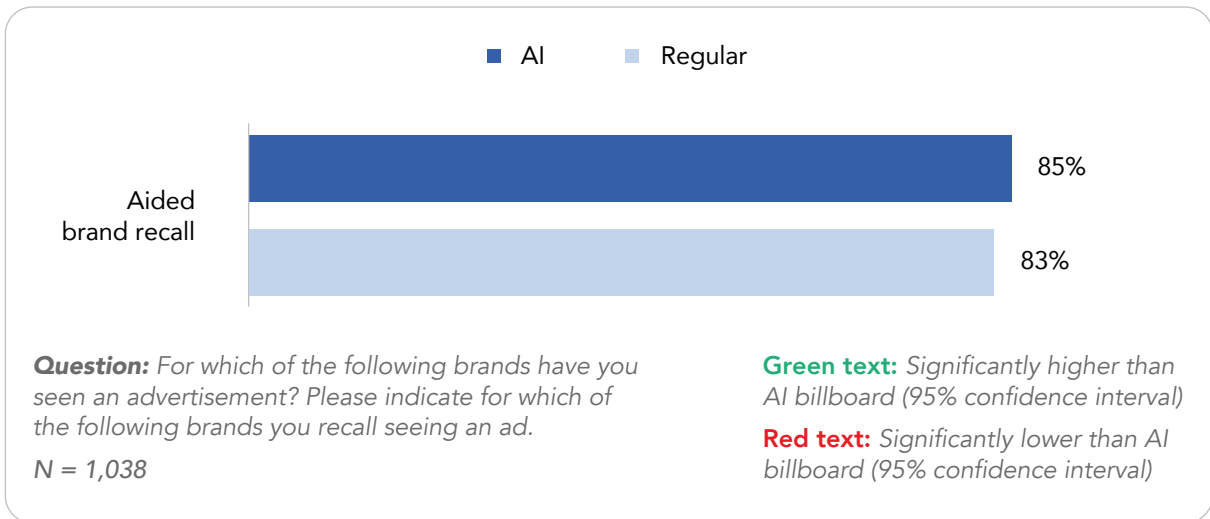


Figure 1: Aided brand recall scores for regular- and AI-billboards

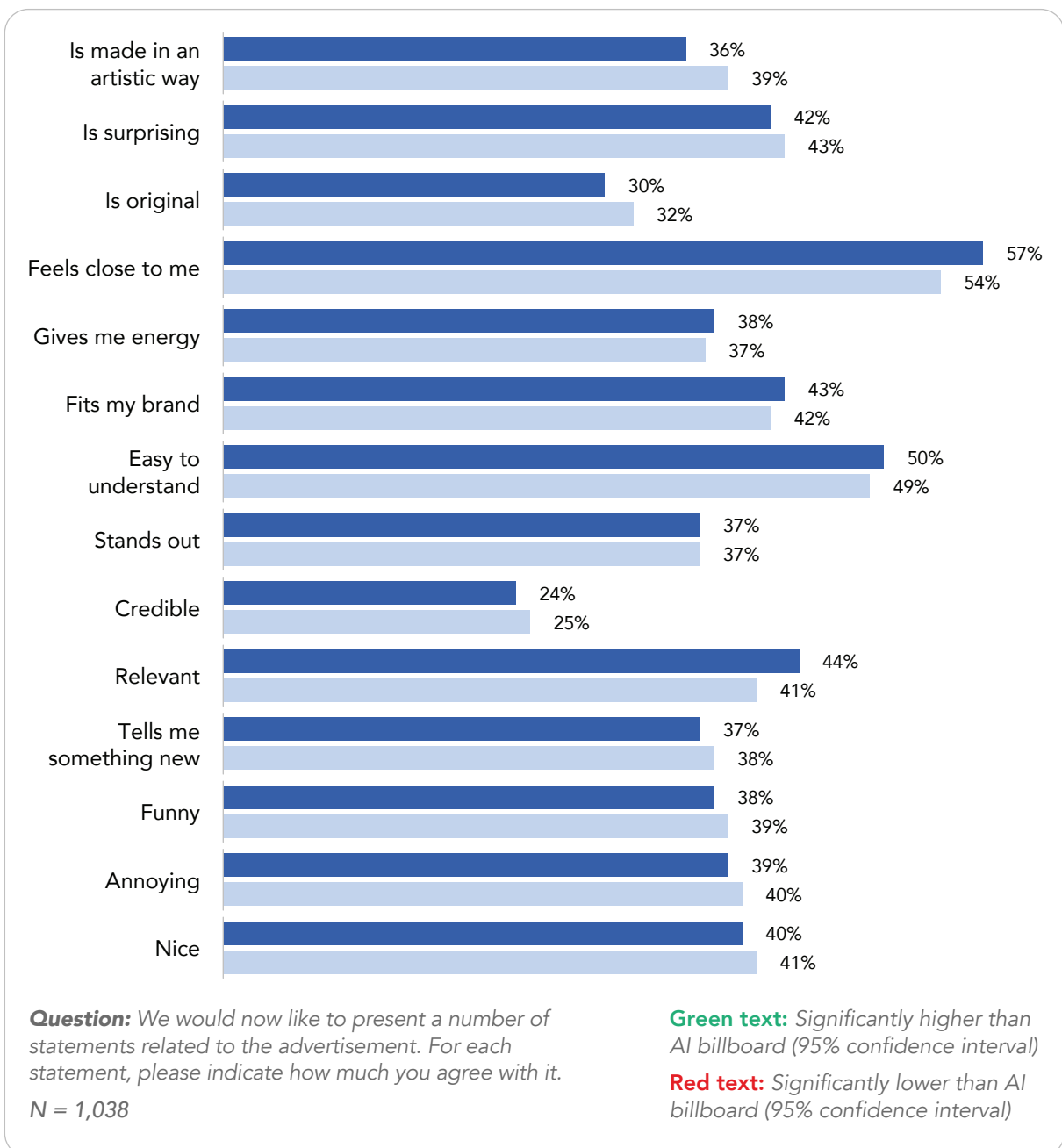


Figure 2: Regular- and AI-billboard scores on evaluation statements

Yet beneath these impressive results, there were subtle signals to heed. While overall perceptions were neutral to positive, when audiences did recognise a spot as AI-generated, it sometimes triggered scepticism about the brand's creativity or authenticity. In other words, the stakes for quality are high. An ad that feels generic or robotic can quickly turn viewers off, damaging brand perceptions.

BALANCING OPPORTUNITY AND RISK

For marketers, this represents both an opportunity and a challenge. AI's potential is undeniable. It can enhance efficiency, free up creative teams for higher-level tasks, and scale personalised content dramatically. But reliance on AI alone risks undermining brand authenticity, especially when creativity feels forced or superficial.

The real question for marketers, then, isn't whether to use AI, it's how. The future will likely be less about replacement and more about collaboration, blending human insight with algorithmic efficiency. This delicate balance could define the next era of advertising.

Importantly, these findings specifically relate to billboards, meaning they are short, low-creativity formats ideal for initial AI experimentation. The genuine test for AI lies in its potential to replace or enhance more complex, narrative-driven video ads. The pessimist might see the rise of AI as the end of human-created advertising. The positivist in me, however, is keen to embrace a more positive future timeline: leveraging AI to handle routine ads, freeing more time and resources for truly creative geniuses to work on innovative, high-impact advertising where human creativity shines brightest. Who is right? Only time will tell. But what's certain is that creativity, in all its forms, will continue to surprise us.

GET IN TOUCH



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