An Exploration of How AI-Generated Visuals Shape Creative Practices of Illustrators in Sri Lankan Print Media

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ABSTRACT: This study explores how AI generated visuals are shaping the creative practices of illustrators working in Sri Lankan print media, with special focus on Colombo District based organizations. The rapid growth of artificial intelligence tools has created many changes in creative industries around the world. However, there is limited research about how these changes are experienced by illustrators in Sri Lanka, especially in print media environments. The central question guiding this research is: How do AI-generated visuals shape the creative practices of illustrators in Sri Lankan print media? The study aimed to understand how illustrators use AI tools in their daily work, how AI affects creativity and originality, and how creative workflows are changing. The study used a qualitative research approach. Data was collected through twelve semi structured interviews and one focus group discussion with professional illustrators and graphic designers working in print media organizations in Colombo District. Illustrators were selected using purposive sampling because they had direct experience with AI-generated visual tools. The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis, guided by Sociotechnical Systems Theory. The findings showed that AI is mainly used as a support tool rather than a replacement for human creativity. Most Illustrator used AI during idea generation, concept development, and reference searching because it helps save time and improve efficiency. At the same time, Illustrator said that human skills, creative thinking, and final editing are still very important for professional quality work. Many Illustrators also explained that too much dependence on AI may reduce original thinking and deep creative exploration. Another important finding was that AI tools often struggle to accurately represent Sri Lankan cultural elements, traditions, and local visual identity. Because of this, designers still need to manually correct and improve many AI generated outputs. Illustrator also shared mixed views about authorship and ownership, but most felt that ownership remains with the designer when the original concept and direction come from the human creator. Overall, the study concludes that AI is changing the creative practices of illustrators in Sri Lankan print media in both positive and challenging ways. AI works best when it supports human creativity rather than replacing it. The study contributes to a better understanding of AI use in Sri Lanka's creative industry and may be useful for designers, educators, organizations, and future researchers.

Keywords: AI-generated visuals, creative practices, illustrators, print media, sociotechnical systems theory

1 INTRODUCTION

Illustration is a form of visual art that plays an important role in printing media such as books, magazines, newspapers and advertisements to convey a message, support storytelling, or communicate an idea within visuals. Illustrators are creative professionals who are responsible for creating these art works. An illustrator should have a level of

creativity, originality, idea generation, concept thinking, imagination, and work experience to generate a successful creative outcome. Creative practice in illustrator is not only about artistic talent; but also, about the process of researching, idea development, making decisions and feedback.

Creativity, commonly defined as the ability to generate novel and useful ideas [5]. Several scholars define creativity as a "human-specific capability which requires conscious thinking and strong emotions and the power of transforming the world" [8].

With the advancement in technology, AI power has been developed to generate visuals in seconds. In recent years, the use of AI generative tools in creative industries, including print media, has rapidly increased. Creative professionals also started to use AI visual generative tools to support their idea of generation, research, and concept development. According to Caramiaux et al. [2], the creative process is time consuming and inefficient for artists and creatives. Many professional designers use these AI visual generative tools to manage their time on predesign stage as an idea generation or a reference tool to explore new ideas and meet deadlines.

Supporters of AI generative tools argue that AI improves the creative practices of a designer because of the wide data base. According to the CEO of Picsart "I really see it more like a copilot to allow humans to be even more creative and more advanced in their expression. So, the things which were taking years of learning and training and fine tuning, now you can do it easier and faster. It's opened an opportunity for more people to be creative." According to Caramiaux et al. [2]. However, other researchers argue that AI visual generative tools rely on existing databases and repeat the visual elements and styles through artworks which reduce the uniqueness, originality, and creativity of an outcome. Additionally, scholars raise concerns about copyright, creative control, and lack of emotional depth in AI-generated art.

In Sri Lanka the use of AI visual generative technology is still in the emerging state. Print media organizations as well as freelance designers, especially in Colombo District, are slowly adapting to these technologies. This was proved by a researcher in an empirical study based on content analysis of 279 Sri Lankan public listed company's annual reports. It found out 26 companies mentioned their plan of using AI. Colombo has become a central hub for publishing houses and advertising agencies. Therefore, it makes a suitable place to study the impact of AI generative visuals on professional illustrators in print media specifically.

Ideally, The Sri Lankan professional illustrators in print media should be able to express their creative ideas with freedom in their artworks and this was expected to be an original, personalized idea with emotional depth and human expressions. In an ideal situation, the AI visual generative technology should be a supportive tool or the illustrator to idea generation or influence without overtaking creative control. Previous study shows that AI generative tools can be a supporting tool rather than a replacement. [5]. However, in reality the rapid increment of AI generative visual tools began to reshape the roles of creative professionals. Many designers use these tools to improve the speed of work and efficiency. Previous studies show that overuse of AI visual generative tools can be affected by design fixation, creative thinking, and originality. [7]. And some designs may contain similar elements and repeated patterns.

From the perspective of Sociotechnical system theory, creative practices are based on interaction between social systems and technological systems. In this situation, the social systems are skills, emotions, creativity, values and knowledge of illustrators, and the technological systems are visual generative artificial intelligence software and workflow. The problem emerges when the technological systems begin to overly influence the creative process of decision making without the user knowing. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the impact of AI generative visuals on the creative practices of illustrators in the Sri Lankan print media.

This paper is organized around a single, central research question that reflects the main research question of the original study:

"How do AI-generated visuals shape the creative practices of illustrators in Sri Lankan print media?" This study helps to understand how AI generated visuals shape the creative practices of illustrators in the print media sector in Colombo District, Sri Lanka. The findings of this research will be important for professional illustrators currently working in print media, for print media organizations seeking to understand the

creative risks of using AI generated visuals without clear guidelines, and for design education preparing future creative professionals to work with developing technologies. The study will also contribute to existing literature on AI generative visuals and creative practices of illustrators by providing empirical evidence from a Sri Lankan context, filling an important gap by adding local knowledge to international research.

The study is conducted to professional illustrators with at least one year of experience working in Colombo District print media organizations which were selected through purposive sampling. It focuses specifically on printing related creative work such as book covers, magazine covers, story book art, advertisement posters and does not extend to newspaper layout or typographic page design or illustration produced solely for digital media.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The rapid development of artificial intelligence has brought significant changes to creative industries. This literature explores the existing knowledge of AI generative visuals and their impact on creative practices and how artificial intelligence shapes the creative process of illustrators in the print media industry. The chapter review is organized around Sociotechnical System Theory as the main framework which provides an understanding of how technology and human creativity interact together.

In recent years, artificial intelligence has transformed from being primarily a research topic to becoming a practical reality in many creative fields. Anantrasirichai & Bull [5] explained if AI has entered industries like design, music, filmmaking and visual arts and they explained that AI was mainly used for automation and repetitive tasks but now AI was developed to generate visuals, music and content writing. [5]. This shows 0 that currently AI is not only a tool to support work, but it also creates creative output by itself. This system is what makes AI more developed. [5]. The rise of generative text to visual AI systems represents a major milestone in AI history, and these tools are adapted in creative industries because they save time for the design process and make it easier for the designer to research and develop ideas. [6].

Caramiaux et al. [2] expand this discussion by looking at how AI changes the narratives and values within creative organizations. Their research findings reveal that when AI tools were introduced to the creative work, they show changes in the creative control, idea generation, and output quality rather than artistic value. This may result in gradually shifting designers from traditional creative processes to AI managed processes. If the focus moves too much toward managing AI systems, there's a risk that traditional creative skills and human decision making might be undervalued. These discussions connect directly with the framework of this study. Sociotechnical system theories explain that technology and social systems are always connected. Bostrom and Heinen [2]. Adaptation of AI generated visuals techniques to the industries in in the creative practice of a designer will not disappear or replace, but it can reshape the process. [7].

According to Fu et al. [6], generative AI does not consistently affect all users' inherent creativity, but it does improve first-time generative AI users' divergent thinking as measured by idea fluency and flexibility. Other researchers, however, caution that AI visual generative tools rely on existing databases and repeat visual elements and styles across artworks, which can reduce uniqueness, originality and creativity in the outcome.

Previous research of Deckker & Sumanasekara [8] shows that AI image generation often struggles to represent Sri Lankan cultural identity properly. Their research reveals that AI systems typically train on predominantly western data sets because of this when users use AI tools to generate Sri Lankan visuals the outputs often fail to accurately represent Sri Lankan, cultural elements, visual, aesthetics, and social context. This creates a challenge for illustrators who want to use AI while keepkeepg cultural accuracy. In Sri Lankan, creative words AI cannot perform individually. The outputs need human guidance to adjust, colour symbols and design details to reflect the cultural impact. [8].

Understanding the organizational context of Print media in Sri Lanka is highly concentrated in Colombo the Department of national archives of Sri Lanka [13] shows that most printing processes are located in Colombo District because of this illustrated working in Colombo District usually walk in

more structured organizations which they may have been better access to technologies, professional networks and industry opportunities at the same time they also faced stronger competition and higher productivity expectations. According to Pasqual [14] Sri Lankan newspaper productions follow a strict editorial system that likely influences visual content production as well newspapers, and operates under deadline pressures, editorial guidelines, and commercial considerations.

This literature review identifies several significant gaps that support the need for this study. Most existing research examines AI's impact on creative work in Western, developed-country contexts, with minimal research addressing developing-country contexts like Sri Lanka, where factors such as technology access, internet infrastructure, workplace culture, professional standards, and organizational structures may influence how AI generative visuals are used in creative work. Existing studies also tend to focus on design professionals in general, with limited research explaining the illustrator's perspective, particularly those in traditional media industries such as magazines, book illustrations, and poster design. Many existing studies also use experimental or quantitative research methods, which, while valuable for establishing general patterns, provide limited insight into the personal experiences of creative professionals. Finally, the combination of AI generated visuals, professional illustrators, print media organizations, and the Sri Lankan context has not been widely studied, and this study aims to fill this knowledge gap by exploring these relationships through empirical research.

Sociotechnical system theory was first developed by researchers at the Tavistock institute in the 1950s and 1960s. The researchers studied the workplace and found that many new technologies did not give the expected results. The main reason was that the organization focused too much on the machines and systems rather than human aspects and social connections. The theory explains that every organization has two main parts, such as technical subway systems and social subway systems. The technical subway system includes tools, machines, technologies, work processes, and physical equipment in this research the tactical subsystems means AI visual, generative tools, digital illustration, software, computers, and other hardware used by illustrators the social subway system includes the people the employers their skills, knowledge attitudes, their practices, professional identities, their workflow, the teamwork, the management structures, values, and organizational culture cultures. Bostrom and Heinen [2] applied sociotechnical systems theory applied sociotechnical systems theory to information systems, establishing principles that remain relevant to AI systems today, arguing that many system failures happen because there is a mismatch between technology and real workplace conditions. Recent research by Storey et al. [10]. applies this framework directly to generative AI, describing generative AI as reshaping work practices rather than replacing them, creating new forms of coordination while also generating new tensions and opportunities around data privacy, copyright, authorship transparency, and ethical decision making.

3 GETTING STARTED

This study used a qualitative research approach because it aimed to understand the personal experiences, opinions, and creative practices of illustrators and related creative professionals. The research design was guided by Sociotechnical Systems Theory. A qualitative approach was suitable because the study focused on experiences and interactions rather than numerical measurement.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants with direct relevance to the research topic.

Participants met the following criteria: (1) they were working professionally in or were directly connected to Sri Lankan print media; (2) they had at least one year of professional experience; (3) they had experience or exposure to AI-generated visual tools through direct use or professional awareness; and (4) they were willing to participate and provide informed consent. Twelve participants took part in semi-structured interviews. A separate group of five participants took part in one focus group discussion.

Therefore, the study involved 17 participants in total. The focus group participants were not part of the twelve interview participants.

The twelve interviews were selected based on the principle of data saturation.

Saunders et al. [11] discuss saturation as a point at which additional qualitative data provide limited new insights. The interviews were the primary data collection method and explored individual experiences, opinions, and creative practices. After the interviews were analyzed, the focus group discussion was conducted to examine and confirm patterns and themes identified from the interview data. The focus group therefore functioned as a validation and comparison stage rather than as a replacement for the interviews.

Ethical considerations were addressed before data collection. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw. Informed consent was obtained before participation.

Participants were not identified by their personal names in the paper. Participant codes such as P1 to P12 were used for the interview data, and the focus group participants were reported collectively to protect confidentiality. Audio recordings and transcripts were handled for research purposes only.

The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-step framework of Braun and Clarke [12]. Interview and focus group data were first analyzed separately. The researcher transcribed the recordings and repeatedly read the transcripts to become familiar with the data. NVivo was used to organize, manage, and code the qualitative data. Initial coding was performed separately for interview and focus group data to identify similarities and differences. The NVivo codes were then reviewed by the researcher, compared across the two datasets, grouped into related concepts, and refined manually. The final themes were therefore developed through researcher-led interpretation of the NVivo-organized coded data, rather than by discarding the NVivo analysis. The focus group findings were used to confirm, clarify, or challenge patterns identified in the interview data.

The analysis was also informed by Sociotechnical Systems Theory. Findings were considered in relation to social system factors such as emotions, professional identity, creative confidence, skills, and originality; technical system factors such as AI tools, prompt writing, workflow changes, speed, technical limitations, and efficiency; and social tensions such as concerns about human creativity, AI suggestions, over-dependence, and design fixation.

3.1 *Participant Profile*

Table 1 provides a summary of the participant groups and professional context. All interview participants met the minimum one-year professional experience criterion. The reported AI experience below refers to the approximate period of AI use or exposure where this information was recorded during participant selection.

Table 1. Participant profile

Code	Role	AI Use
P1	Manager	2 years
P2	Graphic designer	1 year
P3	Graphic designer	2 years
P4	Graphic designer	Since 2023
P5	Graphic designer	1 year
P6	Senior Illustrator	2 years
P7	Graphic designer	2 years
P8	Illustrator	2 years
P9	Graphic designer	2+ year
P10	Art Dirrector	1.5 years
P11	Graphic designer	2 Years
P12	Graphic designer	2 Years
FGD	Five participant from creative design and illustration roles	Varied

* Note: Exact personal names were not reported. Participant codes were used to maintain confidentiality. The five focus group participants were separate from the twelve interview participants.

4 RESULTS

Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with professional illustrators and graphic designers, while five separate participants joined the focus group discussion. The participants included in-house designers, illustrators, a freelance creative designer, a storybook illustrator, and other creative professionals connected to print media in Colombo District. Thematic analysis of the interview and focus group data produced five main themes.

The first theme, human-AI interaction and creative thinking, showed mixed views about whether AI expands or limits creativity. P1 explained that AI is used as a support tool and that users must guide it. Some participants felt AI opened new directions for ideas, while others were concerned that excessive use could reduce critical thinking.

P12 described the general position as being influenced rather than dependent, with final decisions remaining with the designer.

The second theme, workflow transformation, showed that AI mainly saves time during reference gathering and idea generation. P3 explained that AI can reduce the time needed to obtain visual references through prompts. Participants also stressed that AI was normally used at particular stages rather than for the complete final design.

Technical limitations were noted, including the need for further preparation of outputs for print requirements such as CMYK and final file preparation.

The third theme, creative control, authorship, and professional identity, found that participants generally connected ownership with the human contribution to the concept, direction, prompting, editing, and final design. However, participants also recognized that ownership becomes more uncertain when a designer simply copies an AI-generated result with little modification. Some participants were concerned that AI could make it easier for less experienced users to produce work that appears similar to professional work.

The fourth theme, collaboration and communication, showed that awareness of AI use varied among clients and workplaces. Participants described differences in organizational attitudes, with some workplaces encouraging AI use and others restricting it because of concerns about originality or professional standards.

The fifth theme, organizational influence and cultural context, revealed concerns about the accuracy of Sri Lankan cultural representation. Several participants said that AI-generated outputs could contain visual elements associated with other cultural contexts, including Indian visual influences. Participants therefore reported that manual correction was often required. Time, deadlines, and cost pressures were also described as factors influencing AI adoption.

Across the five themes, the findings show that AI is changing illustration work through a combination of benefits and challenges. Benefits include faster idea generation, reference searching, and workflow efficiency. Challenges include originality, cultural representation, professional identity, technical print requirements, and possible over-dependence.

5 DISCUSSION

The findings show that AI is mainly used as a supporting tool during pre-production rather than as a complete replacement for the illustrator.

Participants described using AI for reference gathering, suggesting directions, and developing concepts. From a sociotechnical perspective, this shows an interaction between technical capabilities and the skills, values, and decisions of the illustrator. AI becomes part of the workflow, but human judgement remains important.

Influence versus dependency was an important part of the findings. Participants explained that AI use can increase when deadlines are tight because it saves time. Under less time pressure, participants described using AI more selectively for reference and idea exploration. This suggests that the level of AI influence is affected not only by the technology itself but also by workplace conditions such as deadlines, workload, and organizational expectations.

The study also found that AI changes parts of the workflow without fully replacing the illustrator's work. AI-generated visuals often require further editing, refinement, and technical preparation before they can be used in print. Print work also requires appropriate resolution, colour settings, file preparation, and other production adjustments.

Therefore, human skills remain important in producing final professional outputs.

Participants had different views about authorship and ownership. Many connected ownership with the person who develops the original concept, directs the work, provides the prompts, and performs the final editing. However, some participants considered ownership unclear when AI-generated material is used with little human modification. This finding suggests a need for clearer organizational guidance about AI-assisted creative work.

Cultural representation was another important issue. Participants reported that AI-generated visuals could mix Sri Lankan cultural elements with visual characteristics associated with other countries. This means that AI can save time during early creative stages but may also create additional corrective work when cultural accuracy is important. The finding supports the importance of examining AI use in local cultural con-

texts rather than assuming that findings from other countries will apply directly to Sri Lankan print media.

Organizational context also influenced AI use. Some organizations encouraged AI because it could help meet deadlines and manage costs, while others were more cautious because of concerns about originality and professional standards. This supports the sociotechnical view that technology cannot be separated from the organizational environment in which it is used.

Overall, the answer to the research question is that AI-generated visuals shape the creative practices of Sri Lankan print media illustrators mainly by changing pre-design activities, idea development, reference gathering, and workflow speed. At the same time, AI introduces concerns about originality, authorship, professional identity, cultural accuracy, and over-dependence. The level of influence varies according to the individual, the task, and the workplace context.

5.1 *Practical Implications*

For illustrators, AI can be used as a support tool while maintaining human control over concepts, decisions, editing, and final outputs.

For print media organizations, clear internal guidelines can help employees understand when and how AI-generated visuals should be used, especially when cultural accuracy, originality, and client requirements are important.

For design education, students can continue to develop creative thinking, sketching, concept development, and visual decision-making skills alongside AI literacy. This can help future designers use AI as part of a broader creative process.

For future researchers, longitudinal studies and comparisons between different types of print media organizations could examine how AI use changes over time and how workplace conditions influence adoption.

6 CONCLUSION

This study explored how AI-generated visuals shape the creative practices of illustrators in Sri Lankan print media. The findings show that AI is mainly used as a support tool for idea generation, reference gathering, concept development, and saving time. However, participants also identified concerns about originality, cultural representation, authorship, technical print requirements, and possible over-dependence. The findings demonstrate that the influence of AI is shaped by both technical capabilities and social factors such as human skills, professional values, workplace conditions, and organizational rules. Therefore, AI-generated visuals are becoming part of the creative workflow of Sri Lankan print media professionals, but human judgement and creative skills continue to play an important role in the final work.

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