

Creative Agency, Authorship, and Professional Identity among Graphic Designers in AI-Assisted Brand Design

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ABSTRACT

The integration of generative artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming visual communication design by reshaping creative processes and visual meaning production. However, limited research has explored how graphic designers experience and interpret their creative roles when using AI in brand visual identity development. This study aims to examine how designers make sense of their creative role in AI-assisted design practices. Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with professional graphic designers and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) supported by visual elicitation. The findings show that designers perceive AI as an ambivalent creative partner that enhances ideation while challenging control, authorship, and authenticity. The study also reveals that designers reconstruct their professional identity by positioning themselves as interpreters and mediators of meaning within AI-assisted workflows. These findings contribute to understanding AI-mediated design as a meaning-centered experience and provide insights into the evolving relationship between human creativity and intelligent systems in visual communication design.



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INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has significantly transformed the field of visual communication design and multimedia, particularly with the emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AI). In recent years, AI-powered systems have increasingly been integrated into creative workflows, enabling designers to generate visual outputs, explore stylistic variations, and accelerate the design process through algorithmic assistance (Gonzaga, 2024). This shift has changed not only the technical process of visual production but also the way designers understand creativity, authorship, and professional agency.

In the context of brand visual identity, this transformation is especially significant because branding is not merely a visual or technical activity, but a meaning-making process that communicates values, narratives, and symbolic representations to audiences (Ben-Lulu, 2024). The integration of generative AI into this process introduces new dynamics, where visual outputs can be rapidly produced and iterated, often without the same level of human deliberation traditionally associated with design practice. This shift raises important questions about how designers experience their creative role, how they negotiate meaning in AI-assisted environments, and how they maintain a sense of authorship and authenticity in their work.

The relevance of this phenomenon extends beyond technical efficiency or innovation, as it touches upon the subjective and experiential dimensions of creative work. Designers are not only interacting with tools but are also engaging in processes that shape their professional identity, emotional engagement, and sense of agency (Nachabe Taan, 2025). The presence of AI in creative workflows introduces a new form of interaction in which human intention intersects with algorithmic suggestion, creating a space where meaning is co-constructed. This interaction has implications for how creativity is perceived, valued, and experienced, both by designers themselves and by the broader society that

consumes visual media. As such, understanding the lived experiences of designers becomes essential for capturing the human dimension of this technological transformation.

Despite the growing body of research on AI in design, much of the existing literature has focused on technical capabilities, productivity gains, and aesthetic outcomes, often overlooking the experiential and interpretive aspects of design practice (Subagyo, 2021). There remains a limited understanding of how designers themselves perceive, interpret, and emotionally respond to the integration of generative AI into their work. This gap highlights the need for an approach that prioritizes subjective meaning and lived experience, allowing for a deeper exploration of how individuals make sense of complex and evolving phenomena. A phenomenological perspective is particularly suited to this inquiry, as it enables the investigation of how designers experience the intersection between human creativity and machine-generated outputs, and how they construct meaning within this interaction.

In this regard, exploring the phenomenon through a phenomenological lens provides an opportunity to uncover the essential structures of experience that underlie AI-assisted design practices. By focusing on how designers describe, interpret, and reflect upon their engagement with generative AI, this study seeks to move beyond surface-level observations and engage with the deeper meanings that shape contemporary visual communication. Such an approach not only contributes to theoretical understanding but also offers insights into the evolving nature of creativity, authorship, and professional identity in the digital age.

Research on human experience within creative and technological environments has increasingly gained attention, particularly in the context of visual communication design where meaning, interpretation, and aesthetic judgment are central (Febrian et al., 2025). In recent years, scholars have begun to recognize that the integration of generative AI into creative practices is not only a technical development but also an experiential phenomenon that shapes how designers perceive their roles, construct meaning, and engage with visual production. Studies in digital creativity and algorithmic culture have highlighted how designers interact with intelligent systems, suggesting that creative processes are becoming hybrid spaces where human intuition and machine-generated outputs intersect. This growing interest indicates that understanding the subjective experiences of designers is essential for capturing the evolving nature of creativity in contemporary visual culture.

However, exploring such experiences presents significant methodological challenges. Much of the existing research in this area has relied on quantitative approaches or experimental designs that prioritize measurable outcomes such as efficiency, speed, and visual quality. While these approaches provide valuable insights into the performance and capabilities of AI systems, they often fail to capture the depth, complexity, and ambiguity of human experience (Tuaf & Orkibi, 2025). The subjective dimensions of creativity such as emotional tension, identity negotiation, and perceived authorship are inherently difficult to quantify and require methods that can access participants' lived realities in a nuanced and interpretive manner. As noted in studies on AI aesthetics and creative practice, the reliance on surface-level metrics can obscure the deeper experiential transformations occurring within design processes.

These methodological limitations suggest that many existing approaches remain insufficient for fully understanding the essence of AI-mediated design experiences. By focusing predominantly on observable outputs or generalized patterns, prior studies often overlook the interpretive processes through which designers make sense of their interactions with technology (Gilbert & Dobson, 2025). This gap becomes particularly evident in the context of brand visual identity, where meaning, authenticity, and emotional resonance are central to design practice. Without a methodological framework capable of accessing subjective meaning, the richness of designers' lived experiences remains underexplored. Consequently, there is a clear need for research approaches that can uncover the deeper structures of experience and provide a more comprehensive understanding of how designers navigate the intersection between human creativity and generative AI.

In response to the rapid integration of generative artificial intelligence into visual communication design, existing studies have generally relied on practical and performance-oriented approaches to understand this phenomenon. These approaches often emphasize the functional advantages of AI, such as increased efficiency, rapid ideation, and enhanced visual output quality.

Within the domain of branding and visual identity, AI is frequently positioned as a tool that optimizes workflow and expands creative possibilities. While such perspectives contribute to understanding the operational benefits of AI in design practice, they tend to frame the phenomenon primarily in terms of utility and measurable outcomes, rather than as a lived and interpreted experience.

However, these dominant approaches exhibit clear limitations when applied to the deeper dimensions of creative practice. By focusing on observable outputs and technological performance, prior research often overlooks how designers experience, interpret, and negotiate their interaction with AI systems. The subjective aspects of design such as the sense of authorship, the feeling of creative ownership, and the negotiation of professional identity remain insufficiently explored. As highlighted in studies on digital creativity and algorithmic culture, the integration of AI introduces not only new tools but also new forms of meaning-making that cannot be fully captured through quantitative or surface-level qualitative methods. Consequently, existing approaches provide a fragmented understanding of the phenomenon, where the experiential richness and internal tensions faced by designers are largely absent.

This limitation indicates the need for an alternative methodological orientation capable of capturing the essence of designers' lived experiences. A phenomenological approach offers a more suitable pathway, as it prioritizes the exploration of meaning as it is perceived and constructed by individuals within their specific contexts. By focusing on how designers describe, reflect upon, and interpret their engagement with generative AI, phenomenology enables a deeper and more holistic understanding of the phenomenon. Such an approach allows for the identification of underlying experiential structures, including the negotiation of creative agency, the redefinition of professional identity, and the tension between human intention and algorithmic suggestion. Therefore, adopting a phenomenological perspective is essential to move beyond functional explanations and toward a more comprehensive understanding of AI-mediated design as a lived and meaningful experience.

Building upon the identified knowledge gap, this study shifts the focus from outcome-oriented and technically driven perspectives toward an exploration of lived experience within the domain of visual communication design. Previous studies in AI-assisted design have predominantly emphasized performance, efficiency, and aesthetic output, offering limited insight into how designers themselves interpret and experience the integration of generative systems in their creative practice. As a result, the deeper experiential dimensions such as the negotiation of authorship, the perception of authenticity, and the transformation of professional identity remain insufficiently understood within the current body of knowledge.

To address this limitation, the present study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of graphic designers in constructing brand visual identity in the era of generative artificial intelligence. This approach is particularly relevant because it enables an in-depth examination of how designers interpret, negotiate, and assign meaning to their interaction with AI within the specific context of creative production. Through this lens, the study seeks to uncover how experiences of creative agency, control, authenticity, and identity are shaped by the presence of algorithmic systems in the design process. By prioritizing subjective meaning and reflective interpretation, this approach moves beyond surface-level observations and engages with the complexity of human–technology interaction in contemporary design environments.

This article is structured to provide a coherent and systematic exploration of the phenomenon. The introduction establishes the general and specific background, followed by the articulation of the knowledge gap and the rationale for adopting a phenomenological approach. The method section outlines the interpretative phenomenological design, participant characteristics, data collection procedures, and analytical framework. The results section presents the core themes derived from participants' lived experiences, supported by direct quotations that reflect their subjective perspectives. The discussion then interprets these findings in relation to existing literature, leading to a conclusion that highlights the theoretical and practical implications of understanding AI-mediated design as an experiential and meaning-centered phenomenon.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological design to explore how graphic designers make sense of their creative role and professional identity while constructing brand visual identity in the era of generative artificial intelligence. Phenomenology was selected because the focus of the inquiry centered on lived experience, perceived meaning, and the subjective interpretation of a rapidly changing creative environment. Rather than measuring attitudes or testing predetermined variables, this design enabled an in-depth examination of how participants experienced, interpreted, and emotionally negotiated the integration of generative AI into their design practice.

An interpretative phenomenological orientation was considered particularly appropriate because the phenomenon under investigation involved not only experience itself, but also the meaning assigned to that experience by those living through it (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). In this tradition, experience is understood as context-bound, reflective, and inseparable from the social and technological conditions within which it occurs. The study therefore emphasized how designers described creative tension, authorship, authenticity, and professional transformation in their own terms, while allowing these accounts to be interpreted as part of a broader structure of meaning. This approach was aligned with the research question, which sought to understand how graphic designers subjectively experience and interpret their creative role in AI-mediated branding processes.

Participants

Participants consisted of professional graphic designers with direct experience in developing brand visual identity using generative AI tools. Inclusion criteria were defined as follows: participants had to be actively engaged in graphic design or visual branding work, have at least one year of professional experience in design practice, have used generative AI applications as part of their design workflow within the previous twelve months, and have been involved in projects related to brand identity, visual communication, or digital creative production. Exclusion criteria included designers with no practical experience in branding work, individuals whose interaction with AI was limited to casual experimentation without application in client or professional projects, and participants unable to complete an in-depth interview in a reflective and detailed manner.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling in order to obtain information-rich cases that could illuminate the essence of the phenomenon under study. Recruitment was conducted through professional design networks, online creative communities, and referrals from practitioners working in branding, digital design, and visual communication. Potential participants were first contacted through email or direct message and were provided with a brief explanation of the study aims, eligibility criteria, expected interview duration, and the voluntary nature of participation. Individuals who expressed interest were then screened against the inclusion and exclusion criteria before being invited to participate in the interview. Because interpretative phenomenological studies prioritize depth over breadth, a relatively small and homogeneous sample was considered appropriate (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). The sample comprised eight participants, which allowed close engagement with individual narratives while preserving sufficient variation in experience. The participants included both male and female designers, ranged in age from early adulthood to mid-career, and represented diverse professional contexts such as freelance branding, creative agencies, digital studios, and independent visual consulting. These characteristics were relevant because they situated participants within the contemporary ecology of AI-assisted design practice and provided a meaningful context for understanding how generative systems were encountered across different professional settings.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews supported by visual elicitation. This method was chosen because the phenomenon under investigation was closely tied to visual production, aesthetic judgment, and reflective engagement with design artifacts. A semi-structured interview guide was used to ensure consistency across interviews while preserving flexibility for participants to elaborate on experiences that were personally meaningful. The interview guide included open-ended questions related to creative process, interaction with generative AI, perceptions

of authorship, feelings about authenticity, and changes in professional identity. Follow-up prompts were used to deepen reflection on specific episodes, decisions, and emotional responses emerging from practice.

Visual elicitation was incorporated by inviting participants to discuss selected examples of branding work, AI-generated design outputs, prompt-based experiments, or visual drafts that represented moments of tension, insight, or creative negotiation. The use of visual materials helped participants articulate tacit aspects of their experience that might have remained difficult to express through verbal questioning alone (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). This procedure was especially relevant for a study situated in visual communication design, where meaning is often embedded in images, iterations, and aesthetic choices rather than in abstract verbal explanation.

Interviews were conducted individually in settings that supported privacy and participant comfort, including quiet studio spaces and secure online meeting platforms when face-to-face interaction was not feasible. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 75 minutes, depending on the depth and pace of participant reflection. Data collection was carried out in an atmosphere designed to encourage openness, with participants being informed that there were no right or wrong answers and that emphasis would be placed on lived experience rather than technical performance. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. Field notes were also compiled to capture contextual impressions, pauses, emotional emphasis, and observations related to the visual materials discussed during the interview process.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which was selected because it is well suited to examining how individuals make sense of complex and personally significant experiences. This analytic approach was consistent with the interpretative phenomenological design of the study and supported the exploration of both experiential detail and deeper layers of meaning (Fife, 2020; Kawamura, 2020). The goal of the analysis was not merely to list recurring responses, but to identify essential experiential themes that revealed how generative AI was lived, negotiated, and understood within the designers' creative and professional worlds.

The analysis proceeded through a series of systematic stages. First, each transcript was read repeatedly to develop familiarity with the participant's narrative as a whole. Attention was given to language, emphasis, contradictions, metaphors, and emotionally charged expressions. Second, initial notes were developed to capture descriptive content, linguistic features, and conceptual observations. Third, emergent themes were generated from these notes by identifying units of meaning that reflected significant aspects of the participant's lived experience. Fourth, connections among emergent themes were examined within each case in order to develop a coherent thematic structure grounded in that individual account. After within-case analysis had been completed, patterns across cases were identified to construct higher-order themes that represented shared dimensions of the phenomenon while preserving experiential nuance.

Throughout this process, interpretation moved iteratively between individual excerpts, whole transcripts, and the developing thematic structure. This recursive movement made it possible to retain the specificity of each participant's account while gradually clarifying broader experiential patterns. NVivo software was used to support data organization, coding management, and retrieval of thematic excerpts; however, interpretive judgment remained grounded in close reading of the interview material rather than in software-driven categorization (Daly, 2007; Longhofer et al., 2012). The final themes were refined until they clearly captured the essential meanings embedded in participants' accounts of AI-assisted branding work, particularly in relation to creative agency, authorship, authenticity, professional identity, and perceived control.

To strengthen trustworthiness, several validation strategies were integrated into the analytic process. Member checking was conducted by returning summary interpretations to selected participants to confirm that the thematic representation remained faithful to their intended meaning. Triangulation was supported through the integration of interview narratives, visual artifacts, and contextual field

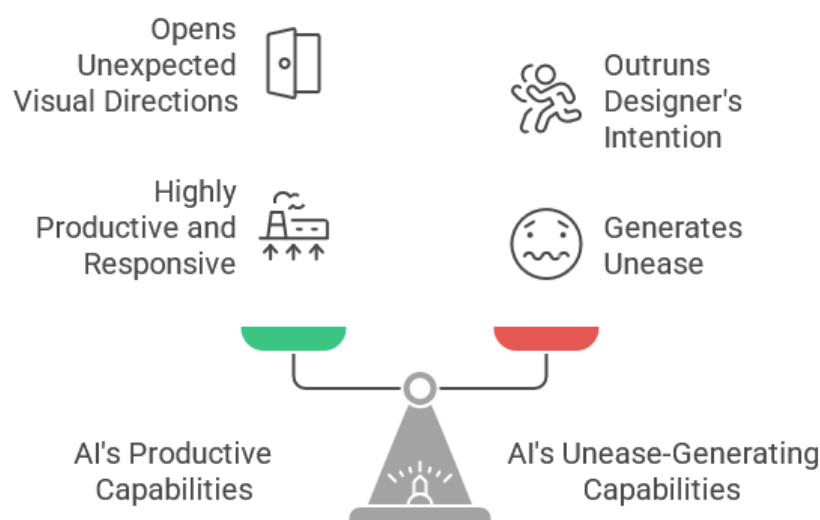
notes. An audit trail was maintained to document coding decisions, thematic development, and analytical refinements, thereby increasing transparency and methodological coherence.

RESULTS

Generative AI as an Ambivalent Creative Partner

Participants consistently described generative AI as a presence that could not be reduced to a simple instrument. Although they initially approached AI as a supportive device for accelerating ideation and visual experimentation, prolonged engagement led them to experience it as an ambivalent creative partner. On the one hand, AI was perceived as highly productive, responsive, and capable of opening unexpected visual directions. On the other hand, this same capability generated unease, particularly when AI-produced suggestions seemed to outrun or redirect the designer's original intention.

Balancing AI's Creative Power and Designer's Control



Several participants explained that AI had changed the tempo and rhythm of their design process. Tasks that previously required extended conceptual development could now be initiated through prompts and quickly translated into multiple design alternatives. For many, this acceleration was experienced as both liberating and disorienting. One participant stated:

“AI gives me a lot of possibilities in a very short time. It feels exciting because I can see many visual directions immediately, but at the same time I sometimes feel that the process becomes too fast for me to really think through what I want to say as a designer.” (P3)

This statement reflects the double character of AI in the participants' experience. AI was not rejected as harmful or embraced as purely beneficial; instead, it was encountered as something that expanded the field of creative possibility while simultaneously compressing the reflective space traditionally associated with design thinking. Another participant described this tension in more personal terms:

“When I work with AI, I feel helped, but I also feel challenged. It is like working with something that keeps offering ideas, even when I am not sure those ideas are truly mine.” (P6)

The data indicate that participants did not simply use AI to generate outputs; they entered into an ongoing exchange with it. This exchange was not symmetrical, yet it was experienced as dialogic. Designers responded to AI outputs, revised prompts, rejected certain results, and adapted others, creating a recursive loop between human intention and machine suggestion. In this sense, AI became embedded in the lived process of visual meaning-making. However, the partnership remained

ambivalent because the designers were never fully certain whether the expanded creative possibilities represented empowerment or subtle displacement.

This theme shows that participants experienced generative AI as a creative counterpart that was both enabling and unsettling. The use of AI introduced new forms of visual discovery, but these discoveries often came with a diminished sense of deliberative ownership over the emerging design direction.

Negotiating Authorship and Authenticity in AI-Mediated Design

A central finding of the study was that designers experienced a profound tension around authorship and authenticity when constructing brand visual identities with the assistance of generative AI. The participants repeatedly questioned what it meant to claim ownership over a design when significant portions of visual ideation had been shaped through algorithmic generation. This was particularly salient in branding work, where visual identity is not only aesthetic but also symbolic, strategic, and culturally positioned.

Participants described brand identity design as a process that traditionally requires emotional sensitivity, conceptual clarity, and a strong interpretive connection between the designer, the client, and the intended audience. In this context, AI-generated visuals were sometimes viewed as visually impressive but affectively shallow. One participant explained:

“The visuals can look polished, but brand identity is not only about looking good. It is about meaning, positioning, and emotional resonance. Sometimes AI gives me something attractive, but it does not feel rooted in the story of the brand.” (P2)

This account highlights a distinction participants made between visual output and authentic design meaning. For these designers, authenticity was not defined by originality in a purely formal sense, but by the degree to which a design emerged from intentional understanding. When AI generated unexpected compositions, participants often appreciated the novelty but doubted whether the result genuinely embodied the brand’s identity. Another participant noted:

“I can use AI to explore styles, but I still need to decide whether the result has soul. That is the difficult part. AI can generate an image, but it cannot fully understand the cultural nuance or emotional tone that a brand needs.” (P5)

The notion of “soul” appeared repeatedly in different forms throughout the interviews. Participants used terms such as depth, intuition, human touch, and emotional layer to describe aspects of design they felt remained distinctly human. These expressions suggest that authenticity was experienced not as a fixed property of the image itself, but as a felt relationship between intention, context, and meaning. The presence of AI disrupted that relationship by introducing outputs that were aesthetically convincing yet ontologically uncertain.

This uncertainty also extended to authorship. Some participants reported discomfort when presenting AI-assisted work to clients because they were unsure how much of the final design could honestly be attributed to their own creative labor. One participant reflected:

“There are moments when I ask myself, ‘Am I the creator of this, or am I just the curator of possibilities generated by a machine?’ That question changes how I see my own role.” (P1)

This quote captures a significant shift in professional self-understanding. Designers no longer experienced authorship as self-evident. Instead, authorship became something negotiated through selection, refinement, interpretation, and justification. Participants did not describe themselves as passive recipients of AI outputs, but neither did they feel fully sovereign in the design process. Their role moved toward mediation, where authenticity had to be actively reconstructed rather than assumed.

This theme demonstrates that AI-mediated design complicated the traditional relationship between authorship and authenticity. Participants remained committed to producing meaningful brand identities, but their experience showed that generative AI introduced persistent ambiguity about who creates, who decides, and what makes a design feel genuinely human.

Reconfiguring Professional Identity in the Presence of Algorithmic Creativity

The introduction of generative AI was experienced not only as a change in workflow, but as a challenge to the designers' professional identity. Participants spoke of their work as historically grounded in cultivated expertise, visual sensitivity, conceptual reasoning, and creative intuition. When AI began to perform tasks that resembled ideation, image synthesis, and stylistic exploration, many participants experienced a subtle destabilization of what it meant to be a designer.

This reconfiguration of identity did not emerge as a dramatic rupture, but as an accumulating uncertainty. Participants described moments of questioning whether their value still resided in making visual forms, or whether it had shifted toward directing, evaluating, and contextualizing machine-generated outputs. One participant articulated this tension clearly:

“Before AI, I believed that my strength as a designer was in creating concepts and translating them visually. Now I feel my role is changing. I am still designing, but in a different way. Sometimes I wonder whether I am becoming more of a strategist than a creator.” (P4)

This account suggests that the participants were not experiencing professional loss in a simple or absolute sense. Rather, they were encountering a transformation in the meaning of expertise. Traditional markers of design competence, such as sketching, composing, and manually developing visual alternatives, were no longer the sole indicators of professional skill. New competencies emerged, including prompt construction, critical filtering, ethical judgment, and the ability to recognize when an AI-generated output did not align with a brand's conceptual identity.

Yet this transition was emotionally complex. Some participants welcomed the shift, interpreting it as an opportunity to elevate their role from execution to higher-level creative direction. Others, however, felt that the emergence of algorithmic creativity threatened the distinctiveness of their profession. One participant explained:

“What worries me is not that AI can generate images. What worries me is that people may start to think that design is easy, instant, and replaceable. That changes how our profession is valued.” (P7)

This concern reveals that identity disruption was linked not only to internal self-perception but also to external recognition. Participants were acutely aware that clients, employers, and broader digital cultures might reinterpret design labor through the lens of speed and automation. As a result, they felt pressure to defend the depth, intentionality, and human reasoning that still underpinned meaningful design work.

Another participant described this identity shift as a form of internal negotiation:

“I do not feel erased by AI, but I do feel pushed to redefine myself. I have to ask what kind of designer I want to be when creativity is no longer something only humans are assumed to have.” (P8)

This statement captures the existential dimension of the findings. Participants were not merely adapting to a new tool; they were renegotiating the boundaries of their professional selfhood in relation to a technology that appeared to imitate or partially perform creative acts. Professional identity thus became fluid, contested, and reflexive.

This theme indicates that generative AI reconfigured the designers' sense of who they were, what they contributed, and how their expertise should be understood. The presence of algorithmic creativity compelled participants to redefine design not as isolated production, but as situated judgment, interpretive discernment, and ethical authorship.

Experiencing the Loss and Recovery of Creative Control

One of the most emotionally charged themes concerned the experience of control. Participants repeatedly described moments in which generative AI seemed to take over the design process by steering visual outcomes in directions they had not intended. This loss of control was not always visible in the final product, but it was deeply felt during the act of designing. The designers spoke of a growing tension between directing the process and being directed by the logic of the system.

For some, the loss of control emerged through the unpredictability of AI outputs. While unexpectedness could stimulate inspiration, it could also undermine coherence and intentionality. One participant said:

“I sometimes feel that AI is leading me instead of the other way around. I begin with a concept, but after several outputs I find myself following what the system seems good at generating rather than what I originally imagined.” (P2)

This shift was especially problematic in branding contexts, where consistency and conceptual alignment are crucial. Participants described instances where AI generated visually appealing material that subtly distorted the intended brand message. In such moments, the abundance of options became burdensome rather than empowering. Another participant explained:

“The more options AI gives, the harder it becomes to stay focused on the essence of the brand. It is not always creative freedom. Sometimes it feels like creative noise.” (P5)

The phrase “creative noise” captures an important experiential dimension of AI-mediated design. Participants did not describe control merely as the ability to choose among outputs, but as the capacity to sustain coherence, intentionality, and conceptual fidelity throughout the creative process. When AI introduced excessive variation or stylistic drift, participants felt that their design agency had been diluted.

Despite this, the data also show that participants developed strategies to recover control. They refined prompts, limited the scope of AI use, returned to manual sketching, or used AI only at particular stages of ideation rather than throughout the full design process. These strategies were not simply procedural adjustments; they represented attempts to restore the designer’s sense of authorship and creative presence. One participant noted:

“I learned that I cannot let AI dominate the process. I use it when I need expansion, but I return to my own judgment to shape the final direction. Otherwise, the work no longer feels like mine.” (P6)

This statement illustrates that control was not abandoned, but renegotiated. Participants did not seek to eliminate AI from their process; instead, they tried to establish boundaries that preserved their human role as the final arbiter of meaning. Another participant similarly stated:

“The challenge is not to reject AI, but to know when to stop listening to it. Control comes back when I can say, ‘This suggestion is useful, but this decision is still mine.’” (P1)

These accounts suggest that creative control was experienced as a dynamic achievement rather than a stable possession. In the presence of generative AI, control had to be continually reclaimed through critical judgment, selective engagement, and reflective distance.

This theme reveals that participants’ experience of AI was shaped by an ongoing oscillation between surrender and resistance. They encountered moments of displacement, but also developed practices for reasserting agency. The design process thus became a site of continuous negotiation in which control was neither fully lost nor fully secure.

Taken together, the findings show that the lived experience of graphic designers using generative AI in brand visual identity construction is marked by continuous negotiation. Participants experienced AI as a powerful but unstable creative partner that expanded ideational possibilities while complicating authorship, authenticity, professional identity, and creative control. Their narratives reveal that the introduction of generative AI did not simply optimize design work; it restructured the meaning of being a designer within an increasingly algorithmic creative environment. Across all themes, the essential character of the phenomenon lies in the designers’ effort to preserve human intentionality and creative agency while working within systems that can simulate, accelerate, and partially redirect the acts through which visual meaning is produced.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that the lived experience of graphic designers using generative AI in brand visual identity construction is fundamentally characterized by continuous negotiation between creative expansion and existential uncertainty (Dounghummes & Phanthaphoommee, 2024). In relation to the broader question raised in the Introduction, this study shows that generative AI is experienced not simply as a tool for efficiency, but as a disruptive and meaning-laden presence that reshapes authorship, authenticity, professional identity, and creative control.

The study contributes to the research question by clarifying how designers subjectively interpret their role in AI-mediated creative work. The central question asked how graphic designers make sense of their creative role and identity when designing with generative AI, and the findings suggest that this meaning is formed through a persistent tension rather than a stable adaptation (Tuaf & Orkibi, 2025). Designers do not experience AI as a neutral extension of existing practice. Instead, they encounter it as a force that broadens visual possibility while simultaneously challenging the boundaries of intentionality, ownership, and professional legitimacy. This insight is important because it shifts the discussion from whether AI improves design output to how AI alters the inner structure of creative experience itself.

More specifically, the findings suggest that the designers' relationship with generative AI is marked by ambivalence (Gilbert & Dobson, 2025). The participants valued the speed, breadth, and visual stimulation offered by AI, yet they also experienced discomfort when machine-generated suggestions appeared to displace reflection, dilute originality, or weaken the emotional and conceptual grounding of brand identity work. This helps answer the research question by showing that the meaning of AI use is not located only in technical assistance, but in the designers' ongoing effort to preserve a sense of agency within a process that increasingly includes algorithmic intervention. In this sense, the study offers a more nuanced understanding of creative work in contemporary visual communication: design remains human-centered, but that human center is now repeatedly tested, redistributed, and reasserted.

The findings also contribute a more focused understanding of authenticity in AI-assisted branding. In the results, authenticity did not emerge as a purely aesthetic criterion, but as a felt correspondence between visual form, intentional meaning, and brand narrative (Haukås & Borlaug, 2025). This suggests that designers continue to position themselves as interpreters of cultural and emotional significance, even when AI assists with visual production. The study therefore extends current understanding by demonstrating that the acceptance of AI in design practice does not eliminate the designer's interpretive function. Rather, it intensifies the need for discernment, judgment, and conceptual alignment. What becomes meaningful for participants is not merely producing an image, but maintaining a design process that still feels humanly authored and contextually faithful.

Another important contribution lies in the finding that professional identity is being reconfigured rather than simply threatened (Anandarajah et al., 2025). The participants did not describe themselves as obsolete, yet they did express uncertainty about what distinguishes human expertise when creativity can be partially simulated by generative systems. This suggests that the role of the designer is shifting from sole creator toward critical mediator, conceptual strategist, and ethical evaluator. Such a shift provides a direct answer to the study's central concern, because it shows that the meaning of creative identity in the age of AI is no longer grounded only in making, but also in selecting, restraining, interpreting, and legitimizing visual possibilities (Mohamed & David Raja Bose, 2025). The study thus contributes a phenomenological understanding of how design professionals experience technological change not only at the level of workflow, but at the level of selfhood.

These interpretations resonate with earlier scholarship that has described AI as a transformative force in visual culture and digital aesthetics. Manovich (2019) argued that AI-based image production is reshaping aesthetic practice by changing how visual content is generated and circulated, and the present findings support that view by showing that this transformation is also experienced intimately by designers in their daily work. However, while Manovich largely approached AI aesthetics from the perspective of cultural and media transformation, the current study adds an experiential layer by demonstrating how these broader shifts are lived through feelings of uncertainty, displacement, and

negotiated agency. In other words, the study complements macro-level observations about AI aesthetics with a micro-level account of what those transformations mean for design practitioners themselves.

The findings also align with McCosker and Wilken's (2020) work on automated vision and the growing entanglement between visual production and algorithmic systems. Their work suggested that automated systems are increasingly implicated in how visual meaning is produced and organized. The present study reinforces this idea, but shows more specifically that designers do not encounter such systems passively (Rasoolipour et al., 2025). Instead, they experience algorithmic participation as both enabling and intrusive. This adds an important nuance to existing literature by suggesting that the incorporation of AI into creative work is not only structural or cultural, but phenomenological (Kamali & Nazari, 2025). Designers feel the presence of automation in the texture of decision-making, in the instability of authorship, and in the difficulty of determining whether a design still carries personal or professional intentionality.

The study also speaks directly to Edmonds' (2018) discussion of creativity and AI. Earlier research has often emphasized collaboration between human creativity and computational generation, sometimes presenting this relationship as an expanded creative ecology. The present findings generally support the idea of collaboration, but they complicate it (Rahmanto & Fariza, 2025). For the participants in this study, collaboration with AI was not experienced as smooth co-creation. It was instead marked by friction, asymmetry, and periodic loss of direction (Na & Kester, 2025). This suggests that collaboration should not be romanticized as automatically productive or balanced. In branding contexts especially, where symbolic coherence and emotional resonance are essential, the presence of AI may multiply options without necessarily deepening meaning. The study therefore extends prior work by showing that collaboration with AI in design must be understood not only as innovation, but also as a site of existential and interpretive strain.

The findings are also consistent with Candy and Edmonds (2018), who emphasized the importance of practice-based insight in understanding digital creativity. Their perspective is useful here because the current study reveals that meaning in creative practice cannot be fully captured through output alone. The designers' narratives show that the core of the phenomenon lies in the lived process of working through ambiguity, not merely in the final visual result (Atanesyan et al., 2025). This supports the idea that creative practice should be understood as reflective, situated, and experiential. At the same time, the present study deepens this argument by foregrounding the designer's subjective struggle to sustain authorship and authenticity when visual alternatives are increasingly machine-generated. It therefore adds a stronger phenomenological emphasis to existing accounts of digital creative practice.

In relation to Davis (2021) and broader discussions of algorithmic culture, the findings suggest that designers are not only adapting to new technologies but are also negotiating new cultural expectations about speed, originality, and replaceability. The participants' concern that AI might make design appear instant or easily substitutable reflects a wider social shift in how creative labor is perceived (Allagui & Ibahrine, 2025). This is important because it positions the findings within a broader cultural context: the designers' experience of AI is not formed solely through software interaction, but also through assumptions circulating in the marketplace and digital culture about what creativity is worth (Rusydi, 2025). In this regard, the study complements literature on algorithmic culture by showing how macro-level discourses about automation become internalized as professional tension and identity uncertainty.

Taken together, these discussions suggest that the phenomenon under study is best understood as a lived negotiation of agency within algorithmically expanded creativity. The contribution of this study lies not in claiming that AI replaces the designer, nor in suggesting that AI simply enhances creativity, but in showing that the meaning of design practice is being reconstituted through ongoing tension between support and displacement. This interpretation is firmly grounded in the results and in the broader literature, and it clarifies why a phenomenological approach is necessary. Without attention to lived experience, much of what matters in this transition, including ambiguity, discomfort, self-redefinition, and the search for authentic authorship, would remain conceptually underdeveloped.

Implications of the Findings

The findings carry important implications for both the scholarly understanding of creative practice and the professional context of visual communication design. At a theoretical level, the study suggests that the integration of generative AI into design work should not be understood only as a technical development, but as a shift in how creative meaning is formed, negotiated, and sustained. The experience of the participants shows that brand visual identity remains deeply dependent on human interpretation, especially when visual communication must convey cultural resonance, emotional depth, and symbolic coherence (Ebrahim et al., 2025). This reinforces the view that design is not reducible to visual production alone, but involves judgment, contextual sensitivity, and meaning-centered decision-making. In this respect, the study contributes to ongoing discussions in digital creativity and visual culture by emphasizing that the human dimension of design remains central even when algorithmic systems become deeply embedded in creative workflows.

The findings also have clear professional implications. For design practitioners, the results indicate that successful engagement with generative AI depends not merely on technical fluency, but on the ability to preserve conceptual clarity and creative intentionality within AI-assisted processes (Baek & Kim, 2023). The participants' accounts suggest that designers increasingly need to act as interpreters and evaluators of machine-generated possibilities, rather than simply as producers of visual output. This has implications for professional training, design education, and industry expectations. Educational programs in visual communication design may therefore need to place greater emphasis on reflective judgment, authorship awareness, and critical engagement with AI-generated material, rather than treating AI only as a productivity-enhancing tool. Such a shift would help future designers maintain the conceptual and ethical depth of their work while adapting to rapidly changing technological environments.

At a broader social and cultural level, the findings are relevant because they illuminate how algorithmic systems are reshaping the meaning of creative labor. The participants' concerns about replaceability, diminished authorship, and weakened authenticity reflect larger transformations in digital culture, where speed, automation, and constant production are often privileged over reflection and interpretive depth. In this context, the study highlights that creative work continues to derive value from its human capacity to situate visual forms within lived, social, and symbolic realities (Noris et al., 2025). This is particularly important in branding, where visual identity functions not only as a commercial artifact but also as a cultural expression that mediates trust, recognition, and belonging. The findings therefore extend beyond individual designers and speak to wider debates about the future of professional creativity in increasingly automated environments.

The practical relevance of the study also applies to organizations and clients who rely on design services. The findings suggest that AI-generated outputs may create an illusion of immediate adequacy, yet meaningful brand identity development still requires human interpretive labor to ensure alignment with values, context, and audience perception. This indicates that organizations should be cautious about treating generative AI as a substitute for design expertise. Instead, AI may be more appropriately positioned as a support system within a human-led creative process. Such an understanding may help protect the integrity of design practice while encouraging more responsible and context-sensitive uses of generative systems in branding and visual communication.

Study Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. First, the study was conducted within a phenomenological framework and involved a relatively small, purposively selected group of participants. This was appropriate for generating in-depth insight into lived experience, but it also means that the findings are not intended for statistical generalization. The themes presented here reflect the meanings constructed by a specific group of graphic designers working within AI-assisted branding contexts, and they should therefore be understood as contextually grounded rather than universally representative.

Second, the focus on professional graphic designers involved in brand visual identity construction may have narrowed the experiential range of the phenomenon (Abbas et al., 2024).

Designers working in other subfields of visual communication, such as motion design, interactive media, editorial design, or game-related multimedia production, may encounter generative AI in ways that differ from those described in this study. Similarly, designers at different career stages or within different cultural and industrial settings may assign different meanings to authorship, authenticity, and control. As a result, the findings should be interpreted within the professional and contextual boundaries of branding-oriented design practice.

Third, the study relied primarily on self-reported experience obtained through in-depth interviews and visual elicitation. While this approach was well suited to accessing subjective meaning, it inevitably depended on participants' ability to articulate complex and sometimes tacit experiences. Certain dimensions of creative practice may remain partially unspoken, embodied, or difficult to verbalize (Tortella et al., 2025). Although visual materials helped deepen reflection, the data still represent narrated experience rather than direct observation of all creative decisions as they unfolded in real time. This limitation is common in phenomenological research and does not weaken the value of the findings, but it does indicate that the results capture interpreted experience rather than exhaustive process documentation.

Finally, the rapid evolution of generative AI technologies means that the phenomenon itself is unstable and likely to continue changing. Participants' experiences were shaped by a particular moment in the development and use of AI tools, and future technological shifts may alter the balance between assistance, authorship, and creative control. For this reason, the findings should be read as a meaningful account of a current stage in AI-mediated design practice rather than as a final statement on the long-term relationship between designers and generative systems.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

The findings open several important directions for future research. One promising avenue would be to extend this line of inquiry to other areas of visual communication and multimedia practice in order to examine whether similar experiences of negotiation emerge across different creative domains. Designers engaged in animation, immersive media, user interface design, digital storytelling, or multimedia education may encounter generative AI under different conditions, and comparative phenomenological work could clarify how professional context shapes the meaning of authorship, authenticity, and creative agency.

Future research could also examine how these experiences evolve over time. Because the present study captured lived experience at a particular point in the adoption of generative AI, longitudinal inquiry would be valuable for exploring whether the tensions described by participants become normalized, intensified, or transformed as designers gain more sustained exposure to AI-assisted workflows. Such work would deepen understanding of how professional identity and creative meaning shift over longer periods of technological adaptation.

Another useful direction would involve exploring the relationship between designers' lived experiences and the institutional environments in which they work (Sukmawati, 2025). The current findings suggest that uncertainty is shaped not only by interaction with AI systems themselves, but also by client expectations, market pressures, and broader cultural assumptions about automation. Further research could therefore investigate how organizational culture, educational background, and professional norms mediate designers' experiences of generative AI. This would strengthen the connection between individual meaning-making and the wider social structures within which that meaning is formed.

Finally, future studies could continue to build on phenomenological inquiry while also drawing on complementary qualitative approaches to enrich understanding of creative practice in technologically mediated contexts (Chioni et al., 2023). Such work may help clarify how human-centered design values can be preserved within increasingly automated environments and how visual communication can continue to retain emotional, cultural, and professional depth in the presence of generative systems. In this way, the present study offers not an endpoint, but a foundation for further inquiry into how contemporary creativity is being redefined through ongoing encounters between human interpretation and algorithmic production.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how graphic designers experience and interpret their creative role and professional identity in constructing brand visual identity within the context of generative artificial intelligence. The findings reveal that designers engage in a continuous negotiation between creative expansion and loss of control, where AI simultaneously enhances ideation while challenging authorship, authenticity, and intentionality. The study demonstrates that creative work remains fundamentally human-centered, as designers actively reinterpret, filter, and contextualize AI-generated outputs to preserve meaning and alignment with brand identity. These findings address the limitations of previous research by moving beyond technical and outcome-based perspectives, offering a deeper understanding of the subjective and experiential dimensions of AI-assisted design practice. The results also highlight the transformation of professional identity, where designers increasingly act as mediators of meaning rather than sole creators of visual form. From a practical perspective, these findings suggest that design organizations and branding agencies should develop strategies that position AI as a collaborative tool rather than a replacement for human creativity. Design education and professional training programs may also benefit from emphasizing critical judgment, ethical decision-making, and brand interpretation skills that enable designers to effectively integrate AI-generated content into creative workflows.

This study is not without limitations. First, the findings are based on a relatively specific group of graphic designers, which may limit the transferability of the results to other creative professions or cultural contexts. Second, the qualitative and cross-sectional nature of the study captures participants' experiences at a particular moment in time and may not fully reflect how perceptions and professional identities evolve as AI technologies continue to advance. Future research may extend this approach by exploring similar experiences across different multimedia fields and examining how these dynamics evolve over time as AI technologies continue to develop.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The research was conducted independently, and no financial or personal relationships have influenced the results or interpretation of the findings.

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