



Creative Autonomy in Flux: A Qualitative Study on How AI Reshapes Graphic Designers' Sense of Self and Expression Through Semi-Structured Interviews

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ABSTRACT

The rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has introduced profound changes to the creative industries, particularly in graphic design. While much attention has been given to productivity and technical innovation, the deeper psychological and identity-based impacts on designers remain insufficiently understood. This study explores how professional graphic designers, based in the United States and Southeast Asia, interpret their evolving roles and creative identities amidst the integration of AI tools. Employing an interpretative phenomenological framework, the research investigates the lived experiences of eight designers who actively incorporate AI technologies such as DALL-E and Midjourney in their workflows. The findings highlight four interconnected themes: contested creative autonomy, redefinition of professional identity, emotional dualities, and the emergence of a human-machine creative synergy. Designers expressed both empowerment and unease—embracing AI's efficiency while struggling with diminished authorship and shifting self-perceptions. Rather than passively adopting automation, participants actively negotiated their roles in co-creating with intelligent systems. These experiences suggest that creativity in the AI era is not just about tool mastery, but about rethinking authorship, emotional investment, and artistic integrity. This study contributes to ongoing discussions in design theory and human-machine interaction by offering nuanced insight into how creativity and selfhood are being reimagined. It underscores the importance of understanding subjective experiences in technological transitions and advocates for more empathetic frameworks within creative education and practice.



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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into creative industries has transformed the landscape of visual communication and artistic production (Khumalo dkk., 2024). Graphic design, as a discipline situated at the intersection of art, technology, and communication, has been significantly impacted by the rise of AI-generated content. Tools powered by machine learning now assist in ideation, layout composition, and even the generation of entire visual narratives. This technological evolution reflects broader societal shifts towards automation and digital augmentation across various professional sectors.

The relevance of this transformation extends beyond operational efficiency; it speaks to fundamental questions about human creativity, authorship, and identity (van den Beuken dkk., 2024; Xie dkk., 2021). For graphic designers, whose work traditionally involves intuition, aesthetic judgment, and personal expression, the encroachment of AI into their creative processes invites complex emotional and intellectual responses. These responses are not merely reactions to technological change but are deeply embedded in the subjective experiences of navigating professional roles, creative autonomy, and artistic identity in a digitally mediated world.

Despite the growing presence of AI in design workflows, little is known about how designers interpret, internalize, and emotionally engage with this shift (Gonsalves dkk., 2023; Jian, 2023). Most existing research focuses on functional integration and productivity outcomes, often overlooking the human dimensions of such transitions. As creativity is inherently experiential, there is a pressing need to explore how designers live through these changes—not just how they adapt on a surface level, but how they feel, perceive, and construct meaning from these experiences.

Given this context, a phenomenological inquiry becomes essential (Mills dkk., 2020). By attending to the lived experiences of designers, such an approach can reveal the nuanced ways in which AI reconfigures not only workflows but also self-understanding, purpose, and the very essence of creative labor. This study seeks to fill this gap by foregrounding the voices and inner worlds of designers who are actively engaging with AI technologies in their creative practices.

Research into how individuals experience specific phenomena has become increasingly vital in fields concerned with human-centered practices, such as design, psychology, and education (Savoldelli dkk., 2022; Wulfovich dkk., 2019). Within the creative industries, particular attention has been paid to understanding how practitioners interpret and respond to technological transformations that affect their sense of identity, authorship, and creative agency. Studies such as those by (Miyake dkk., 2022) have begun to examine how digital and AI-assisted environments reshape the experiential dimensions of artistic practice. However, these inquiries remain limited in their exploration of the deeply personal, often ambiguous, lived realities of designers engaging with AI technologies.

One of the primary methodological challenges in this area lies in adequately capturing the subjective nuances of these experiences (Kwon dkk., 2023; Velciu dkk., 2023). Traditional quantitative approaches, while effective in measuring trends or patterns, fall short in revealing the layered, interpretative processes through which meaning is constructed. Descriptive surveys or structured questionnaires may identify the existence of change but rarely uncover how these changes are felt, negotiated, and internalized by individuals within their professional and personal contexts.

As a result, much of the current literature lacks the depth required to fully understand the existential and psychological implications of AI integration in creative work (Bartolome dkk., 2021; Peng dkk., 2021). The limitations of prior research approaches—particularly those that prioritize generalizability over personal insight—have constrained our ability to access the essence of the phenomenon. To address this gap, a methodological framework is needed that privileges lived experience and allows for the co-construction of meaning through dialogic engagement and reflexive interpretation. Phenomenology, especially in its interpretative form, provides such a framework, offering a path toward richer, more authentic understandings of how AI is not merely used, but experienced, by design professionals.

In response to the rapid integration of AI technologies within the creative industries, much of the existing research has centered on pragmatic and operational solutions—ranging from optimizing design workflows to evaluating user satisfaction with AI-assisted tools (Page & Heiss, 2023; Zalewski dkk., 2020). While these practical approaches provide valuable insights into the functional utility of AI, they often rely on frameworks that prioritize efficiency and output over lived experience. As such, they tend to overlook the deeper, more personal transformations that designers undergo in their creative identity, emotional engagement, and perceptions of authorship.

Standard empirical methodologies, particularly those grounded in quantitative data collection or surface-level qualitative descriptions, fall short in capturing the intricate meaning structures that shape designers' internal realities. For example, studies such as (Olatinwo dkk., 2024) have made important contributions to understanding the broader implications of AI in design practice, but they offer limited insight into how designers interpret and make sense of these changes from within their own cognitive and emotional landscapes. This has resulted in a body of knowledge that is technically informative but experientially shallow.

To bridge this gap, there is a clear need for a methodological shift toward research that centers subjective interpretation and meaning-making. Phenomenology, especially in its interpretative form, offers a rigorous yet empathetic framework for exploring how individuals experience and

internalize complex phenomena (Birk dkk., 2021; Sun dkk., 2020). By foregrounding the lived experiences of designers, a phenomenological approach can uncover the essence of how creative processes, professional identities, and emotional responses are being reshaped by AI—a dimension largely missing from current literature. This study therefore adopts phenomenology not as an alternative for its own sake, but as a necessary lens to access the rich, layered understandings that existing methods have failed to fully illuminate.

Previous research has explored the intersection of creativity and technology, focusing on how digital tools influence artistic practices. Studies by (Omodara dkk., 2023) have emphasized the transformative role of AI in reshaping creative workflows, but often overlook the personal meanings behind these changes. While some work highlights adaptation strategies, few studies deeply examine how designers interpret their evolving roles. The subjective and emotional dimensions of working with AI remain underexplored, especially within the professional identity of designers. This study addresses that gap by centering on lived experiences rather than operational effects.

To understand these experiences, this research adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach (LeBaron dkk., 2023; Nantume dkk., 2023). This method enables a deep exploration of how individuals construct meaning through their interactions with AI in creative practice. Interpretative phenomenology was chosen for its focus on personal experience within context, making it well-suited for revealing how designers make sense of shifting creative roles. This approach responds to the knowledge gap identified earlier, offering insight into how creativity, identity, and emotion converge in the AI-driven design landscape. It aims to articulate the essence of designers' experiences in a way that previous methods could not fully capture.

This article begins with an introduction and literature review, outlining the cultural and technological shifts influencing design (Dawson dkk., 2024; Lin dkk., 2023). It then presents the methodological foundation of interpretative phenomenology, followed by the data collection process and analytic strategy. The findings section describes emergent themes from designer narratives, highlighting shared meanings and unique perspectives (Prazeres dkk., 2023). A discussion interprets these findings in relation to existing theory and practice. The article concludes with reflections on the implications for design, education, and future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of graphic designers navigating creative processes in the age of AI-generated content. Phenomenology was selected for its capacity to investigate subjective human experiences, focusing on how individuals perceive and make sense of specific phenomena within their personal and professional contexts. The interpretative (hermeneutic) strand of phenomenology, grounded in Heideggerian philosophy, was deemed appropriate for this research due to its emphasis on contextual meaning-making rather than pure description. This approach enabled an in-depth examination of designers' inner reflections, emotional responses, and identity negotiations as they engaged with AI in their creative workflows.

Participants

Participants were professional graphic designers with practical experience in using AI-based tools such as DALL·E, Midjourney, or Adobe Firefly within their design projects (Sattar dkk., 2023). A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify individuals whose experiences were directly relevant to the research focus. Inclusion criteria consisted of at least three years of design practice, active engagement with AI in creative processes, and willingness to articulate personal insights. Exclusion criteria included designers who had no experience with AI tools or whose roles were limited to administrative or managerial tasks without creative involvement.

A total of eight participants were involved, comprising five male and three female designers, aged between 27 and 41 years (mean age: 33.5). Participants came from diverse professional settings

including freelance, agency-based, and in-house design teams, enhancing the richness and variation of the data collected.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews designed to elicit detailed narratives of the participants' experiences. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or via secure video conferencing platforms, depending on participants' availability and geographic location. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and followed an open-ended guide focusing on themes such as creative autonomy, emotional engagement, and identity transformation in relation to AI usage.

The interview setting was arranged to ensure psychological safety and confidentiality, allowing participants to speak openly (Sharna dkk., 2024). Audio recordings were made with consent and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual elements. All interview questions were piloted prior to the main data collection to ensure clarity and relevance, with minor modifications applied based on initial feedback.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which is well-suited for examining how individuals make sense of their personal and professional realities. The analytic process followed a systematic progression: initial immersion through repeated reading of transcripts, identification of significant meaning units, coding, and development of emergent themes. These themes were then clustered to form superordinate categories that encapsulated the essence of participants' experiences.

NVivo 14 software supported data organization and management, enabling efficient retrieval and cross-referencing of thematic patterns (Singh dkk., 2022). Throughout the analysis, reflexivity and bracketing techniques were employed to mitigate interpretative bias, ensuring that the final interpretations were grounded in participants' perspectives.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the appropriate institutional review board prior to data collection. Written informed consent was secured from all participants, who were assured of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence (Taranov & Kawabata, 2024). Anonymity was preserved through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifiable information from transcripts. All procedures adhered to international ethical guidelines for qualitative research involving human participants.

RESULTS

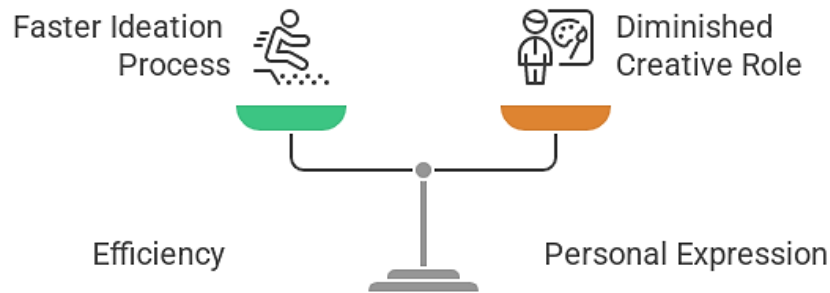
Negotiating Creative Control in an Automated Landscape

Participants consistently described a shifting sense of authorship and creative autonomy when working with AI tools. While AI was seen as a powerful collaborator, many expressed ambivalence about their diminished role in the ideation phase.

“Sometimes I feel like the idea wasn't really mine—it's more like I'm choosing from what the AI gives me. It's faster, yes, but I'm not sure it's me anymore.” (Participant 4)

This sentiment reflects a perceived tension between efficiency and personal expression. The automation of ideation stages led some designers to feel that their role had shifted from creator to curator—a change that was both liberating and unsettling.

Balancing Efficiency and Personal Expression in AI-Driven Creativity



The Reconfiguration of Artistic Identity

For many, the integration of AI prompted a re-evaluation of their identity as artists and professionals. Several participants noted a transformation in how they defined themselves in relation to their work.

“I used to call myself a visual storyteller. Now, it’s like I’m managing a conversation between machine outputs and human intention. I don’t know if that’s still being an artist.” (Participant 2)

This shift indicates a deeper psychological negotiation with emerging technologies, where designers attempt to retain creative authenticity while adapting to new paradigms of co-creation with AI.

Emotional Ambivalence and Technological Anxiety

While AI tools were often appreciated for their efficiency, they also sparked anxiety and emotional dissonance. Participants voiced concerns about professional relevance and the potential erosion of their unique creative value.

“It’s strange... I admire the speed, but I also fear it. What happens when clients can generate things on their own? What’s my place in all of this?” (Participant 7)

The coexistence of appreciation and fear characterized much of the emotional landscape. These dual emotions shaped designers’ day-to-day experiences and influenced their decision-making in project execution.

Emergent Opportunities for Hybrid Creativity

Despite apprehensions, many participants recognized new opportunities arising from AI-assisted workflows. Several described AI not as a replacement, but as a tool that expands the boundaries of traditional design.

“AI didn’t replace me—it challenged me. It pushed me to think differently, to reframe my style, and sometimes, to surrender control and see what happens.” (Participant 5)

This reframing allowed some designers to move beyond initial resistance, embracing AI as a catalyst for hybrid creativity that blends intuition, machine suggestion, and human refinement.

The findings reveal that graphic designers’ experiences with AI are nuanced and deeply tied to their sense of identity, authorship, and emotional well-being. While AI presents challenges to traditional notions of creativity, it also opens new possibilities for reimagining design as a collaborative practice between human insight and machine intelligence. These lived experiences underscore the importance of contextualizing technological adaptation within the subjective realities of creative professionals.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that graphic designers engaging with AI in their creative processes experience a profound shift in how they perceive authorship, professional identity, and emotional investment (Chong dkk., 2022; Issom dkk., 2020). These experiences illuminate the

essential meaning behind the phenomenon: a renegotiation of creativity that challenges the traditional boundaries between human agency and machine-assisted design. This directly addresses the central research question regarding how designers make sense of their evolving roles in the presence of AI technologies.

By articulating themes such as the loss of creative control, transformation of identity, emotional ambivalence, and emerging hybrid creativity, this study provides a nuanced answer to the core inquiry. It demonstrates that the integration of AI is not merely a technical adjustment but a deeply existential experience for many designers (Sheth dkk., 2019; Shin dkk., 2023). Unlike studies that reduce AI adoption to increased efficiency or workflow optimization, this research uncovers how AI compels designers to reflect on what it means to create, express, and innovate in a digitally co-authored space. The interpretative phenomenological approach was instrumental in capturing these subtleties, revealing personal narratives that are often absent in broader industry reports or empirical summaries.

These insights align with and extend previous literature. McCormack (2023) emphasized the evolving nature of creativity in AI environments but did not fully explore its emotional and identity-related consequences. Similarly, (Tresson dkk., 2020) highlighted workflow adaptation but did not examine how designers internalize such transitions. The current study fills these gaps by framing AI not only as a tool but as a relational force that shapes the designer's sense of self. The ambivalence observed mirrors (Wiese dkk., 2021) findings on autonomy, while the themes of hybrid creativity support (Zwane, 2019) notion of posthuman design identity. Together, these comparisons show that the present research both confirms and deepens existing knowledge by focusing on subjective meaning rather than external outcomes.

The implications of these findings are both theoretical and practical, particularly for understanding the evolving relationship between creativity and technology (Cooper dkk., 2022; Daniels dkk., 2025). On a social level, the study highlights how AI influences not only workflows but also designers' sense of authorship and emotional engagement with their work—pointing to a cultural shift in how creative labor is valued and understood. Professionally, the results suggest the need for new frameworks within design education and industry that account for the psychological and identity-based dimensions of AI integration. Rather than viewing designers as passive users of technology, this research frames them as active negotiators of meaning, navigating between traditional creativity and machine-enhanced productivity (Abbasi dkk., 2022). These insights are highly relevant for a wider population of creative professionals confronting similar technological disruptions.

As with all qualitative inquiries, this study has limitations. The purposive sampling, while suitable for phenomenological depth, restricts the generalizability of findings beyond the specific context of professional graphic designers familiar with AI tools. The interpretative nature of the analysis may also be influenced by contextual and cultural factors unique to the participants' backgrounds (Abdelaal dkk., 2024; Leuzzi dkk., 2025). Furthermore, the rapidly evolving landscape of AI technologies means that some experiences captured here may soon shift as tools and user relationships develop. These limitations do not diminish the value of the findings but rather situate them as context-bound insights that invite further exploration.

Future research could expand on these insights by exploring other creative fields such as fashion, animation, or architecture, where AI is also being integrated into design practice (Delmastro dkk., 2019; Pais dkk., 2020). Longitudinal studies may help trace how designers' perceptions and identities continue to evolve as they adapt to technological change over time (Alfaras dkk., 2020). Additionally, comparative research across cultural contexts could reveal how local values and traditions mediate responses to AI in creative processes. By extending this line of inquiry, future studies can deepen our understanding of how technology not only transforms creative practice but reshapes the very meaning of what it means to create.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how professional graphic designers experience and interpret the integration of AI technologies in their creative processes. The findings revealed four key themes—loss of creative control, identity transformation, emotional ambivalence, and the emergence of hybrid creativity—that reflect a deep renegotiation of authorship and artistic identity. These insights respond directly to the central research question by illustrating how designers construct meaning from their interactions with AI. Unlike prior research focused on functional or technical aspects, this study highlights the subjective, emotional, and existential dimensions of AI in design. The phenomenological approach enabled access to rich, lived experiences often absent in quantitative or surface-level studies. Future research may build on these insights by examining other creative domains or exploring cultural differences in how designers adapt to AI-enhanced environments.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. All funding sources have been transparently acknowledged, and no financial, professional, or personal relationships influenced the outcomes of this research.

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