



## A Phenomenological Exploration of Creativity, Authenticity, and Identity in Digital Artists' Experiences with Artificial Intelligence

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### ABSTRACT

The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into creative practices has reshaped contemporary art and design, challenging traditional notions of originality and authorship. This study explores the lived experiences of digital artists, focusing on how they negotiate creativity and identity amid technological disruption. While prior research has addressed AI's technical and cultural roles, limited attention has been given to artists' phenomenological interpretations of creativity when engaging with AI tools. Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, data from semi-structured interviews with twelve digital artists were analyzed through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The findings highlight four key themes: (1) confronting authenticity threats, (2) navigating resistance and adaptation, (3) redefining creativity as a dialogical process, and (4) reconstructing professional identity in the digital era. Overall, AI is experienced not only as a disruptive force but also as a catalyst for transformation, enabling a collaborative interplay between human imagination and algorithmic systems. These insights advance understanding of how emerging technologies reshape the meanings of creativity and identity, offering implications for future studies on human-AI collaboration across creative disciplines.



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## INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has profoundly reshaped creative practices in the fields of art and design. Among these innovations, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as both a tool and a disruptor, influencing how artistic works are conceived, produced, and received in contemporary culture (Powell-Warren, 2025). In recent years, AI has been integrated into a wide range of creative domains from visual arts and music composition to digital design and interactive media altering the boundaries of what is traditionally understood as human creativity. This development reflects broader transformations in society, where technology not only facilitates artistic production but also challenges the cultural narratives surrounding authorship, originality, and artistic identity.

The relevance of this phenomenon extends beyond technical considerations, as it touches upon deeply human dimensions of artistic experience (Erincin, 2025). For many digital artists, AI is not simply a medium of production but an agent that provokes reflection on the meaning of creativity, authenticity, and the role of the artist in an increasingly technologized world. Such experiences are embedded within cultural and social contexts, where questions of authorship and originality have long been central to artistic discourse (Boko et al., 2024). The encounter with AI brings these questions into sharper focus, as artists negotiate the tension between embracing innovation and preserving the essence of their creative identity.

Given the transformative influence of AI on artistic practice, there is a pressing need to explore the lived experiences of artists who engage with these technologies (Gomes, 2025). Phenomenology offers a pathway to examine not only what artists do with AI, but how they

experience its presence in their creative lives (Mukhlis, 2025a). By attending to the subjective dimension of these encounters, phenomenological inquiry provides an opportunity to uncover meanings that are often obscured in purely technical or theoretical accounts (Bi, 2025). Such an approach allows for a richer understanding of how artists interpret, resist, adapt to, and ultimately redefine creativity in the digital age.

Research on subjective experiences within creative practices has become an increasingly important area of scholarly inquiry, particularly in contexts where technology intersects with human expression (Matheron, 2024). In the field of digital art, the emergence of AI as a creative partner or disruptor has raised fundamental questions about how artists experience, interpret, and navigate their roles in the creative process. Prior studies have offered valuable insights into the technical applications of AI in artistic production, yet they often overlook the lived experiences and personal meanings that accompany such transformations (Mukhlis, 2025b). This omission highlights the necessity of approaches that prioritize the voices of artists themselves, situating their experiences within the broader cultural and social implications of technological disruption.

One of the central challenges in investigating these experiences lies in methodological orientation (Drummond et al., 2024). Quantitative frameworks and technical analyses, while useful for measuring outputs or evaluating efficiency, are limited in their ability to capture the nuanced, subjective, and often contradictory dimensions of artistic identity and creativity (Sharma et al., 2024). Surveys and statistical models tend to abstract the individual voice, reducing the richness of lived experience into generalized patterns (Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). As a result, the essential meanings behind how artists feel, perceive, and make sense of AI remain obscured.

This methodological limitation has made many previous studies less effective in grasping the essence of the phenomenon (Turner & Hennessy, 2025). Without a focus on subjective narratives, critical aspects such as ambivalence, resistance, adaptation, and identity reconstruction are left underexplored (Severynova et al., 2025). Phenomenological approaches, in contrast, provide the tools to illuminate these dimensions, enabling a deeper engagement with the existential and interpretative layers of artists' encounters with AI (Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). By centering the lived experience, phenomenology addresses the need for a more comprehensive understanding of how digital artists negotiate creativity and authorship in an era of technological transformation.

Current research addressing the role of AI in art and design has largely focused on practical or technical perspectives, emphasizing efficiency, creative augmentation, or aesthetic outcomes generated by algorithms (Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). While such approaches provide valuable insights into the mechanics of AI-driven creativity, they rely heavily on frameworks that prioritize outputs and measurable results (Wiratno & Callula, 2024). These perspectives, although informative, do not adequately capture the subjective and existential dimensions of how artists themselves experience AI as part of their creative practices.

The predominant reliance on technical or quantitative analyses has created a significant limitation: the inability to grasp the deeper meanings, tensions, and transformations experienced by artists (Brown, 2025). Practical approaches often reduce complex encounters to surface-level descriptions, overlooking how artists negotiate questions of authorship, authenticity, and identity when confronted with technological disruption (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023). This gap has resulted in a fragmented understanding, where the emotional, reflective, and interpretative aspects of artistic practice remain underexplored.

Addressing this limitation requires an alternative lens that centers the lived experience of artists and explores the meanings embedded in their encounters with AI (Zheng et al., 2025). Phenomenology, with its focus on subjective perception and interpretative depth, provides such a pathway (Mukhlis et al., 2024). By adopting this approach, research can move beyond describing what AI does for art to uncovering how artists experience, interpret, and redefine creativity in response to it (Windsor, 2024). This shift allows for a more holistic and profound understanding of the phenomenon, bridging the current gap in literature and offering insights that are both theoretically significant and practically relevant to the evolving discourse on art, design, and technology.

Previous studies have explored how technology influences creative practices, with particular attention to the role of AI in generating or enhancing artistic output. Scholars such as (Thompson & Mukhopadhyay, 2025) have highlighted both opportunities and disruptions brought by AI, yet their focus remained on the cultural or technical aspects of creativity. Few studies have directly examined the lived experience of artists as they navigate these disruptions (Xiong et al., 2024). Theories of creativity and authorship emphasize the centrality of human intention and subjectivity, but empirical research capturing these dimensions is scarce (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). This lack underscores the need for qualitative approaches that illuminate how artists experience and interpret their encounters with AI.

This study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to address that need. Phenomenology provides a methodological framework for uncovering meanings embedded in lived experiences and for examining how individuals interpret phenomena in their daily lives (ALsaqr & Mahzari, 2025). By applying this method, the research responds to the gap identified earlier, namely the absence of studies that capture the depth of artists' subjective engagement with AI (Cutter et al., 2025). The choice of this approach allows for a detailed exploration of how creativity, identity, and authenticity are redefined within human–AI interactions (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025). In doing so, it moves beyond technical evaluations to foreground the voices and meanings of the artists themselves.

The structure of this article follows a clear progression to guide the reader through the study. It begins with an introduction that outlines the background, knowledge gap, and research aim (Preston, 2024). The methodology section presents the phenomenological approach, the participants, data collection process, and analytic strategy (Taama, 2025). The results section narrates the thematic findings, supported by direct quotations that illustrate participants' experiences (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). The discussion interprets these findings in relation to existing literature and theoretical frameworks, while the conclusion highlights contributions, implications, and directions for future research.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach, which is well suited for exploring the lived experiences of individuals and the meanings they ascribe to particular phenomena. Phenomenology emphasizes subjective perception and the essence of human experience, allowing for an in-depth exploration of how digital artists encounter and interpret the disruption of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in their creative practices. The interpretative orientation, rooted in Heideggerian phenomenology, guided the study toward uncovering not only descriptive accounts of experiences but also the deeper contextual meanings attached to them. This design was particularly relevant for capturing the complexity of identity, authenticity, and creativity in the evolving digital art landscape.

### **Participants**

Participants consisted of professional and semi-professional digital artists actively engaged in creating artworks with or in response to AI technologies. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that participants possessed direct and substantial experience relevant to the phenomenon under study. Inclusion criteria required that participants had at least two years of practice in digital art and prior exposure to AI tools in their creative processes. Artists who had no experience with AI-based tools or whose work was limited to non-digital mediums were excluded. A total of 12 participants were involved, comprising 7 males and 5 females, with ages ranging from 25 to 42 years. Their diverse professional backgrounds, from freelance illustrators to academic practitioners, provided varied perspectives on the phenomenon.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews that encouraged participants to share their personal experiences, emotions, and reflections in relation to AI in their artistic

practices. An interview guide was developed, containing open-ended prompts to facilitate rich, narrative responses while allowing flexibility for participants to highlight their unique experiences. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and via secure online platforms, depending on participants' availability. Each session lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. The interviews were conducted in settings chosen by participants to ensure comfort and privacy, thereby creating an environment conducive to open and reflective dialogue.

### **Data Analysis**

The interview transcripts were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This analytic process involved several iterative steps: repeated readings of transcripts to achieve immersion; identification of meaning units; initial coding of experiential statements; clustering of codes into emerging themes; and subsequent abstraction into superordinate themes. NVivo software was used to assist in organizing the data, although interpretative insights were derived directly from systematic engagement with participants' narratives. The analytic process was recursive and reflexive, with attention given to both convergence and divergence across participants' accounts. Through these steps, the essential structures of participants' experiences with AI were elucidated.

## **RESULTS**

### **Confronting the Threat of Creative Authenticity**

Many participants described a profound sense of unease when AI entered their creative process. They expressed concerns that their personal voice as artists was being overshadowed or diluted by algorithmic interventions. The experience of loss of authorship emerged as a recurring sentiment.

One participant remarked:

“I feel that my artwork is no longer entirely mine when AI intervenes in the process. It is as if the machine steals part of my identity as an artist.”

Another artist echoed this feeling, stating, “AI makes everything look too polished, too perfect—it erases the imperfections that make my work human.”

A third participant described the emotional toll of this experience: “When people praise my AI-assisted pieces, I sometimes feel they are admiring the algorithm, not me.”

This theme reflects how AI challenges long-held notions of originality and authenticity in artistic creation, revealing an emotional spectrum that spans from anxiety and loss to self-doubt and frustration. The convergence of these sentiments highlights how digital artists confront not only technical but existential threats to their creative authenticity.

### **Negotiating Resistance and Adaptation**

Despite initial resistance, many artists revealed a process of gradual adaptation, oscillating between rejection and acceptance. Resistance was often linked to skepticism about AI's ability to replicate human emotion and intentionality, while adaptation stemmed from recognizing AI as a practical tool rather than a competitor.

As one participant explained:

“At first, I rejected it completely. I thought AI was cold and soulless. But later, I started to see it as a tool like a new brush. It doesn't replace me; it expands what I can do.”

Several others described this transition as a learning curve rather than a conversion. One participant shared, “I went from fearing AI to experimenting with it daily—it's now part of my studio routine.” Another noted, “Resistance gave way to curiosity. The more I understood how AI ‘thinks,’ the more I saw creative possibilities.”

This negotiation illustrates the ambivalence of digital artists who grapple with integrating new technology without compromising their sense of self and agency. The interplay between rejection and acceptance suggests that adaptation is not a linear process but a continuous negotiation of boundaries between artistic control and algorithmic influence.

### Redefining Creativity in Human–AI Collaboration

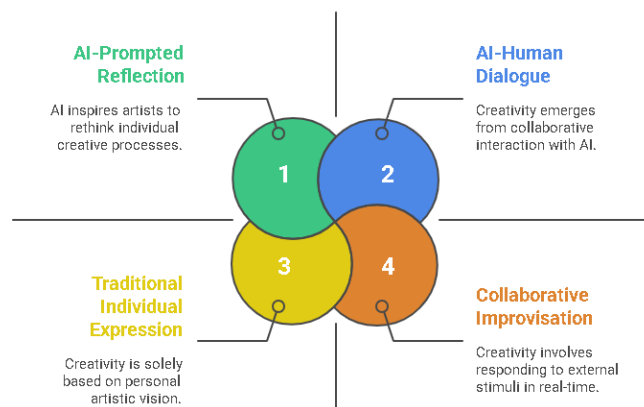
Several participants emphasized how AI prompted them to rethink the meaning of creativity itself. Rather than viewing creativity solely as individual expression, artists began to conceptualize it as a relational process where human imagination interacts with algorithmic generation.

One artist reflected:

“Creativity for me used to mean producing something entirely from within. Now, with AI, creativity feels more like a dialogue between me, the data, and the machine.”

Another participant elaborated, “It’s like improvising with another musician—you respond to what AI generates, and that shapes your next move.”

#### Evolving Conceptualization of Creativity



A different artist described this shift in mindset as liberating: “AI challenges my ego as a creator. It reminds me that creativity is not ownership, but participation.”

This redefinition of creativity highlights the transformative role of AI as both collaborator and provocateur, inviting artists to co-construct meaning through interaction rather than authorship. The theme underscores a paradigm shift where creativity emerges as an evolving conversation between human intuition and computational suggestion.

### Identity Reconstruction in the Digital Era

Beyond creative practice, the presence of AI influenced how artists reconstructed their personal and professional identities. Some artists reported embracing new hybrid roles, positioning themselves as curators, directors, or co-creators with AI systems. This shift often brought empowerment, as they learned to claim agency in shaping technological tools for artistic ends.

One participant noted:

“I no longer call myself just a painter. I am an artist–technologist. Working with AI gave me a new identity that merges tradition and innovation.”

Another participant similarly observed, “AI forced me to redefine my artistic persona—I’m no longer just producing, I’m orchestrating.”

Others, however, experienced tension in this transition: “Sometimes I feel like a manager of algorithms rather than an artist. It’s empowering but also alienating.”

This theme underscores the dynamic identity transformations that occur as artists situate themselves in an evolving digital ecosystem. The multiplicity of voices reveals that identity

reconstruction is both empowering and destabilizing—an ongoing negotiation between technological agency and human intentionality.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study reveal that digital artists experience AI as both a disruptive and transformative force, reshaping their sense of creativity, authenticity, and identity. These results address the central research question by demonstrating how artists redefine their creative roles when confronted with technological disruption.

### **Contribution of Findings to the Research Question**

The research question asked how digital artists subjectively experience and reinterpret creativity in the face of AI disruption (Carvalho et al., 2024). The thematic findings indicate that artists not only perceive AI as a challenge to authenticity but also actively negotiate its presence through resistance, adaptation, and redefinition of creativity. This demonstrates that the phenomenon of AI in art cannot be reduced to technical augmentation; rather, it represents an existential encounter that requires artists to reconstruct their sense of authorship and professional identity (Murphy & Hume, 2025). By foregrounding lived experience, the study contributes a unique perspective that extends beyond functional accounts of AI to highlight the relational and meaning-making processes that artists engage in. In doing so, it provides a richer, more holistic understanding of creativity in the digital era.

### **Relationship with Previous Literature and Theories**

The results resonate with prior research that has suggested AI alters cultural and artistic practices (Alava & Bravo-Villasante, 2025), but this study deepens the understanding by showing how such alterations are personally experienced by artists. Whereas (Ignazzi et al., 2025) emphasized the cultural implications of AI for digital art, the present findings reveal the lived negotiations of identity and authorship that underpin those cultural shifts. Furthermore, the ambivalence between resistance and adaptation aligns with theories of human–technology interaction that highlight both disruption and integration as coexisting processes (Gałuszka, 2025). At the same time, the findings challenge deterministic perspectives that portray AI either as a threat or as an inevitable collaborator by showing how artists redefine creativity in ways that are contextually grounded and personally meaningful. This interpretative depth positions phenomenology as a vital methodological lens for understanding how emerging technologies affect the subjective dimensions of artistic practice.

### **Implications of the Findings**

The findings of this study carry important implications for both scholarly and practical understandings of creativity in the digital era (Petrides & Vila de Brito, 2024). From a cultural perspective, the narratives of digital artists reveal how AI not only disrupts but also reshapes the social meaning of authorship and authenticity, suggesting a reconfiguration of artistic identity in contemporary practice (Nachabe Taan, 2025). Professionally, the results highlight the importance of equipping artists and designers with critical frameworks that allow them to integrate AI tools without compromising their sense of agency (Henry, 2025). The recognition of creativity as a dialogical process between human imagination and algorithmic input challenges traditional models of artistic production and opens pathways for new interdisciplinary approaches in art, design, and technology (Ma, 2024). These insights are relevant not only for the art community but also for educators, policymakers, and technologists concerned with fostering sustainable and ethically grounded innovation in creative fields.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The sample size, while adequate for phenomenological inquiry, was limited to a small group of digital artists within specific cultural and professional contexts, which may restrict the transferability of the findings to other populations. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported narratives through interviews may have introduced subjectivity, as participants' reflections are shaped by memory and

interpretation. The study also focused exclusively on experiences with AI in digital visual art, leaving other creative domains such as music, literature, or performing arts outside its scope (Bourrier et al., 2024). These limitations do not diminish the value of the findings but point to the importance of cautious interpretation and contextual application. They also serve as a foundation for identifying directions for future research.

### **Prospective Directions for Future Research**

Future studies could expand on these findings by exploring artists' experiences with AI across different cultural settings, professional disciplines, or generational groups, thereby enriching the understanding of how context influences subjective engagement with technology. Comparative research between digital art and other creative fields may illuminate shared and divergent ways in which creativity is negotiated in the presence of AI. Longitudinal studies could also capture how artists' perceptions evolve over time as AI tools become more pervasive and sophisticated. Moreover, integrating phenomenological approaches with complementary qualitative methods such as ethnography could deepen insight into the social practices surrounding human–AI collaboration. Such directions would not only advance theoretical debates on creativity and authorship but also contribute to practical frameworks for supporting artists in a rapidly changing technological environment.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study examined how digital artists experience and interpret creativity in the face of disruption by Artificial Intelligence, addressing the broader problem of authenticity, authorship, and identity in contemporary art. The findings show that artists initially perceive AI as a threat to originality but gradually negotiate its presence through resistance, adaptation, and redefinition of creativity. These results contribute a deeper understanding of creativity as a dialogical process shaped by both human imagination and algorithmic input, thus filling a gap left by earlier research that emphasized technical or cultural perspectives alone. The study also demonstrates that phenomenology provides a valuable methodological framework for uncovering the subjective meanings of artistic encounters with technology.

Beyond theoretical insights, this research offers several practical implications. For artists, the findings suggest pathways for embracing AI as a co-creative partner rather than a rival, promoting reflective engagement and ethical authorship in hybrid art-making. For art educators, the study highlights the need to integrate AI literacy and critical reflection on technology into creative curricula, preparing future artists to navigate and shape digital tools responsibly. For policymakers and cultural institutions, the results underscore the importance of developing frameworks that protect creative authorship and ensure fair recognition in AI-assisted works. While the focus on a specific group of digital artists limits the generalizability of the findings, these implications reveal how artistic practice, education, and policy can collectively foster a more inclusive and adaptive creative ecosystem in the age of AI. Future research could extend this work by exploring diverse creative fields and cultural contexts to build a more comprehensive view of how artists across domains navigate technological transformation.

### **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 the sponsor's role was limited to providing financial support without influencing the design, execution, or interpretation of the study.

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