

‘HUMAN IMAGINATION WON’T SURVIVE ON AUTOPILOT,’ WARN DIGITAL INNOVATION EXPERTS

DIGIT Lab responds to new research, stating that industry, education and government need to set new standards and expectations to preserve creative sectors

- New research from DIGIT Lab, the UK’s national research centre for digital innovation, reveals that **78% of UK creatives believe AI is making creative work feel soulless** and homogenised with **70% fearing it will replace creative roles**, including their own
- Despite these concerns, **94% of creatives say they now use AI** in some part of their process; and 42% rely on it daily even as only **11% believe machine-made work is creatively valid**
- The research shows **design professionals are twice as likely as writers / journalists to describe AI-generated work as soulless**, suggesting that design may be the creative field most at risk of homogenisation
- DIGIT Lab concludes that while AI can accelerate production and expand creative capacity, true creativity still depends on three uniquely human forces; **imagination, inspiration and intention**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: AI is transforming creative industries but at a cost to satisfaction and self-belief, according to new research commissioned by **DIGIT Lab, the UK’s national research centre for digital innovation and part of the University of Exeter**. A focused study, conducted with 500 professionals across the UK’s creative sector, explores how AI tools are reshaping attitudes toward originality, authorship, and creative confidence; revealing widespread concern that automation is diluting the human edge of creativity.

“True creativity needs nourishment, not substitution,” says **Professor Saeema Ahmed-Kristensen, DIGIT Lab, part of the University of Exeter**, has warned that lived experiences and feeding the brain are now more vital than ever to remain creative and relevant. Professor Ahmed-Kristensen is urging industries to “position AI as a tool for creation, not as a replacement for creativity itself.” A former Head of Design Products and Chair of Engineering Design at the Royal College of Art, she argues that the term *creativity* must remain defined by human experience.

“Large language models like ChatGPT and Gemini can generate ideas at speed, remix ideas and surface countless options,” she says, “but they cannot experience imagination, inspiration or intention - the qualities that give creative work meaning and resonance. Only humans can be creative beyond what is known.”

What New Research Shows

The new study, studying professionals across creative industries, found that **78% believe AI is already making creative work feel soulless and homogenised**, while **70% worry that the technology will limit opportunities or replace roles altogether**.

Despite deep concerns about its impact, **94% of UK creatives say they now use AI in some part of their process**, with **over four in ten relying on it daily**. Even as **only 11% believe** that AI-generated output should be considered true creativity.

Designers emerged as the most sceptical group, with four in five (81%) saying AI homogenises creativity, compared with 63% of writers and journalists who showed slightly greater acceptance of machine-assisted work.

The findings mirror results from MIT studies, where researchers found that students using AI to complete essays produced near-identical, ‘soulless’ work, with EEG scans showing reduced neural activity in regions linked to creativity and attention. Those who worked unaided displayed higher neural connectivity and satisfaction, particularly in the brain’s creativity and memory centres.

“Overreliance on LLMs could lead to unexpected cognitive consequences for creatives,” Professor Ahmed-Kristensen explains. “Research has shown that neural connections which support memory, problem-solving and resilience can weaken, leaving even experienced professionals less able to generate original ideas or think critically under pressure.”

She likens the human brain to the natural world: “The human brain needs nourishment from culture, experience and knowledge. If we fail to tend it and depend solely on AI, we risk eroding the very conditions in which human creativity thrives. Feeding the brain with real-world input has never been more important.”

Creativity at a Crossroads

“Human imagination won’t survive on autopilot,” she continues. “Industry, education and government need to set new standards and expectations to preserve original thought.”

While machine technology can transform the scale of what can be produced, it can’t experience inspiration; the spark that comes from lived life, accidents and human emotion. AI can frame problems faster than any human but it cannot leap beyond them. Generative technology remixes creative work but humans imagine.”

DIGIT Lab warns that the arrival of human-level AI (AGI / ASI) will intensify these pressures. Without safeguards, industries risk being flooded with repetitive outputs that dilute originality and strip work of emotional impact. “AI will not replace creativity,” says Ahmed-Kristensen, “but it can hollow it out if used incorrectly, producing work that feels novel at first but quickly lapses into sameness.”

The research also found that while **two-thirds of Gen Z creatives already use AI tools, only 52% trust them**, and just **one in ten believe machine-made work holds genuine creative value**. With careful integration, AI can still enhance creativity; making it more personalised and sustainable but without deliberate standards and boundaries, DIGIT Lab warns we risk creating a generation of creative professionals who think less, risk less and feel less.

The Design Perspective

Design has been a key focus within DIGIT Lab’s work. Unlike art or entertainment, design must work on three levels simultaneously: aesthetically, functionally and commercially. More than half (52%) of designers now use AI in their process but three-quarters say it reduces originality and blurs authorship. Large language models can churn out infinite variations and prototypes, but they cannot replicate the imaginative leaps that expert designers make drawing on nature, chance, or lived experience.

Senior Lecturer in Design and Innovation at the University of Exeter and Co-Investigator at DIGIT Lab, Ji Han, explains: “Large language models can sometimes reach the level of a novice designer, but they remain far behind experts. And we don’t expect this to change as we move towards AGI. The ability to make unexpected connections and analogies, how we’d define true creativity is still very human.”

Professor Ahmed-Kristensen has seen this in her research. In a recent study, teams used AI to generate vase designs. The resulting forms were perceived as beautiful, but only because researchers had first programmed human models of perception into the system. “AI can produce objects that people recognise as elegant,” she notes, “but only when human values, emotional cues and practical functionality have already been built in. Without that, AI can’t ever understand what beauty means.”

Her work also highlights the role of real-world reasoning in design breakthroughs - especially with biomimicry. Buildings inspired by sunflowers, antibacterial materials inspired by shark skin, or thermal products inspired by polar-bear fur. Humans can leap across categories to generate unexpected solutions, while AI remains limited by learned patterns.

The Formula for Originality

DIGIT Lab defines transformative creativity as the combination of three uniquely human experiences - imagination, inspiration and intention. "Imagination is seeing what doesn't exist yet," says Ahmed-Kristensen. "Inspiration is the spark from lived and unexpected experiences, and intention; rooted in human experience; gives ideas meaning and helps connect with people."

Together, these forces form a formula for originality that machines can accelerate or simulate, but never organically create.

The Future of Creativity

A culmination of its research, DIGIT Lab is publishing a new book later this year exploring the role of design and creativity in the age of AI. The book tackles the central challenge raised by their findings: how do we best use AI and data to evaluate creativity when large language models can generate endless variations but can't deliver inspiration or intent?

"We need to rethink how we value creativity itself," says Professor Ahmed-Kristensen. "AI can simulate patterns, but human imagination and inspiration remain central to what makes ideas meaningful. Humans must evolve with AI. By guiding and shaping it, creatives can boost scale and speed while protecting originality and imagination. The future of creativity is hybrid. The challenge is not what AI can generate but how humans decide to use it better."

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About DIGIT Lab:

DIGIT Lab is the UK's national Next Stage Digital Economy centre for digital innovation, a part of the University of Exeter. Funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), the centre brings together experts in design, engineering, data science and management to explore how emerging technologies are reshaping business, industry and society. Through its work with partners across creative industries, manufacturing, and public services, DIGIT Lab provides evidence-based insights and practical frameworks to help organisations adapt to the digital economy responsibly and sustainably.