NEW RESEARCH SHOWS HUMANS ARE EMOTIONALLY TUNING OUT AI GENERATED DESIGN

DIGIT Lab - the UK's national research centre for digital innovation - unveils new research showing the human cost of poorly executed AI design and outlines recommendations for using it more intelligently

- The research showed similar designs generated by humans and AI and asked respondents for their emotional responses. Although objectively attractive, an overwhelming 71% of those surveyed had weak responses to AI generated work and 82% say human or hybrid work feels more meaningful
- AI-only generated work might make a strong first impression but has a low staying power on our brains, with 36% of respondents saying its emotional impact on them fades quickly
- The reason? Perceived skill shapes value in our minds. An overwhelming 81% percent believe AI work requires little to no skill, while 62% say human-led design shows exceptional creative talent
- When investigating the negative response people noted AI work feels 'overly perfect' (40%) and 'lacking human emotion' (48%). Hybrid, human-led processes are seen as the strongest way to create meaningful design

[DIGIT Lab](#), the UK's research centre for digital innovation has undertaken new research and found that creative work made entirely by AI evokes weaker emotional engagement than human or hybrid human and AI driven design.

Participants were shown human-led designs across architecture, film and art, alongside AI-generated versions based on the same brief and were asked to report their emotional responses and impressions of each.

A staggering 82% of respondents described the human generated work as more meaningful and emotionally resonant whilst a further 71% report feeling less emotionally connected to AI-only design.

These new insights highlight the importance of using innovation in a balanced and purposeful way - combining human experience with machine capability. When people view creative work produced *only* by AI both their psychological and physiological responses are markedly lower than when viewing human or human-AI collaborative work.

A recent creative controversy illustrates this divide. Coca-Cola's latest AI-generated Christmas campaign was widely criticised for feeling "soulless" and emotionally flat, while Apple's latest Apple TV intro - created using real glass panels and human craft - was praised for its authenticity and warmth.

The contrast shows growing public intuition: when work is made entirely by machines, it may impress at first glance, but rarely creates the emotional connection that human creativity sustains.

The findings from DIGIT Lab reveal a deeper truth about how we value creativity itself. Respondents showed a strong respect for the talent on display in the human art, with 62% stating it required exceptional creative skill. When we see something made by a human being, we recognise the skill, talent and difficulty behind it. The same can't be said for purely AI-generated work, with the vast majority (81%) of participants asserting that it required little or no skill, despite the emerging tools still requiring significant human oversight.

AI tools that are easy to access don't truly understand public perception of the world, so AI-generated ideas don't always match what real people want. This gap in understanding helps explain why human expertise remains essential to assess and refine AI outputs so they better align with human wants and needs.

Emotion drives value
When asked to elaborate on their responses to the human generated creative works, most respondents said that it felt more personal (52%) and that they could sense the effort poured into the work (65%). In comparison when asked about the AI-generated creative works, they perceived it as overly perfect (40%) and lacking emotion (48%).

Simply put, the value of creative skills shapes our admiration. A purely machine generated image might at first appear beautiful but its impact fades once we realise the skill behind it belongs to a machine, not a mind. In fact, 38% said they wouldn't notice an AI-generated piece at all with over a third (36%) admitting it would quickly lose its impact. Humans are wired to detect humanity in design, and when that signal is missing, the body senses it before the brain can rationalise it.

"We also found that emotional response and perception towards a product or experience are vital, not only for people's desire to own and keep things but for driving economic growth and supporting sustainable design," says **Professor Saeema Ahmed-Kristensen, Head of DIGIT Lab at the University of Exeter.** "When we use AI - whether it's for consumer or industrial purposes - we need systems that model these complex human experiences to ensure they remain relevant to the end user."

The response echoes what scientists call the uncanny valley; the discomfort triggered when something looks *too* perfect - crossing the line from human to inhuman. The data suggests this reaction now extends to design itself. When creative work is flawless but devoid of human intention, our instinct is to disengage.

Human creativity carries imperfection and intent; traces of the person that shaped it. AI, without a human hand, produces near-instant perfection. We might admire it at first glance, but the appreciation fades quickly.

Similarly, when we use products that feel personal or evoke emotion, we form a lasting connection. Even when such products have flaws, like Philippe Starck's iconic lemon squeezer that prioritised form over function, they are cherished rather than discarded. That emotional, personal attachment not only deepens our appreciation but also encourages longevity with the item, and ultimately, more sustainable behaviours.

Professor Saeema Ahmed-Kristensen continues: "AI is an indisputable reality of our future. At DIGIT Lab, our focus is to investigate how to use AI thoughtfully, by setting deliberate standards for its integration and management. The future of great, sustainable creativity is hybrid; fusing human intent and talent with machine capability."

Meaningful design depends on cooperation

Much of today's conversation about AI and creativity focuses on generation - how machines make images, music or design from prompts and the jobs at risk from it. DIGIT Lab argues that true consumer appeal relies on sophisticated human models of perception and desire - subtle judgments current AI cannot replicate alone - which is why meaningful design will always depend on human and machine working in deliberate cooperation.

One way DIGIT Lab has been exploring this is through research into how human expertise can be reflected in AI algorithms. In a recent study, Professor Saeema Ahmed-Kristensen 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."

Beyond generation, an often-overlooked opportunity may lie after creation. Once a design idea exists, AI can help generate many variations as well as refine it: analysing performance, testing resonance and improving sustainability, cost and accessibility in ways the human mind cannot always identify. However, it's about combining superpowers: people for purpose and feeling, machines for scale, optimisation and evaluation. When asked about this approach a staggering 70% said that they would see art as creative and meaningful, so long as the process was considered and human-led.

DIGIT Lab's paper *Exploring the Use of LLMs to Evaluate Design Creativity* shows how this can work. The research found that AI, when structured correctly, can mirror expert reasoning, such as design experts, when assessing novelty and usefulness - offering new ways to measure, test and evolve creative ideas. In this model, AI becomes an analyst, refining rather than replacing human imagination.

The future of creativity

"To put things simply, machines generate and people feel," says Ahmed-Kristensen. "AI can enhance the final stages of the creative process not by replacing imagination but by refining and accelerating it. If we use technology to make design smarter, fairer and more impactful - then it becomes a partner, not a threat."

The study argues for a new balance in creativity, one where humans lead with emotion and AI follows with analysis. It is not a choice between them but a chance to extend what each does best.

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Survey methodology:
*Study of 500 UK adults commissioned by DigitLab, carried out in November 2025.

About DIGIT Lab:
DIGIT Lab is an EPSRC Next Stage Digital Economy Research Centre, based in London, with the University of Exeter. It brings together researchers and industry partners to explore the future of work, design and creativity in an AI-driven world. Led by Professor Saeema Ahmed-Kristensen, DIGIT Lab studies how technology can enhance human capability and create more sustainable, inclusive and emotionally intelligent design systems.

Notes to editors:
Professor Saeema Ahmed-Kristensen, Head of DIGIT Lab, and Melisa Leñero, Global Programs Director at International Development Enterprises, are launching dcoded on 10th December 2025, a podcast that decodes design, technology, and the experiences shaping our world. As hosts, Saeema and Melisa will explore how these influence how we live, work, and connect. The podcast will be available on TikTok, Instagram, Spotify [dcoded-podcast] Riverside Studio [info@dcodedpodcast.com] and Youtube [d.coded-podcast].

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