Hybrid creativity in 2026: Forecasting the future of human-AI design

If we don't rethink how we use AI now, human creativity will flatline by 2027

Five predictions for AI in design from DIGITLab, UK's national research centre for digital innovation

As AI tools are increasingly used in design, the conversation is shifting from "what AI can do" to "how it should be used."

If we continue treating AI as a shortcut rather than a creative partner, we risk 2026 being the year of weaker imagination, homogenised outputs, and a generation of designers who create less, think less, and feel less. New research from DIGIT Lab, the UK's national research centre for digital innovation, led by Professor Saeema Ahmed-Kristensen, shows the warning signs are already here.

A striking 78% of UK creatives say AI is making work feel soulless and homogenised, while 70% fear it could replace roles. Yet despite these concerns, 94% now use AI in some part of their process, and 42% rely on it daily. The risk is that designers in the creative process adopt generic AI tools and use generated ideas uncritically.

Further findings from DIGIT Lab reveal that UK adults are already emotionally tuning out of AI-only, generated design. Seven-in-10 (71%) reported weak emotional responses to machine-made work, and 82% say human or hybrid work feels more meaningful. This emotional disconnect stems from a simple truth: we value what we perceive as skilful, and AI alone cannot demonstrate imagination, inspiration, or intention.

We are at a pivotal moment. Rapidly evolving AI capability can elevate human creativity, especially when using models of experts and human perceptions. Professor Ahmed-Kristensen's own research shows generic LLMs can generate countless ideas, but often similar ones, risking a creative monoculture if humans don't actively intervene. Without intentional use, AI accelerates output but flattens originality.

For DIGIT Lab and Professor Ahmed-Kristensen, the path forward is clear: the most successful creative practices will be hybrid, combining human emotion, judgement, and context with AI's ability to analyse, optimise, and scale. This is the only route that preserves originality while boosting performance and resonance.

DIGIT Lab's mission is to build the frameworks, standards, and guardrails needed for human-centred AI design, ensuring that AI enhances creativity rather than hollowing it out. If we fail to act now, the damage to imagination and originality could be irreversible by 2027.

Here are five key predictions for AI in design:

1. Generic AI tools will reach their limit for design and innovation

Generic AI is reaching the limits of its utility for design and innovation. Its lack of accurate understanding of human wants and needs, and reliance on rehashing existing designs, hinders its ability to generate truly novel designs.

"We need to adapt widely available tools, such as LLMs, by embedding models of creative thinking and design thinking into them," says Ahmed-Kristensen, Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research & Impact, University of Exeter and Director of DIGIT Lab. "Doing this will support genuine collaboration between people and AI on creative work."

To make true cooperation possible, the data itself must evolve.

[Research](#) by Ahmed-Kristensen points to the next frontier: ethically sourced human data. Behavioural, physiological, feedback, and emotional data, collected transparently and with consent, can unlock richer and more personalised design. Some practical examples already emerging include:
  ● Physiological insight from heart rate variability, used to understand stress and wellbeing, enabling designers to ground decisions in real human data rather than assumptions.
  ● Comfort-optimised headsets and hand orthosis, modelled using detailed anthropometric data, sensors and a dataset of 200 head scans to predict fit and reduce the number of prototype iterations needed.
  ● Aesthetic modelling of products using perception data. By analysing how people rate shapes through semantic scales and statistical modelling, designers can link specific form features to perceptions like beauty or elegance, helping create products that better match what users want to own.

Designers across all industries must prioritise human insight and real-world experience to push beyond repetitive outputs. When used responsibly, human data gives AI fresh context, keeping design innovative rather than repetitive.

2. Emotional resonance will become the benchmark for success

DIGIT Lab findings show the public already senses the "flatness" of AI-only design. By 2027, the emotional impact of a design - how it resonates with humans - will become a key metric.

Professor Ahmed-Kristensen's research illustrates why. In one study, AI-generated vase designs were perceived as beautiful, but only because researchers had first programmed human models of perception into the system. "AI can produce objects people recognise as elegant," she explains, "but only when human values, emotional cues, and practical functionality are built in first. Without that, AI can't grasp what beauty really means."

Hybrid processes, where human creativity shapes intent and AI optimises form, function, and accessibility, will dominate. "Machines generate, but humans feel," Ahmed-Kristensen explains.

3. Creativity monocultures will emerge without human intervention

AI often converges around average patterns and existing works, risking a global creative monoculture and stifling true innovation. Without deliberate human intervention, we will start to see work homogenised on a global scale, optimised for broad appeal but lacking originality.

"Inspiration is the spark from understanding lived and unexpected experiences, which helps to give ideas meaning. Injecting human unpredictability, emotion, needs, and intuition into AI workflows will be essential to preserve diversity and cultural richness in design," advises Professor Ahmed-Kristensen.

4. AI as analyst, not artist, will enhance human capability

One of the biggest opportunities for AI lies in evaluation. DIGIT Lab research in a design engineering setting found that AI, when structured correctly, can mirror expert reasoning, such as design experts, when assessing novelty and usefulness of a product. This offers new ways to measure, test and evolve creative ideas that humans alone might miss.

"In this model, AI isn't replacing human creativity, it's enhancing it," says Ahmed-Kristensen. "It can analyse, compare, and predict, but only humans can decide what matters, what inspires, and what has meaning or design these into the AI models ."

5. Hybrid design will become the gold standard

The future of meaningful design is hybrid: humans provide intention, inspiration, and skill, while AI - when given accurate models of human perception - can provide refinement and optimisation of creative workflow.

DIGIT Lab research shows that embedding human values and emotional cues ensures AI outputs are both functional and resonant enhancing human work rather than replacing it.

"The challenge is not what AI can generate, but giving it the data to do so with human values in mind," says Ahmed-Kristensen.

Teams that embrace hybrid creativity now will lead in distinctive and emotional design. Those that don't risk falling behind in a landscape of sameness.

The hybrid imperative for 2026

If we fail to rethink how we work with AI, and use AI as is without human expertise, human creativity risks flattening by 2027. DIGIT Lab research shows that the designers who successfully combine human imagination, inspiration, and intention with AI's evaluative and optimising power will unlock designs that are emotionally resonant, innovative, and distinctive.

"The future of creativity is hybrid - a rebirth of design that safeguards originality while accelerating innovation," says Professor Saeema Ahmed-Kristensen. "How we integrate AI today will determine whether 2026 is a year of creative stagnation or a turning point for human-centered design."

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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, Professor of Design Engineering and Innovation and Director of DIGIT Lab at the University of Exeter, and Melisa Leñero, Director of the Paul Polak Innovation Fund at International Development Enterprises, have launched dcoded. The new podcast explores design, technology, and the experiences shaping how we live, work, and connect. The pair first met a decade ago on a joint RCA and Imperial course led by Saeema, where Melisa studied. Dcoded is available on TikTok @dcoded.podcast, Instagram @dcoded.podcast, Spotify @dcoded-podcast, Apple @dcoded-podcast and Youtube.

As a culmination of its research, DIGIT Lab will publish a new book in Spring 2026 examining the role of design and creativity in the age of AI. Written by Professor Saeema Ahmed-Kristensen, Professor of Design Engineering and Innovation and Director of DIGIT Lab at the University of Exeter, and Ji Han, Associate Professor of Design and Innovation at the University of Exeter, *Design Thinking in the Digital Age: Data and AI to Innovate New Products, Services and Systems*, with Cambridge University Press explores how creativity should be measured and protected in the age of AI. Release date for paper expected to be Spring 2026 - To join mailing list, contact Lauren Cowles