Perceiving Human–AI Creative Competition: An Exploratory HCC Discourse Study

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Abstract: As organizations confront accelerating waves of digitalization, a central question emerges: how does generative AI reshape work, roles, and value creation in ways that challenge established understandings of creativity and human contribution? The rapid diffusion of generative AI has intensified debates about how creative work is being reorganized, redistributed, and increasingly automated in contemporary organizations. While Human–Computer Co-Creativity (HCC) research has emphasized collaboration between humans and machines, emerging evidence suggests that AI also introduces new competitive tensions that challenge existing assumptions about creative agency, role boundaries, and the future of creative labor. In response to these developments, this study explores how practitioners articulate these tensions in everyday sensemaking. Specifically, we address the following research question: How does public online discourse extend or challenge existing Human–Computer Co-Creativity frameworks when interpreting AI's growing role as a potential creative competitor? Drawing on a qualitative discourse analysis of naturally occurring conversations on social media we identify how participants make sense of shifts in creative processes, professional identities, and labor dynamics as generative AI becomes embedded in organizational practices. Three thematic configurations emerge: Constrained Co-Creative Agency, where AI remains tool-like and limited; Advancing AI Co-Agency, where AI begins to shape creative decisions and elevate competitive pressures; and AI-Dominant Creative Substitution, where participants report or anticipate the displacement of human creative roles. Our findings show that public discourse both reinforces and extends HCC theory by revealing how practitioners negotiate not only collaboration but also competition and substitution as AI systems assume greater generative initiative. The study contributes to ongoing conversations on AI and digitalization by illuminating how creative workers interpret the reconfiguration of creative labor, the redefinition of skill requirements, and the restructuring of value creation in AI-enabled organizations. We argue that understanding these emergent interpretations is essential for anticipating how generative AI will reshape work practices and roles.

Keywords: Digital transformation, Human–computer Co-creativity, Generative AI, Creativity

1. Introduction

Digitalization has long been a catalyst for organizational transformation, reshaping how work is structured, coordinated, and valued. Across sectors, advances in automation, data-driven decision-making, and platformization have altered business models, workflows, and skill requirements. The emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AI) represents a new inflection point in this trajectory—one that extends automation from routine tasks into domains traditionally understood as creative, interpretive, and meaning-making. As organizations increasingly integrate generative AI tools into design, communication, writing, and content-production processes, questions arise about how creative roles are being redefined and how humans perceive their place in these evolving socio-technical systems.

Research on GenAI in creative contexts is still in its early stages but is developing rapidly (Heigl, 2025). We frame the study with Human–Computer Co-Creativity (HCC), which conceptualizes creativity as distributed across human and computational actors and emphasizes mixed-initiative processes, role negotiation, and co-agency. Early research in Human–Computer Interaction (HCI) approached creativity primarily through the lens of creativity support tools, framing technology as an aid to human ideation and execution. The more recent evolution toward Human–Computer Co-Creativity (HCC) shifts this perspective by considering how computational systems can act as active contributors—sometimes proposing ideas, selecting alternatives, or modifying artifacts alongside human creators. Scholars have emphasized the potential of such mixed-initiative systems to foster new forms of creative exploration, enabling humans to traverse conceptual spaces that would be difficult to reach alone (Lin et al., 2023; Yannakakis et al., 2014). Yet, as generative AI systems gain unprecedented autonomy, speed, and productive capacity, they also challenge core assumptions of HCC: that the computer remains a supportive partner rather than a creative competitor, and that humans retain control over creative direction, evaluation, and authorship.

At the same time, public and industry discourse increasingly suggests that generative AI may be reshaping labor markets in creative industries (Zhao, 2024). Designers, writers, developers, and content producers report shifting expectations about productivity, skill requirements, and the economic value of creative labor. Some describe generative AI as a powerful extension of human capability; others view it as a competitor capable of

displacing tasks—or entire roles—once performed by humans. These perceptions matter: how workers, freelancers, and founders understand AI's role in creativity shapes adoption practices, workplace dynamics, and the broader evolution of creative professions.

Despite these developments, existing scholarship offers limited insight into how people outside formal research settings make sense of AI's growing participation in creative work. Organizational change does not occur solely through strategic initiatives or the technological affordances of new tools; it also unfolds through the meanings actors attach to these tools and the narratives through which they interpret shifting boundaries between human and machine agency. Social-media discussions represent a rich source of such meaning-making, capturing real-time reflections, anxieties, and expectations from individuals directly encountering generative AI in their work.

This paper offers three main contributions. Conceptually, it extends the Human–Computer Co-Creativity (HCC) framework by foregrounding the competitive dimension of human–AI creative relations, showing that co-creativity is not experienced solely as collaboration but also as a shifting negotiation of agency, initiative, and substitution across a continuum from constrained assistance to AI-dominant creative roles. Empirically, it provides a discourse-based analysis of naturally occurring public conversations in which creative practitioners and observers negotiate authorship, value, and role boundaries with AI—revealing how users articulate emerging forms of co-agency, meritocratic pressures, and perceived displacement within everyday creative work. Practically, the study distills implications for designing human–AI workflows that preserve meaningful human agency, suggesting the need for workflow structures, skill development, and organizational practices that acknowledge both collaborative possibilities and competitive tensions as generative AI becomes increasingly embedded in creative production

2. Literature Review

Early work on computers and creativity emphasized that computational systems may assume multiple roles in the creative process, ranging from managerial support to active collaboration. Lubart (2005) famously characterized computers as nanny, pen-pal, coach, or colleague, foreshadowing the possibility that systems may act as creative partners in their own right.

Where traditional AI operates within fixed problem-solving constraints, generative AI introduces a qualitatively different ambition: its purpose is not merely to compute, but to produce new artifacts, ideas, and forms. Generative AI shifts interaction from task execution to collaborative iteration. This real-time dialogue supports creative discovery by accelerating variation and encouraging experimentation. This transformation reframes creativity as a distributed process: rather than relying on passive tools, humans now co-create with generative systems that contribute ideas, variations, and refinements (Geroimenko, 2025).

Thus, Generative AI technologies are reshaping the human–computer relationship by pushing the field from a classical HCI (Human-Computer Interaction) model—centered on usability, control, and task efficiency—toward a Human–Computer Co-Creativity (HCC) paradigm where systems assume an active generative role (Lin et al*.,* 2023). In this emerging view, AI becomes a co-creative partner capable of contributing ideas, variations, and novel combinations across various domains. This shift from Human–Computer Interaction (HCI) to Human–Computer Co-Creativity (HCC) is not incremental but paradigmatic (Geroimenko, 2025).

Wingström et al. (2024) contribute a human-centered perspective through 52 interviews with computer scientists and new media artists in Finland, showing that while both groups draw on similar elements to define creativity, they attribute different roles to AI: scientists rely on AI for accuracy and reliability, whereas artists use it more for exploration and experimentation, with some describing their practice as genuinely co-creative.

Human–Computer Co-Creativity is regarded as a means of extending creative exploration, enabling humans to access conceptual spaces they would struggle to reach independently. Mixed-initiative systems in particular have been shown to support this expanded search process by introducing alternative directions, variations, and suggestions that push creators beyond their habitual patterns (Yannakakis et al., 2014).

In this perspective, Ivcevic and Grandinetti (2024) discuss the co-creation scenario in which AI acts as a catalyst for human creativity. They argue that AI can support creators across a continuum of four creative levels—from mini-c creativity involved in learning, to little-c everyday creativity, to Pro-C professional creativity, and ultimately Big-C eminent creativity. Rafner et al. (2023) argue that integrating insights from psychological science into generative AI systems could transform our understanding of creativity and unlock deeper synergies within human–AI hybrid creative interfaces.

HCC research also seeks to update classical creativity perspectives for co-creative settings. Expanding on Rhodes (1961), Kantosalo and Takala (2020) propose the "Five C's"—collective, collaboration, contributions, community, and context—to analyze how creative agency is distributed, coordinated, and evaluated in human–machine ensembles. A creative human–computer collective involves at least one human and one computational partner engaged in joint creative activity. Their collaboration comprises both individual and shared creative processes, supported by ongoing interactions between the agents. The outcome of this collaboration is an artifact that reflects the distributed contributions of the collective and is ultimately communicated to a broader community of peers, audiences, and other social influences. Crucially, this co-creative process unfolds within a specific context that shapes and enables the creative act.

Although HCC foregrounds the possibilities of collaboration between humans and AI, it simultaneously highlights the competitive tensions emerging as AI acquires creative agency. As Atkinson and Barker (2023) argue, generative systems can reconfigure disciplinary boundaries and taste cultures by supplying creative outputs that rival those produced by humans.

Geroimenko (2025) argues that HCC requires us to rethink not only what technology can do but what creativity can become when machines contribute actively to the creative process, projecting a future in which art, science, and human potential are jointly reconfigured by human–machine co-production. This reframing surfaces a cluster of contested questions, including how augmentation balances against replacement in shaping human creative development.

From a broader labor-market perspective, Chen et al. (2025) show that generative-AI automation has heterogeneous effects: it reduces labor demand and lowers skill requirements in structured cognitive-task occupations, while simultaneously increasing both demand and skill complexity in roles that involve human–AI collaboration.

In a study of six AI-integrated commercial products, Erickson (2024) analyzes how generative technologies intersect with labor processes in creative industries. Although the case studies show little immediate substitution—indeed, AI frequently created new forms of labor—the findings point to emerging competitive dynamics, indicating that widespread industry adoption may lead to future displacement or restructuring of creative roles.

Specifically in creative sectors, Clarke and Joffe (2025) examine the introduction of generative AI tools into creative workplaces by conducting 17 ethnomethodologically informed interviews with international creative-agency professionals. Their analysis shows how workers actively re-specify the division of labor with AI, including how tasks are delegated to generative systems, how AI-produced contributions are modified or remediated, and how practitioners manage these outputs to meet the expectations of internal and external stakeholders. As contributions, the authors conceptualize generative-AI prompting as a form of situated, reflexive delegation; demonstrate that creatives must continually configure and repair AI role boundaries to sustain intelligibility and accountability in the workplace; and introduce the notion of interpretive templatized trust, whereby workers adapt automated generative templates to local contexts in order to maintain stakeholder confidence.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that Human–Computer Co-Creativity (HCC) must now be understood within an evolving landscape where collaboration and competition increasingly intersect. While HCC scholarship has traditionally emphasized how generative systems can expand human creative possibilities through mixed-initiative processes, the literature also reveals growing tensions as AI begins to enter creative domains with outputs that challenge established practices, roles, and standards. Yet, despite these emerging dynamics, relatively little is known about how such competitive tensions are actually perceived, articulated, and negotiated in the everyday interpretive work of practitioners, founders, and creative workers themselves. Existing research rarely examines how public discourse extends or contests theoretical assumptions about shared agency, co-creative roles, or the boundaries of machine creativity.

This paper addresses that gap by turning to naturally occurring online conversations, where users reflect in real time on the shifting distribution of creative agency between humans and AI. By examining how these communities describe, justify, or resist the idea of AI as a creative competitor, our study contributes to ongoing debates about the future of co-creativity. Accordingly, we investigate the following research question: How does public online discourse extend or challenge existing Human–Computer Co-Creativity frameworks when interpreting AI's growing role as a potential creative competitor?

3. Methodology

This exploratory study adopts a qualitative discourse-analytic design to investigate how online participants make sense of emerging competitive dynamics between human and AI creativity. Given that perceptions of technological change often materialize first in informal, public discussions rather than in formal organizational settings, social-media discourse offers a valuable site for capturing real-time sensemaking. Following the Human–Computer Co-Creativity (HCC) framework, which foregrounds how humans interpret shifting roles, agency, and creative boundaries with computational partners, we examine how individuals articulate, negotiate, and contest AI's evolving role in creative work. The study is explicitly exploratory, seeking to map discursive patterns rather than test predefined hypotheses.

The empirical material consists of a Reddit thread discussion about creative job shifting in the context of the emergence of AI, posted and actively commented on between October and December 2025. This thread was selected because it attracted a large number of contributions from individuals identifying as designers, developers, writers, founders, and creative freelancers—all professions directly exposed to generative-AI tools. The thread provides naturally occurring, unsolicited, and peer-to-peer exchanges, making it a suitable corpus for capturing situated perceptions and spontaneous accounts of workplace change.

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. First, all comments were manually coded to identify expressions related to AI's perceived creative agency, labor substitution, skill changes, role boundary shifts, and evaluations of creative quality. Codes were then manually iteratively grouped into higher-order categories to capture recurring interpretive patterns. This process led to the identification of three dimensions reflecting increasing levels of perceived creative substitution. In total, the dataset for these three dimensions comprised 130 quotes. For each dimension, we derived three major sub-dimensions that help explain the underlying patterns shaping these perceptions.

Rather than seeking platform representativeness or demographic generalization, the analysis aims to surface how online communities collectively construct meaning around human–AI creative relations during a period of rapid technological change.

We analyzed only publicly accessible posts and did not interact with users at any point. To protect participant privacy, we anonymized all quotations, removed usernames, timestamps, and any uniquely searchable strings, and altered the wording of selected excerpts, preserving their meaning. These procedures follow established recommendations for ethical research using publicly available online data (Adams, 2024).

4. Findings

We present three thematic perceptions that emerged from our qualitative analysis, each illuminating how online participants make sense of Human–AI competitive dynamics in creativity across their reported practices, value judgments, and skill trajectories. Read together, these themes trace a graduated spectrum—from no replacement to it's already happening: Constrained Co-Creative Agency (views that emphasize AI's current limitations and the continued centrality of human oversight), Advancing AI Co-Agency (accounts in which AI's speed, adequacy, and initiative begin to shift creative tasks away from humans, often through merit-based differentiation), and AI-Dominant Creative Substitution (claims that creative roles are already being bypassed, compressed, or replaced in practice).

4.1 Constrained Co-creative Agency (AI is not yet a Creative Competitor)

This dimension captures a view in which participants position current generative systems as accelerators but not as substitutes—at least for now—for human-led creative intent. In this perspective, AI is understood as part of a long continuum of creative tools rather than a disruptive creative rival: it expedites early-stage production while remaining reliant on human direction, evaluative judgment, and contextual refinement to achieve distinctive and durable results. While they do not constitute an exhaustive representation of the discourse, three dimensions provide especially meaningful insight into how and why AI continues to be perceived as constrained in its co-creative agency: first, its outputs tend toward Reduced Creative Distinctiveness; second, it is often framed within a Tool Continuum rather than as a transformative creative actor; and third, its utility is largely confined to Early-Stage Augmentation rather than full creative authorship.

Table 1: Summary table Constrained Co-Creative Agency dimension

Pattern	What it captures	Illustrative quotes
Reduced Creative Distinctiveness	AI's generative capacity expands production volume but tends toward homogeneity, accelerating the replication of familiar patterns	"AI certainly speeds up and lowers the cost of producing content, but what it generates often ends up looking fairly generic" "Generative AI seems to offer only a limited level of novelty and originality"
Tool-continuum	AI is positioned as the next step in a long tooling arc in creativity, not a true creative rival	"To me, this simply feels like the next step in making tools more efficient " "The AI output replaced a standardized template, not a creative professional's role"
Early-Stage Augmentation	While AI can handle foundational tasks and initial proofs of concept, the advancement of a project ultimately depends on human creative expertise	"AI can support plenty of creative tasks, but much of its output needs human correction." "Building a compelling brand still requires human oversight, experimentation, and refinement".

4.2 Advancing AI Co-agency (AI as an Emerging Creative Competitor)

This dimension captures a view in which participants increasingly frame generative systems as capable co-creative actors—no longer limited to accelerating routine production, but beginning to intrude into areas of creative initiative and outcome quality that were traditionally regarded as human domains. In this perspective, AI appears to move beyond its historical status as a supportive tool: it can now deliver creative output with enough autonomy, speed, and adequacy to be perceived as an emerging creative competitor. Within this evolving stance, participants articulate three patterns that, while not exhaustive, provide valuable insight into how AI is coming to be viewed as possessing competitive co-creative agency: first, signs of Accelerated Machine Initiative, where AI begins to shape or steer creative directions; second, forms of Meritocratic Competitiveness, through which AI raises performance thresholds and rewards creatives who can strategically leverage it; and third, a sense of Competitive Erosion of Human Creative Value as AI's adequacy challenges the distinctiveness and perceived necessity of human contributions.

Table 2: Summary table Advancing AI Co-agency dimension

Pattern	What it captures	Illustrative quotes
Accelerated Machine Initiative	AI demonstrates increasing generative initiative, producing creative outputs quickly and autonomously enough to appear as an active contributor rather than a passive tool.	"I worked with a colleague on a small project, and we assembled layout pieces and visual references we found online, fed them into the system, and let it generate options. After only a few cycles, it produced something nearly complete." "By providing colors and keywords through vibe coding, I generated a placeholder interface whose final quality was comparable to my own design output"
Meritocratic Competitiveness	AI intensifies competitive pressures within creative work by raising quality expectations rewarding creatives who can elevate quality and strategic value.	"What if the quality standards produced by AI surpass yours, resulting in better user engagement, higher traffic, and stronger overall performance?" "The project suffered from weak UI/UX work; an AI tool may have helped it progress more smoothly".
Competitive Erosion of Human Creative Value	AI's rising capability reduces the perceived distinctiveness and value of human creative contributions, fostering a sense of being replaced or outperformed.	"With clients able to build a tailored site in a single day using these tools, the demand for professional creatives drops significantly" "This illustrates that AI tools can be imperfect yet still good enough to do the job"

4.3 AI-dominant Creative Substitution (AI is Replacing Creative Labor)

This dimension captures a view in which participants perceive generative AI not merely as an influential co-agent but as a system increasingly capable of *replacing* human creative labor altogether. In this perspective, AI is no longer framed as a complementary partner within creative workflows but as a substitute that can autonomously deliver outputs once requiring human skill, time, and professional expertise. Participants

describe roles being reduced, bypassed, or entirely eliminated as AI assumes responsibility for tasks across writing, design, and content production—often at a fraction of the time and cost. While not exhaustive, three meaningful patterns provide insight into how and why AI is perceived as displacing human creative agency: first, *System-Level Displacement of Creative Roles*, where AI directly undertakes tasks previously assigned to human specialists; second, *Structural Reconfiguration of Creative Labor*, as AI compresses workflows and redistributes responsibilities across fewer human actors; and third, the *Expansion of Machine-Led Creative Autonomy*, in which AI is viewed as increasingly capable of performing full creative processes—from ideation to execution—with minimal human oversight.

Table 3: Summary table AI-Dominant Creative Substitution dimension

Pattern	What it Captures	Illustrative quotes
System-Level Displacement of Creative Roles	AI is perceived as directly replacing human creative professionals rather than merely assisting them. Participants report vanished roles, halted hiring, and human outputs being bypassed because AI can now deliver acceptable—or even superior—results.	"As a professional writer and journalist, I'm already seeing AI take over work that used to go to humans. The output has become so polished that most readers either can't tell the difference or simply don't mind." "The ability to build a website quickly may reduce clients' dependence on creative professionals"
Structural Reconfiguration of Creative Labor	AI compresses or reorganizes creative workflows, enabling individuals to bypass specialized roles and perform multi-role functions with AI support. This shifts value away from distributed creative teams toward lean, AI-enabled production models.	"Using an AI assistant, I can now build a full website in a single day—the same person can handle everything by prompting the system." "if a company had a team with 10 designers, now they only need 1 senior with AI tools"
Expansion of Machine-Led Creative Autonomy	Participants describe AI as taking over entire creative processes—from ideation to execution—with speed, adequacy, and autonomy that surpass human capacity. AI becomes capable of producing complete outputs with minimal human oversight, redefining creative agency.	"After more than a decade in front-end development, it still surprises me that one prompt can now generate a nearly finished webpage—most of the structure and visuals are done instantly." "I am prototyping a feature as a product manager. I wrote the PRD and normally would have sent this to our $100/hr designer. Instead I put the PRD in Figma Make, I had something that was exactly what I wanted."

5. Discussion

This study examined how online participants make sense of the shifting relationship between human and AI creativity at a moment when generative systems are rapidly transforming creative workflows. It makes three principal theoretical contributions. First, it extends HCC theory by showing that AI is interpreted not only as a co-creative partner but also, in some cases, as a potential creative competitor. Building on the work of Lubart (2005), which offers an early view of computers as creative collaborators, and on more recent accounts of AI as a catalyst for human creativity (Ivcevic & Grandinetti, 2024), our findings suggest that AI's active role in creativity is perceived as ambivalent. The three dimensions identified — Constrained Co-Creative Agency, Advancing AI Co-Agency, and AI-Dominant Creative Substitution — capture a continuum from support to partial substitution, showing that co-creativity is also a space of negotiation over authorship, standards, and value.

Second, the findings contribute to debates on AI and creative labor. In line with Chen et al. (2025), participants describe AI as more likely to affect routine, structured, or template-based creative tasks, while increasing the importance of higher-order skills such as judgment, taste, and strategic direction. This also resonates with the view of Erickson (2024) that AI may create new forms of labor and future competitive pressures rather than simply replacing creative workers. Our study adds that these transformations are interpreted through a hierarchy of creative work, where some tasks are viewed as more automatable than others.

Third, the study extends workplace-oriented research on AI in creative industries. Clarke and Joffe (2025) show that creative professionals renegotiate the division of labor with AI through delegation, remediation, and boundary repair. Our findings show that similar boundary work also appears in online discourse, where

participants debate what counts as a legitimate creative contribution. The ability to prompt, evaluate, curate, and refine AI outputs is increasingly framed as part of creative value, while routine or easily reproducible contributions are seen as more vulnerable to substitution.

Taken together, these insights extend HCC theory by showing that contemporary human–AI creativity is not only collaborative but also shaped by competitive and substitutive dynamics. Generative AI is perceived both as a tool that can enhance creativity and as a technology that may reshape the boundaries between human expertise and machine-generated output. We therefore suggest understanding contemporary human–AI creativity as a form of competitive co-creativity, where human and machine contributions are combined, evaluated, and negotiated in relation to authorship, expertise, and professional identity.

From a managerial perspective, the study suggests that organizations should support AI integration while acknowledging concerns about displacement and changing skill expectations. As AI takes over some routine or template-based tasks, creative roles may need to be redefined around judgment, creative direction, aesthetic coherence, and strategic sense-making. Organizations should also provide targeted training in prompting, curation, and responsible evaluation of AI outputs, while communicating transparently about how AI adoption may affect roles and workflows.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how public online discourse interprets the evolving relationship between human and AI creativity. It makes three main contributions. Conceptually, it extends HCC literature by showing that AI is perceived not only as a creative partner but also as a potential competitor. Empirically, it shows how naturally occurring online discourse reveals emerging negotiations around authorship, value, role boundaries, and displacement. Practically, it suggests that organizations should design human–AI workflows that support creative agency while addressing the competitive tensions created by generative AI.

The study has limitations. Because it relies on online conversations, it captures public sensemaking rather than direct workplace practices or individual creative processes. The findings may also reflect the specific norms and demographics of the communities studied. Future research could extend this work through interviews, workplace ethnographies, or cross-platform comparisons.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest the need to move beyond a simple augmentation-versus-replacement debate. Policy makers, educators, and professional bodies should support responsible AI adoption by strengthening AI literacy, clarifying authorship and accountability, and protecting human capacities such as judgment, originality, and ethical responsibility.

Ethics Declaration: Ethical clearance was not required for the research

AI Declaration: AI tools were used as writing and editing assistants during the preparation of this paper. They supported tasks such as refining wording for clarity, and helping structure sections of the manuscript. AI was also used as a reflective aid to reinforce conceptual development, for example, by helping compare alternative formulations, articulate theoretical distinctions, and improve the coherence of the argument. All conceptual decisions, analytical interpretations, coding processes, and theoretical contributions, were made by the authors.

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