

Lim had no ready answers. Facing this new trend, he felt that making judgments based purely on personal experience seemed to lack persuasive power. Ultimately, he decided to return to school, spending an entire year at LASALLE College of the Arts. Through his Master of Arts thesis research, he set out to understand one specific question: in the age of AI, where does the human soul of design go?

During an interview, Lim laughingly said he was not a natural academic but chose to understand this pressing issue through academic research; this was a systematic exploration. "Otherwise, what other ways are there to answer the question persuasively? While it might not be enough to call it a definitive answer, by setting up comparative experiments and collecting survey responses from over 20 countries,, my project has at least provided a sense of direction. If this can help even a small group of people, it is enough for me."

11 dimensions of the human soul of design

As this was a topic of common concern in the creative community, people flocked to the exhibition on weekdays and weekends, prompting the exhibition period to be extended from the originally planned one week to three weeks. Although the space was small, the exhibition offered rich information. Many spent nearly an hour reading the small texts line by line, slowly taking it in and reflecting deeply.

The research's background premise is that the power of design originally represented how humans express the humanistic spirit through imagination, feeling and judgments based on specific contexts. The so-called "human soul"—the core of humanity—was the heart of design. However, as AI increasingly infiltrates the creative industry, this human spirit is being challenged.

Combining reflections on this issue with his past industry experience, Lim proposed the 11 dimensions of the human soul of design. He believed that 11 irreplaceable human traits in design were demonstrated through curiosity, creativity, critical thinking, taste, intuition, emotional quotient (EQ), cultural resonance, ethics, presence, passion and courage.

"These 11 dimensions came from my continuous questioning during my reflections on the traits that set humans apart from AI, until I could not think of any more, thus forming this framework in which not a single element can be missing. The top-tier human design works we see all possess these elements behind them."

Human agency determines the quality of work

During his research, Lim validated the 11 dimensions of the human soul of design through literature reviews, expert interviews, commercial case studies and design experiments.

One of the experiments, Design Probes, invited seven designers to create branding for a florist based on the same requirements. Four used AI while three did not and a panel of judges conducted a blind evaluation based on the 11 dimensions.

The results showed that scores had no direct correlation with whether AI was used. The key lay in whether the designer retained creative agency. The better-performing AI users did not

accept everything unconditionally; instead, they continuously judged, modified and discarded elements, keeping the direction of the work and final decisions in human hands. Lim believed that "the quality of creative work does not depend on whether AI was used but on how much creative agency humans retained throughout the process."

He also analysed eight real-world commercial case studies from recent years, observing different outcomes along the spectrum from AI "replacing human labour" to AI being "strictly directed by humans". Coca-Cola remade its classic Christmas advertisement *Holidays Are Coming* using AI in 2024 but was criticised for losing the warmth of the original. He believed the work failed to re-interpret what Christmas meant to contemporary audiences and lacked emotional quotient and cultural resonance.

In contrast, Heinz's 2022 AI ketchup campaign used DALL-E 2 to generate ketchup for different scenarios. The results often bore hints of Heinz packaging, cleverly proving that the brand had become a cultural symbol for ketchup. The slightly surreal images instead became part of the creativity, reflecting human curiosity, taste and intuition, where AI was responsible for generating images and humans were responsible for prompting and selecting.

Mixed feelings among design practitioners

The exhibition scrutinised current industry trends based on real-life case studies, while also touching upon creative workers' reflections on their careers. Situ Yinuo, 32, who works in creative design, took leave specifically on his birthday to visit the exhibition. Having long followed Lim's work on social media, he said: "understanding the thoughts and insights of a veteran who has 28 years of experience in the creative field gave me great inspiration, letting me know where my positioning and value lies as a designer."

Originally he felt neutral towards AI, as he felt during early experiments that the output was far from satisfactory and posed no threat. Recently, however, seeing generative content become increasingly refined, coupled with his company's overall shift toward AI adoption, he inevitably felt anxious about his outlook. He worried that if the industry only pursued surface-level efficiency, it would continuously produce uninspiring "AI slop". Viewing the exhibition offered him some relief. "A designer's value does not lie in generating images faster than a machine, but in understanding culture and local context, body languages, subtler interpersonal interactions and feelings born from real life experiences. AI can pull data from the internet but it does not necessarily understand these nuances."

Hong Ziqing, 32, who works in visual marketing, was more optimistic. She viewed AI as a tool for organising thoughts and offering suggestions but believed it still could not accurately identify client needs and pain points, let alone propose appropriate design solutions in physical spaces. She felt that design thinking remained a designer's unique foundational skill. When asked about advice for young people looking to enter the industry, she said, "in the AI era, we should instead ask whether a person can design without relying on AI. Our training back then did not have AI; it was in such an environment that we honed our so-called foundational skills."

Among the attendees was a married couple in their 50s from the Philippines—a photographer and a scriptwriter. Chatting with Lim, they lamented how difficult the industry had become. Nowadays, AI technology is so advanced in producing product photos that images can be

produced without studio shoots, making it hard for photographers to make a living. They expressed regret that the general public did not care whether something was created by AI or a human; to them, there was no difference. But when aesthetic pursuits have yet to become mainstream, high public acceptance of AI creation might leave those who spent a lifetime honing their craft unable to compete.

Humans can play the notes that are not there

What truly separates human design from AI? This question may become an unending inquiry for designers in the AI era until one finds their own footing to make a living. A section of the exhibition displayed artists and creators who had influenced Lim over the years, representing what he considered the embodiment of the human creative soul. They include famous American furniture designer, architect and industrial designer, Charles Eames, Japan's "Sushi God", Jiro Ono, contemporary British artist David Hockney, contemporary Japanese photographer, Rinko Kawauchi and American jazz singer, Ella Fitzgerald.

When comparing AI and human mastery across fields and looking at it through the dimension of time, "Sushi God" Jiro Ono's apprentices needed to spend 10 years just to earn the qualification to learn to make tamagoyaki. This craftsman spirit of sharpening a sword for ten years sounds like a fairy tale against the backdrop of AI producing answers in 10 seconds.

At the end of his 74-page research report, Lim wrote, "The question is not whether machines can do what humans do but whether humans will continue to do what machines cannot." Starting from the perspective of "feeling", Lim said, "I started dabbling in photography influenced by Rinko Kawauchi. Her ethos is that only if you like the photo you took will others like it. Only if you feel something while shooting will others feel something when looking at it—these are human thoughts, not machine thoughts. Also, there is what jazz diva Ella Fitzgerald often said, 'play the notes that are not there'. This kind of live improvisation is something only those who understand what soulful music is can comprehend."

"Feeling" is something which cannot be quantified, designed or path defined. To some extent, it is an expression originating from the soul—perhaps what AI might see as a kind of human "metaphysics". Going a step further, when human emotions connect and build up over time, they form the human touch. Lim believed that "the more advanced technology becomes, the more important the human touch is. For designers, if you consistently design with a human touch, it will never go out of style. As technology becomes more advanced, the human touch may be diluted, and that is precisely when it is needed most."

Using passion to withstand the tide of the times

Choosing Basheer Graphic Books as the exhibition venue is the best illustration of the human touch. 30 years ago, when Lim was still a first-year design student, he stepped into Basheer for the first time. Spanning various creative fields and housing over 10,000 titles, this bookstore was a "pilgrimage site" for all local creatives and designers, as well as a gathering place for industry reflection. Daily visitors include students, educators, budding designers, veteran creative figures and policymakers, all reading between rows of bookshelves and immersing themselves in the works of designers they admire.

Locating the exhibition here stems firstly from his deep attachment with this bookstore and secondly from the fact that this research is closely connected to every single person in this group. In this bookstore which connects the creative community, everyone comes together to reflect upon and discuss the questions posed by our era. During the exhibition, many made a special point to come down and chat with him. Glowing eyes and sincere conversations brought forth the foundational passion that many had when they first started learning design, loving it, and joining the creative industry.

At the beginning of the research report, Lim quoted Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence*: "Our passion, when properly harnessed, has its own wisdom; it guides our thinking and our values and it is also about our survival." Once again, at a moment when technological change poses a soul-searching question to humanity, we will continue to witness whether passion can withstand the tide of the times.