

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.38035/dijemss.v7i6><https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/0/>

Women's Experiences in Producing and Communicating Digital Products Using Canva AI on Instagram

Symmas Pinasthika Syarbini¹, Irmawan Rahyadi², Muhammad Aras³, La Mani⁴

¹Communication Department, BINUS University, Jakarta, Indonesia, symmas.syarbini@binus.ac.id

²Communication Department, BINUS University, Jakarta, Indonesia, irmawan.rahyadi@binus.edu

³Communication Department, BINUS University, Jakarta, Indonesia, maras@binus.edu

⁴Communication Department, BINUS University, Jakarta, Indonesia, la.mani@binus.ac.id

Corresponding Author: symmas.syarbini@binus.ac.id¹

Abstract: Despite the rapid adoption of AI-based design tools, limited research examines how women interpret their interaction with generative AI within digital product production and platform-based communication. Existing studies largely emphasize technological efficiency or algorithmic visibility, leaving underexplored the reflective communicative processes occurring during human–AI collaboration. This study addresses this gap by investigating women's lived experiences in producing and communicating digital products using Canva AI on Instagram. Using an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, the research involved seven women aged 22–35 who actively use AI-enabled features in Canva. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and qualitative analysis of Instagram posts, and analyzed through iterative coding, thematic clustering, and interpretative synthesis. Findings are organized into five themes: Canva AI as a collaborative production tool; authenticity as negotiated curation of AI outputs; creative agency through prompt-writing and modification; visual aesthetics as product identity strategy; and Instagram as a site of visibility negotiation. The study conceptualizes human–AI interaction as dialogic digital communication and highlights AI tools' potential to expand women's creative-economic participation while sustaining agency.

Keywords: Canva AI, Digital Communication, Digital Products, Instagram, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms have become central to digital communication, particularly in the production and circulation of visual content. Instagram, in particular, functions not only as a space for self-expression but also as a site for professional positioning, product promotion, and creative economic activity. As Marwick (2013) argues, digital identity is strategically constructed through deliberate content management, while Miguel et al. (2023) show that women creators use social media to negotiate identity and pursue economic independence through creative practices.

At the same time, the rapid adoption of generative AI tools has transformed digital content production. Canva AI enables users to generate templates, visual designs, and other digital materials with minimal technical expertise, potentially lowering structural barriers that have historically limited women's participation in digital production. Human–AI collaboration, as suggested by Cariaga (2025), may enhance creativity and productivity while maintaining user agency.

However, despite growing scholarship on AI, digital labor, and women's platform participation, limited research specifically examines how women experience the use of Canva AI in producing digital products and communicating them on Instagram. Existing studies tend to emphasize technological efficiency, algorithmic visibility, or general gendered digital labor, without addressing the reflective communicative processes occurring during interaction with AI design systems. Moreover, little attention has been given to how production (Canva AI) and distribution (Instagram) form an interconnected communicative ecosystem in women's everyday creative-economic practices.

This study addresses this gap by investigating how women interpret their interaction with Canva AI during digital product creation, how they construct authenticity and creative agency in AI-assisted design, and how Instagram functions as a platform for negotiating visibility and economic positioning. Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, the research aims to: (1) examine women's lived experiences in interacting with Canva AI as a design partner; (2) analyze how digital products are curated and framed for Instagram audiences; and (3) understand how platform logics shape women's strategies of self-representation and market participation. By focusing on the intersection of Canva AI and Instagram in the Indonesian context, one of the largest Canva AI user bases globally, this study highlights the urgency of understanding AI-mediated creative labor as a communicative and gendered practice within platform-based economies.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore women's lived experiences in producing and communicating digital products using Canva AI through Instagram. IPA was selected because it enables in-depth examination of how individuals make sense of specific, meaningful experiences. In this case, interaction with AI during digital production.

1. Participants

Seven women aged 22–35 participated in the study. The sample size aligns with IPA's idiographic emphasis on depth rather than breadth. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the research focus. Selection criteria included:

- a. active use of Canva, including AI-enabled features (e.g., Magic Design, text-to-image, AI layout suggestions);
- b. production of digital products such as templates, social media kits, websites, or other monetizable visual assets;
- c. use of Instagram as a primary platform for showcasing, promoting, or marketing digital products;
- d. at least six months of consistent digital product activity; and
- e. willingness to articulate reflective experiences.

Participants came from diverse professional backgrounds (freelancers, small business owners, content creators) and different regions in Indonesia to capture variation in digital practices.

2. Data Collection

Data were collected in October 2025 from three sources:

- a. Semi-structured in-depth interviews (45–70 minutes), conducted via Zoom or WhatsApp, focusing on creative processes, AI interaction, authenticity, and marketing strategies.
- b. Document analysis of Instagram posts, examining captions, visual style, and calls to action as representations of prior AI-mediated production processes.
- c. Researcher reflexive notes documenting contextual observations and analytic reflections.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

3. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed IPA procedures (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) with several iterative stages:

- a. Close reading and initial noting: detailed descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments were made on each transcript.
- b. Development of emergent themes: significant meaning units were coded inductively.
- c. Thematic clustering: related codes were grouped into superordinate themes through constant comparison.
- d. Cross-case analysis: patterns across participants were identified while preserving individual nuance.
- e. Interpretative synthesis: themes were contextualized within theories of digital communication, technological affordances, and platform labor.

Coding was conducted manually to maintain interpretative sensitivity, and themes were repeatedly refined to ensure coherence and conceptual depth.

4. Reflexivity and Trustworthiness

To minimize subjective bias, the researcher practiced reflexive bracketing by documenting preconceptions about AI and gender prior to analysis. Member checking was conducted by sharing summarized interpretations with participants for confirmation. Peer debriefing with two qualitative research colleagues was used to discuss thematic interpretations. Thick description and verbatim quotations were employed to strengthen credibility and transparency.

5. Ethical Considerations

Participants provided informed consent prior to data collection. They were informed about the study's objectives, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms were used, and identifying details were removed from transcripts and Instagram documentation to ensure anonymity. All data were securely stored and accessible only to the researcher.

6. Limitations

As a phenomenological study, findings are context-specific and not statistically generalizable. Variations in participants' business scale and Instagram engagement levels influenced analytic depth. However, the IPA approach enabled rich, nuanced understanding of women's meaning-making processes in AI-mediated digital production.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Results were derived from in-depth interviews with seven women (22–35 years old) who actively used Canva AI in producing digital products and used Instagram as a marketing

channel. An interpretative phenomenological approach was applied to understand how participants' personal experiences shaped meanings related to technology, creative practice, and productive orientations in everyday life. Here, communication is conceptualized as an ongoing dialogic interaction between users and Canva AI, where meaning emerges through iterative prompting, visual interpretation, and reflective decision-making.

Following IPA procedures by Smith, Flowers, & Larkin (2009), analysis involved repeated reading of transcripts, identifying meaningful statements, grouping experiences into key themes, and interpreting emergent meanings. The analysis focused on participants' experiences of producing digital products using Canva AI, how they interpreted the process, and the role of social media in supporting distribution and marketing.

In-depth analysis indicated that Canva AI use was not understood purely as a technical design activity, but as part of a productive practice intertwined with identity, personal values, and economic goals. Canva AI was perceived as a tool that accelerates production, facilitates packaging of digital products, and opens opportunities for participants to remain productive and earn income from home. These experiences were associated with confidence, creative control, and the courage to offer work in public spaces.

Instagram was positioned as a showcase and marketing channel for digital products rather than as the primary goal of self-expression. Participants viewed Instagram publishing as a strategy to introduce products, reach audiences, and build legitimacy for their outputs. As a result, producing digital products and marketing them through social media formed an interconnected chain of experiences that participants interpreted reflectively.

Overall, women's experiences of using Canva AI were situated at the intersection of self-expression, creative practice, and economic orientation. Technology not only mediated design processes but also shaped how participants understood themselves as empowered digital product creators in digital spaces.

Table 1. Summary of Women's Experiences as Canva AI Users.

Main Theme	Subtheme / Meaning Focus	Participants	Key Quotation or Narrative	Phenomenological Interpretation
Canva AI as a digital product production tool	Canva AI simplifies and accelerates the digital product creation process	1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7	"Using Canva AI makes my work faster and more organized, so I feel more confident creating and offering my own products."	Canva AI is interpreted as a supportive tool that reduces technical barriers, enabling women to feel more prepared to produce and offer digital products.
Digital product authenticity	Authenticity is understood as the result of curation and personalization rather than raw AI output	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7	"AI-generated results are just the starting point; I still modify them to match my own style and values."	Digital product authenticity is understood as a reflective process in which personal meaning and identity are constructed through the reworking of AI-generated outputs.
Creative control and agency	A collaborative relationship between users and Canva AI	1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7	"AI helps a lot, but I still decide the final outcome."	Women position themselves as the primary agents in the creative process, while AI is understood as a supportive collaborative partner.

Visual aesthetics as product identity	Choices of color, elements, and visual style reflect personal character	1, 4, 5, 6, 7	“I have my own colors and style, that’s what makes my product different.”	Visual aesthetics are interpreted as markers of digital product identity and representations of the creator’s personal values.
Instagram as a marketing channel	Instagram is used as a showcase and promotional medium for digital products	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7	“Instagram is a place to display and offer products, not just for posting content.”	Social media is understood as a space for distribution and validation of digital products rather than merely a platform for self-expression.

Discussion

1. Canva AI as a Means of Digital Product Production

Participants constructed diverse meanings around Canva AI as a production tool, revealing both enabling and constraining dimensions. For some (Participants 1 and 3), Canva AI was experienced as emotionally supportive; the interface facilitated a calming and reflective design process that allowed personal ideas and feelings to be translated into visual form. Others (Participants 2 and 5) emphasized efficiency, highlighting the platform’s ability to accelerate production, standardize layout, and generate outputs that were “ready” for public presentation. Participants 4 and 6 adopted a more cautious stance, acknowledging its practical benefits while stressing the need for deliberate control to maintain alignment with personal identity. Participant 7 foregrounded its economic potential, noting that ease of use expanded market access and professional opportunities.

While these experiences appear to affirm Hutchby’s (2001) concept of technological affordances, suggesting that technology offers possibilities without determining outcomes, a closer analysis reveals more complex dynamics. Although participants emphasized agency, their creative processes were simultaneously structured by AI-generated templates, embedded aesthetic logics, and default design suggestions. This indicates that affordances are not neutral; they are shaped by platform architectures that subtly guide visual norms.

Moreover, reliance on AI features for ideation and layout development raises questions about emerging forms of technological dependency. Creative labor shifts from manual design toward prompt-based curation and selective editing. Agency is not eliminated, but reconfigured: expertise increasingly resides in negotiating, filtering, and refining algorithmic outputs rather than generating visuals from scratch. Over time, this may contribute to aesthetic convergence, where AI-assisted products display similar compositional patterns across creators.

Importantly, participants did not describe Canva AI as a passive tool. Instead, they engaged in iterative, dialogic exchanges with the system accepting, rejecting, and modifying suggestions. This interaction constitutes a communicative process in which meaning emerges relationally between human intention and algorithmic proposal. Thus, Canva AI functions not merely as a production instrument but as a co-structuring actor within digital creative practice, simultaneously enabling empowerment while embedding subtle normative constraints.

2. Digital Product Authenticity: Between Process Transparency and Visual Strategy

Participants articulated authenticity not as an inherent quality of a product, but as a negotiated outcome of human–AI interaction and platform-oriented strategy. For Participants 2 and 4, authenticity resided in the act of curating and modifying AI-generated templates. They positioned Canva AI outputs as provisional drafts requiring

personalization to align with individual values and stylistic identity. Participant 3 further framed emotional involvement in the design process as a marker of authenticity, suggesting that affective investment distinguishes human-created meaning from automated generation.

In contrast, Participants 1 and 5 emphasized transparency toward audiences, including openly acknowledging AI assistance as a trust-building strategy. Meanwhile, Participants 6 and 7 adopted a pragmatic orientation: authenticity was measured less by process transparency and more by stylistic consistency and functional relevance within market expectations. These variations demonstrate that authenticity operates as a strategic construct rather than a stable moral principle.

While these findings resonate with Goffman's (1959) concept of self-presentation, they also reveal a contemporary tension specific to AI-mediated production. The presence of generative systems complicates traditional notions of originality, raising implicit questions about authorship, creativity, and legitimacy. Participants negotiated this tension by repositioning authenticity from "creating from scratch" to "curating with intention." In doing so, authenticity shifts from being origin-based to being process-based.

However, this reframing may also obscure structural influences embedded in AI systems. Because Canva AI templates often reflect dominant visual trends, personalization occurs within pre-configured aesthetic boundaries. Thus, even as participants assert individuality, their expressions are partially shaped by algorithmically standardized design logics. Authenticity, therefore, emerges within constraints rather than outside them.

From a communicative perspective, authenticity materializes through iterative dialogue with AI-generated visuals prior to audience exposure. Meaning is co-constructed between user intention and algorithmic suggestion before being strategically framed for Instagram distribution. This demonstrates that authenticity in AI-assisted digital production is relational, negotiated, and platform-conditioned rather than purely expressive.

3. Creative Control and Agency in Human–AI Collaboration

Participants consistently emphasized the importance of maintaining creative control despite relying on Canva AI. Participants 3 and 5 described moments when AI-generated outputs diverged from their original intentions, requiring deliberate human intervention to realign the design with personal vision. Participants 2 and 4 framed prompt-writing as a new form of creative competence, arguing that the ability to formulate precise instructions significantly shaped the quality and relevance of AI outputs. For Participant 6, system inconsistencies and unexpected results reinforced the need for continuous monitoring and renegotiation. Participant 7 characterized the relationship as pragmatic collaboration: AI accelerates production, but final authority remains human.

At first glance, these accounts support Cariaga's (2025) argument that human–AI collaboration enhances productivity without displacing agency. However, a closer examination reveals that agency is not simply preserved—it is transformed. Creative control shifts from manual execution toward strategic orchestration of algorithmic processes. The designer becomes less a sole creator and more a curator, editor, and prompt strategist. This redistribution of creative labor redefines expertise: mastery increasingly lies in knowing how to guide, filter, and correct AI suggestions.

Yet this transformation also introduces structural asymmetries. While participants perceive themselves as decision-makers, their range of possible outcomes is bounded by the AI system's training data, interface constraints, and embedded

aesthetic norms. Agency, therefore, operates within algorithmically pre-structured parameters. Rather than a binary condition (present or absent), agency becomes relational and negotiated within platform architectures.

Importantly, interaction with Canva AI emerged as a dialogic communicative process. Prompts functioned as speech acts, AI outputs as responses, and revisions as iterative feedback loops. Meaning was not generated unilaterally but co-constructed through ongoing exchange. This suggests that human–AI collaboration in digital design should be understood not merely as technical assistance, but as communicative co-production where creative authority is asserted through negotiation rather than autonomous control.

4. Visual Aesthetics as a Product Identity Strategy

Participants' aesthetic decisions were central to how they positioned their digital products and professional identities. Participants 1 and 4 associated feminine visual elements such as soft color palettes and minimalist layouts with professionalism, empathy, and approachability. Participant 5 framed these choices as expressions of personal balance, while Participant 2 emphasized that feminine aesthetics did not undermine credibility but instead enhanced emotional resonance with audiences. Meanwhile, Participants 6 and 7 prioritized visual consistency as a branding mechanism, highlighting the importance of recognizability in competitive digital marketplaces.

These patterns suggest that feminine aesthetics function less as essentialized gender expression and more as strategic identity work. In line with Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity, gendered visual styles are enacted through repeated aesthetic practices in digital space. However, AI-mediated design complicates this process. Canva AI's template libraries and suggested color harmonies often reflect dominant global design trends, which may subtly standardize what counts as "professional," "feminine," or "marketable." As a result, while participants perceive their aesthetic choices as intentional and personal, these choices are partially shaped by platform-curated visual norms.

This introduces a tension between differentiation and homogenization. On one hand, consistent visual identity strengthens branding and economic positioning. On the other, reliance on AI-generated templates risks aesthetic convergence, where distinct creators produce visually similar outputs. Feminine aesthetics, therefore, may simultaneously function as empowerment strategies and as reproductions of algorithmically mediated design conventions.

Participants described aesthetic decision-making as an iterative exchange with Canva AI: selecting, rejecting, and refining suggested elements. This interaction reinforces the idea that visual identity is co-produced through communicative negotiation with the system. Rather than merely expressing identity, creators strategically perform it within the aesthetic parameters embedded in AI-driven design infrastructures.

5. Instagram as a Marketing Channel: Negotiating Visibility

Participants described Instagram as an indispensable yet demanding platform for digital product promotion. Participants 2 and 3 openly acknowledged that algorithmic trends, popular formats, and engagement metrics influenced their visual and narrative decisions. Participant 4 adopted a selective adaptation strategy, incorporating trends while attempting to maintain stylistic distinctiveness. Participant 5 deliberately limited algorithmic conformity to preserve personal values, even at the risk of reduced reach.

Meanwhile, Participants 6 and 7 framed Instagram as a legitimacy-building showcase necessary for market recognition and audience expansion.

These varied strategies reflect what Cotter (2019) conceptualizes as visibility negotiation where creators continuously adjust communication practices to align with algorithmic logics while attempting to sustain identity coherence. However, this negotiation reveals structural asymmetries embedded in platform governance. Instagram's algorithmic architecture prioritizes certain visual styles, posting frequencies, and engagement patterns, thereby shaping what becomes visible and economically viable. Participants' efforts to remain "authentic" were therefore constrained by the necessity of strategic adaptation.

This dynamic introduces a tension between creative autonomy and platform dependency. While Instagram expands economic opportunity, it also imposes performance pressures that may subtly standardize aesthetic presentation and communication style. Visibility becomes contingent not only on creative quality but on compliance with opaque algorithmic criteria.

Importantly, participants' Instagram strategies were not formed in isolation; they were extensions of prior negotiations with Canva AI. Decisions about layout, color, and messaging were already shaped during AI-mediated production. Thus, Instagram functions less as a separate stage of communication and more as a continuation of an earlier human–AI meaning-making process. Visibility, in this context, is co-produced through layered negotiations with both design algorithms and platform algorithms, positioning women creators within a multi-level system of technological mediation.

6. Productive Meaning and Emotional Reflection

Emotional dimensions emerged as a significant yet complex aspect of participants' experiences with Canva AI. Participants 1 and 4 described feelings of relief and pride upon completing digital products, while Participant 5 associated the design process with emotional balance and well-being. Participant 2 interpreted productivity as self-recognition of effort and competence, and Participant 7 reported growing confidence to continuously produce and market her work. These accounts suggest that AI-assisted digital production extends beyond economic functionality into affective and identity-forming domains.

Consistent with Marwick (2013) and Duffy & Hund (2019), digital creative labor can generate symbolic value and emotional affirmation alongside economic potential. However, a critical perspective reveals that such empowerment is not unconditional. Emotional satisfaction is closely intertwined with productivity, visibility, and perceived market validation. Confidence often followed successful output completion or positive audience response, indicating that empowerment may remain contingent on performance outcomes within platform economies.

Moreover, emotional attachment to AI-mediated production raises questions about subtle forms of affective dependency. When ease, speed, and aesthetic coherence are consistently facilitated by AI systems, creative fulfillment may become increasingly tied to technological assistance. The risk, therefore, lies not in the erosion of agency, but in the normalization of AI as an indispensable emotional and productive companion.

Importantly, participants' emotional responses were shaped through iterative communicative engagement with Canva AI—interpreting visual feedback, revising outputs, and witnessing ideas materialize rapidly. Meaning and confidence emerged relationally within this exchange. Overall, Canva AI does not produce a singular trajectory of empowerment; rather, it structures a spectrum of experiences in which economic aspiration, identity construction, emotional validation, and technological mediation intersect in dynamic and sometimes ambivalent ways.

This study offers three primary theoretical contributions. First, it reconceptualizes human–AI design interaction as a form of dialogic digital communication, where meaning emerges through iterative negotiation between user intention and algorithmic suggestion. Rather than treating AI as a neutral tool or as an autonomous creator, the findings demonstrate that creative production is co-structured within communicative exchanges shaped by platform architectures.

Second, the study extends the concept of technological affordances by introducing a more relational understanding of agency. Agency is neither fully preserved nor diminished in AI-assisted production; instead, it is reconfigured within algorithmically bounded environments. This reframes empowerment as conditional and situated rather than inherently guaranteed by technological access.

Third, the research contributes to gendered platform studies by showing how AI-mediated design intersects with visibility logics on Instagram, positioning women creators within layered systems of technological mediation that shape identity, aesthetics, and economic participation.

Practically, the findings highlight the importance of critical AI literacy for women digital entrepreneurs. While Canva AI expands access to creative production and market entry, sustainable empowerment depends on awareness of aesthetic standardization, algorithmic visibility pressures, and potential technological dependency. Designers, educators, and platform developers should therefore consider not only usability but also the structural norms embedded in AI-driven creative systems.

CONCLUSION

This study advances digital communication scholarship by conceptualizing AI-assisted design not merely as technological facilitation, but as a form of dialogic co-production in which meaning, identity, and economic positioning are negotiated through iterative interaction between human intention and algorithmic suggestion. By examining women's lived experiences with Canva AI in relation to Instagram-based distribution, the research demonstrates that agency in AI-mediated production is relational and structurally conditioned rather than inherently guaranteed. Empowerment emerges not simply from access to AI tools, but from the capacity to critically navigate platform architectures, aesthetic norms, and algorithmic visibility regimes.

The findings reveal that Canva AI simultaneously expands access to digital entrepreneurship and embeds creators within layered systems of technological mediation. Women's creative control, authenticity strategies, and aesthetic positioning are shaped through continuous negotiation with both design algorithms and social media logics. This reframes human–AI collaboration as a communicative process embedded within platform economies rather than as neutral technical assistance.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study's small, context-specific sample limits transferability beyond Indonesian women creators using Canva AI. Second, reliance on self-reported experiences may not fully capture unconscious forms of algorithmic influence. Third, the study focuses on Canva AI and Instagram, leaving other AI design tools and platforms unexplored.

Future research should comparatively examine different AI design systems to assess how platform architectures shape agency and aesthetic standardization. Longitudinal studies could investigate whether prolonged AI reliance alters creative skill development or reinforces dependency. Additionally, cross-cultural research would help determine whether the relational configuration of agency identified here operates similarly across different socio-digital contexts.

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