

The Impact of Template-Based Design Tools on Gen Z Creators' Sense of Creative Freedom and Perception of Originality

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Abstract: Template-based design tools such as Canva and CapCut have lowered the technical barriers to visual creation by providing preset layouts, ready-made visual elements, and automatic formatting functions. While these tools enable non-professional users to produce visual content efficiently, they may also contribute to stylistic homogenization and influence creators' perceptions of creative freedom and originality. This study examines the relationship between template-based design tool usage, perceived creative freedom, and perceived originality among Generation Z non-professional creators aged 18 to 26. Based on 200 valid questionnaires, the study adopts a cross-sectional survey design and uses pretested, reliable scales to measure template usage, perceived creative freedom, and perceived originality. The results show that respondents generally displayed high-frequency but moderate-dependent template use. Pearson correlation analysis found a moderate positive relationship between template usage and perceived creative freedom ($r = .481, p < .001$) and a weak positive relationship between template usage and perceived originality ($r = .192, p = .006$). Linear regression analysis further showed that template usage significantly predicted perceived creative freedom, but did not significantly predict perceived originality after controlling for age and gender. The study suggests that template-based design tools may enhance non-professional creators' sense of expressive autonomy, while their relationship with perceived originality remains weak and unstable. These findings contribute to understanding the social impact of digital creative tools and offer implications for platform design and creative education.

Keywords: Template-Based Design Tools; Generation Z; Creative Freedom; Perceived

Originality; Design Homogenization

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of digital media and social platforms, visual content creation is no longer limited to professional designers. Ordinary users now frequently produce posters, short videos, presentations, and social media content in everyday communication, making efficiency and accessibility increasingly important in digital creative platforms[11].

Template-based design tools such as Canva and CapCut support this shift by providing preset layouts, ready-to-use materials, and automatic formatting functions. These tools reduce technical barriers, allow users to begin from existing templates, and make visual creation more accessible to non-professional users. At the same time, their reliance on preset structures has raised concerns about repeated styles and reduced space for personalized expression [7][12].

Generation Z is a particularly important group in this context. As digital natives, they rely heavily on social media and online creative tools for communication and self-expression, while often lacking formal design training [5][14]. Prior research suggests that non-professional users tend to value efficiency and idea realization more than originality concerns [17].

Against this background, this study examines the relationship between template-based design tool usage and creative experience among Generation Z non-professional creators. It focuses on three questions: patterns of template use, the relationship between template use and perceived creative freedom, and the relationship between template use and perceived originality.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Characteristics of Generation Z Non-Professional Creators' Use of

Template-Based Design Tools

Creativity support tools lower barriers to creative participation by simplifying artistic and design workflows [7]. In visual content creation, template-based design tools extend this function by turning complex design processes into intuitive actions such as replacing text, dragging assets, and modifying preset layouts. Because templates are usually organized in catalog form and rely on standardized layouts, preset color schemes, and stock images, they resemble semi-finished designs that can be quickly customized and published [12].

These tools are especially relevant in social media environments where visual content plays an important role in user engagement [2]. For Generation Z non-professional creators, templates are commonly used in contexts such as social media, academic presentations, and personal content production to improve visual quality and reduce time costs. Compared with professional designers, non-professional users tend to prioritize efficiency and usability over originality concerns [12]. At the same time, frequent use does not necessarily imply complete dependence, since many users still modify templates to some extent.

2.2 The Impact of Template-Based Creation on the Sense of Creative Freedom

The sense of creative freedom refers to a creator's subjective experience of autonomy, control, and unconstrained expression during the creative process. It is closely related to creative self-efficacy, or confidence in one's own creative ability [3][1][18]. Research on creativity support tools suggests that structured starting points can reduce uncertainty and help users overcome the "blank page effect"[7]. In this sense, template-based design tools may function as a form of scaffolding by reducing technical difficulty and allowing non-professional creators to focus more on content and information organization.

However, templates may also restrict exploration if their structures are too fixed. When digital systems prioritize uniformity and simplicity too strongly, users' space for experimentation may be compressed[12]. The impact of template-based creation on creative freedom is therefore mixed and remains an empirical question.

2.3 The Impact of Template-Based Creation

on the Perception of Originality

The perception of originality refers to a creator's subjective evaluation of the uniqueness and novelty of their own work [16]. For non-professional creators, template-based design tools may affect this perception in two opposite ways. On the one hand, templates help users complete visual tasks efficiently. On the other hand, because templates contain preset structures and visual conventions, works created from the same template may appear similar, which may weaken users' sense that their work is unique[12].

At the same time, templates do not necessarily suppress originality. They may also function as supportive structures that help users focus on content and new combinations of elements. The effect of template-based creation on perceived originality is therefore also mixed, and empirical research on this relationship remains limited.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

This study draws on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the theory of creative self-efficacy to explain the relationship between template-based design tool usage and creative experience. TAM explains users' adoption of digital tools through perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use [6]. In the context of template-based design tools, users may adopt these tools because templates make visual creation easier, faster, and more accessible. Creative self-efficacy further explains how structured support may influence users' confidence and subjective creative experience [3][18].

Based on these perspectives, this study treats the extent of template-based design tool usage as a key behavioral variable, while perceived creative freedom and perceived originality are treated as subjective evaluations of the creative process and creative outcomes. By integrating TAM and creative self-efficacy theory, this study examines how template usage may be associated with Generation Z non-professional creators' perceived creative freedom and perceived originality.

3. Research Questions and Hypotheses

Although template-based design tools are widely used by non-professional creators, empirical research on how their use relates to subjective creative experience remains limited, especially among Generation Z users in contexts such as

social media, academic presentations, and personal content production. This study therefore examines the relationship between template usage, perceived creative freedom, and perceived originality.

The study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What patterns characterize the frequency of use and level of dependence on template-based design tools among Generation Z non-professional creators?

RQ2: Is the degree of template-based design tool usage associated with creators' perceived creative freedom?

RQ3: Is the degree of template-based design tool usage associated with creators' perceived originality of their work?

Based on these questions, two hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Template usage significantly predicts perceived creative freedom.

H2: Template usage significantly predicts perceived originality.

4. Research Method

4.1 Research Design and Measurement

This study employed a cross-sectional online survey conducted in January 2026 to examine the relationship between template-based design tool usage and creators' subjective creative experiences. The questionnaire included four sections: demographic information, template usage, perceived creative freedom, and perceived originality.

Template usage (Use) was measured with four items covering frequency, dependence, ease or difficulty of use, and preference for starting from a blank canvas or from a template. Perceived creative freedom (Freedom) was measured with four items adapted from Abulela [1], and perceived originality (Originality) was measured with four items based on Lamb et al. [9] and Maudet [12]. All items used a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A pilot test was conducted before the formal survey, and reliability analysis showed satisfactory internal consistency for all three scales, with Cronbach's alpha values of .84 for Use, .88 for Freedom, and .91 for Originality.

4.2 Sample

Participants were recruited through online channels, including social media platforms and

university mailing lists. To be included, they had to be 18 to 26 years old, have prior experience using template-based design tools such as Canva or CapCut, and have no systematic professional training in graphic design.

A total of 224 responses were collected. After incomplete or invalid questionnaires were removed, 200 valid cases remained for analysis. Among the final sample, 56% were female and 44% were male, with a mean age of 21.7 years ($SD = 2.3$). About 80% of respondents reported using template-based design tools at least once a week.

4.3 Data Analysis

All analyses were conducted using SPSS 28. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize template usage, perceived creative freedom, and perceived originality. Pearson correlation analysis was used to examine the relationships among these variables. Linear regression analysis was then conducted to test whether template usage predicted perceived creative freedom and perceived originality while controlling for age and gender. All tests were two-tailed, with statistical significance set at $p < .05$.

5. Results

5.1 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were calculated to provide an overview of respondents' template usage, perceived creative freedom, and perceived originality. Before the composite score for template usage was calculated, Q1_4 was reverse-coded so that higher values consistently indicated greater reliance on templates. This ensured that all items within the Use scale measured the same direction of template dependence.

The composite mean for template usage was 3.29 ($SD = 0.36$), suggesting that respondents generally used template-based design tools at a moderate level. This result indicates that although participants were familiar with templates and used them regularly, they did not completely rely on templates in the creative process. In other words, template use among the respondents can be understood as frequent but not fully dependent.

The composite mean for perceived creative freedom was 3.55 ($SD = 0.85$), indicating a moderate to relatively high level of perceived

autonomy and control during the creative process. This suggests that most respondents did not experience template-based tools as strongly restrictive. Instead, they tended to feel that templates still allowed them to make choices, adjust visual elements, and express their own ideas.

The composite mean for perceived originality was 3.45 ($SD = 0.81$), suggesting that participants generally viewed their work as moderately original. This result shows that although templates provide preset structures, respondents did not necessarily perceive their own outputs as highly repetitive or lacking uniqueness. Reliability analysis also showed satisfactory internal consistency for all three scales, with Cronbach's alpha values of .84 for Use, .88 for Freedom, and .91 for Originality.

5.2 Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among template usage, perceived creative freedom, and perceived originality. The results are presented in Table 1. Template usage was moderately and positively correlated with perceived creative freedom, $r = .481, p < .001$. This indicates that respondents who reported higher levels of template usage also tended to report stronger feelings of creative freedom. In this study, more frequent or more dependent template use was therefore associated with a stronger sense of autonomy and control in the creative process.

Template usage was also weakly and positively correlated with perceived originality, $r = .192, p = .006$. Although this relationship was statistically significant, the strength of the correlation was relatively small. This suggests that template usage was only weakly associated with how original respondents perceived their own work to be. Therefore, template usage appeared to have a clearer relationship with creative process experience than with evaluations of creative outcomes.

The correlation between perceived creative freedom and perceived originality was not significant, $r = .060, p = .398$. This means that respondents who felt more creative freedom did not necessarily rate their work as more original. Overall, the correlation results suggest that template usage was most strongly associated with perceived creative freedom, while its relationship with perceived originality was weaker.

Table 1. Correlations among key variables (N = 200)

| Variable | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|---|---------|------|---|
| 1. Template usage (Use) | — | | |
| 2. Perceived creative freedom (Freedom) | .481*** | — | |
| 3. Perceived originality (Originality) | .192** | .060 | — |

Note: Correlation coefficients are Pearson's r . All p values are two-tailed. $p < .01$. $p < .001$.

5.3 Regression Analysis

Hierarchical linear regression was conducted to further examine whether template usage predicted perceived creative freedom and perceived originality after controlling for age and gender. Gender and age were entered in the first step, and template usage was added in the second step.

The results showed that template usage significantly predicted perceived creative freedom ($\beta = .46, p < .001$), explaining an additional 24% of the variance. This suggests that template usage remained an important predictor of perceived creative freedom even after demographic variables were considered. In other words, respondents who used templates more strongly tended to feel more freedom, control, and autonomy during their creative process.

In contrast, template usage did not significantly predict perceived originality after age and gender were controlled ($\beta = .11, p = .15; \Delta R^2 = .02$). This indicates that although template usage had a weak positive correlation with perceived originality, it did not have a stable predictive effect in the regression model. Therefore, template usage appeared to be more important for explaining perceived creative freedom than perceived originality.

5.4 Hypothesis Testing

Based on the regression results, H1 was supported. Template usage significantly predicted perceived creative freedom, suggesting that greater use of template-based design tools was associated with a stronger sense of creative autonomy and control.

H2 was not supported. Although template usage was weakly and positively correlated with perceived originality in the correlation analysis, it did not significantly predict perceived originality after age and gender were controlled. This means that the relationship between

template usage and perceived originality was weak and unstable.

Overall, the results show that template-based design tools were more clearly associated with creators' subjective experience of creative freedom than with their perception of originality. For Generation Z non-professional creators in this sample, templates appeared to function more as supportive tools for creative expression than as a direct threat to perceived originality.

6. Discussion

This study found that template usage was positively associated with perceived creative freedom, while its relationship with perceived originality was weaker and less stable. The positive relationship between template usage and perceived creative freedom suggests that templates may support creative experience by lowering technical barriers and reducing the uncertainty of starting from a blank page [7][19]. For Generation Z non-professional creators, templates may provide an accessible starting point that allows them to focus more on content organization, message delivery, and visual adjustment rather than on complex design techniques.

This finding challenges the assumption that template-based creation necessarily restricts creative freedom. Although templates provide preset layouts and visual structures, they may also give non-professional users a stronger sense of control by making the creative process easier to manage. In this sense, templates can function as a form of creative scaffolding. Instead of beginning with an empty canvas, users can modify existing structures, adjust colors and images, replace text, and reorganize elements according to their own needs. This may explain why higher template usage was associated with stronger perceived creative freedom in this study.

The findings on perceived originality are more nuanced. Although template usage showed a weak positive correlation with perceived originality, it did not significantly predict perceived originality in the regression model. This suggests that template use does not have a strong or stable relationship with how original users perceive their own work to be. One possible explanation is that templates embed established design principles rather than merely duplicating existing designs, so users may still perceive their work as distinctive when they

adapt content, images, colors, and layout details within these frameworks [10].

Overall, the findings suggest that template usage shapes creative process experience more strongly than evaluations of creative outcomes. For Gen Z non-professional creators, templates may be experienced primarily as tools that improve accessibility, efficiency, and confidence during creation. However, their influence on perceived originality appears weaker, because originality may depend not only on the use of templates but also on users' modification strategies, content choices, visual literacy, and the social context in which their work is evaluated.

7. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, its cross-sectional design does not allow causal inference [16]. Although the results show associations between template usage, perceived creative freedom, and perceived originality, they cannot prove that template usage directly causes higher perceived creative freedom or changes in perceived originality. Future research could use longitudinal or experimental designs to examine how creative experience changes before and after the use of template-based design tools.

Second, the study relied on self-reported questionnaire data, which may introduce social desirability bias and common method bias [17][18]. Respondents may overestimate their creative freedom or originality, especially because creativity is often viewed as a positive personal quality. Future studies could combine survey data with behavioral data, platform usage records, or expert evaluation of creative outputs to provide a more comprehensive understanding of template-based creation.

Third, the sample consisted mainly of university students from eastern China, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Generation Z creators in different cultural, educational, and professional contexts may use template-based design tools differently. Future research could include a more diverse sample across regions, occupations, and levels of design experience.

Fourth, template usage was measured mainly through frequency and dependence, which may not fully capture different usage strategies. For example, some users may only make small changes to templates, while others may heavily modify layouts, colors, images, and typography. Future studies could distinguish between passive

template use and active template customization to better understand how different forms of template use affect creative experience.

Finally, this study focused mainly on individual perceptions and paid limited attention to platform-level factors such as recommendation systems, template libraries, interface design, and algorithmic visibility [19]. Future research could further examine how platform structures guide users toward certain styles, formats, or design choices, and how these platform features influence both creative freedom and perceived originality.

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