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Artificial Intelligence and the Cultural Meaning of Creativity: An Anthropological Study of Youth Perspectives in the Digital Age

Subtopic : From an anthropological perspective, how do young people understand and experience human creativity in the age of AI, and what does this reveal about shifting cultural definitions of creativity?

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping creativity among young people, focusing on authorship, originality, and ethical concerns. The scope is limited to widely used AI platforms such as Midjourney, DALL·E, and ChatGPT. AI's rise has sparked debates over authenticity and cultural value in creative work. Once defined by human struggle, skill, and imperfection, creativity now faces redefinition as machines produce polished outputs with ease. This shift has created generational divides: older groups often see AI as a threat, while younger users adopt it as a tool for experimentation. A mixed-method approach was employed. A ZohoSurvey with 103 participants of diverse ages and nationalities included multiple-choice, short-answer, and scale-based questions on creativity, authorship, and ethics. Secondary sources, including academic studies and media reports, contextualized the findings. Eighty percent of respondents reported using AI for creative purposes, reflecting its normalization. Yet 75% expressed conflict over authorship, questioning whether AI outputs truly belonged to them. While many valued AI's accessibility and inclusivity, others worried it diminished the role of effort, process, and skill. Ethical concerns included bias, uncredited data usage, and the invisibility of labor behind AI systems. Further research should explore long-term cultural impacts of AI on creativity. Integrating AI literacy into education is essential to equip young people with the tools to engage critically and responsibly.

Keywords: Creativity, Youth, Artificial Intelligence, Culture, Digital, Anthropology, Authorship, Originality, Art

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, artificial intelligence has taken the world by storm by advancing rapidly day by day. It has become increasingly proficient at generating sounds, images and even text in less than a second, all with the click of a button. This leads to the question of whether AI poses a threat to originality and creativity. (Wade, 2024) We know that great art and great artists have been created before the advancements in artificial intelligence. So does AI either benefit creativity by keeping it up with the modern times or go against what creativity and authenticity mean themselves. This research examines how artificial intelligence is transforming creative expression, particularly among young people with tools like Midjourney and DALL·E becoming popular in digital art spaces, questions about authorship, originality, and the role of technology in creativity are growing. (Moore, 2023) A deeper question emerges, What does it mean to be creative when a machine generates your work?

LITERATURE REVIEW

A critical point is how AI has created new social dynamics around creativity. In the past, creativity often carried a sense of exclusivity, tied to factors such as training, resources, or even talent. (Hussain, 2024) Now, anyone with an internet connection can generate a painting or a short story in seconds. Some see this as a powerful democratization of art, opening doors for people who might otherwise have never had the chance to create. Yet others worry that when creation becomes so easy, the meaning attached to artistic labor and originality becomes diluted. (Granados, 2022) It is also worth considering how this technology is tied to generational identity. Older generations may view AI-generated art with suspicion or dismiss it as “cheating,” while younger people tend to engage with it more openly, seeing it as just another tool to explore their ideas. (Shackell, 2023) This generational divide highlights how technology not only changes artistic practices but also reshapes cultural definitions of what counts as creativity.

Finally, the rise of AI in art cannot be separated from broader debates about authenticity. For centuries, authenticity in art was linked to human touch, the brushstroke, the handwriting, the personal imperfections that made a work unique. In contrast, AI outputs are often polished and precise, but they risk losing that human texture. For many of the young people surveyed, this raised an inner conflict: is something still “theirs” if they did not fully struggle for it? This conflict sets the stage for the larger themes this paper explores, where creativity in the age of AI is not simply about making art, but about negotiating meaning, identity, and ownership in a rapidly changing cultural landscape (Mineo, 2023) Artificial intelligence is distorting the world, blurring the line between real and fake. CBS News conducted an interview with Geoffrey Hinton, a Nobel Prize-winning computer scientist discussing the threat AI might pose to social and cultural development worldwide. Geoffrey shares knowledge on the world of artificial intelligence and whether its causes can be reversed. He discusses how there is no

guarantee for the continuity of our species if AI continues to advance.

Artificial intelligence gets rid of any imperfections while we forget that we humans are bound to have flaws. Artificial Intelligence has a monumental negative impact across various fields. AI can take people's lives and work away and undermine those who put in time and effort. For example, an article published by The Express Tribune (The Express Tribune, 2025) talks about the director Tim Burton opening up about how the digital world leaves him feeling depressed and disconnected. He particularly reminisced on how Disney characters were AI-generated in his signature style of work. His iconic style took him years to find and so he felt as if his creative process was overshadowed, he felt as if his "soul had been taken," and it was like "robbing you of humanity" further leaving us questioning the presence of AI in creative industries. Artificial Intelligence is often described as the "new paintbrush", a tool that extends rather than replaces imagination. AI being in some cases free and widely accessible on the internet can help young creatives who are under-resourced where access to traditional art materials, formal training, mentorship, etc may be limited. By lowering walls AI can boost confidence in the youth in terms of creating, as it lets them focus more on the idea and narrative pressure structures, rather than the technical aspect of creation. This wider access also brings more diverse voices into digital art spaces, allowing cultural stories, local styles, and personal experiences to be shared in new ways. Still, some worry that making creation too easy could weaken the value of learning a craft. The hard work and practice involved in traditional art have long been seen as part of what makes creativity meaningful. AI doesn't just make art faster; it also challenges how we define "skill" in the first place. (Leos & Zimmerman, 2022) At the same time, young people often describe AI as both liberating and unsettling. On one hand, it removes the weight of technical barriers, you don't need to master oil paints, camera equipment, or music theory to produce something that looks or sounds impressive. This makes creative experimentation less intimidating. For students or beginners, AI feels like a way to dip their toes into artistic expression without fear of failure. On the other hand, some worry that this easy access produces work that feels shallow or detached from the effort that traditionally gives art its depth. This tension shows how technology reshapes cultural ideas of value. In many societies, effort, practice, and mastery are not only ways of making something "good," but also ways of proving commitment to a community or tradition. (Pearse,2024) When AI shortcuts these processes, it raises the question: is creativity still respected if it lacks the "struggle" that once defined it? Youth responses reflect this unease, some celebrate the inclusivity AI offers, while others see it as hollowing out the meaning of creative work. An important element is how AI broadens participation across cultures. Many young people emphasize how AI allows them to remix, visualize, and share cultural symbols that might otherwise be overlooked.

A teenager from one background might generate images blending their heritage with global pop culture, creating a hybrid form of expression that feels both personal and global. In this way, AI is not just a paintbrush, but a cultural mirror,

reflecting how identity and creativity are being renegotiated in digital spaces. Ultimately, the promise and challenge of AI as a “paintbrush for all” lies in balance. (Rothman, 2025) While it undeniably lowers barriers and invites more people into creative practices, it also forces society and especially young creators to ask what makes art valuable. Is it the final product, or the journey of making it? According to the survey results, 75% of respondents reported feeling conflicted about whether their AI-generated work was truly their own, indicating a strong internal conflict over ownership. AI's threat to creativity is so emotionally deeply rooted, as a generation we are losing ourselves don't you see? We are becoming desensitized, we are losing that fire, that spark that ignites us to create. Why did we need it to become easier? When people use AI to generate ideas for any form of art, such as a video or painting, they are stripping themselves of the uncomfortable experience of “not knowing” that is required to be a creative individual. To confront that feeling of the unknown, to want to create but not know what yet, to search for inspiration; To be a creative person is to go through that process yourself. To go to AI for that inspiration is to deny yourself the very thing that makes you a creative individual in the first place. They steer clear of the search process, exploration, and any potential failure. The cost of doing this, however, is ceding the personal connection to the work and the sense of ownership that comes from having fought with, and nurtured, an idea from its messy beginnings to its polished, final version. There's growing concern about what counts as original art when AI is involved. The fear is not simply that AI will replace artists, but that it will quietly change the very definition of the category. (Pipada & Srivastava, 2025) Creativity has always been tied to human struggle, the ups and downs of an idea not working or trying to match the vision in your head, the flicker that comes from boredom, with AI that journey is lost, the feeling of satisfaction once you get it right using your own resourcefulness and when your intuition comes to life. Throughout history, some of the most groundbreaking artistic and scientific discoveries were born in this space of uncertainty and trial and error. This is why authorship has become such a resistance in the age of AI. This zone of ambiguity is what sparked the concern of authorship. New artists in the current world are thinking, can I still call it my work if it's a machine either? (Levin, 2025) These are not just technical or legal questions, they go to the heart of a world where human creation and machine creation are fusing together. Another layer of this authorship dilemma comes from how AI blurs the boundary between inspiration and imitation. Traditionally, artists have always borrowed from one another, learning styles, techniques, or themes, but the process was mediated through interpretation and transformation. With AI, that line is thinner: the machine can directly replicate or remix styles in seconds, leaving youth unsure whether their creation is inspired or copied. Many participants expressed unease when AI outputs looked “too polished” or “too similar” to famous works, because it felt less like their voice and more like an echo of someone else's. What makes this tension more striking is the emotional connection artists usually have with their work. For many young people, creating something original feels like

putting a piece of themselves into the world.

But when AI plays a large role, that personal investment seems diluted. Some explained that it was almost like sharing credit with a stranger except this “stranger” is a machine that doesn’t feel, doesn’t struggle, and doesn’t care. The absence of human experience in AI’s contribution makes the final product feel hollow for some, even if it looks impressive on the surface. (Pipada & Srivastava, 2025) This conflict is more than just individual discomfort, it reflects a cultural shift in how we define authenticity. Authorship has historically been tied to human intention, imagination, and ownership of labor. Youth questioning “who made this?” are really questioning what it means to “own” creativity in a world where machines participate in the process. This is not simply about art as an object, but about identity.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Nature of the Study

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative survey questions with qualitative open-ended responses. Secondary research, including a literature review, was also conducted to provide additional context.

Population

The target population consisted of individuals of diverse ages and nationalities who had varying degrees of experience using AI tools for creative purposes.

Sample Size

A total of 103 participants completed the survey. The majority were between the ages of 15 and 22, while a smaller proportion were aged 26 and above.

Sampling Technique

Convenience sampling was used. The survey was distributed online, making participation voluntary and accessible to a broad audience.

Instrument

The research instrument was an online questionnaire designed on ZohoSurvey. It was divided into five sections:

1. Basic Information
2. Creative Experience
3. Authorship and Identity
4. Ethics and Awareness
5. Looking Ahead

The survey included multiple-choice questions (e.g., “What kind of creative work have you used AI for?”), short-answer questions (e.g., “In one sentence, what does ‘being creative’ mean to you in the age of AI?”), and slider scale questions (e.g., “On a scale of 1 to 5, how helpful do you find AI tools in expressing your creativity?”).

Validity and Reliability

Content validity was ensured by aligning the survey questions with the research objectives and reviewing relevant literature. Reliability was supported by

the use of standardized scales, consistent wording, and clear instructions.

Pilot Testing

An informal pilot test was conducted to assess question clarity and survey functionality. Minor adjustments were made before the survey was distributed widely.

Data Collection Procedure

The online survey link was shared via digital platforms. Participants provided informed consent before beginning, and responses were collected anonymously to ensure confidentiality.

Data Analysis Technique

Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages. Qualitative responses were examined through thematic analysis to identify recurring themes related to creativity, authorship, and ethics in AI use.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were upheld by ensuring voluntary participation, informed consent, and anonymity. No personal identifiers were collected, and all data was used strictly for research purposes.

Results

Out of the 103 participants, 80% reported using AI for creative purposes. This demonstrates that AI engagement is no longer niche but has become part of mainstream creative practice, particularly among younger generations. Popular tools included ChatGPT, Midjourney, and DALL·E, which many respondents described as being as accessible as traditional tools like sketchbooks or Photoshop.

Perceptions of AI Helpfulness

When asked, “On a scale of 1 to 5, how helpful do you find AI tools in expressing your creativity?” (1 being not helpful, 5 being extremely helpful), responses were divided. About 28.57% selected 1–2 (low helpfulness), while 14.29% selected 3–5 (moderate to high helpfulness). This split suggests that AI is not universally empowering: while some participants felt AI enhanced their creative process, others believed it hindered it.

Ethical Awareness and Concerns

Many respondents were initially unaware that AI models are trained on data drawn from artists, writers, and other creators, often without their consent. Once informed, participants expressed concern that such practices could be exploitative, especially if creators were not credited or compensated. Ethical issues surrounding ownership, authorship, and fairness emerged as recurring themes.

Demographics

The majority of respondents were between the ages of 15 and 22, highlighting the central role of youth in experimenting with AI creativity. A smaller proportion of participants were aged 26 and above, suggesting generational differences in engagement with AI tools.

Overall Trends

The findings indicate that AI has been normalized in creative spaces. For many participants, working with AI felt natural and accessible. However, this normalization also raised concerns that creativity might be shifting from being process-oriented to more product-driven (Habib, 2024).

RESULTS TABLE

CATEGORY	KEY FINDINGS
Total Participants	103
Age Distribution	Majority aged 15–22; small proportion above 26
AI Use for Creativity	80% reported using AI for creative purposes
Helpfulness of AI (Scale 1–5)	28.57% selected 1–2 (low helpfulness); 14.29% selected 3–5 (moderate–high)
Ethical Awareness	Many unaware of training datasets; concerns raised over exploitation & credit
Emerging Trend	AI normalized as part of everyday creativity; questions about process vs product

CONCLUSION

AI tools may look magical, but beneath every image, song, or video they produce lies a system built on massive amounts of data. Much of this data comes from human creators, artists, writers, musicians often without their permission. For young people, this raises uncomfortable questions about fairness, ownership, and respect. From an anthropological perspective, these concerns are not only about technology, but about culture: how communities decide what is valued, who gets credit, and whose voices are being silenced. Many of the youth I studied expressed a kind of cultural “clutter” surrounding AI. On the surface, AI offers endless possibilities, but underneath, there is unease: Who really owns the work?

Are they unintentionally benefiting from exploitation of other artists? This tension reflects more profound cultural anxieties about how technology transforms social values. (Poremba, 2025) Creativity, once tied to effort and originality, now risks being overshadowed by speed and replication. Bias also plays a role. Since AI systems learn from existing data, they reproduce the same inequalities found in society. Youths notice that AI often reflects stereotypes or favors certain aesthetics

over others. In this way, the technology does not just shape individual artworks, but reinforces cultural hierarchies deciding whose creativity is seen, and whose is erased. From an anthropological lens, these reflections reveal that AI is more than a tool; it is part of an ongoing negotiation over meaning. For young creators, using AI is not just about producing art, but about situating themselves within broader ethical debates. (SAP, 2024) The question becomes, what kind of cultural world do they want to create when they choose to use, resist, or reshape these tools?

Another challenge that young people point out is the invisibility of labor behind AI systems. While the final output may look sleek and effortless, it is built on the work of countless creators and data engineers. This invisibility creates a kind of cultural amnesia, where the origins of creative material are erased, and only the polished surface remains. For youth, this disconnect between process and product prompts them to question whether the art they create with AI is truly authentic or whether it is built on hidden forms of exploitation. There is also the question of accountability. If an AI-generated image reproduces a harmful stereotype or plagiarizes an artist's style, who is responsible? The programmer, the company, or the young person using it? Many respondents I spoke with described feeling caught in the middle, excited to use these tools, but worried about being complicit in something unfair. This ethical tension is a defining feature of how young people experience AI, not as a neutral invention, but as a cultural force that implicates them in larger debates about fairness and justice.

Anthropologically, these worries can be understood as part of a broader negotiation between tradition and innovation. Every society has rules about how creativity is passed on, borrowed, and transformed. In the past, imitation and inspiration were seen as natural aspects of art-making, but boundaries still existed regarding respect, credit, and ownership. With AI, those boundaries blur. (Abrams, 2024) Youths are now grappling with whether AI is a continuation of that old cycle of influence, or whether it represents a rupture that erases too much of the human role.

Ultimately, these reflections underscore that creativity is no longer solely about expression, but also about ethics. For young people, deciding to use AI in their work is not just a technical choice, it is a moral one. They must weigh convenience against fairness, innovation against exploitation. In doing so, they are not only making art, but also shaping the cultural values of their generation.

Recommendation

When I think back to the survey, one of the most interesting parts was the last question, where participants had to define what “being creative” meant to them in just one sentence. The answers revealed the mixed and complicated feelings people have about creativity right now. Some saw creativity as freedom to experiment with AI and push ideas further, while others saw it as something more personal, a spark that has to come from within. A few even admitted they weren't sure anymore what counted as their own creativity when AI was part of the process.

That says a lot, creativity isn't a fixed idea, it's shifting and being redefined right in front of us. (Crouch, 2025)

The results also make it clear that AI isn't neutral. It's not just a tool sitting quietly in the background. For many young people, especially the 75% who felt conflicted about authorship, AI has become a kind of mirror forcing them to ask tough questions: "Is this really mine?" or "Does the effort still matter if a machine can do it faster?" For generations, creativity has been tied to struggle, to learning a craft and working through the hard parts. Now, AI challenges that by removing some of the difficulty. That isn't necessarily bad, but it does mean that our cultural values around what counts as "real" art are starting to shift.

We've seen this before. When photography appeared, painters thought it was the end of art. Instead, it opened the door to new movements like impressionism. The same thing happened with digital art: at first people doubted its legitimacy, but over time it became its own recognized form. But AI is different in one way, it doesn't just capture or edit, it produces. That raises a deeper question: if AI can generate something entirely new, who gets credit? The machine? The programmer? The dataset of artists whose work it was trained on? Or the young person who typed in the prompt? That uncertainty about ownership is exactly what today's generation is wrestling with.

Ethics make this even more complicated. A lot of young people in the survey said they hadn't really thought about how AI tools are trained, but when they learned that datasets often use artists' work without permission, many felt uncomfortable. That discomfort is important, it shows a growing awareness that creativity in the AI age isn't only about making something beautiful, but also about making something fair. From this angle, being creative is not just about expression, but also about the choices we make in how to use these tools responsibly.

Even with these challenges, one thing stood out. Young people still want their voice in the process. Even if AI helps, they often look for ways to put a personal touch on the final piece. That tells us creativity isn't disappearing, rather it's transforming. Maybe it's less about creating everything from scratch and more about directing, editing, and shaping. In a way, youth are becoming not only creators but also curators of culture, deciding what to keep, what to change, and how to guide the tools at their disposal. Looking ahead, the role of education, ethics, and culture will be huge. Schools could teach students not just how to use AI, but how to think critically about it. Society could decide whether we value effort, originality, or simply the end result. From an anthropological perspective, this is what makes the current moment so fascinating, it's a liminal space, an "in-between" where the old rules of creativity don't fully apply but the new ones aren't fully defined either.

So maybe AI is neither muse nor menace, like I first thought. Maybe it's better understood as a medium, a tool that reflects the intentions and choices of the people who use it. What the future looks like will depend on how this generation,

today's young people, decide to shape it. Their voices matter because they remind us that creativity is not just about output. It's about meaning, struggle, ethics, and expression.

The future of creativity is still being drawn. Whether it becomes a world where machines dominate or one where human imagination and technology work in harmony will depend on how we choose to move forward. What feels clear is that creativity, at its core, can't be replaced. It can only be redefined accessibility.

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