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Machine kitsch theory: Contrasting shifts in public perceptions towards AI-generated art

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Abstract. The rapid integration of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) into the art world has sparked debates on its authenticity and creative value. This study investigates public perceptions of AI-generated art, focusing on changes in interest and interpretation before and after disclosure of GenAI's involvement. Grounded in theories of generative art and kitsch, it examines how GenAI evokes both admiration and criticism. Using an explanatory sequential mixed-method approach, a survey of 553 respondents evaluated interest, emotional reactions, and the ability to distinguish AI-generated from human-made artworks. Quantitative data revealed a decline in interest post-disclosure (overall mean: 5.09 to 4.75), while qualitative insights highlighted polarised views on AI's role in art. Respondents praised GenAI's technical sophistication and democratising potential but criticised its lack of emotional authenticity. It identifies contrasting perceptions of GenAI in art, emphasising the need for ethical considerations and a redefinition of artistic values as technology reshapes creativity and aesthetic judgement.

Keywords: Generative AI, Generative Art, Kitsch, Human-AI Interaction, Creative Industries

Introduction

The vast development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has expanded its trajectory from discriminative towards generative models based on human language, also known as Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI), with text-to-text and text-to-image outputs among others (Gozalo-Brizuela & Garrido-Merchan, 2023). This paper focuses on text-to-image GenAI and its impacts on art because the role of the machine as a "creator" will directly impact an industry primarily built by the creation process. Furthermore, the democratisation of GenAI, as demonstrated by the emergence of accessible platforms such as Dall-E, Midjourney, and Leonardo, has broadened the scope of creators from selective professionals to the general public.

In the art scene, artists like Mario Klingemann and Goodby Silverstein & Partners have integrated GenAI into their art-making process by exploring the unconscious reality using AI-made dreamlike imagery (López-Varela Azcárate, 2023). In this way, both artists aimed to surpass the boundaries of the conservative medium, hence considered an acceptable usage of GenAI. However, there was a strong reaction when an AI-made artwork won a digital art photography contest at the Colorado State Fair (Roose, 2022), primarily highlighting the need to

separate the competition for exclusively human-made artwork and hybrid artwork, for example, the Dezeen competition for its AItopia editorial series (Barker, 2023). Beyond the digital realm, a humanoid robot was trained to mimic the gesture of painting to produce tangible artwork on canvas (Cain, 2024).

Nevertheless, art is not limited to the end product and the producer, but a collective ecosystem consisting of multiple actors, including the viewers who judge, interpret, and contemplate the artwork, making the perception of art, both in traditional and contemporary contexts, a multifaceted cognitive and emotional process (Becker, 1982). In the discourse of GenAI usage in art, it is essential to include the perspective of the viewers, which is addressed in this paper. The research questions are as follows: (1) How do respondents interpret and value the artworks before and after learning about GenAI involvement?; (2) How do respondents explain changes or consistency in their perception of the AI-generated artworks?; and (3) How do respondents perceive the usage of GenAI in the art world?

This study addresses a literature gap by examining the nuanced shifts in public perception towards AI-generated art, focusing on how these perceptions change before and after learning about AI involvement. While previous research has primarily explored the technical and philosophical implications of AI in the art world (Chesher & Albarrán-Torres, 2023; Horton Jr et al., 2023), there has been limited empirical investigation into the emotional and cognitive reactions of diverse audiences, particularly in the context of public engagement with GenAI in art.

It chooses the term kitsch (Greenberg, 1939) to contextualise the perception of AI-generated art within the broader art discourse. Historically, kitsch has been associated with art that is easily accessible, emotionally shallow, and often regarded as lacking depth. Emerging alongside avant-garde movements, kitsch became a point of contrast, frequently evoking debates about authenticity, originality, and societal values in art. In the postmodern era, this dichotomy has blurred, with artists like Jeff Koons reclaiming kitsch elements to create works celebrated as high art, bridging the divide between popular and elite culture (Ortlieb & Carbon, 2019)

The term kitsch aptly captures the tension between creativity and mass production. AI-generated art often relies on patterns and clichés drawn from vast datasets, resonating with kitsch's reliance on mundane, comforting themes rather than groundbreaking originality. This resemblance raises questions about the role of AI as a creator and its ability to produce art that transcends surface-level appeal. By adopting kitsch as a conceptual lens, the paper explores the duality in public reception, where AI art is both admired for its technical sophistication and critiqued for lacking emotional authenticity (Ortlieb & Carbon, 2019), this study introduces a novel approach to understanding AI-generated art. Furthermore, it emphasises the impact of transparency on the perception of AI involvement, offering fresh insights into how disclosure influences the perceived authenticity and value of the artwork. By identifying these perspectives, this research contributes to the discourse on human-AI artistic collaboration, informing ethical discussions and future policy considerations in the creative industries.

Methods

The research gathered data from 553 respondents in ten urban cities prominent with museums and galleries in DKI Jakarta, West Java, Yogyakarta, East Java, and Bali. A screening mechanism was installed, making those who did not reside in the cities automatically ineligible to complete the survey. Respondents were paid since the survey was conducted by a professional survey company in Bahasa, Indonesia. Accordingly, the quotes mentioned

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throughout this paper are translated by the authors. It included the respondent's number, such as R138 for respondent 138, followed by their occupations or non-CI if they do not work in the creative industries.

The research employed explanatory sequential mixed methods to capture the nuanced beliefs and reasoning that cannot be inferred from numbers alone (Creswell & Clark, 2017). The primary quantitative component utilised 7-point Likert scale ratings analysed using descriptive statistics, while the qualitative component aimed to provide insights into the initial quantitative findings using thematic analysis. Therefore, the qualitative question always follows the quantitative one, such as: (1) Is it possible for GenAI to replace artists? (1 = very impossible; 7 = very possible) and (2) Why (Open-ended).

The answers to the qualitative questions were coded using NVivo based on three clusters. For instance, in the previous question, the clusters are: impossible (1-3), neutral (4), and possible 5-7). The results were then visualised using GSheet to portray the size of each determined node. Additionally, the authors crafted all AI-generated images in this study using Leonardo AI.

Result and Discussion

Demography of Respondents

The study involved 553 respondents with a relatively balanced gender distribution, comprising 58.23% males (*n*=322) and 41.77% females (*n*=231). All respondents were from upper and middle socioeconomic statuses, with the majority residing in Jakarta (*n*=171) and Surabaya (*n*=126). The participants' ages ranged from 20 to 50 years, with the dominant age groups being 25–30 years (*n*=186), 20–24 years (*n*=129), and 31–35 years (*n*=93) as illustrated in Figure 1.

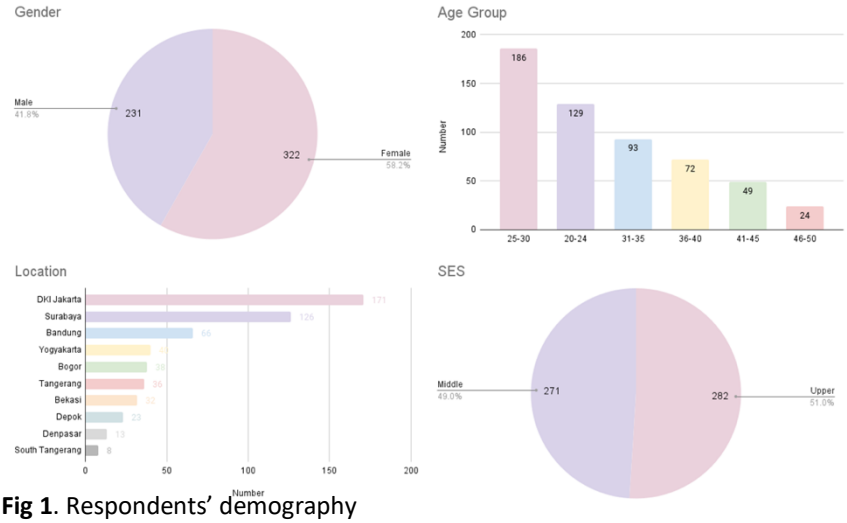

Fig 1. Respondents' demography (Source: authors)

Background-related data indicate that 50.42% of respondents (*n*=279) had formal education in art or design, either at vocational schools or universities. Furthermore, 78.12% (*n*=432) engaged in art-related hobbies, such as drawing or designing clothes. A smaller segment, 7.78% (*n*=44), worked professionally as artists or artisans, emphasising their relevance to the study. Only 13.20% (*n*=73) had not visited a museum or gallery in the past three years.

Respondents demonstrated moderate familiarity with the art world, with a mean score of 5.11 (*SD*=1.72). In contrast, the familiarity with text-to-image GenAI was more neutral, with a mean score of 4.09 (*SD*=2). The second question was posed in the latter section of the survey,

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revealing that the presented images were not real. Thus, respondents were unaware that the evaluated images were AI-generated during the first section. The survey's general framing under “Public Perceptions Towards Artworks” helped ensure unbiased responses in earlier sections. Considering the demography, the study's results might differ when the scope is broadened, assuming lesser involvement in the art scene.

Kitsch and the Perception of Art

The experience of art is a complex interplay of aesthetic emotions and cognitive evaluations, encompassing factors such as artistic techniques, historical significance, and presentation (Tröndle et al., 2014). These evaluations often invoke emotional responses ranging from fascination and surprise to boredom and even displeasure (Menninghaus et al., 2019). Such responses are critical in defining the public's engagement with art. For instance, familiarity with an artist or a distinctive style significantly influences aesthetic judgements, as evidenced by studies showing reduced appreciation for artworks falsely attributed to renowned artists like Van Gogh (Leder, 2001).

Modern art, however, demands a deeper interpretative effort than earlier artistic traditions that championed masterful techniques. This increased complexity enhances viewers' cognitive and emotional engagement, fostering a richer aesthetic experience (Leder et al., 2004). Digital reproductions seen on brochures or the internet are often perceived as less impactful than original artworks, underscoring the importance of tangible, authentic encounters in heightening aesthetic judgement (Reymond et al., 2020).

Generative art is a broad domain encompassing various forms of automated and semi-automated creative processes, predating the advent of digital technology. The term primarily refers to art partially or entirely created through systems that exhibit a degree of autonomy, whether physical, mechanical, or computational (Dorin et al., 2012). These systems engage with their environment to produce sensory outcomes, often emphasising the iterative nature of the artistic process.

Boden & Edmonds (2009) developed a category consisting of eleven generative art clusters based on their form, including C-Art, D-Art, R-Art, and VR-Art, which stand for computer, digital electronic technology, robot, and virtual reality art. This illustrates the diversity within this term. Moreover, despite its recent digital prominence, generative art's roots can be traced to the mid-20th century, when conceptual and performance art leveraged randomness and process-oriented methods to challenge traditional artistic norms (Dorin et al., 2012). In AI-generated art, users must acknowledge the “calculated randomness” of the incomprehensible and unpredictable nature of the machine to create exact results (Dzhimova & Tigre Moura, 2024).

The integration of GenAI into art production represents a significant evolution in generative art. GenAI operates by reorganising and synthesising data using complex algorithms, enabling the production of works that mimic, and occasionally challenge, traditional artistic outputs (Tao, 2022). However, the absence of intrinsic understanding in AI systems underscores their reliance on probabilities and patterns rather than genuine creativity or symbolic meaning. The involvement of AI in art has sparked both fascination and skepticism. Collaborative efforts between human artists and AI systems often yield works perceived as more valuable than AI-only creations, emphasising the importance of human contributions in maintaining authenticity and relatability (Horton Jr et al., 2023). Nevertheless, AI-produced works frequently elicit an "uncanny valley" effect, evoking audience discomfort or suspicion (Tao, 2022).

The perception of AI-generated art is further influenced by the identity of its creator. Research indicates a pronounced bias against artworks explicitly attributed to AI, particularly in fine arts contexts, where human effort and originality are highly valued (Hattori et al., 2024).

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Conversely, this bias diminishes in commercial applications, suggesting that perceptions of creativity are context-dependent (Magni et al., 2024).

In the context of AI-generated art, the viewer's perception is shaped not only by the artwork's intrinsic qualities but also by their awareness of its production process. This interplay between the artwork, its creator, and its audience underscores the necessity of understanding how the knowledge of AI involvement influences public engagement with art. As GenAI continues to democratisise artistic creation, it challenges long-standing notions of artistic authenticity and creativity. This evolving dynamic calls for a nuanced examination of public sentiment and its implications for the future of art.

Interpretation of artworks

An experimental approach was implemented while creating the AI-generated images. Various prompts and aesthetic styles were tried to craft a mixture of realistic, beautiful, and evocative images that could easily deceive the viewers. Generally, images that depict humans and Indonesian culture, as in the paintings of Raden Saleh or Basuki Abdullah, were unrepresentative due to inaccuracies.

In Table 1, the three final images were generated using intricate prompts, with two of them mirroring the style of Tisna Sanjaya and Ay Tjoe Christine. Not only using specific sentences to describe the appearance, such as "a large-scale charcoal on canvas artwork" and "carcasses and grave soil," the prompts included the intended meaning to be portrayed, namely the death of democracy in Image 1 and social justice in Image 2. Instead of using a shorter, looser prompt like "an art installation representing something," this descriptive, straightforward approach was taken to enhance the image quality. The prompt of Image 1 also incorporated the detailed gallery environment by mentioning wooden floors, white walls, and art barriers.

Prior to knowing the artworks were AI-generated, viewers were tasked to interpret the images and describe the perceived meaning in three separate open-ended questions. The perceived themes varied, but most did not match the intended meaning of the prompts. For example, rather than about politics, responses towards Image 1 leaned toward environmental issues related to land waste and polluted oceans. Image 2, on the other hand, was perceived as a manifestation of psychological problems like loneliness, social pressure, and feeling trapped inside the mind. In contrast, Image 3 did not bring a specific theme to mind, representing the challenges of interpreting abstract works.

To enhance respondents' understanding of the research context, they were presented with multiple choices and asked to choose three options as the most important factors that constitute art. The top four answers are: (1) theme, concept, and message; (2) aesthetic and/or beauty; (3) the ability to evoke emotion and/or inspiration; and (4) production technique and/or the artists' skills. The respondents' emphasis on aesthetics and themes aligns with kitsch, simplifying art's emotional and conceptual complexity to make it universally appealing (Ortlieb & Carbon, 2019).

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Table 1. GenAI images and prompts

No	GenAI Image	Prompt	Perceived Theme
1		An art installation in a gallery with a wooden floor and clean white walls. The installation is made from found objects that remind us of death, such as carcasses and grave soil. Installation only. No text. Make it classy, massive, and awe-striking, evoking a feeling of despair and hopelessness in the audience. It shall visualise the death of democracy in Indonesia. Add a minimalist art barrier protecting the installation from visitors to make it look like photos from a real-life exhibition.	● Environmental issues (land, waste) ● Environmental issues (ocean, fishery) ● Social issues (poverty, hunger) ● Survival, hardship, suffering
2		A large-scale charcoal on canvas artwork, reminiscent of Indonesian artist Tisna Sanjaya's expressive style, applied in bold, gestural strokes and textured layers, creating a mesmerising visual depth, a birds-eye view. The subject matter is left open to interpretation, allowing the viewer's imagination to fill the void, with human silhouettes representing social justice.	● Social pressure, judgment ●Emotional/mental struggles, trapped inside the mind ● Loneliness, isolation
3		An abstract oil colour painting in the style of Indonesian artist Ay Tjoe Christine with a white background and soft, muted colours	● Abstract ● Colour, harmony ● Life

Perceptions towards AI-generated artworks

Although the misspelt name of Ay Tjoe Christine and the distorted art barrier structure might provide clues about AI-generated images, only 34.72% of respondents (*n*=192) suspected the artworks were made by machines. Some respondents pointed out the glitch mentioned before, while some active in the art scene noticed they had never seen the artwork in person or the media, raising suspicion. One respondent, in particular, was a Leonardo AI user, so even though he could not pinpoint the distinctive aspect that set the images apart from real artworks, he believed AI-generated images have specific characteristics. Those familiar with text-to-image GenAI also doubted the authenticity for various reasons, such as the visuals being too neat and eerie, giving an uncanny experience, or “too much.”

For the remaining 65.28% of respondents (*n*=361), it did not cross their minds that the artworks were not real photographs, and the survey was to evaluate that. The main reason was the exceptional resemblance to manual artworks, notably in Image 2, even though it resulted from the highly descriptive prompt: “expressive style, applied in bold, gestural strokes, and textured layers.” Another prominent reason was the lack of awareness about the art scene or the aptitude of the current GenAI model. Though the existence of GenAI is widely acknowledged, not everyone understands the full extent of its capability.

Respondents were then asked to write three emotions that came to mind after knowing the truth. The research captured spontaneous, unrestricted responses by not incorporating

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multiple choices in this part. The most frequent words included “sad,” “upset,” “angry,” “surprised,” and “not,” which was a shortened response from “not believable” or “not expecting.” Nevertheless, positive sentiments such as “good,” “unique,” “interesting,” “cool,” and “amazed” were also notable, representing the duality of responses that will continuously appear in the following sub-chapters. Still, these responses might change if respondents already knew about AI involvement since the beginning, eliminating words like “surprised” at the very least. The full result is visualised as a word cloud in Figure 2 using Bahasa Indonesia.

Fig 2. Word cloud of perceived emotions
(Source: Authors)

The research measured interest in the artworks twice, before and after the disclosure of GenAI usage, summarised in Table 3. There is a consistent lowering of interest in all images from the overall mean score of 5.09 (quite interested) to 4.75 (neutral), with the most significant decline in Image 1 with -0.46. In addition, the most significant changes depicted in Table 4 are 6 (interested) and 5, which solidify the decrease towards a more unfavourable perception. Still, this finding does not represent the whole since, in contrast, the perception shift also accommodates elevated interest in some respondents. The increase in the most frequent value of Image 1 from 5 to 7 (very interested) and the addition of the number of respondents who chose 7 from 145 to 147 in Image 3 speak to this anomaly. The rising standard deviation also supports these differing perspectives.

Table 3. Quantitative results from the GenAI revelation

No	Mean			Standard Deviation			Most Freq. Value		Least Freq. Value	
	Before	After	Change	Before	After	Change	Before	After	Before	After
1	5.18	4.72	-0.46	1.6	1.91	+0.31	5 (*n*=144)	7 (*n*=143)	1 (*n*=20)	1 (*n*=40)
2	5.06	4.75	-0.31	1.67	1.86	+0.19	7 (*n*=143)	7 (*n*=143)	1 (*n*=20)	1 (*n*=40)
3	5.03	4.78	-0.25	1.67	1.90	+0.23	7 (*n*=145)	7 (*n*=147)	1 (*n*=21)	2 (*n*=37)
x̄	5.09	4.75	-0.34	1.65	1.89	+0.24				

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Table 4. Most value changes from the GenAI revelation

No	Most Value Change	*n* Before	*n* After	Change
1	6 (Interested)	116	74	-42
2	6 (Interested)	104	85	-19
3	5 (Quite Interested)	119	90	-29

In other words, while the mean score of perception change is 4.66 (*SD*=1.91), it represents both changes towards more interested and less interested, which can be tied back to the question about what constitutes art. In Figure 3, a thematic analysis based on the open-ended questions reveals four reasons behind the changed perception, three reasons behind the unchanged perception, and four more reasons for the respondents' neutral attitude.

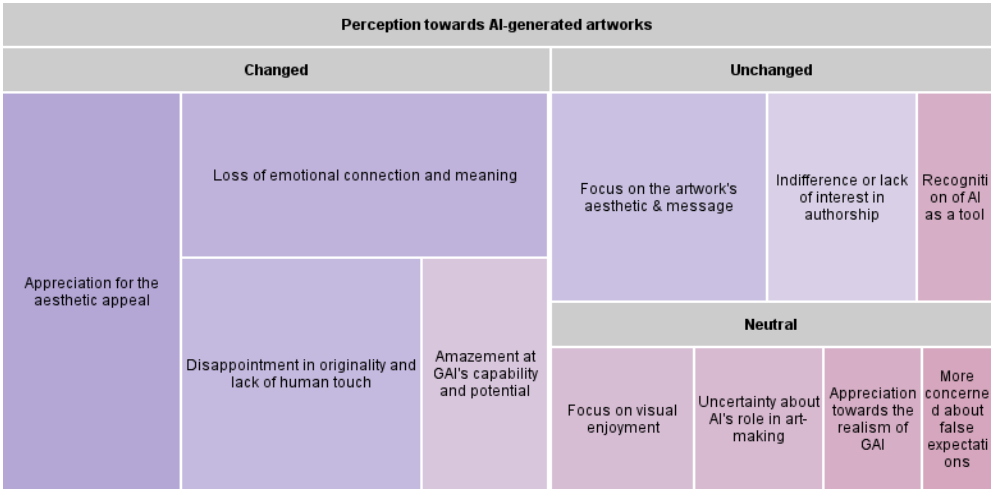

Fig 3. Thematic analysis of perception towards AI-generated artworks
(Source: Authors)

In the unchanged cluster, indifference or lack of interest in authorship is the most straightforward reason. This approach was frequently stated by those who do not understand or are interested in art. The majority of respondents with this mindset believe the artwork's aesthetic and message are the most important aspects, for example:

- No problem about who the artist is. Usually, I only notice the artwork's aesthetic (R138, author).
- Whether it was made by humans or GenAI, the message and concept are well presented (R254, non-CI).

Other responses highlight the human involvement in creating AI-generated artworks, hence recognising GenAI as a mere tool in the creation process:

- AI is only a medium, and the only thing that matters is the message (R111, digital marketing).
- Perception does not change because, essentially, the AI prompt was input by humans (R509, artist/artisan).
- An artwork is still an artwork regardless of who or what made it (R521, graphic designer).

The last response is interesting as it chooses the word "what" to represent that, to this person, an artwork does not have to be entirely created by humans.

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In the neutral cluster, respondents are primarily focused on casual visual enjoyment and are affected by uncertainty about AI's role in art-making:

- Perhaps it could be visually enjoyed, but the real installation, which is the "true art," cannot be enjoyed (R393, video editor).
- Whether GenAI made it or not, in my opinion, all of them are artworks that were created through the thinking process of the creators (R268, author).

There are also concerns about false expectations, such as: *This is about trust, and this breaks my expectations. I am a bit upset (R081, interior designer).* Thus, while respondents outwardly claim neutrality, the nuanced justifications often reveal underlying changes in perception.

As mentioned in the quantitative analysis, there are two contrasting reasons behind the changed cluster, showing a polarity of positive and negative perspective change. The positive ones consist of those amazed by GenAI's capability and potential, followed by an appreciation for the aesthetic appeal that surpasses their expectations: *The message and originality are still delivered. Still, I am slightly disappointed as I want to appreciate the real artist (R353, graphic designer).* The feeling of being awed by GenAI echoes the hypothesis by Chesher & Albarrán-Torres (2023) that some people view AI as magical and enigmatic, leaving behind the complex mechanistic aspect because of the instant results.

On the other hand, the changes toward negative perception are fueled mainly by the loss of emotional connection and meaning, drawing strong responses such as:

- I disapprove of using GenAI to create or commercialise any kind of artwork. I am angry because I feel that the work I do with all my heart and pour all my soul into it was easily done by GenAI (R066, author).
- Usually, art manifests because the artist is inspired by their life experience or anything they have ever seen. If AI created the artwork, then the art itself lost its artistic nature since it was created without emotional involvement (R020, graphic designer).
- An artwork must convey the creator's emotion. So, if it was made by GenAI, there is no authentic emotion conveyed (R051, artist/artisan).

While still related to the previous point about the classification of what is art and what is not, other respondents point out disappointment in originality and lack of human touch:

- Knowing that the artwork is not real changes how I view it. Previously, I was amazed and tried to interpret the meaning, so I became upset and felt like my efforts were in vain. (R276, author)
- Art that was made by AI cannot be classified as art anymore. Perhaps it could be added to [another classification, such as] artificial painting (R061, non-CI).

This reflects the negative emotions highlighted in the word cloud, as the respondents feel tricked or lied to. Beyond disagreement towards the general usage of GenAI, some respondents are more concerned about transparency, which means the disclosure of AI involvement might lessen the dissenting perception.

Furthermore, despite the differences, the reasons behind the unchanged and changed perspectives accurately map what defines art in Figure 2, with the unchanged representing the inclination towards the top two aspects, namely concept and aesthetic. In contrast, the reasons behind the negative changes are attributed to eliminating emotion and manual artistic skills.

Ability to distinguish AI-generated artworks

After seeing the capability of GenAI, respondents were tasked to distinguish AI-generated artworks from real artworks. With 1 as very unsure and 7 as very sure, respondents scored 4.47 (*SD*=1.63) in certainty of this ability. For this section, four images were compared with real paintings from the romantic movement by John William Waterhouse (A), Charles-Amable Lenoir

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(B), and Josef Grassi (C), installations by Jeff Koons, and avant-garde dresses by Iris van Herpen, considering the close resemblance of high fashion to art. The full images can be seen in Figure 4.

Fig 4. Multiple choices consisting of AI-generated and human-made artworks
(Source: Authors)

The result in Table 6 reveals that the average percentage of 68.47% (x̄ *SD*=1.15) respondents cannot differentiate AI-generated artworks, with yellow highlights accentuating the correct answer between options A-D. The hardest to distinguish is the dress mimicking the style of Iris van Herpen, with most respondents choosing the most intricate one to be AI-generated (*n*=212). A similar pattern also applies in assessing the installations of Jeff Koons (*n*=179), which ties back to the perception of GenAI images being "too much," even though those were the real ones in these two cases. Nevertheless, more respondents answered correctly about the romantic oil painting style (*n*=218).

Table 6. Respondents' ability to distinguish AI-generated artworks

No	*n* (A)	*n* (B)	*n* (C)	*n* (D)	*n* Wrong	% Wrong	*n* Right	% Right	*SD*
4	144	115	76	218	335	60.58%	218	39.42%	1.24
5	61	189	91	212	364	65.82%	189	34.18%	1.07
6	116	117	141	179	437	79.02%	116	20.98%	1.13
		Average			68.47%		31.53%		1.15

A related study by Horton Jr et al. (2023) also mentions the inability of almost 3000 respondents to distinguish AI-generated art. Uniquely, this does not mean it directly affects how they value the artworks. Hence, this study expands the findings by including more evaluation criteria.

Responses towards GenAI in art

The survey explored respondents' general responses towards GenAI, such as how they perceive the increasingly realistic AI-generated images and the notion of authenticity. The results are presented in Table 7, and the first two questions have been explained in the previous sub-chapters.

Regarding attitudes towards the increasingly realistic images, respondents scored 4.62 (*SD*=1.65), representing neutral, yet leaning towards quite bothered, as the most frequent value

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is 5 (*n*=139). The main reason is difficulty differentiating GenAI results from real images, circling back to the arguments on the importance of transparency, as being upfront about GenAI usage influences the receptivity of AI-generated content. Besides, respondents fear misuse by irresponsible people, which could lead to deception and fraud. Regarding consideration of authenticity, respondents scored 4.1 (*SD*=1.95), with the most frequent value being 4, hovering in neutrality.

Table 7. Quantitative results of respondents' perception towards GenAI in art

No	Question	Mean	Standard Deviation	Most Freq. Value	Least Freq. Value
1	Did your perception of the artwork and its meaning change after knowing it was AI-generated? (1 = very unchanged; 7 = very changed)	4.66	1.91	7 (*n*=132)	1 (*n*=45)
2	How sure are you in correctly distinguishing between human-generated and AI-generated artworks? (1 = very unsure; 7 = very sure)	4.47	1.63	4 (*n*=163)	1 (*n*=23)
3	How do you perceive the increasingly realistic AI-generated images? (1 = very unbothered; 7 = very bothered)	4.62	1.65	5 (*n*=139)	2 (*n*=27)
4	Are AI-generated artworks authentic? (1 = very inauthentic; 7 = very authentic)	4.1	1.95	4 (*n*=107)	6 (*n*=55)
5	Is it possible for GenAI to replace artists? (1 = very impossible; 7 = very possible)	4.42	2.10	7 (*n*=136)	3 (*n*=49)

Regarding the possibility for GenAI to replace artists, respondents scored 4.42 with a relatively high standard deviation of 2.10, which revealed another two contrasting opinions among the 553 respondents. The explanatory sequential method was performed in this question to gather more qualitative evidence that supports the data, resulting in three clusters in the thematic analysis: impossible, possible, and neutral, each consisting of four to five themes.

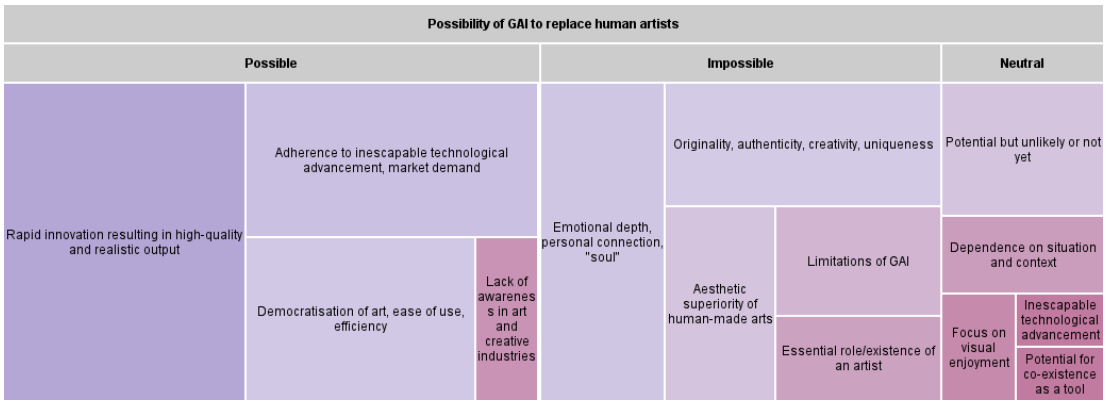

Fig 6. Thematic analysis of the possibility of GenAI to replace human artists
(Source: Authors)

The main reason respondents believe it is impossible to replace humans with GenAI is the desire for emotional depth and personal connection; those who aim to connect with "the soul" of the art as illustrated by this answer: *In essence, art, be it writing, painting, sculpture, etc. must*

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be done by humans. Surrendering it to technology means there is no meaning in art, no matter how beautiful and real. Art will only be meaningful if it is made by a person with feelings and emotions, and by pouring their thoughts on a piece of paper.' Relying on AI is akin to empty vessels making the most noise (R229, author).

Another theme in the impossible cluster houses various answers related to originality, authenticity, creativity, and uniqueness, which are deemed hard for machines to replicate. Similarly, some respondents feel human-made arts possess aesthetic superiority, from the impressive details that can only be seen in real life to the genuine characteristics of the artists. This extends into the ability to form a personal connection from human to human, and it would not happen without intent.

Considering that, some respondents underscore the essential role of an artist, advocating art beyond materials, techniques, and even concepts. Usually, viewers relate not only to the artworks but also to the artist's past experiences or worldviews—the self. Here are the examples:

- Perhaps the result is adequate for those who only admire the art visually. However, as someone who appreciates real, tangible painting, of course, the artist's identity is a very significant aspect (R059, graphic designer).
- An artwork will be more valuable depending on who the creators are (R165, non-CI).

The findings also reflect the producer identity bias (Hattori et al., 2024). Many respondents highlighted the absence of human effort and emotional involvement, not merely an emotional message, as key reasons for their diminished interest post-disclosure.

At the same time, respondents who believe GenAI could replace artists consider the rapid innovation resulting in high-quality and realistic output, which will keep vastly improving in the future. Still, this accepting mindset is not always without a doubt, for example, perhaps *for aesthetics. However, for an artwork with a profound message, it seems like it would be hard (R020, graphic designer).*

Another reason is the democratisation of art. Rather than being exclusive, the widely accessible and affordable GenAI offers ease of use and efficiency, which might change human behaviour in the long run:

- A layperson can create an artwork easily, simply by writing several words; apparently, the results are appealing. They are not very different from artworks directly handcrafted by the artists (R536, non-CI).
- Drawing an artwork just requires a detailed description, even though most likely the results must be perfected by human touch. (R195, non-CI).

This encapsulates the significance of the chosen term *kitsch,* leading us to reexamine the value of art, what constitutes art, or who could be called artists nowadays. This dichotomy of making art accessible and relatable yet challenging its perceived value puts forward *kitsch*'s role in redefining art for a broader audience while risking the erosion of its cultural depth.

However, the most concerning theme is the lack of awareness in the art and creative industries:

- Most people nowadays only see an artwork through social media without ever having a chance to see it in real life (R067, non-CI).
- The layman's eyes would encounter significant difficulties distinguishing whether it is an authentic artwork or a mere technological construction (R395, interior designer).

This provides an alternative perspective that, despite the respondents' judgment towards GenAI, the general public is the one who decides the value of GenAI. Suppose they are ignorant and do not care about the prevalence of this issue. In that case, the transition to replace artists will likely be with no significant rejection, particularly if more artworks are only enjoyed through the screen.

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This pattern can also be found in neutral answers. These respondents humbly accept that their stance on agreeing or disagreeing is less important. However, people often do what must be done according to situations that are often beyond their control. In this case, there is adherence to inescapable technological advancement and pressure to conform to market demand. Thus, there is a mix of admiration and concerns related to GenAI usage in art, with both sides of the argument providing equally rational reasons. Since there is no way to escape the technologically mediated society, it is best to manage GenAI instead of fully accepting or refusing it. In the end, 46.29% of respondents (*n*=256) think the usage of AI in the art scene should be limited by rules or policies to ensure fairness.

Conclusion

This study examines contrasting perceptions of AI-generated art by analysing how public interest and interpretations shift upon disclosure of GenAI involvement. Drawing on theories of art perception, generative art, and the concept of kitsch, the findings illuminate the duality in how audiences engage with AI-created artworks, prompting a nuanced look at each case.

Before learning about GenAI involvement, respondents generally expressed moderate interest in the presented artworks, with an overall mean score of 5.09. However, post-disclosure, this interest declined to a neutral level of 4.75, highlighting the tension between initial visual appeal and subsequent scepticism. These contrasting perceptions underscore biases against AI as a creator, particularly regarding its perceived lack of emotional authenticity and originality, qualities central to traditional notions of art.

Respondents' reactions revealed a spectrum of sentiments. Some were captivated by GenAI's technical capabilities and democratising potential, which broadens creative participation. Conversely, others expressed disappointment, citing the loss of emotional resonance and personal connection they associate with human-made art. These opposing views reflect kitsch's duality: its accessibility and aesthetic appeal juxtaposed with its perceived superficiality.

The findings also spotlight challenges in distinguishing AI-generated from human-made artworks. While this reflects the sophistication of GenAI outputs, it raises concerns about transparency and trust in the art world. For many respondents, knowledge of AI involvement diminished their connection to the artwork, emphasising the critical role of authorship in shaping artistic value. However, this might change if the work maintains transparency by noting AI involvement from the beginning.

Overall, this study identifies a pivotal cultural moment where GenAI reshapes artistic boundaries, fostering admiration and critique. Undoubtedly, unveiling these contrasting perceptions underscores the importance of addressing ethical considerations and redefining creativity in an era where technology and art increasingly intersect to ensure fairness.

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