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Original Research Article

Generative AI in the arts and humanities: A bibliometric analysis of global research trends and thematic clusters (2021-2026)

Enci Huang | Qijun Song*

School of International Studies, Guangdong University of Education, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China.

*Corresponding Author Email: henryqijun@outlook.com

Abstract:

The rapid advancement of generative artificial intelligence (AI) has fundamentally transformed the creation, perception, and societal implications of visual and literary art. The present study presents the first comprehensive bibliometric analysis of SSCI- and A&HCI-indexed scholarship on AI-generated art, drawing on 290 publications retrieved from the Web of Science Core Collection. Bibliometric methods, including performance analysis, Bradford's law, keyword clustering, and citation analysis, were applied to examine publication trends, core journals, leading authors and institutions, geographical distributions, thematic clusters, and intellectual influence. Results reveal an explosive growth trajectory: from 4 publications in 2021 to 111 in 2025 (CAGR = 129.5%), reflecting a field in rapid institutionalisation. Keyword analysis identifies four thematic clusters: (1) aesthetic perception and human–AI evaluation, (2) generative AI technology and text-to-image systems, (3) societal and ethical implications, and (4) media, journalism, and communication. The h-index of 24 and g-index of 45 indicate a rapidly maturing, though still nascent, evidence base.

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1. Introduction

The advent of large-scale generative AI, most notably diffusion models such as Stable Diffusion, Midjourney, and DALL-E, has precipitated a profound ontological and epistemological rupture within contemporary cultural production. By enabling the translation of natural language prompts into complex visual and literary signifiers, these systems have dismantled the traditional boundaries separating computational mechanics from humanistic creative practice. This democratization of synthetic media has moved rapidly from specialized technical environments into the mainstream cultural zeitgeist, triggering urgent, multi-disciplinary interrogations across experimental psychology, critical media studies, the philosophy of art, human–computer interaction, and sociology. At stake is not merely a technological evolution, but a fundamental renegotiation of aesthetic value, discursive power, and human agency in the digital epoch.

Despite the explosive proliferation of these critical debates, the cumulative intellectual and discursive structure of the field remains remarkably under-theorized and poorly mapped. To resolve this deficit, the present study offers the first comprehensive epistemic mapping of SSCI- and A&HCI-indexed scholarship concerning AI-generated art. By examining a meticulously curated corpus of 290 publications retrieved from the Web of Science Core Collection as of 1 June 2026, this analysis transcends traditional descriptive bibliometrics to expose the underlying theoretical tensions and institutional power dynamics shaping this nascent discourse.

To systematically deconstruct this evolving intellectual landscape, the following five research questions guide the analysis:

- RQ1: How has the temporal trajectory of scholarly output evolved to signal the rapid institutionalization of this emerging field?
- RQ2: Which journals, contributing authors, and institutional nodes constitute the hegemonic core of the knowledge base?
- RQ3: How is the geographic distribution of research activity structured, and what global dynamics of knowledge production does it reveal?
- RQ4: What underlying discursive formations and thematic clusters are exposed through an interpretive analysis of keyword topographies?
- RQ5: What are the intellectual foundations of the field as evidenced by citation networks and the consolidation of discursive influence?

2. Methodology

The Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection was selected as the primary bibliographic database for this study. WoS maintains the most rigorous journal-selection criteria among major citation databases, applying structured evaluation processes for journal inclusion (Mongeon & Paul-

Hus, 2016). Within WoS, the present study drew exclusively from two specialised citation indices: the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) and the Arts & Humanities Citation Index (A&HCI). The two indices are ideally suited to capturing the cross-disciplinary social, cultural, aesthetic, and humanistic dimensions of AI-generated art. SSCI and A&HCI were preferred over the Science Citation Index Expanded (SCIE) and the Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI), which index technical computer science and engineering publications. By excluding SCIE and ESCI, this study deliberately focuses on how the *social, humanistic, and arts* scholarly communities have responded to and theorised AI-generated art, rather than on technical model development *per se*, consistent with prior bibliometric analyses of technology-and-society research (Donthu et al., 2021). While Scopus offers broader coverage of recent publications and non-English journals, WoS SSCI/A&HCI provides deeper historical coverage in humanities disciplines and is considered the gold standard for arts and humanities citation indexing (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016).

The search was conducted on 1 June 2026 using the WoS Core Collection's advanced search interface. The following Boolean query was entered in the Topic (TS=) field, which searches across article titles, abstracts, author keywords, and KeyWords Plus entries simultaneously: TS=("AI-generated art" OR "AI art" OR "AI-generated imagery" OR "AI-generated images"). The four search terms were selected through an iterative process informed by (a) examination of terminology used in early high-impact papers in this domain, (b) review of WoS thesaurus entries related to generative artificial intelligence and visual production, and (c) pilot searches to assess recall and precision. No date restriction or language restriction was applied. A total of 290 records were retrieved and exported in tab-delimited plain-text format (.txt) with full field tags, including bibliographic, source, authorship, citation, keyword, address, and abstract fields.

To ensure validity and reproducibility, explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria were established prior to analysis (Donthu et al., 2021; Zupic & Čater, 2015). Inclusion criteria: (1) Indexed in WoS Core Collection SSCI or A&HCI; (2) retrieved by the four-term Topic search; (3) published in any language; (4) published in any year up to 22 June 2026. Exclusion criteria: Duplicate records (none identified; WoS deduplicates within a single export session); records with entirely missing bibliographic fields (zero records); non-scholarly output such as errata or retraction notices (none present). Because the Topic field searches titles, abstracts, and author keywords conjointly, all 290 retrieved records were thematically relevant to AI-generated art or imagery, and no additional manual relevance screening was conducted. The retained corpus of N = 290 records was therefore identical to the initial retrieval set.

The raw bibliographic dataset was systematically parsed utilizing a Python-based computational pipeline. To map the discursive topography and structural evolution of the field, the following core Web of Science (WoS) metadata fields were extracted and categorized for multidimensional analysis:

Author Names (AU), Author Addresses (C1), and Institutional Organizations (C3) were utilized to map collaborative networks and institutional productivity. Article Titles (TI), Author Keywords (DE), and KeyWords Plus (ID) provided the textual foundation for qualitative thematic synthesis and concept mapping. Publication Year (PY), Source Journal (SO), and Times Cited (TC) were extracted to track chronological trajectories, disciplinary stratification (Bradford's law), and intellectual resonance (h/g-indices).

To ensure the integrity of the semantic analysis, author keywords (DE) and WoS-generated KeyWords Plus (ID) were consolidated. A rigorous normalization protocol was applied to resolve orthographic ambiguities, executing case folding and the conceptual merging of variant terminologies (e.g., standardizing "generative artificial intelligence" and "artificial intelligence (AI)" to the core node "generative AI"). Geopolitical extraction was conducted via regular expression matching against the terminal elements of the C1 strings, retaining sub-national designations (e.g., constituent countries of the UK) in accordance with standardized scientometric conventions. Missing citation values were conservatively imputed as zero to prevent algorithmic skew.

The analytical framework integrated both macro-level bibliometric distributions and micro-level impact assessments: Rather than relying on rigid percentage growth rates which risk statistical artifact on small early-year baselines (e.g., 2021), the annual publication distribution (PY) was analyzed to trace the field's rapid trajectory toward academic institutionalization. The partial year 2026 was excluded from growth modeling to maintain longitudinal validity. Bradford's law of scattering was applied to evaluate the concentration of knowledge production. By demarcating the corpus into three yield zones (N/3 thresholds), the analysis isolated 18 core Zone 1 journals, revealing the field's genuine disciplinary pluralism against a broader periphery of 57 Zone 2 and 96 Zone 3 publications. The h-index and g-index were computed to measure sustained scholarly impact. While the h-index ($h = 24$) captures consistent citation performance, the g-index ($g = 45$) provides a complementary measure sensitive to the outsized influence of highly cited, foundational papers in this nascent discourse.

Given the highly concentrated nature of the current evidence base ($N = 290$), deploying fully automated, algorithmic co-occurrence networks (such as standard VOSviewer renderings) risks generating fragmented or statistically unreliable clusters. Consequently, this study employed a computationally-assisted interpretive synthesis. Keyword groupings were established by triangulating three dimensions: (a) semantic congruence, (b) observed textual co-occurrence within the metadata records, and (c) the distinct epistemic communities driving the publications. This methodology intentionally bridges the quantitative tracking of co-word analysis with the qualitative depth of discourse synthesis, allowing for a more nuanced mapping of the field's underlying ideological and theoretical contours. All computational parsing, data aggregation, and structural visualizations, capturing temporal trends, geographic dispersion, and thematic typologies, were executed utilizing a custom Python 3.12 environment (pandas, NumPy, Matplotlib).

3. Results

The 290 documents span publication years 1981 to 2026, though the substantive corpus begins in 2021 (Table 1). Articles dominate (74.1%), with 19.0% Early Access articles reflecting the field's recency. English is the language of 97.6% of publications.

Table 1. Overview of results

Characteristic	Value
Total documents	290
Active publication years	2021–2026
Unique journals	171
Unique authors	821
Total citations	2,549
Average citations per paper	8.79
h-index	24
g-index	45
Average authors per paper	2.91
Single-author papers	95 (32.8%)
Multi-author papers	195 (67.2%)

The corpus reveals an explosive growth trajectory: from 4 papers in 2021 to 111 in 2025 (CAGR = 129.5%) (Figure 1). As of June 2026, 107 papers have already been indexed, suggesting full-year 2026 output will likely exceed 2025. This growth surge aligns with the public release of major text-to-image systems (Midjourney: March 2022; DALL-E 2: September 2022; Stable Diffusion open-source: August 2022).

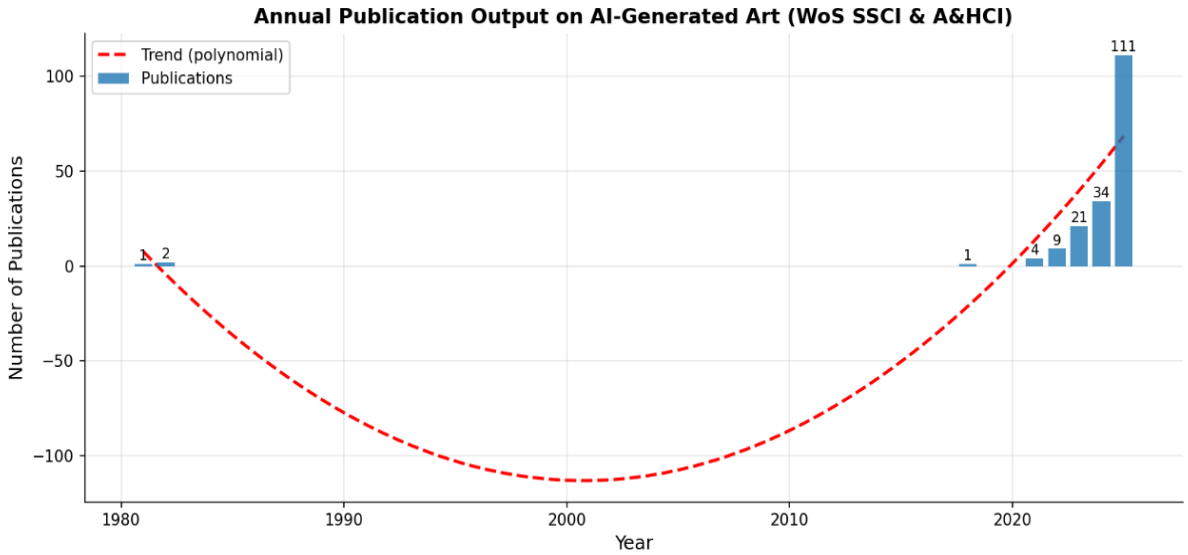

Figure 1. Annual publication output on AI-generated art in WoS SSCI & A&HCI (2021–2025; 2026 partial).

3.1. Source Analysis and Bradford's Law

To map the epistemic infrastructure of the field, a Bradford's law of scattering analysis was applied to evaluate the concentration and dispersion of knowledge production. The resulting stratification delineates a core of 18 Zone 1 journals that collectively account for approximately one-third of the total publication volume, supported by a secondary tier of 57 Zone 2 journals and a highly fragmented periphery of 96 Zone 3 journals. The unusually expansive constitution of this core zone, comprising 18 distinct venues, indicates a profound disciplinary pluralism rather than monopolistic concentration within a single academic community.

The composition of this intellectual core reveals that AI-generated art functions as a powerful boundary object, actively theorized across psychology, human-computer interaction, media studies, and the philosophy of art (Figure 2). Leading the aggregate output is *Frontiers in Psychology* (9 publications), flanked closely by *Empirical Studies of the Arts* (8), the *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction* (8), *Leonardo* (8), *Convergence* (8), and the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (8). This multidisciplinary convergence underscores a dual theoretical focus on both the cognitive reception of synthetic imagery and its formal aesthetic properties.

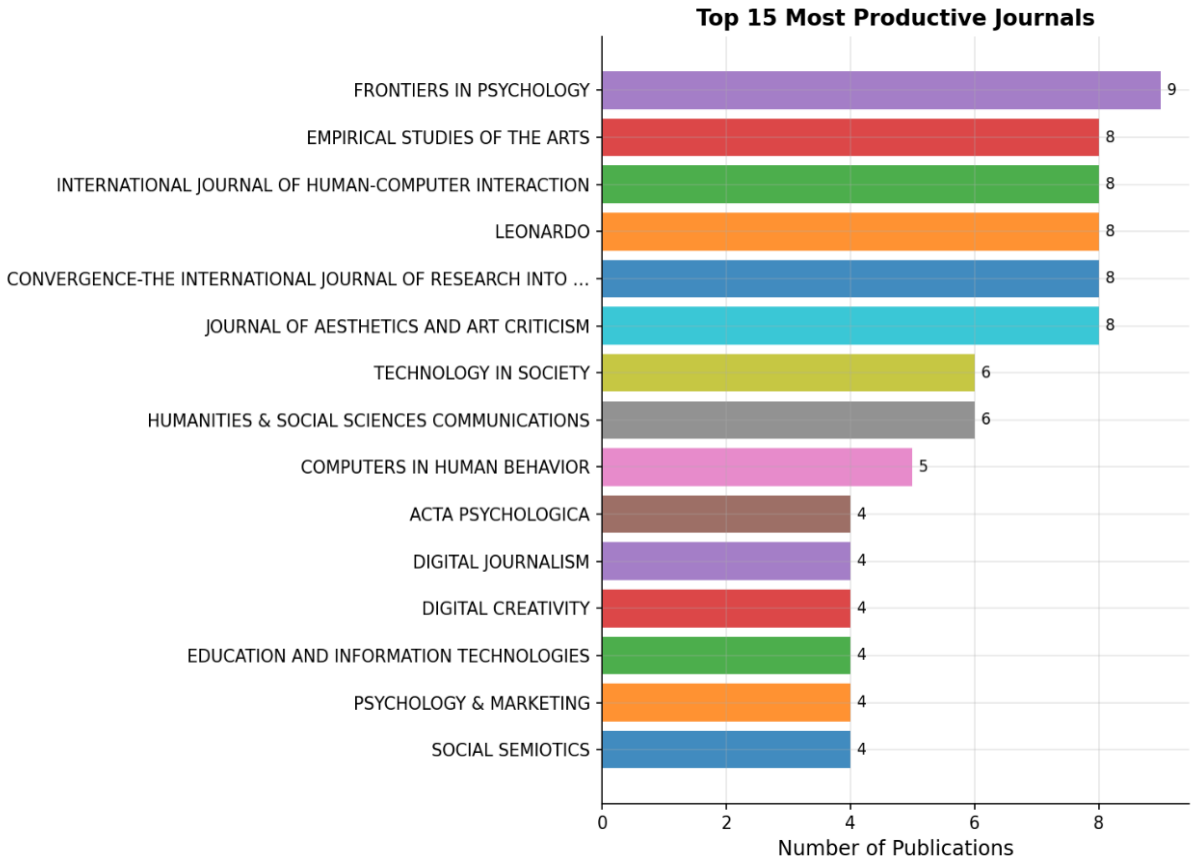

Figure 2. Top 15 most productive journals in AI-generated art research.

Furthermore, the prominence of macro-societal and applied venues, such as *Technology in Society* (6), *Humanities & Social Sciences Communications* (6), and *Computers in Human Behavior* (5), highlights a shifting scholarly focus toward the broader ethical, communicative, and market implications of generative technologies. The presence of additional core journals, including *Digital Journalism* (4), *Digital Creativity* (4), *Education and Information Technologies* (4), *Psychology & Marketing* (4), *Social Semiotics* (4), and *Acta Psychologica* (4), further illustrates the pervasive penetration of this discourse into deeply specialized and applied social science domains.

3.2. Author and geographical distribution

The 821 unique authors demonstrate low individual publication counts (maximum 3 per author), consistent with the field's nascency. The average of 2.91 authors per paper reflects social science rather than natural science collaboration norms. Notable early contributors include Chen Jiayu, Robin S.S. Kramer (facial perception and AI aesthetics), and Jonas Oppenlaender (prompt engineering) (Figure 3).

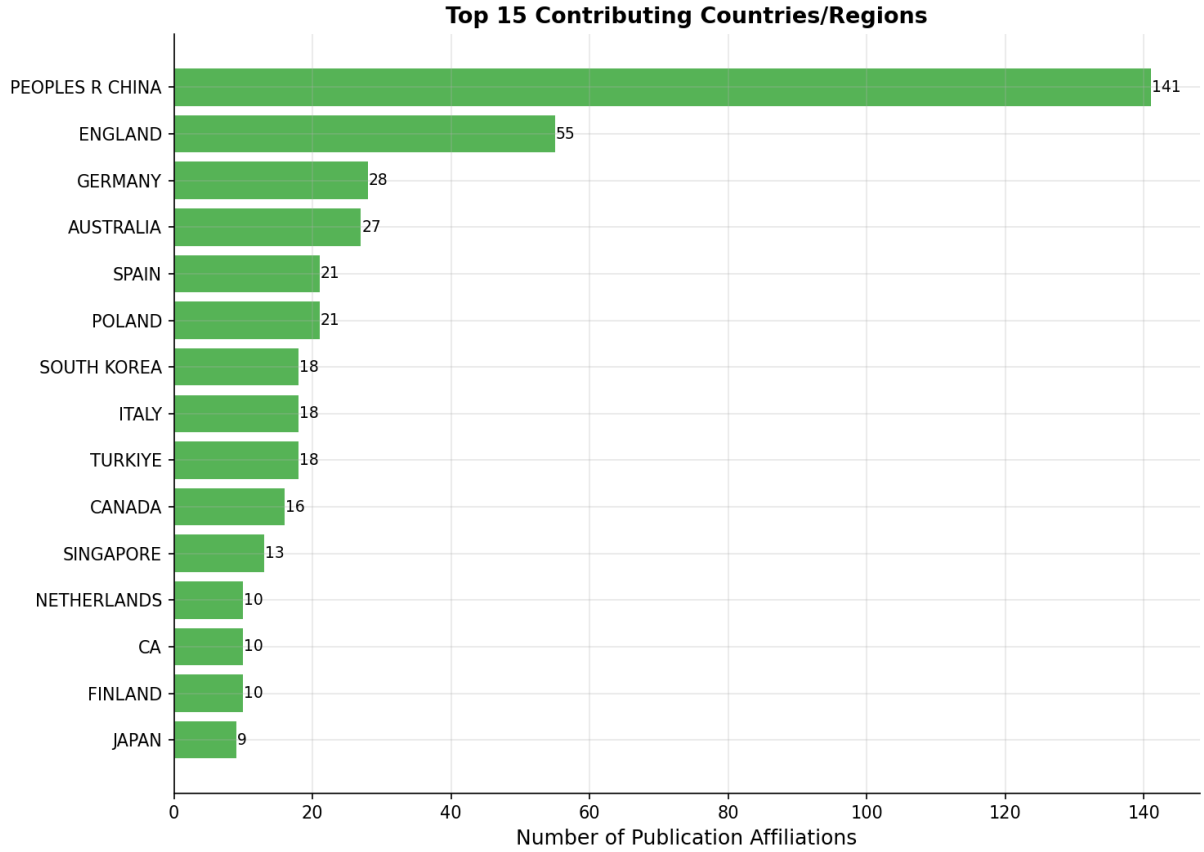

Figure 3. Top 15 contributing countries/regions (affiliation-level counts).

China dominates with 141 affiliation-level contributions (48.6% of the total country-level count), nearly three times that of England (55). The European cluster—Germany, Spain, Poland, Italy, the Netherlands—collectively contributes over 100 affiliations, reflecting the

strong humanistic and social-scientific research traditions in Europe as applied to AI art debates.

3.3. Keyword analysis and thematic clusters

The synthesis of author keywords (DE) and KeyWords Plus (ID) reveals a deeply stratified vocabulary that transcends mere technical terminology, mapping the epistemic shift occurring across the humanities and social sciences (Figure 4). Foundational signifiers naturally dominate the frequency distribution, namely artificial intelligence (f = 76), generative AI (f = 58), AI-generated images (f = 31), and AI art (f = 22). However, the true value of the dataset lies in its underlying discursive formations. An interpretive, computationally-assisted clustering of this vocabulary elucidates four principal research domains, each grappling with the ontological, aesthetic, and societal ruptures provoked by synthetic media (Figure 5).

The first cluster, focused on the aesthetics of algorithmic aversion and cognitive perception, is defined by a core vocabulary encompassing aesthetics, perception, eye-tracking, appreciation, creativity, preference, and beauty. Frequently published in venues such as *Empirical Studies of the Arts*, *Frontiers in Psychology*, and *Acta Psychologica*, this discourse meticulously interrogates the human–machine ontological boundary through experimental aesthetics and cognitive psychology. Rather than merely assessing visual output, researchers are uncovering profound algorithmic aversions. Studies deploying eye-tracking and dual-process models reveal a persistent implicit prejudice against AI-generated art; even when viewers cannot consciously distinguish synthetic from human-made artworks, their gaze patterns and subjective evaluations often penalize AI creations. Furthermore, scholars highlight that labeling an artwork as AI-generated can actively diminish its capacity to evoke profound emotional responses, specifically awe and empathy, compared to human-authored counterparts.

The second cluster centers on socio-technical affordances and generative architectures. Characterized by terms such as generative AI, diffusion model, Stable Diffusion, Midjourney, DALL-E, prompt engineering, and text-to-image, this research is prominently featured in the *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction* and *Behaviour & Information Technology*. Moving beyond output evaluation, this cluster treats the generative models themselves as complex socio-technical assemblages. The scholarship here ranges from assessing the specific creative capacities of leading text-to-image models, such as testing their ability to accurately process and render figurative language and proverbs, to utilizing these platforms to generate highly controlled, ecologically valid object stimuli for cognitive research. A key emerging sub-theme within this cluster is the conceptualization of prompt engineering not merely as a technical input, but as a novel site of human-in-the-loop creative practice.

The third cluster confronts the crisis of authorship and the political economy of synthetic art. Utilizing keywords like authorship, authenticity, copyright, ethics, trust, bias, deepfakes, and intellectual property, this deeply critical discourse finds a home in *Social Semiotics,*

Convergence, Technology in Society. This literature addresses the ethical dilemmas and power asymmetries triggered by AI's distributed agency. Scholars are revisiting classical cultural theory, such as Walter Benjamin's concept of the "aura," to theorize the status of data-driven, mechanically reproduced art in the digital age. Concurrently, urgent socio-legal debates dominate this space, exploring the inadequacy of current copyright frameworks to handle prompted content, the ethical implications of hidden AI authorship, and the labor precarity of human creators, evidenced by netnographic studies of fan-art communities protesting platform-driven algorithmic exploitation.

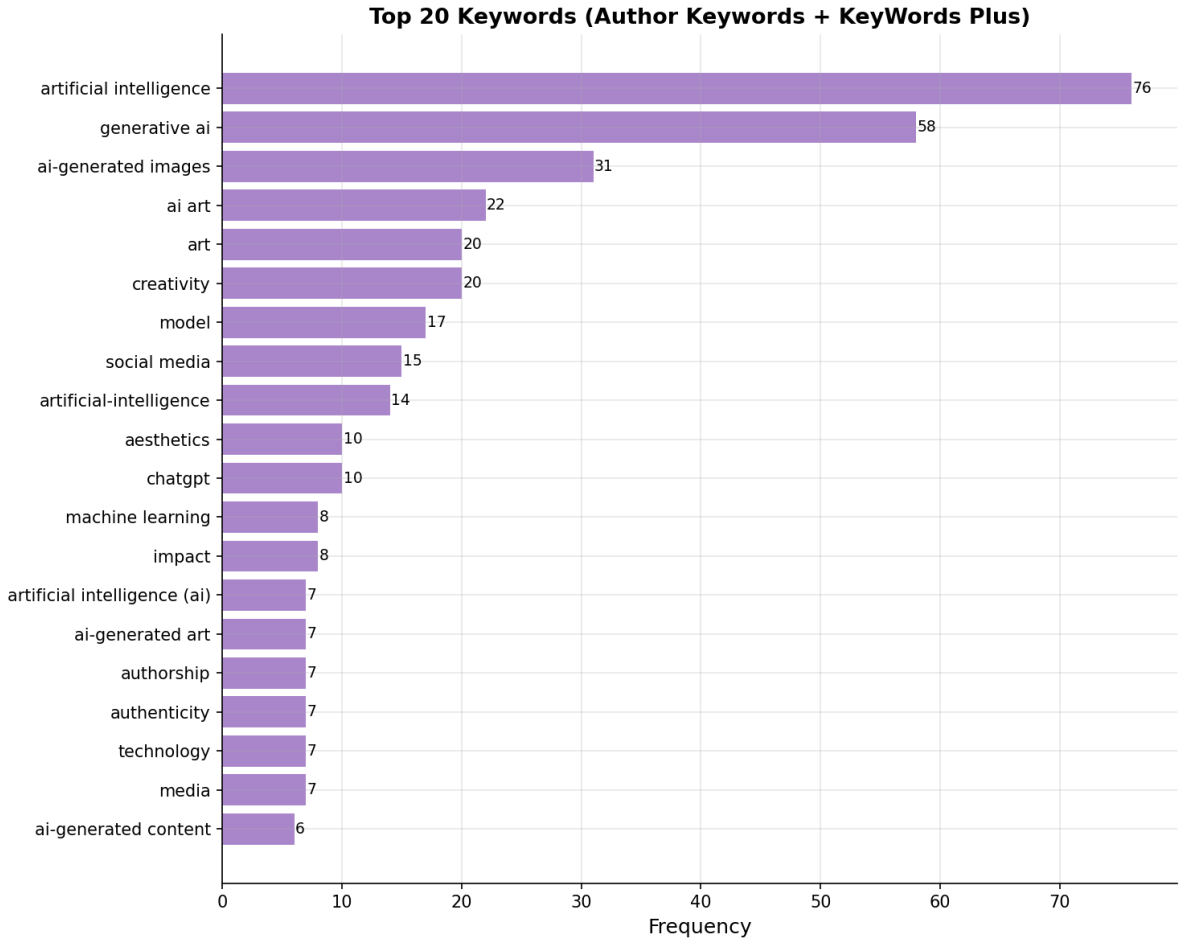

Figure 4. Top 20 keywords (author keywords + KeyWords Plus, normalised).

The final cluster investigates cultural narratives, media discourse, and market logic. Drawing on terms like social media, news, digital journalism, misinformation, advertising, and health communication, this research spans journals such as *Digital Journalism, Computers in Human Behavior, Psychology & Marketing*. This focus examines how generative AI functions as a mechanism for cultural storytelling and ideological reproduction. In critical discourse analysis and media studies, researchers are exposing how AI image generation can visually entrench hegemonic stereotypes, such as the multimodal securitization of refugees or the perpetuation of stigmas surrounding severe mental illness and aging bodies. Conversely, within consumer behavior and marketing paradigms, scholars are investigating the paradoxical "effort

heuristic". While AI can generate marketing imagery with superhuman effectiveness and high aesthetic appeal, consumers often exhibit ambivalence or an outright refusal to pay for synthetic art due to the perceived lack of human labor and intentionality.

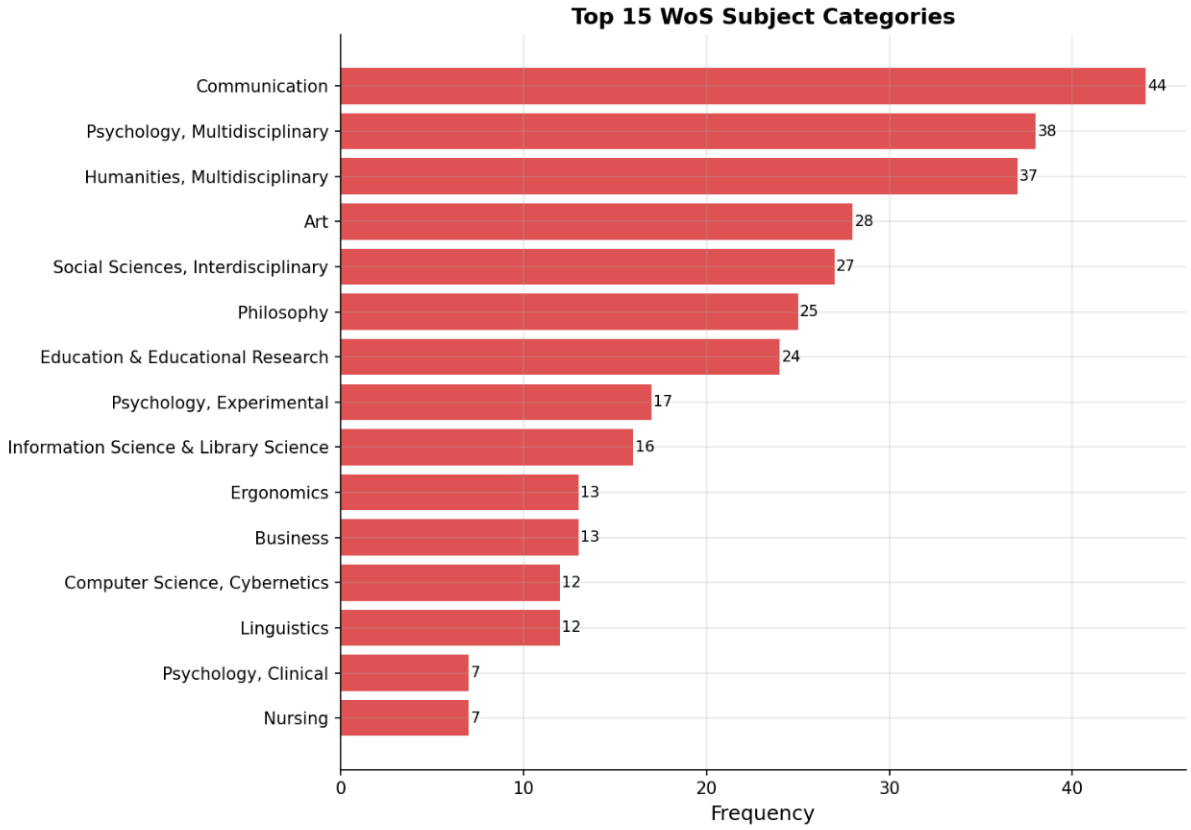

Figure 5. Top 15 WoS subject categories (paper-level counts).

3.4. Citation Analysis

The intellectual resonance of this emerging field is captured through its citation dynamics, which reveal a rapidly consolidating knowledge base despite the youth of the discourse. The corpus has accrued a total of 2,549 citations, yielding an average of 8.79 citations per document (Figure 6). Beyond mere volume, the structural maturity of this scholarly network is evidenced by an h-index of 24 and a g-index of 45. In the context of a nascent discipline, these metrics signify more than basic academic impact; they denote the rapid formation of a robust theoretical core. The g-index, in particular, highlights that the top 45 papers have collectively amassed over 2,025 citations, indicating that a concentrated stratum of highly influential texts is disproportionately driving the field's intellectual trajectory.

This concentration of epistemic power is further illustrated by the highly right-skewed citation distribution, which exposes a structural asymmetry typical of paradigm-shifting academic domains (Figure 7). Rather than an egalitarian diffusion of influence, the discourse is anchored by a small, elite cohort of publications that establish the foundational heuristics and methodological protocols for subsequent research. Preeminent among these is the seminal work

by Köbis and Mossink (2021), which commands the network with 254 citations. By empirically demonstrating that human readers are fundamentally unable to distinguish AI-generated poetry from human-authored texts, this paper precipitated an ontological crisis regarding authenticity, authorship, and algorithmic mimicry. Its outsized influence underscores how early experimental validations of human–AI indistinguishability have successfully established the paradigmatic frameworks upon which the broader, interdisciplinary field continues to build and extensively replicate.

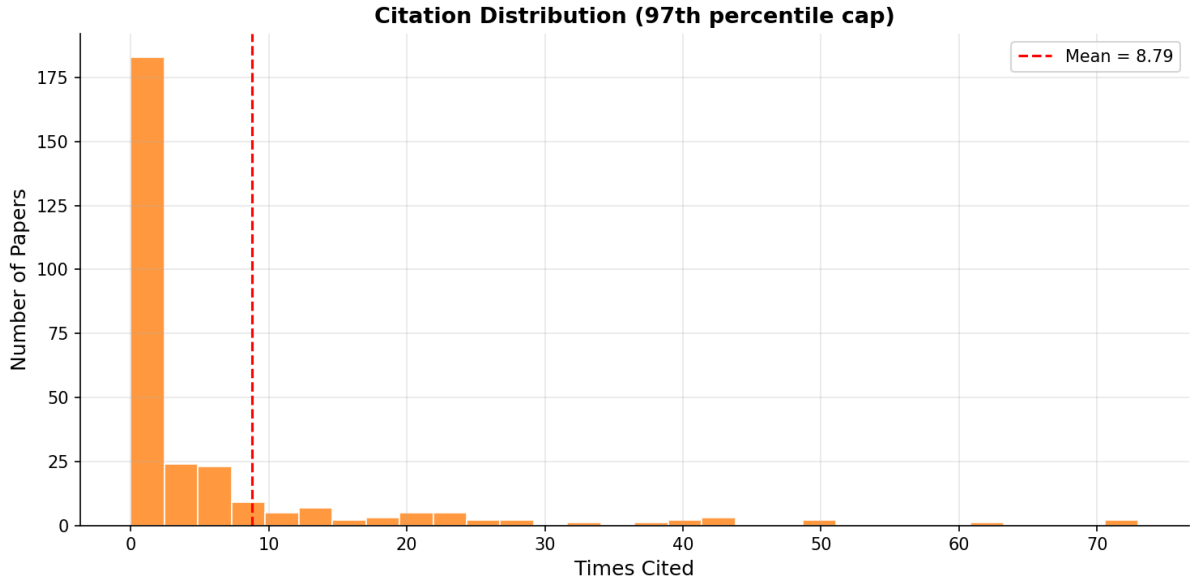

Figure 6. Citation distribution across the 290-paper corpus (97th percentile cap applied).

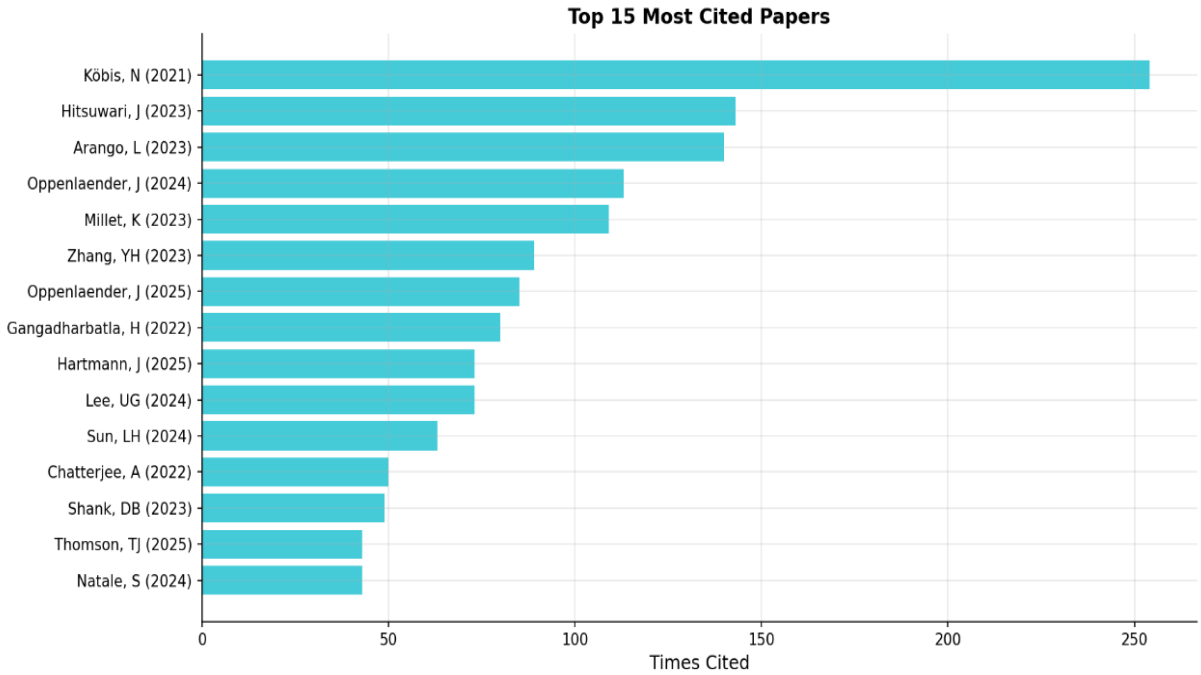

Figure 7. Top 15 most cited papers in the AI-generated art literature.

4. Discussion

Rather than reducing the field's genesis to potentially misleading compound growth rates on a micro-baseline, it is more analytically rigorous to observe a rapid trajectory of academic institutionalisation. The inflection point of this discourse—scaling abruptly from a marginal presence in 2021 to a projected output approaching or exceeding 200 papers by the end of 2026—precisely mirrors the public release of latent diffusion models such as Midjourney, DALL-E 2, and Stable Diffusion. This synchronicity illustrates a profound socio-technical rupture: as generative platforms democratised visual production, the locus of scholarly inquiry necessarily shifted from the technical domain of computer science into the critical humanities and social sciences.

The dispersion of the literature across 171 unique journals and 15 diverse subject categories signifies genuine disciplinary pluralism, yet it simultaneously exposes the risks of profound thematic fragmentation. The field currently lacks a unifying theoretical paradigm; cognitive psychologists investigating implicit "algorithmic aversion", legal scholars debating the parameters of copyright and intellectual property, and critical discourse analysts deconstructing visual stereotypes frequently operate within isolated epistemic silos. While this multipolar landscape enriches the initial mapping of AI art, it threatens to perpetuate parallel research streams devoid of cross-disciplinary dialogue. Future scholarship must transcend these boundaries, integrating, for instance, the empirical rigor of cognitive aesthetics with the structural critique of media studies to formulate a holistic theory of synthetic cultural production.

The geographic distribution of the corpus reveals a striking center-periphery dynamic in global knowledge production. China’s absolute dominance in affiliation-level contributions (141 affiliations compared to England's 55) reflects robust institutional investments and the strategic prioritisation of AI research. However, a critical examination of the citation network reveals that the “discursive hegemony”, the elite, highly cited papers that establish the foundational frameworks of the field, remains disproportionately concentrated within US and European institutions. This volume–impact asymmetry suggests that while non-Western institutions are prolific in output, the core theoretical frameworks governing the ontology and perception of AI art are still predominantly shaped by Western academic centers.

As the field matures beyond initial exploratory comparisons, four critical frontiers demand sustained theoretical and empirical engagement. First, scholarship must transition from binary comparisons of “human versus machine” to nuanced interrogations of distributed agency, exploring how artistic practitioners continuously negotiate their creative autonomy alongside algorithmic systems. Second, far from a mere technical mechanism, prompt engineering must be theorised as a distinct cognitive and discursive practice. It represents a new grammar of visual creation where textual articulation directly dictates aesthetic materialisation. Third, critical attention must be directed toward auditing the biases embedded within AI-generated

representations. Because synthetic models are trained on historical data, they risk visually entrenching hegemonic stereotypes, such as the multimodal securitization of refugees or the stigmatisation of ageing and mental illness. Finally, in the realms of journalism, marketing, and cultural consumption, future research must unpack the "effort heuristic" and the capitalistic valuation of art. This involves critical inquiries into how the absence of human intentionality alters the perceived economic and aesthetic value of an image, raising urgent questions about public trust, labelling conventions, and the preservation of the artistic “aura”.

5. Conclusion

This study transcends traditional bibliometric counting to offer a systematic epistemic mapping of the rapidly institutionalising discourse surrounding AI-generated art. By interrogating the metadata of 290 SSCI and A&HCI publications, we reveal a field experiencing profound socio-technical rupture and unprecedented scholarly expansion. The literature is characterised by genuine disciplinary pluralism, spanning diverse subject categories and a robust core of influential journals. Yet, beneath this heterogeneity lies a stark geopolitical asymmetry: while non-Western institutions, notably in China, drive a substantial volume of research output, the citation network's discursive hegemony remains deeply anchored by a select group of foundational, highly influential papers (e.g., Köbis & Mossink, 2021; Hitsuwari et al., 2023; Arango et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the computationally-assisted thematic clustering delineates four primary arenas of intellectual contestation—ranging from the cognitive intricacies of aesthetic perception to the political economy of algorithmic authorship. As generative architectures continue to destabilise traditional boundaries of human creativity and cultural production, the academic response must evolve beyond isolated empirical observations. Continuous, critical monitoring of this discourse, coupled with rigorous interdisciplinary synthesis, is imperative. Only by bridging these epistemic silos can scholars transform a fragmented and explosive body of literature into a coherent, critical research programme capable of navigating the ontological and ethical complexities of the synthetic age.

Declaration of conflict of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest(s) concerning the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. There is no conflict of interest, whether financial or non-financial. The researcher(s) do not have any personal bias or affiliation in the matter under study.

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