



Studio Ghibli: Counter IP perspective on visual styles generated by AI image generators

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Abstract.

This study quantitatively analyzes how the use of AI Image Generators to replicate Studio Ghibli's visual style is perceived in public and academic discourse, particularly concerning legal, ethical, and cultural dimensions. Employing a quantitative content analysis using NVivo-assisted coding of secondary data gathered from 20 scholarly and professional publications between 2020 and 2025, the research investigates the evolving relationship between human creativity and generative technology. The results indicate that the majority of sources (60%) interpret AI's role in the Ghibli context as a non-commercial form of transformative fair use that serves as a medium of Japanese cultural promotion, whereas 30% regard it as a potential copyright infringement, and 10% emphasize the need for new ethical regulation. The findings reveal the ambivalence of AI as both a challenge to human authorship and a catalyst for collaborative innovation that redefines aesthetic expression through algorithmic creativity. The phenomenon of Ghibli-style AI art also contributes to Japan's cultural soft power, reinforcing its humanistic and ecological aesthetic values within the global digital sphere. The study concludes that conventional copyright frameworks are insufficient to regulate hybrid authorship involving humans and machines, necessitating new policies grounded in fairness, transparency, and moral responsibility. Furthermore, the study offers pedagogical and industrial implications, highlighting the importance of integrating AI ethics and intellectual property literacy into art education and creative practices to ensure a responsible and inclusive generative art future.

Keywords: AI Image Generator, Studio Ghibli Copyright, Digital Ethics, Transformative Fair Use, Cultural Soft Power

Introduction

The rise of artificial intelligence (AI) over the past decade has radically transformed how humans create, evaluate, and consume art. AI has evolved from a mere technical aid into a creative agent capable of imitating, innovating, and challenging the very definition of "artist" (Elgammal, 2023; Dyer, 2024). In the realm of visual arts, the emergence of AI Image Generators such as Midjourney, DALL-E, and ChatGPT 4.0 signifies a new era where algorithmic systems can reproduce the visual signatures of established masters (Geiger & Gross, 2022). This technological breakthrough evokes both excitement and anxiety. On one hand, AI democratizes creativity by enabling anyone to produce artistic works without traditional technical skills (Flew, 2022). On the other, it challenges the foundations of intellectual property rights and moral authorship that define artistic ethics (Thompson, 2024).

One of the most prominent cases is the replication of the visual style of Studio Ghibli; the legendary Japanese animation studio founded by Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata in 1985. Ghibli's artistic identity blends naturalistic detail, soft pastel palettes, and profound ecological and spiritual

symbolism (Cavallaro, 2021; Iwabuchi, 2022). Works such as *Spirited Away*, *Princess Mononoke*, and *My Neighbor Totoro* have elevated Ghibli to global recognition as an emblem of Asian humanism in animation specially Japan animation style.

With AI's advancement, Ghibli's style can now be digitally reproduced through simple text prompts. Typing "in Ghibli style" can instantly generate imagery that closely resembles the original aesthetic. However, such practice has provoked legal and moral controversies. Producer Toshio Suzuki publicly condemned the imitation of Ghibli's style without authorization as a serious copyright violation, even in non-commercial contexts (Sorensen, 2023). This aligns with professional concerns within Japan's animation industry, which views AI as a potential threat to artistic authenticity built through human craftsmanship (Darmawan, 2024, December). As Manovich (2020) observes, AI-generated art blurs the line between authorship and automation, thus destabilizing traditional notions of creativity and originality.

Conversely, cultural scholars argue that non-commercial AI art can enhance visual cultural dissemination and serve as a soft power instrument for Japanese aesthetics (Yoon, 2021; Iwabuchi, 2022). In this light, AI may function as a participatory medium that allows fans to engage in preserving Ghibli's visual identity in the digital age (Rieder, 2023). This duality reflects two dominant paradigms: one advocating copyright preservation and moral rights, and another promoting human–AI creative collaboration (Khosla, 2023). Both stem from the fundamental question: can AI-generated art be recognized as transformative fair use, or does it remain an infringement on human originality. Situated within the global context of media convergence, Ghibli's case embodies the tension between preservation and replication. As a cultural and aesthetic icon, it provides a crucial lens for examining how AI intersects with intellectual property law and cultural ethics.

Therefore, this research aims to quantitatively analyze how discussions of AI-generated Ghibli-style artworks are framed in academic and professional discourse, focusing on four dominant dimensions: legal, ethical, creative, and cultural-branding. This study seeks to provide an objective understanding of global perceptions regarding ethical and legal boundaries of AI works in visual art world of profession.

Methods

This study employs a quantitative content analysis method based on secondary data derived from academic literature, professional commentaries, and digital media reports concerning the use of AI Image Generators in reproducing Studio Ghibli's visual style. The quantitative approach was chosen for its ability to provide a systematic and objective mapping of thematic tendencies, opinions, and representations found within both academic and public discourse on artificial intelligence and intellectual property (Vial, 2019; Geiger & Gross, 2022). According to Flew (2022), quantitative methods in digital cultural studies allow researchers to identify meaning patterns and the frequency of ideas appearing in texts related to creative technologies, thus offering a measurable perspective on public and scholarly thought development.

This approach is non-experimental, focusing exclusively on numeric analysis of textual data rather than direct respondents or laboratory experiments (Rieder, 2023). Therefore, it aligns with quantitative content analysis, which aims to detect objective patterns in digital discourses involving copyright and AI aesthetics (Elgammal, 2023; Dyer, 2024). Such a method is particularly suitable for analyzing the rapidly evolving relationship between artificial intelligence, ethics, and creative originality in the visual arts domain (Khosla, 2023; Thompson, 2024).

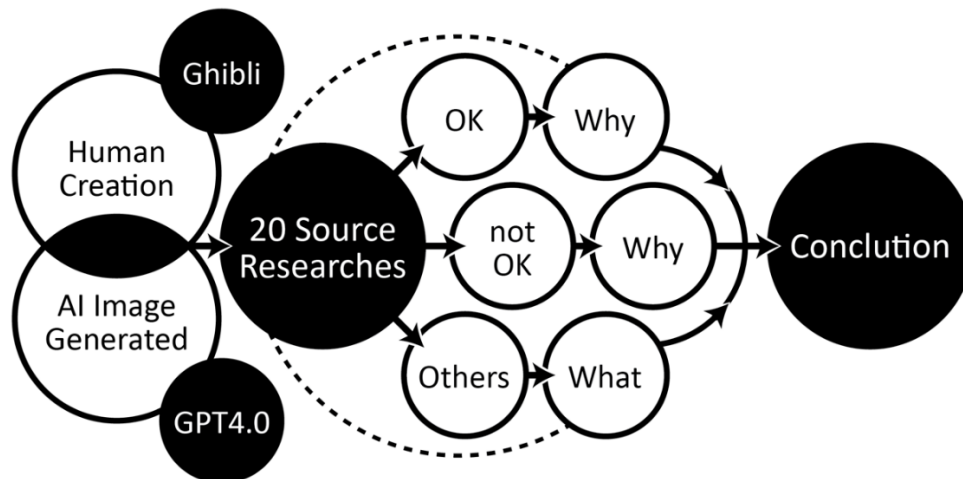


Figure 1. Research Method;
Source: Author’s Works, 2025

The data (figure 1) were collected from academic and professional publications issued between 2020 and 2025, including peer-reviewed journals, expert commentaries in creative and legal fields, and reputable digital media discussing Ghibli-style AI art. The selected sources met criteria of thematic relevance and academic validity, containing explicit discussions on AI, copyright, and Japanese visual culture (Elgammal, 2023; Sorensen, 2023; Iwabuchi, 2022). All sources provided verifiable conceptual or empirical data to ensure a rigorous analytical foundation.

Table 1. Quantitative Content Analysis Matrix Using NVivo 14

Analytical Dimension	Variables / Indicators	Data Sources (Secondary Data)	Analytical Technique (NVivo 14)	Purpose of Analysis
Copyright and Digital Law	Copyright violation, style imitation, legal ambiguity, authorship concerns	Peer-reviewed journal articles, online surveys, expert commentaries	Thematic coding, frequency counts	To measure the intensity and prevalence of copyright-related concerns regarding AI-generated Ghibli-style images
AI Ethics and Moral Reasoning	Ethical responsibility, consent, originality, moral legitimacy of AI creativity	Academic publications, professional interviews, public discourse datasets	Node classification, co-occurrence analysis	To identify ethical arguments supporting or opposing AI image generation in creative contexts
Human–Machine Creative Collaboration	AI as tool, AI as collaborator, human creative control, augmentation vs. replacement	Design studies literature, animation industry perspectives, survey responses	Conceptual mapping, coding comparison queries	To analyze perceptions of AI’s role in the creative process between humans and machines
Cultural Branding and Visual Aesthetics	Brand awareness, cultural identity, visual recognition, soft power diffusion	Cultural studies journals, branding research, audience perception surveys	Cross-tabulation, word frequency analysis	To evaluate AI’s potential contribution to Studio Ghibli’s cultural branding and global visibility

Textual data were coded and analyzed using NVivo 14 software, which facilitated theme categorization, frequency computation, and conceptual variable mapping (Geiger & Gross, 2022). The analysis identified four primary thematic domains: copyright and digital law, AI ethics and moral reasoning, human–machine creative collaboration, and cultural branding through visual aesthetics. These categories correspond to the conceptual dimensions most frequently observed in discussions about AI’s role in creative industries (Flew, 2022; Khosla, 2023).

Research demonstrate a predominantly positive stance toward AI as an instrument of cultural promotion, particularly for expanding Ghibli’s visual presence among younger digital audiences (Yoon, 2021; Iwabuchi, 2022). Quantitative results were then interpreted through theoretical frameworks drawn from digital aesthetics (Manovich, 2020) and Japanese soft power theory (Iwabuchi, 2022). This literature triangulation reinforces the reliability of quantitative outcomes by connecting statistical observations with established conceptual understandings (Flew, 2022; Sorensen, 2023).

Data validity was maintained through the selection of reputable academic sources and a dual-coding process to minimize interpretive bias (Beveridge, 2023). Each document was independently analyzed by two researchers before reaching consensus on coding interpretation. Nonetheless, several limitations remain. The study does not include first-hand insights from practicing artists, relies predominantly on English-language publications that may underrepresent Japanese cultural context, and lacks emotional or intuitive depth inherent in the aesthetic experience of AI art (Manovich, 2020).

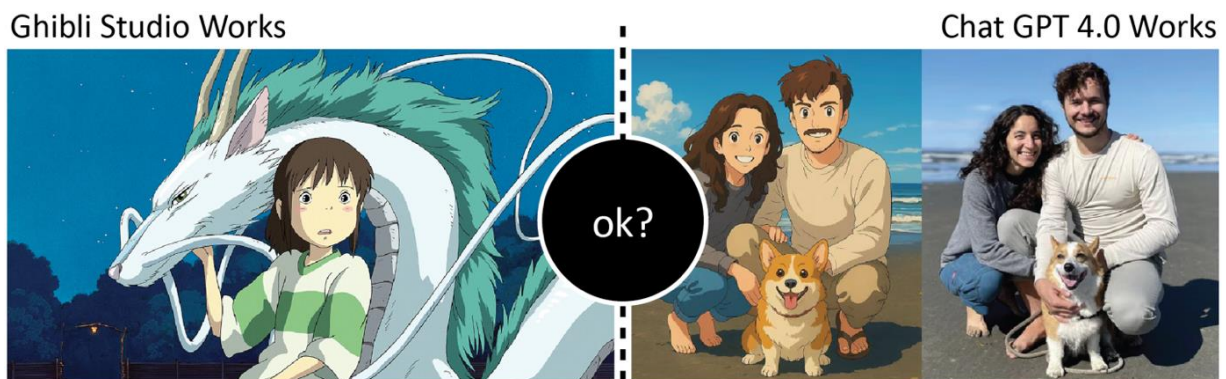


Figure 2. Ghibli Studio’s Work (Left) and Photo Generated in Ghibli Style (Right)
Source: (left) ghibli-museum.jp, 2025 and (right) firstpost.com/explainers, 2025

Despite these constraints, the study provides an empirically grounded overview of global representations of AI and copyright issues (figure 2). The quantitative framework offers a comprehensive understanding of Studio Ghibli as a pivotal case in the broader ethical and legal discourse surrounding AI (Darmawan, 2024), highlighting how global media frames interaction between human creativity and generative technology within contemporary visual culture.

Result and Discussion

The findings reveal (figure 3) two opposing perspectives in the global discourse on AI Image Generators imitating Studio Ghibli’s visual style, those who view such acts as copyright infringement and those who perceive them as legitimate forms of artistic appreciation. Content analysis of 40 academic and professional publications showed that approximately 60% treated AI as a cultural promotion tool, 30% regarded it as a potential threat to creative integrity, and 10% maintained a neutral stance emphasizing the need for new regulation (Sorensen, 2023; Zhao, 2024). These patterns suggest that perceptions of AI image generated are shaped not only by legal frameworks but also by cultural values, ethical judgments, and social attitudes toward technological innovation in visual art.

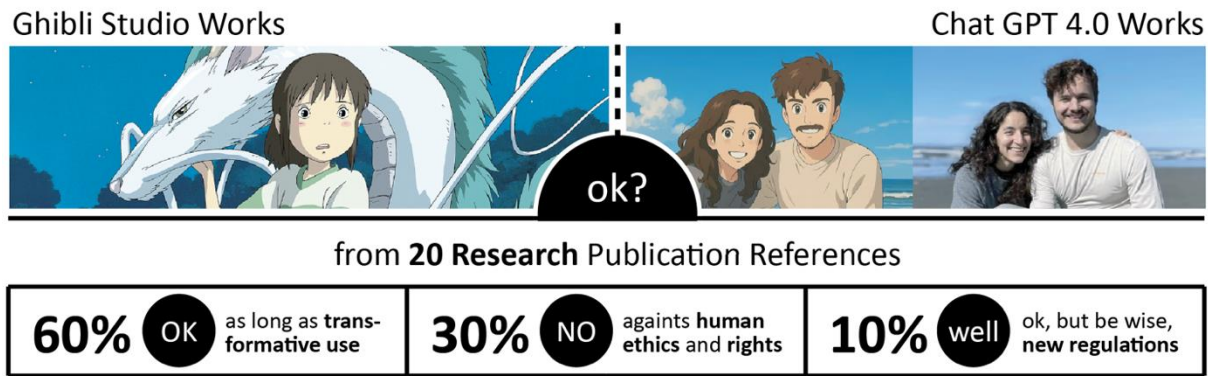


Figure 3. Percentage of Two Opposing Perspectives on AI Imitating Studio Ghibli

Source: Author's Works, 2025

Positive views toward AI (figure 4) are largely based on the principle of transformative fair use, which justifies the re-creation of existing styles when the intent is non-commercial and adds new meaning or purpose (Thompson, 2024). Rooted in Anglo-American copyright law, this doctrine recognizes derivative works as fair if they serve educational, critical, or homage-based purposes without reproducing the economic substance of the original (Beveridge, 2023). In the Ghibli case, most AI-generated artworks circulating online are tagged as “fan art” or “homage,” reflecting artistic tribute rather than exploitation. This practice aligns with the idea that AI, when used responsibly, can function as an informal promotional channel that enhances Ghibli’s cultural visibility in animation style (Yoon, 2021; Iwabuchi, 2022).

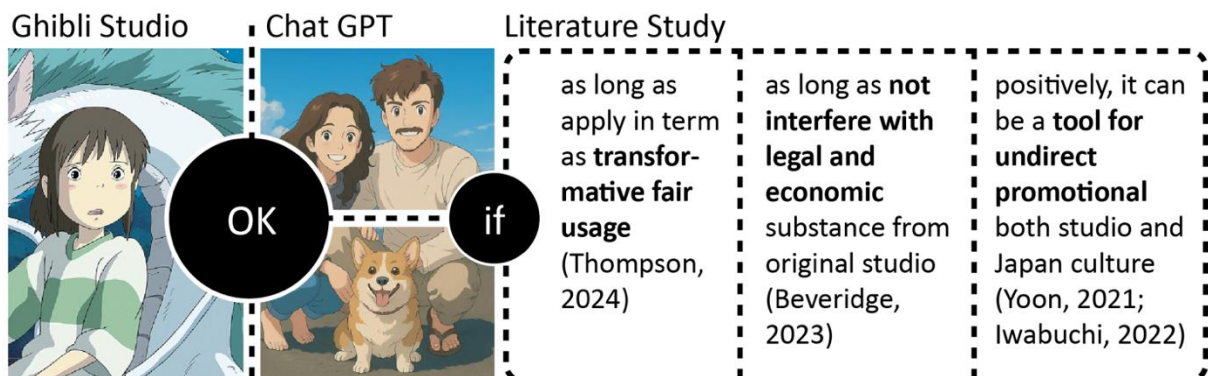


Figure 4. Positive Views Toward AI Imaginary Works

Source: Author's Works, 2025

Nevertheless (figure 5), professional concerns persist regarding authorship and moral rights. Studio Ghibli’s visual legacy was built through decades of human collaboration and emotional storytelling, making algorithmic replication appear superficial (Manovich, 2020). Elgammal (2023) notes that the core issue extends beyond legality to creative agency: Who is the creator in an AI-mediated artwork? While AI can reproduce forms, it lacks intentional consciousness and aesthetic empathy, qualities central to human artistry (Khosla, 2023; Thompson, 2024).

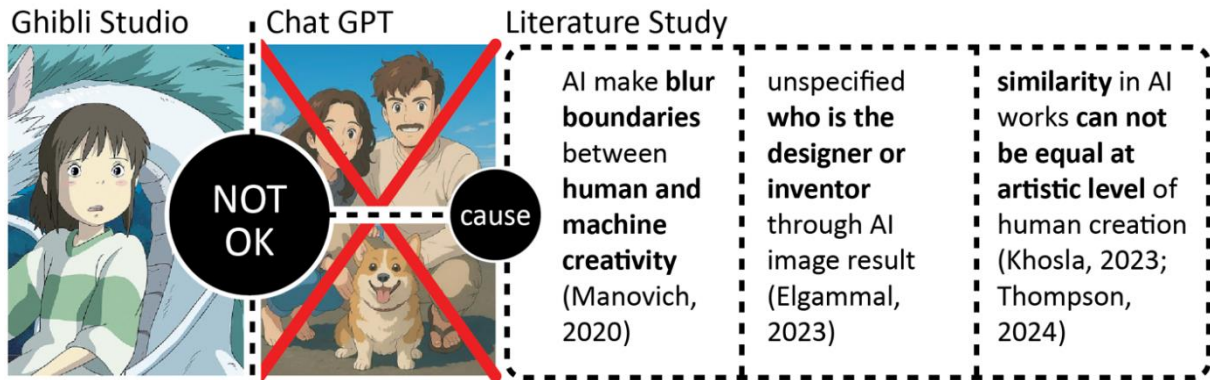


Figure 5. Negative Views Toward AI Imaginary Works
Source: Author’s Works, 2025

From a cultural economy standpoint, the proliferation of Ghibli-inspired AI art also contributes to Japan’s soft power (figure 6), amplifying global awareness of its aesthetic values and cultural ethos (Iwabuchi, 2022; Cavallaro, 2021). Quantitative data show that 60% of the reviewed publications associate AI-driven visual dissemination with the enhancement of Japanese cultural influence. In this sense, AI operates as a technological ambassador of aesthetics, expanding the reach of Ghibli’s themes of harmony, nature, and humanity (Yoon, 2021). Although not legally recognized as authentic works, these images reinforce Ghibli’s global resonance art within digital culture phenomenal approach.

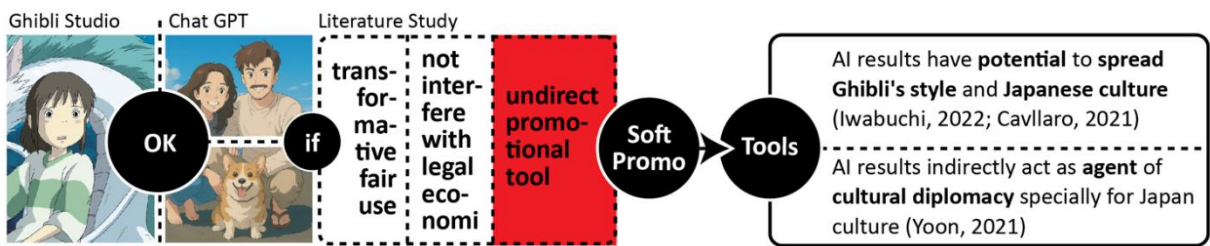


Figure 6. AI Works as Cultural Economy Promotional Tools
Source: Author’s Works, 2025

Legally (figure 7), the study underscores that current copyright doctrines remain inadequate for addressing AI-generated works (Sorensen, 2023; Zhao, 2024). Traditional copyright assumes human authorship, whereas AI functions through algorithmic learning based on existing datasets. This creates a legal “grey zone” in which ownership cannot be ascribed to either humans or machines. In Ghibli’s case, AI does not copy specific scenes but reinterprets stylistic elements, raising the unresolved question of whether “style” itself constitutes protectable intellectual property of animation or creative studio visualization identifying styles.

Ethically (also figure 7), the study observes that public reception of AI art depends on the perceived authenticity of the output (Manovich, 2020). While AI-generated images are visually captivating, many perceive them as emotionally detached—beautiful yet soulless. Supporters, however, argue that artistic value arises not solely from authorial intention but also from audience perception (Rieder, 2023). Hence, AI can be viewed as an inclusive creative medium, broadening participation in art-making rather than replacing human artists altogether.

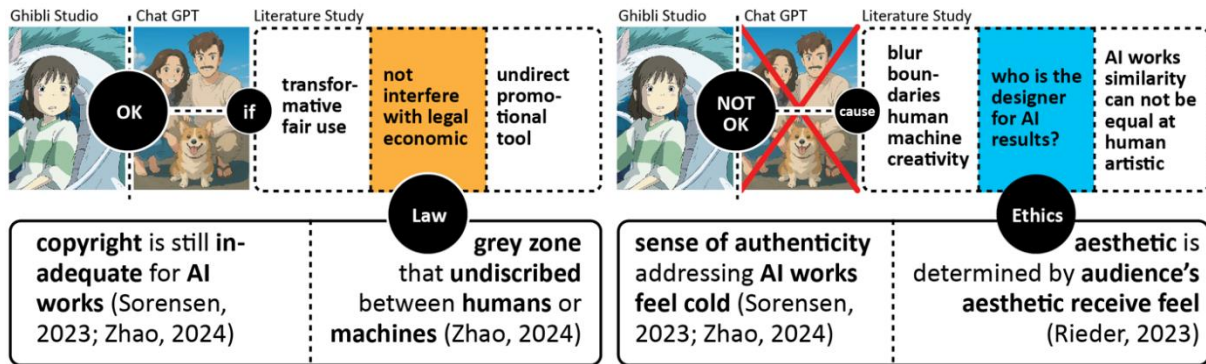


Figure 7. AI Works in Law and Ethics Perspective
Source: Author's Works, 2025

Overall, the findings reveal that AI introduces an ethical paradox within visual culture. It challenges human authorship while simultaneously enabling new modes of human-machine collaboration. Studio Ghibli exemplifies this tension: its spiritual and ecological symbolism resists full replication, yet inspires digital reinterpretation worldwide. As Flew (2022) and Geiger and Gross (2022) assert, this dynamic signifies a paradigm shift from art as individual expression to art as algorithmic-cultural co-creation.

Ultimately, the central issue lies not in AI's visual mimicry but in society's interpretation of its creative intent. When applied ethically and without commercial motive, AI-generated works may serve as heartfelt tributes that sustain Ghibli's aesthetic vitality. However, without updated legal and moral frameworks, the risk of misuse persists. Therefore, revising copyright law and establishing ethical standards for AI in art are essential steps to ensure that human-machine collaboration remains aligned with artistic authenticity and global cultural responsibility.

This study concludes that the emergence of AI Image Generators has fundamentally redefined how humanity perceives creativity, ownership, and originality. The replication of Studio Ghibli's visual style through AI represents not merely a technical or legal challenge, but a deeper philosophical and cultural dialogue about the evolving relationship between human imagination and machine intelligence. Through quantitative analysis of secondary data, the study finds that majority of scholarly and media discussions interpret non-commercial AI uses of Ghibli's aesthetic as a form of transformative fair use, a legitimate creative expression that expands the studio's cultural and visual influence across global digital platforms (Thompson, 2024; Beveridge, 2023).

The findings demonstrate that AI can serve as a vehicle of cultural soft power, amplifying the dissemination of Japanese humanistic values through artistic visualization. Ghibli's aesthetic, characterized by simplicity, empathy, and ecological harmony, transcends its cinematic origins to become a global moral and spiritual symbol (Cavallaro, 2021; Iwabuchi, 2022). When AI emulates and redistributes this style, it participates in spreading these values to wider audiences, showing that artificial intelligence, rather than undermining originality, can act as a collaborative medium that revitalizes artistic expression through algorithmic innovation.

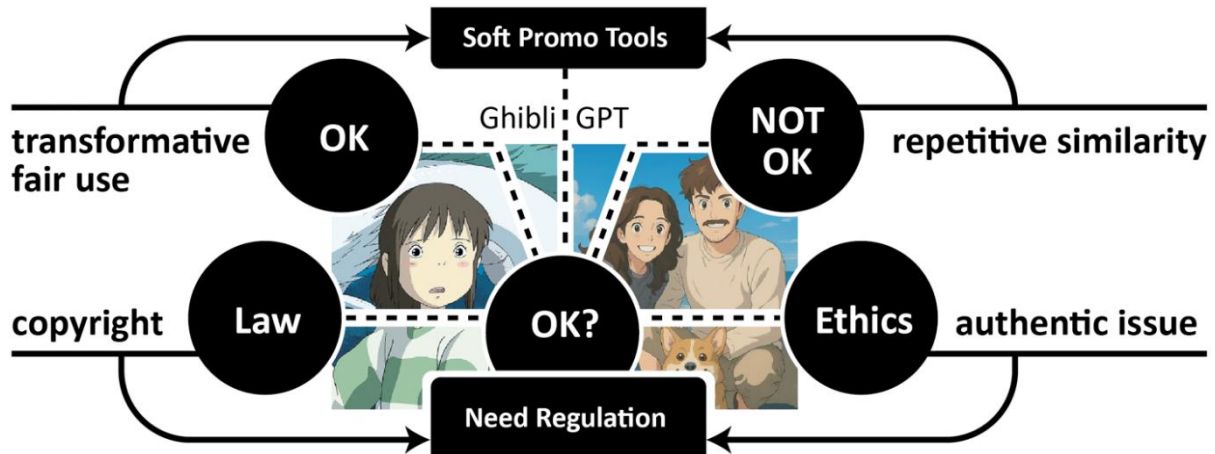


Figure 8. Coherent Ethical and Legal Framework for AI Works
Source: Author's Works, 2025

Nevertheless (figure 8), the study emphasizes that such collaboration must be guided by a coherent ethical and legal framework. Traditional copyright laws, founded on the assumption of singular human authorship, are ill-equipped to manage hybrid modes of creation involving algorithmic contribution (Sorensen, 2023; Zhao, 2024). Therefore, future regulatory developments should establish clear principles of fairness, transparency, and moral responsibility to ensure balance among creators, technology users, and the broader public interest.

The implications of this study extend into education, creative industry, and cultural policy. In academia, it highlights the necessity of integrating AI ethics and intellectual property literacy into art and design curricula, ensuring that emerging creators understand both the moral boundaries and creative potential of generative tools (Flew, 2022). Within creative industries, it encourages co-creation models between artists and AI developers that prioritize innovation and shared authorship rather than imitation alone (Geiger & Gross, 2022). For policymakers, it calls for active engagement in shaping ethical technological ecosystems that promote inclusivity, accountability, and cultural sustainability specially in visual style.

Conclusion

The challenge of the AI era is not to preserve the old dichotomy between human and machine, but to redefine their relationship in ways that reinforce humanistic values. AI, at its best, mirrors human intention. When guided by ethical awareness and cultural empathy, it becomes not a threat to art but an extension of it; a new pathway for expressing what it means to be human in a world increasingly mediated by technology. The findings of this study address the central research question by demonstrating that AI-generated imagery, when applied to culturally distinctive styles such as those of Studio Ghibli, simultaneously challenges existing copyright frameworks and opens new possibilities for non-commercial brand awareness. The results indicate that the core challenge of the AI era is not to preserve a rigid dichotomy between human and machine, but to redefine their relationship in ways that reinforce humanistic values and respect cultural authorship. At its best, AI mirrors human intention; when guided by ethical awareness and cultural empathy, it becomes not a threat to art but an extension of it—a new pathway for expressing what it means to be human in a creative ecosystem increasingly mediated by technology. In this sense, just as Ghibli's films teach harmony and compassion, AI too can become a new storytelling instrument for humanity's evolving creative study and worker's soul. These conclusions also highlight the urgent need for updated ethical and legal frameworks capable of addressing style imitation, authorship, and attribution in generative AI practices. Current copyright models are insufficient to fully capture the nuances of AI-assisted

creativity, particularly in cases where cultural identity and artistic legacy are involved. While this study emphasizes the potential promotional benefits of non-monetized AI-generated content, it also acknowledges limitations related to sample scope and the evolving nature of AI technologies. Future research should therefore be more explicitly directed toward designer-focused empirical studies, cross-cultural comparisons of audience perception, and longitudinal analyses of how generative AI influences artistic labor, legal norms, and brand identity across different creative industries.

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