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Submission date: 31-Aug-2026 03:25PM (UTC+0700)

Submission ID: 3021053237

File name: ies_of_precarity_negotiating_generative_AI_in_Indonesia_s_1.pdf (722.46K)

Word count: 11130

Character count: 65939



Imaginaries of precarity: negotiating generative AI in Indonesia's cultural and creative labor

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Received: 10 February 2026 / Accepted: 18 May 2026

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Abstract

This paper examines how cultural and creative workers in Indonesia negotiate the adoption of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) under conditions of labor precarity. Drawing on sociotechnical imaginaries and scholarship on precarious creative labor, the study explores how workers interpret, appropriate, and constrain GenAI in their everyday practices. The research adopts a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach in collaboration with a creative workers' union, *Serikat Sindikasi*, combining focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and a feedback workshop involving 40 participants across multiple subsectors. The findings identify three sociotechnical imaginaries: GenAI as a bounded assistant, through which workers seek to maintain authorship and professional identity; GenAI as an engine of acceleration, intensifying productivity demands and reshaping temporal expectations; and GenAI as a contested system of governance, raising concerns about fairness, ownership, and regulation. Together, these imaginaries show that GenAI adoption is deeply shaped by existing labor insecurities. The paper argues that workers' selective engagement with GenAI reflects efforts to navigate precarity, underscoring the need for context-sensitive, labor-centered approaches to AI governance in the Global South.

Keywords Artificial intelligence · Cultural and creative industry · Indonesia · Precarious labor · Sociotechnical imaginaries

1 Introduction

For many cultural and creative workers, artificial intelligence (AI) technology, especially Generative AI (GenAI), is no longer seen as an abstract technology, but has become part of their daily creative process. GenAI is increasingly perceived as something that is difficult to avoid in contemporary creative work (Taso et al. 2025). On the one hand, GenAI is considered to help increase work efficiency and save time (Tomaselli and Acar 2024). On the other hand, the adoption of GenAI in the creative industry sector also reshapes labor relations and working conditions, particularly

for workers already positioned precariously within freelance, informal, and project-based employment systems. GenAI enables faster and cheaper content production, which can increase pressure on workers to deliver more output within shorter timeframes while receiving the same, or even lower, compensation (Ponce Del Castillo 2024; Zhao 2024). In highly competitive creative markets, AI-assisted production may also reduce demand for certain forms of human labor, intensify competition, and weaken workers' bargaining power, especially where labor protections and collective representation remain limited (Berg et al. 2025; Jin 2026). Since many creative workers rely on unstable contracts and platform-based work, the efficiency gains generated by GenAI are often absorbed by clients and companies rather than translating into improved working conditions for workers themselves (Schofield and Sinclair 2025). As a result, GenAI is not experienced simply as a neutral technological tool, but as part of broader transformations in the political economy of creative labor that may deepen existing forms of precarity. Yet, research specifically focusing on the experiences of cultural and creative workers and how they navigate new technologies such as GenAI in precarious conditions

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remains relatively limited, especially in the context of South-east Asia.

Inspired by studies examining tech workers' attitudes toward AI and digital technologies (Bonini and Treré 2024; Browne et al. 2024; Qadri and D'Ignazio 2022; Soares Seto 2025), this study understands technological adoption as a socially negotiated process shaped by workers' lived experiences, labor conditions, and collective understandings of technological change. Existing research shows that workers do not simply accept or reject technologies passively. Instead, they actively interpret, resist, adapt to, and strategically appropriate technological systems in ways shaped by power relations, workplace insecurity, and broader socio-economic contexts. These studies demonstrate that workers' responses to AI are closely connected to concerns about autonomy, surveillance, inequality, and labor precarity. Building on these insights, this study approaches GenAI as a sociotechnical phenomenon whose meanings are shaped through collectively held visions of the future.

Drawing on the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries, understood as collectively held visions of desirable technological futures that both shape and are shaped by social practices, institutions, and power relations (Jasanoff and Kim 2015), the paper understands creative workers' engagements with GenAI as embedded in shared expectations, anxieties, and normative assumptions about what creative work should become in an AI-mediated economy (Öztaş and Arda 2025). These imaginaries are not limited to abstract future visions; they actively inform present-day practices, including decisions about whether, how, and to what extent AI tools are integrated into everyday creative labor (Pranteddu et al. 2024).

Indonesia provides a critical site for examining these dynamics because sociotechnical imaginaries of GenAI emerge within a labor market already structured by informality, project-based employment, and weak institutional protection for creative workers (Aritenang et al. 2025; Mediartha and Adnan 2020). These precarious labor conditions are significant because they shape how workers imagine and negotiate technological futures. In contexts where institutional protections are weak, workers may actively interpret GenAI in relation to risks of job insecurity, intensified competition, and economic survival.

Indonesia's cultural and creative industries are recognized for their growing economic contribution and international engagement, yet uneven development across subsectors highlights the urgent need for research that captures the lived realities and structural challenges faced by creative workers (Hutapea 2024). Moreover, Indonesian creative workers encounter GenAI from a position of structural precarity (Izzati et al. 2021), which shapes how AI is imagined: not simply as a tool for productivity, but as a technology closely entangled with concerns over job displacement, declining

remuneration, and intensified global competition (Dasari 2025; Lee 2024; MacNeil et al. 2025). Situating sociotechnical imaginaries within this context allows the study to demonstrate how visions of AI's future are unevenly produced and experienced, reflecting broader inequalities within the global creative economy.

While scholarship on GenAI and creative work has addressed critical issues such as authenticity, intellectual property, and deskilling (Bender 2025), these discussions are largely centered on the Global North's established industrial frameworks and strong labor unions. In contrast, cultural creative workers in Indonesia encounter GenAI from a position of systemic precarity. This disparity obscures the nuanced ways GenAI transforms labor globally and incorrectly suggests that technological impact is a universal experience.

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This research fills this gap by investigating the appropriation of GenAI among Indonesian cultural and creative workers, focusing on its influence on their career trajectories and professional identities. This study adopts sociotechnical imaginaries as its central framework because it allows us to examine not only workers' direct experiences with GenAI, but also how they collectively interpret and negotiate the future implications of technological change. Instead of viewing workers' responses as isolated personal opinions, sociotechnical imaginaries connect everyday experiences to broader expectations, anxieties, and power relations surrounding AI and creative labor. The study addresses persistent blind spots in existing scholarship that overlooks how technological change unfolds under conditions of informality, weak labor protection, and global asymmetries in creative production. These concerns give rise to the following research questions:

RQ1. How do cultural and creative workers in Indonesia appropriate and integrate GenAI technologies into their everyday work practices under conditions of labor precarity?

RQ2. What sociotechnical imaginaries of GenAI circulate among Indonesian cultural and creative workers, and how are these imaginaries shaped by precarious employment conditions?

RQ3. In what ways does the growing use of GenAI risk reinforcing or reshaping existing forms of inequality and precarity in Indonesia's cultural and creative industries?

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 Sociotechnical imaginaries

In examining the dynamics surrounding the introduction of new technologies in the creative industries, a number of scholars have employed sociotechnical imaginaries as a central conceptual framework (see Brause et al 2025; Laba

2025; Hassan 2020). Jasanoff and Kim (2015, p. 4) define sociotechnical imaginaries as “collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology.” Thus, individuals’ understandings of and responses to technological adoption are shaped not merely by personal attitudes, but more significantly by collective perspectives that position the role of technology within broader social contexts.

Prior research suggests that work-related discourses shaped by collective imaginaries play a crucial role in influencing how creative workers perceive the position of GenAI in their everyday work practices, as well as the extent to which this technology is seen to affect the future of creative labor (Cave and Dihal 2019; Laba 2025). These imaginaries help structure expectations about whether GenAI is understood as an opportunity, a tool, or a threat, thereby shaping workers’ anticipations of change within their professional trajectories.

According to Jasanoff and Kim (2015), collective technological discourses tend to be hierarchical and top-down in nature. Narratives about emerging technologies are often initiated by experts, governments, or industry actors and subsequently amplified by the media, resulting in limited and largely passive public participation. As a consequence, many creative workers come to understand the role of GenAI by drawing on ‘master concepts’ defined by elite actors (Chow and Bueno 2025). This dynamic contributes to relatively homogeneous interpretations of GenAI and its anticipated implications for the future of creative work. Meanwhile, other scholars offered alternative perspectives by arguing that the public is not always passive in responding to elite-driven technological discourses (Sahakian et al 2025; Soares Seto 2025). Instead, Zeng et al. (2022) suggest that members of the public increasingly engage in technological discourse through online discussions, contributing to the emergence of more bottom-up forms of sociotechnical imagination.

Importantly, sociotechnical imaginaries are always embedded within specific historical, economic, and institutional contexts. Imaginaries surrounding emerging technologies are shaped by longstanding structural conditions, including informal labor arrangements, weak social protections, and uneven access to technological infrastructure (Anwar and Graham 2021; Graham et al 2017; Jalli 2025). For workers in Indonesia, these contextual factors significantly mediate how GenAI is imagined, adopted, and experienced in everyday work. Rather than being framed solely as a neutral or empowering innovation, GenAI is often interpreted through the lens of existing labor insecurities, where flexibility has long been coupled with instability. This perception is rooted in longstanding structural conditions within Indonesia’s creative economy, which is characterized by small-scale enterprises, market uncertainty, and

resource vulnerability (Jasmine and Utomo 2024; Wiryono et al 2015).

Therefore, sociotechnical imaginaries in these contexts tend to foreground concerns about job displacement, declining remuneration, and intensified competition, alongside more optimistic narratives of efficiency and creative expansion. In Indonesia, the introduction of GenAI has intersected with, and in some cases exacerbated, already precarious working conditions (Tuasikal and Timmerman 2025). GenAI has lowered barriers to entry and intensified market competition, while simultaneously enabling global clients and platforms to further outsource creative tasks at reduced costs. Within this landscape, creative workers’ imaginaries of GenAI are closely tied to their lived experiences of precarity, shaping how they assess the technology’s risks and opportunities. For many, GenAI is imagined not only as a tool or collaborator, but also as a force that amplifies existing power asymmetries between Global North clients and Global South labor (Crawford 2021; Graham et al. 2017). Situating sociotechnical imaginaries within this specific context is therefore crucial for understanding how creative workers in Indonesia negotiate agency, adaptation, and resistance in the face of technological change, and why global narratives of AI-driven creativity often fail to capture the uneven and unequal consequences of GenAI adoption across different socio-economic settings.

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2.2 Cultural and creative workers as precarious labor

The cultural and creative industries are often seen as offering greater work flexibility than other sectors, making them attractive to younger workers. Many are drawn by the promise of autonomy in working hours, locations, and project choices, which is framed as a form of labor freedom that supports creativity and non-linear careers (Morgan et al. 2013). These sectors appeal to those who value meaningful work and independence over rigid employment structures (Taylor and Littleton 2008). However, beneath this narrative of flexibility and freedom, the creative industries are also characterized by vulnerable and unstable working conditions. Gallien and van den Boogaard (2021) note that many workers in this sector face insecure employment conditions in terms of income stability, job continuity, and access to social protection. These circumstances position creative workers within the broader category of the precariat, a group of workers who experience structural uncertainty in their working lives.

Precarity in the creative industries is not a new phenomenon and has long been the subject of scholarly attention. Studies demonstrate that labor vulnerability in the creative sector results from a combination of industry-specific characteristics and labor market dynamics that increasingly

prioritize flexibility while offering limited protection (Eltham et al 2025; Gu et al 2022). Precarity in creative work is shaped by the inherent nature of creative labor itself, including high levels of demand uncertainty, reliance on reputation and recognition, and intense competition among workers (Menger 2001). Therefore, precarity is not merely an anomaly but a structural feature of how the creative industries operate.

As a consequence, many creative workers are embedded in employment arrangements that are temporary, non-permanent, and project-based. Gill (2010) emphasizes that creative work rarely provides long-term contracts, requiring workers to continually seek new projects in order to sustain their livelihoods. Thus, freelance status has become the dominant mode of employment in the creative industries (Comunian and England 2020). Although freelance work is often promoted as a symbol of independence and autonomy, it also carries significant negative consequences for workers' well-being, including heightened stress and mental health challenges (Alacovska 2021; Standing 2011). Also, the flexibility offered by creative work frequently comes at the cost of income instability, low levels of job security, and limited access to social protection and labor benefits (Kreshpaj et al 2020).

Eltham et al (2025) identify several key factors that help explain why precarity is so deeply entrenched in the creative industries. First, most creative work is temporary and project-based, resulting in limited opportunities for sustained, long-term employment. This pattern is evident in film and television industries, where crews and creative workers are recruited only for the duration of a single production. Similar arrangements exist in cultural occupations such as singers and musicians, who are typically paid per performance or gig, with no guarantee of continued work. Second, many workers actively embrace freelance work cultures, often driven by narratives of freedom, passion, and self-actualization. These narratives play an important role in normalizing unstable working conditions and encouraging workers to accept uncertainty as a 'natural' aspect of a creative career. Third, the growing number of local talents amid limited job opportunities has intensified competition within the creative industries. Many creative workers are willing to accept temporary and freelance positions under less favorable working conditions.

These dynamics are further complicated by the increasing competitiveness of local creative industries, partly driven by the growing outsourcing of creative labor by global companies (Curtin and Sanson 2016). Advances in digital technologies have enabled global firms to recruit creative workers across borders at lower costs, thereby exerting downward pressure on wage standards and weakening the bargaining power of local creative workers (Flew 2012). As a result, precarity cannot be understood solely

as an individual condition but must be seen as a reflection of global structural dynamics that are reshaping labor relations.

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Research on precarity in the cultural and creative industries predates the disruptive emergence of GenAI. In earlier phases, scholarly attention focused on the role of digital platforms in exacerbating precarious labor conditions (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2013). In many cases, especially in the Global South, digital platforms are framed through two competing narratives. On the one hand, platforms are seen as creating new employment opportunities by offering flexible working arrangements and expanding access to geographically dispersed markets (Graham and Anwar 2019). Research in the Philippines shows that platform-based work is attractive not only because of its flexibility but also because it is perceived to provide appealing financial returns compared to other formal employment, particularly in contexts of limited job availability (Soriano and Cabañes 2020). On the other hand, such flexibility is accompanied by high levels of uncertainty, the absence of social protection, and increased dependence on opaque algorithmic systems and unilateral platform governance. In Bangladesh, gig workers from socio-economically marginalized groups often experience discrimination and increasing social exclusion (Pankaj and Jha 2024). Similar patterns can be observed across the Global South. Nevertheless, some workers actively resist platform-based injustices through various individual and collective strategies (Qadri and D'Ignazio 2022).

GenAI has added new complexity to the cultural and creative industries, prompting diverse responses (Anantrasirichai and Hull 2022). Broadly, three perspectives shape debates about its role. First, GenAI is seen as a transformative technology that reshapes creative workflows through greater efficiency, speed, and automation. Second, it is viewed as an assistive tool that supports rather than replaces human creativity, remaining dependent on human imagination and judgment. Third, some scholars and practitioners understand GenAI as both collaborator and creator, actively participating in the production of creative content alongside humans (Carnovalini and Roda 2020).

These competing perspectives are not merely abstract positions but are increasingly reflected in the everyday practices of cultural and creative workers. Despite the uncertainty, the impacts of GenAI are already being felt in the everyday work routines of cultural and creative workers. Changes in workflows, productivity expectations, and standards of quality and production speed risk deepening existing precarious conditions (Jalli 2025). Accordingly, this study situates the precarious conditions experienced by creative workers in Indonesia within a specific social context and examines how their interpretations of GenAI are shaped and influenced by the sociotechnical imaginaries they hold.

3 Research method

3.1 Research design

This study adopts Participatory Action Research (PAR) to examine how cultural and creative workers in Indonesia appropriate, negotiate, and contest the use of GenAI in their everyday work. PAR is grounded in the principle that knowledge production should be conducted *with* research participants rather than *on* them, emphasizing collaboration, reflexivity, and the pursuit of social change (Reason and Bradbury 2008). PAR combines systematic inquiry with cycles of reflection, dialogue, and intervention, enabling research to generate both analytical insight and practical change (Kemmis et al 2013).

The use of PAR is informed by the structural conditions of Indonesia's cultural and creative industries. It allows the study to foreground workers' lived experiences while also supporting advocacy for more inclusive and context-sensitive policies. The research design aims not only to document these experiences but also to help articulate collective concerns and policy demands from the field (Baum et al 2006). Inspired by Prado and Verdegem (2024) on critical data studies, rather than treating GenAI as a purely technical innovation, this study situates it within broader labor relations, power asymmetries, and regulatory gaps that characterize the Global South creative economy.

This study focuses on creative workers in three Indonesian cities that serve as major creative industry hubs: Jakarta, Yogyakarta, and Denpasar (Minister of Creative Economy 2025). These cities reflect different creative ecosystems, from corporate agencies in Jakarta to more community-based and artist-led practices in Yogyakarta and Denpasar. The research was conducted in collaboration with *Serikat Sindikasi*, a union representing cultural and creative workers, to ensure close engagement with workers and relevance to ongoing labor advocacy. Together, we pursued two main objectives: to document how GenAI is being used in creative work, and to support more responsive AI regulation in Indonesia's creative sectors.

Fieldwork was conducted between July 2024 and February 2025. The research design evolved iteratively through ongoing discussions between the research team and union representatives, allowing research questions and data collection instruments to be refined based on emerging concerns from the field, through cyclical processes of consultation, feedback, and methodological adjustment.

Data collection consisted of two stages: Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) followed by in-depth interviews with selective key informants. The first stage involved a series of FGDs across research locations, with each session

comprising five to eight participants, resulting in a total of four FGDs (see Appendix A). The FGDs were designed to generate collective reflections on participants' experiences with GenAI, focusing on patterns of use, perceived benefits and risks, ethical concerns, and imaginaries of future creative work. The discussions functioned as an exploratory phase, enabling the research team to identify recurring themes, points of tension, and sector-specific dynamics that informed the subsequent interview stage.

Based on insights generated through the FGDs, the second stage consisted of in-depth interviews with fourteen selective key informants (see Appendix B). These informants were identified through snowball sampling, beginning with recommendations from *Serikat Sindikasi* members and extending to non-union workers who were actively engaged with or affected by GenAI. The interviews aimed to deepen understanding of how GenAI is embedded in everyday work practices, with particular attention to strategic appropriation, efficiency pressures, ethical reasoning, and perceptions of job security. In total, 40 participants/informants from diverse sectors engaged in this research. This diversity allowed the study to capture variations in GenAI appropriation across sub-sectors.

Subsequently, the research team organized a participatory workshop in Yogyakarta, in which preliminary findings were shared and collectively discussed with previous participants (see Appendix C). This feedback-oriented stage is central to PAR principles, emphasizing dialogue, reflexivity, and the co-production of knowledge rather than one-directional data extraction. The workshop provided an opportunity to validate findings, clarify interpretations, and situate individual accounts within collective experiences.

The workshop also moved beyond reflection toward deliberation on possible interventions. Participants discussed strategies for fostering critical AI literacy among creative workers and advocating for human-centered, labor-sensitive regulation in the creative industries. These discussions reinforced the role of workers not merely as research subjects, but as active agents capable of shaping technological trajectories and policy debates.

The data analysis followed a primarily inductive, reflexive thematic approach, while remaining sensitized by the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries introduced in the literature. Transcripts from FGDs and interviews were coded iteratively, beginning with open coding to identify recurring patterns in participants' accounts, followed by the development of broader thematic categories. Through a process of comparison across cases, the research team synthesized these codes into three overarching sociotechnical imaginaries that structure workers' engagements with GenAI. Also, the workshop discussions were used to refine interpretations and ensure that emergent themes remained grounded in participants' narratives.

This study adopts PAR as both an ethical commitment and a reflexive analytical approach. Here, we recognize that sociotechnical imaginaries were actively shaped through the research process, especially under conditions of labor precarity. The project began as an academic inquiry, but collaboration with *Serikat Sindikasi* introduced an advocacy-oriented perspective. Through negotiation, the research design was adjusted to address both scholarly and practical goals, foregrounding issues of labor rights, authorship, and job security.

Close engagement with participants also challenged claims of researcher neutrality, as many shared experiences of job loss and asked for their concerns to be amplified. This study treats such ethical engagement as central to PAR rather than a limitation (Medrado and Verdegem 2024). Workshops and discussions served not only to validate findings but also to foster collective reflection, where individual experiences were transformed into shared understandings of GenAI and its implications for creative labor.

4 Research findings

This section is organized around three emerging sociotechnical imaginaries through which participants make sense of generative AI: *control and authorship*, *acceleration and productivity*, and *governance and justice*. These imaginaries reflect how GenAI, as a sociotechnical system shaped by infrastructures, platforms, and institutional contexts, reconfigures relationships between materials, competences, and meanings across different forms of creative work. While these themes cut across sectors, participants' accounts also reveal important variations depending on the type of creative practice involved.

4.1 GenAI as a 'bounded assistant': a defensive sociotechnical imaginary

The ways in which cultural and creative workers in Indonesia adopt, limit, and negotiate the use of GenAI cannot be understood solely through patterns of technological use or assessments of efficiency. These practices are embedded within shared sociotechnical imaginaries, collectively held interpretations of what GenAI is, what it should do, and what it threatens to become in the context of precarious creative labor. For workers operating under conditions of freelance employment, income instability, and weak institutional protection, GenAI is not imagined simply as a neutral productivity tool. Instead, it is understood as an unavoidable infrastructure of contemporary creative work, a conditional assistant that must be carefully managed, and a potential force of displacement that may intensify existing inequalities.

In this imaginary, the *technical* dimension of GenAI, such as image generators, transcription tools, and text-producing systems, is inseparable from its *social* embedding in freelance labor markets, reputational economies, and norms of authorship. It is this entanglement that makes GenAI meaningful to participants not merely as a tool, but as a system that reshapes how creative value and professional identity are negotiated under conditions of precarity.

Across the data, this understanding takes the form of a defensive sociotechnical imaginary, in which GenAI is integrated into everyday work practices under strict conditions. Participants consistently described practices of selective and bounded appropriation, where AI tools are deliberately confined to peripheral or preparatory tasks. This pattern does not stem from a lack of technological awareness, but from a strategic response to precarious labor conditions, where maintaining human authorship, professional credibility, and creative identity remains central to workers' survival.

Across sectors, informants emphasized that GenAI is perceived less as a disruptive innovation and more as 'just another tool' added to an already dense digital workflow. However, this normalization should not be mistaken for uncritical acceptance. Workers' engagement with GenAI is conditional and fragile, shaped by ongoing concerns about authorship, reputation, and the erosion of creative labor. This suggests that the bounded use of GenAI functions as a form of strategic boundary-making, through which workers attempt to retain control over scarce forms of professional distinction in competitive and insecure labor markets.

Budi, a senior photo/videographer in Yogyakarta, reflects his selective appropriation of GenAI:

"While we don't rely on it 100% of the time, there are definitely things it can assist with. For example, a simple case would be if we're doing a corporate shoot and we miss a certain shot or find something we couldn't capture. We can use AI to 'manipulate' or polish what's missing. But honestly, it comes back to 'feel.' For me, you can really feel the difference between a natural shot that was captured for real and something made with AI."

Media workers, similarly, describe bounded uses of GenAI. AI tools are employed to support routine tasks such as transcribing interviews, generating outlines, or checking grammar. These practices are widely viewed as legitimate because they do not interfere with core journalistic functions such as verification, editorial judgment, or accountability. Journalists were explicit that GenAI is not used to generate full news articles. While efficiency gains are acknowledged, all substantive writing and framing decisions remain human responsibilities. Here, the boundary is not only technical but institutional, reflecting professional norms of accountability specific to journalism.

Rendy, a senior journalist, further described using GenAI as a ‘brainstorming partner,’ particularly in moments of time pressure. AI-generated suggestions function as prompts rather than authoritative inputs and are always subject to collective editorial discussion. This cautious positioning reflects a broader concern that overreliance on AI could undermine editorial integrity and blur lines of accountability.

Comparable strategies are evident among designers, illustrators, and visual artists. They reported using tools like Midjourney or DALL-E primarily for rough drafts and visual references. AI outputs serve as starting points rather than final products, requiring substantial reinterpretation and refinement. By restricting AI to early-stage ideation, workers seek to protect originality while avoiding accusations of inauthenticity. Here, the boundary around GenAI is closely tied to aesthetic authorship and originality, rather than institutional accountability.

Lucia, a fashion designer working with batik patterns, highlighted the limitations of AI in capturing cultural specificity. While GenAI can generate initial ideas, it struggles to reproduce the symbolic meaning embedded in traditional motifs. Relying too heavily on AI would not only diminish the cultural value of her work but also threaten her professional identity in a competitive and informal market. This indicates that in culturally embedded creative practices, resistance to GenAI is shaped not only by labor concerns but also by the perceived inability of AI systems to reproduce tacit and symbolic knowledge.

Putri, while acknowledging the usefulness of GenAI, remains critical of its broader implications:

“But at the same time, for a creative worker, it actually kills creativity. People start thinking, ‘Oh, just use AI,’ without considering any other options. Even though I see AI as just a tool that gathers existing information from the internet, it still stifles our creativity and our ability to think for ourselves as individuals. That’s where the danger lies.”

These patterns suggest that GenAI adoption is best understood as carefully managed appropriation. Workers leverage AI to cope with increasing productivity demands, while simultaneously constraining its role to minimize reputational risk and protect claims to authorship. This defensive configuration reflects not only aesthetic or ethical concerns, but also the structural insecurity of precarious labor, where maintaining authorship and distinctiveness is essential for sustaining employability.

While this boundary assistant imaginary appears across sectors, it manifests differently depending on the nature of creative work. In journalism, boundaries are shaped by institutional norms of verification and accountability; in visual and design fields, they are tied to originality and authorship; while in culturally embedded practices such as batik design,

they are grounded in concerns about symbolic meaning and cultural integrity. These variations highlight how sociotechnical imaginaries are unevenly produced across sub-sectors, reflecting differences in professional norms, market structures, and forms of creative labor.

4.2 GenAI as an engine of acceleration: a sociotechnical imaginary of intensified productivity

Alongside efforts to contain GenAI, participants describe it as a powerful driver of speed and efficiency, particularly under conditions of tight deadlines and project-based work. However, rather than alleviating precarity, these efficiency gains often function as a mechanism of work intensification, reshaping expectations around productivity, availability, and turnaround time.

This reflects a second sociotechnical imaginary, in which GenAI operates as an *engine of acceleration*. Here, GenAI is not simply a tool that saves time, but part of a broader sociotechnical assemblage linking algorithmic systems, client expectations, and competitive market dynamics. The *technical* capacity of GenAI to automate and accelerate tasks is thus inseparable from its *social* embedding in platform economies, deadline cultures, and client-driven valuation of speed. Time saved through automation is rarely converted into rest; instead, it is absorbed into faster production cycles and increased output demands. This suggests that efficiency operates less as a benefit for workers and more as a mechanism through which market pressures are redistributed onto individual labor.

Among media workers, AI-powered transcription tools were described as particularly transformative. Tasks that previously required hours can now be completed in minutes. While this is widely accepted as a practical improvement, it has also contributed to tighter writing schedules and heightened expectations for immediacy. Journalists are expected to produce more content in less time, reinforcing the pressures of continuous news production rather than reducing workload. In this sense, acceleration is shaped by institutional rhythms of news production, where speed is directly tied to competitiveness and audience engagement.

Similar dynamics are evident among photographers and videographers. Budi explained that AI-assisted editing tools now allow him to complete in an hour what previously required an entire night of work. However, clients increasingly expect faster delivery without additional compensation, meaning that efficiency gains translate into higher performance expectations rather than improved working conditions. He reflected on this tension:

“Yeah, as a photographer, there’s definitely that idealistic side where you feel like your work should have a

specific signature style. But when you're dealing with clients, you inevitably have to push that idealism aside a bit... if we rely on editing, the result won't be as natural as it would be if we set it up on location or take the shot naturally."

This indicates that acceleration not only restructures time, but also reconfigures professional values, forcing workers to negotiate between efficiency and craft.

Beyond time efficiency, GenAI is also associated with cost reduction. Participants described using AI-generated images to avoid costly reshoots or additional production expenses. Angga, a photographer in Denpasar, noted that while these practices offer economic advantages, they also raise concerns about replacing human labor and undermining professional solidarity.

Importantly, access to these efficiency gains is uneven. While some workers can afford premium GenAI tools, many freelancers rely on free or limited versions with restricted functionality. In this sense, GenAI introduces new dependencies and costs, even as it promises efficiency. This uneven access highlights how acceleration is stratified, benefiting those with greater resources while potentially marginalizing already precarious workers. Freelancers also described limiting their use of paid tools as a form of ethical or strategic restraint, avoiding deeper participation in systems that monetize creative labor without fair compensation.

This illustrates how efficiency is not simply a technical benefit, but a socially and economically mediated process. Efficiency becomes an obligation rather than a benefit, reinforcing faster, cheaper forms of production while shifting the burden of adaptation onto individual workers. In Indonesia, where labor protections are limited and competition is intensified by global market integration, these dynamics contribute to the deepening of existing inequalities.

4.3 GenAI and the question of fairness: a sociotechnical imaginary of governance and justice

Participants further extend their reflections to broader concerns about ethics, regulation, and the distribution of value within AI-mediated cultural and creative economies. Here, GenAI is understood as a contested system that raises broader questions about ownership, compensation, and the distribution of value.

Participants highlighted issues of transparency, data privacy, originality, and fair compensation. For many, ethical concerns function as a language through which they articulate structural vulnerabilities and contest asymmetries between human labor, technological platforms, and institutional authority. Transparency, for instance, is closely tied to professional legitimacy, particularly in journalism, where

undisclosed AI use is seen as potentially undermining public trust.

Concurrently, concerns about data use and intellectual property reflect anxieties about extraction. Many participants were aware that GenAI systems are trained on large datasets of human-created content, often without consent or compensation. This awareness informs skepticism toward AI platforms that profit from creative labor while offering limited returns to the workers whose contributions underpin these systems.

Job displacement anxieties further highlight the political nature of these concerns. While immediate replacement is not universal, many participants expressed fears about declining demand, wage suppression, and intensified competition. Himas described her experience:

"So, after I finished my Master's, I started looking for a job, and it turned out to be really tough... I eventually found a spot as a content writer, but it only lasted about three months. I lost the job because they started using AI—ChatGPT and all that. So yeah, I'm back to being unemployed."

Similarly, Agus, a freelance illustrator, pointed to the normalization of AI-generated content in commercial and political contexts:

"Maybe it's partly due to the economy, but AI is definitely playing a role because people aren't commissioning artists anymore ... During the recent election, for instance, they started using AI, and that kind of thing has already become totally normalized."

These developments are interpreted as indicators of a broader shift in how creative labor is valued. Ethical concerns are therefore closely tied to questions of livelihood and long-term sustainability.

During the workshop, participants emphasized the urgency of developing worker-oriented policies within the cultural and creative industries. They noted that existing legislation does not adequately address the impact of GenAI, and argued that government responses have been too slow in adapting to emerging technologies. In the absence of strong institutional protections, workers rely on informal norms and personal guidelines to navigate ethical dilemmas. These include selectively disclosing AI use, limiting engagement with certain tools, or setting boundaries around automation.

At the same time, workshop participants expressed skepticism toward existing guidelines, which are often perceived as symbolic rather than enforceable. Agus articulated this concern clearly:

"I think it's high time that future policies favor the workers more, rather than creating rules that end up normalizing modern slavery... Eventually, designers

being underpaid will become the norm just because ‘AI is there to help.’”

These reflections highlight how ethical discourse functions as a form of proto-political engagement. Rather than simply prescribing correct behavior, workers use ethical language to articulate demands for recognition, protection, and fair compensation. In Indonesia, where regulatory oversight is limited and workers are embedded in global production networks, these concerns take on added urgency.

Against this backdrop, [17](#) *governance and justice imaginary* reveals how GenAI is deeply entangled with broader questions of power and inequality. It underscores the need to move beyond individualized ethical frameworks toward more structural and inclusive approaches to AI governance that account [39](#) for the sociotechnical conditions shaping creative labor, particularly in the Global South.

5 Discussion

While the findings show a range of responses across sectors, a clearer pattern emerges when these responses are understood through the lens of sociotechnical imaginaries, where participants’ accounts can be read as organized around three interrelated concerns: the appropriate boundaries of AI use, the changing pace and organization of work, and the fairness of emerging AI systems. These concerns reflect broader interpretations of how AI is embedded within social, economic, and institutional contexts.

Participants’ reflections consistently move across these dimensions. For example, concerns about AI ‘copying style’ are not only about technology, but about training data and ownership; concerns about speed relate to platform-driven client expectations; and ethical concerns emerge from a lack of institutional governance. Thus, the study operationalizes sociotechnical imaginaries at the level of everyday practice, showing how workers interpret AI through its embeddedness in these overlapping systems.

In journalism, GenAI is primarily negotiated in relation to professional norms and epistemic authority. Journalists tend to accept AI for peripheral tasks while resisting its use in core editorial functions (Cools and Diakopoulos 2024; Erickson 2024; Guzman and Lewis 2024). Here, the key concern is not only job displacement, but the preservation of credibility, verification, and public trust. AI is therefore filtered through institutional routines and normative role conceptions.

In visual design and creative production, meanwhile, the central issue is authorship and originality. Designers and illustrators are more concerned with how AI systems appropriate and reproduce stylistic elements. As a result, GenAI is often confined to ideation stages, while final outputs remain

human-produced, which reflects the symbolic and economic importance of originality in creative industries.

This cautious and selective appropriation of GenAI reflects findings from previous studies showing that creative workers often position AI as an assistive rather than autonomous technology in order to preserve authorship, professional identity, and creative control (Erickson 2024; Öztaş and Arda 2025).

Nevertheless, the boundaries seen in journalism or design are more difficult to maintain, as workers operate with fewer institutional protections. These differences demonstrate that GenAI does not transform ‘creative work’ uniformly, but interacts with distinct professional logics, value systems, and institutional structures.

Among freelancers and content creators, particularly those working with international clients, GenAI is interpreted more directly through market pressures. The dominant concern is economic survival: AI is adopted because it is required to remain competitive, even when it contributes to lower rates or increased expectations. These experiences echo broader concerns in creative labor scholarship that technological efficiencies frequently translate into intensified productivity expectations rather than improved working conditions (Lee 2024).

Moreover, this finding aligns with Menger’s (2001) and Gill’s (2010) accounts of creative labor as reputation-dependent and risk-intensive, but extends them into the context of AI-mediated production. Selective appropriation functions as a form of risk management, allowing workers to cope with efficiency pressures while resisting deskilling and dispossession. This also supports arguments by Pranteddu et al. (2024) and Öztaş and Arda (2025) that sociotechnical imaginaries shape not only how technologies are imagined, but how they are practically integrated into work routines. The Indonesian case shows that such imaginaries are inseparable from precarity: the insistence on human authorship is not nostalgic resistance, but a survival tactic in a highly competitive and weakly regulated labor market.

Across sectors, participants describe how GenAI accelerates production processes. However, this acceleration is not experienced uniformly, and is shaped by differences in access to tools, clients, and infrastructures. Participants in Jakarta, who are more likely to work in established organizations, tend to have access to paid AI tools, organizational guidelines, and collaborative workflows. Therefore, GenAI is often integrated more systematically, though still bounded by institutional norms. In Yogyakarta and Denpasar, where freelance and project-based work is more common, access to AI tools is more uneven. Many participants rely on free or limited versions of AI systems, which affects output quality and efficiency. These differences point to uneven sociotechnical affordances—that is, unequal capacities to use, benefit from, and shape AI

technologies. GenAI is therefore not a uniform resource, but one whose value depends on access to infrastructure, capital, and networks.

Furthermore, while existing scholarship highlights efficiency as one of GenAI's primary benefits (Tomaselli and Acar 2024), this study demonstrates that efficiency gains are experienced ambivalently and are often perceived as a source of intensified work pressure. This finding resonates with long-standing critiques in creative labor studies, which show how flexibility and autonomy frequently mask processes of self-exploitation and work intensification (Alacovska 2021; Gill 2010; Morgan et al. 2013). As time-saving tools, GenAI recalibrates expectations around speed, availability, and output, reinforcing what Standing (2011) describes as the chronic insecurity of the precariat. This aligns with recent work on platformization and automation in the Global South, where technological efficiencies are often absorbed by markets and clients rather than redistributed to workers (Curtin and Sanson 2016; Pankaj and Jha 2024).

By foregrounding efficiency-as-pressure, this study contributes to emerging critiques of AI productivity narratives (Glenster et al 2024; Wang et al 2024). As reflected in participants' accounts, some workers did identify positive aspects of GenAI, particularly its ability to streamline workflows and reduce repetitive tasks, yet these perceived gains were closely intertwined with rising expectations for faster and more continuous output. Rather than democratizing creative work, GenAI risks normalizing faster, cheaper, and more disposable forms of creative output, particularly in contexts where workers lack collective bargaining power. This reframes GenAI as a technology that intensifies existing inequalities within precarious creative economies.

The findings also show that participants do not simply adopt dominant global narratives about AI (e.g., efficiency, innovation, disruption). Instead, they reinterpret these narratives through the lens of local labor conditions and global positioning. In Indonesia, where creative labor is often freelance, informal, and weakly regulated, AI is closely associated with precarity. Efficiency gains are understood not as freeing up time, but as intensifying competition. Similarly, automation is not viewed in abstract terms, but in relation to immediate risks of income loss.

At the same time, participants are aware that GenAI technologies are largely developed in the Global North. This shapes how they understand their position—not as designers of these systems, but as users operating within externally defined technological and economic frameworks. This supports arguments by Natale et al. (2025) and Kothari and Cruikshank (2022) that AI imaginaries are unevenly produced and reflect global power geometries. Indonesian workers reinterpret global AI narratives through the lens of local labor precarity and Global South positioning.

This pattern is not unique to Indonesia, but resonates with a broader body of research on cultural and platform labor across the Global South (Qadri and D'Ignazio 2022; Soares Seto 2025). At the same time, there are important regional variations in how these dynamics are experienced. Drawing on Soares Seto (2025), research on AI and tech workers in Latin America highlights how workers' imaginaries are shaped by an awareness of structural inequalities embedded in global AI development, including algorithmic bias, lack of workforce diversity, and the dominance of corporate interests. Yet, rather than positioning AI solely as a source of precarity, these imaginaries are markedly ambivalent and future-oriented.

However, ethnographic work in Southeast Asia points to somewhat different mediations, emphasizing the role of uneven digital infrastructures, linguistic hierarchies, and informal learning networks in shaping how workers access and navigate global platforms (Nowak 2023; Soriano and Cabañes 2020; Soriano et al 2025). These differences suggest that while precarity and structural inequality are shared conditions across the Global South, workers' interpretations of AI are not uniformly pessimistic or solely defined by labor insecurity. This highlights that 'Global South positioning' is not a homogeneous condition.

Finally, the study reframes ethical concerns about GenAI as proto-political claims, rather than abstract moral debates. While existing literature on AI ethics in creative industries often focuses on principles such as transparency, consent, and fairness (Kyri et al 2025), this research shows how ethical discourse functions as a language of labor politics among precarious workers. Concerns about disclosure, data extraction, and job displacement articulate demands for recognition, compensation, and protection in the absence of strong regulatory frameworks. This resonates with global labor struggles in the creative industries, such as the Hollywood writers' strikes (Kinder 2024; Richwine and Ross 2024), but highlights a key difference: Indonesian creative workers articulate these claims without the backing of strong unions or enforceable labor law. Ethics, in this context, becomes a substitute for formal political leverage.

Although formal union engagement remains limited among participants, their accounts point to emerging forms of collectivization through informal networks, online communities, and industry workshops. This reflects the broader structure of Indonesia's creative economy, where freelance and platform-based work often falls outside traditional union frameworks. In the context of GenAI, these networked forms of solidarity remain fragmented, underscoring the challenges of building collective representation and advocating for worker protections in a rapidly evolving technological landscape.

Calls for regulation thus represent efforts to re-politicize AI governance and resist techno-deterministic framings

of inevitability. However, skepticism toward non-binding guidelines reflects broader distrust in institutional capacity to protect precarious workers, a pattern also observed in other Global South contexts (Garduño et al 2024; Promkhuntong 2024). This underscores the need to understand AI governance as a labor issue embedded in structural inequality.

6 Conclusion

5

This study has examined the integration of GenAI into the everyday work of cultural and creative workers in Indonesia as a situated labor practice shaped by precarity, unequal power relations, and uncertain regulatory environments. The findings underscore that GenAI is being incorporated through strategic and selective appropriation, where workers consciously delimit its role to protect authorship, professional identity, and credibility. GenAI use cannot be separated from the political economy of creative work in which it is embedded, nor from the asymmetrical power relations that govern access, valuation, and control over creative production.

Important to note, the experiences discussed here are shaped by the specific socio-economic and geographic context of Indonesia's creative economy, particularly in urban hubs. These cities are embedded in transnational production networks, where creative workers frequently engage with global clients through digital platforms, freelance marketplaces, and remote collaboration tools. Therefore, participants operate at the intersection of local labor conditions and global market demands, where expectations around speed, cost-efficiency, and technological adoption are often externally driven.

By situating sociotechnical imaginaries within everyday labor experience, this study contributes to debates on AI governance from a Global South perspective. Workers' imaginaries of GenAI are fragmented, ambivalent, and often shaped by informal knowledge circulation rather than institutional guidance. This challenges universalist and technocratic approaches to AI policy, suggesting that governance frameworks must be attentive to localized labor conditions, asymmetries of power, and workers' lived realities as

Table 1 Focus group discussions participants

No	Pseudonyms	Sub-sector in the creative industry	Age group
1	Rani	Media production	25–30
2	Rifqi	Media production	35–40
3	Iman	Translator/writer	30–35
4	Setyo	Media production	35–40
5	Fandy	Journalism	30–35
6	Yohanes	Photography	30–35
7	Hutomo	Media production	35–40
8	Verizza	Social media	30–35
9	Julia	Voice over/media production	35–40
10	Steven	Journalism	30–35
11	Yoko	Film/videography	30–35
12	Ahmad	Graphic designer	30–35
13	Putri	Translator/writer	25–30
14	Kim	Graphic designer/illustrator	20–25
15	Ali	Graphic designer/illustrator	20–25
16	Arfriani	Graphic designer/illustrator	25–30
17	Faizal	Arts	25–30
18	Himas	Film	25–30
19	Dita	Advertising	25–30
20	Vallery	Public relations	25–30
21	Gigi	Public relations	25–30
22	Christian	Advertising	25–30
23	Agus	Graphic designer/illustrator	25–30
24	Kharisma	Other	25–30
25	Jesse	Graphic designer/illustrator	30–35
26	Willy	Advertising	25–30

constitutive elements of technological adoption rather than downstream policy considerations.

This study has several limitations. Cultural and creative labor is highly diverse, and experiences with GenAI differ across sectors, career stages, and levels of technological exposure. Future research should examine other regions, including smaller cities and rural communities, and adopt longitudinal approaches to understand long-term impacts on careers and labor inequality. Comparative studies across Global South contexts would also help identify different regulatory paths and shared challenges in AI governance as these technologies spread unevenly.

Table 2 List of informants

No	Pseudonyms	Sub-sector in the creative industry	Age group
1	Irma	Journalism	30–35
2	Asri	Translator/writer	30–35
3	Anies	Film	30–35
4	Inez	Graphic designer/illustrator	30–35
5	Eviera	Journalism	30–35
6	Gede	Arts	25–30
7	Pande	Arts	25–30
8	Ngakan	Arts	35–40
9	Angga	Photography	35–40
10	Gladhys	Translator/writer	30–35
11	Lucia	Fashion designer	35–40
12	Budi	Photography/videography	35–30
13	Rendy	Journalism	40–45
14	Agung	Journalism	40–45

Table 3 Workshop participants

No	Pseudonyms	Sub-sector in the creative industry	Age group
1	Irma	Journalism	30–35
2	Rendy	Journalism	40–45
3	Ahmad	Graphic designer	30–35
4	Putri	Translator, writer	25–30
5	Kim	Graphic designer/illustrator	20–25
6	Ali	Graphic designer/illustrator	20–25
7	Arfrian	Graphic designer/illustrator	25–30
8	Faizal	Arts	25–30
9	Himas	Film	25–30
10	Dita	Advertising	25–30
11	Vallery	Public relations	25–30
12	Christian	Advertising	25–30
13	Agus	Graphic designer	25–30
14	Kharisma	Other	25–30
15	Jesse	Graphic designer	30–35
16	Willy	Advertising	25–30

Appendix A

1).

Appendix B

2).

Appendix C

3).

Acknowledgements The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of Universitas Multimedia Nusantara. A previous version of this work was presented at the 2025 IAMCR post-conference workshop 'Methods, Approaches, and Challenges of Researching AI and Labour in Creative Media Ecologies from Global Perspectives'. We extend our thanks to Pei-Sze Chow, Hong Leo-Liu, and Maxime Harvey for their comments. We also thank the special issue editors and anonymous reviewers for their insightful feedback, which was instrumental in refining the final manuscript.

Author contributions Y.P.S. contributed to conceptualization and wrote the main manuscript text. A.W.O. contributed to the data collection. N.J. contributed to conceptualization and provided the editing. All authors reviewed the manuscript.

Data availability The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available because they contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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