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PEER-REVIEWED JOURNAL ON THE INTERNET

“Ghiblified by AI”: Viral AI-generated image trend in press narratives

by Paulina Rutecka and Karina Cicha

Abstract

This study analyses media narratives surrounding the viral Ghibli Trend. Its main aim was to determine which thematic areas of news feed titles the trend referred to, which sentiments dominated, and whether sentiment was linked to thematic areas. In this phenomenon, we noticed the possibility of filling a gap: understanding how AI technologies intervene in society and culture. This study also explored what press narrative dominated and how the media utilized it: to gain popularity and clicks or escalate ethical discussion. We identified the main press narrative thematic groups through quantitative content analysis with sentiment analysis of the news feed titles of 760 articles collected directly after the viral trend began. A sentiment analysis provided insight into the attitude towards the first, so massive, trend in generating images using an AI tool, presented by the press.

Contents

Introduction

The use of AI tools for automating tasks is becoming increasingly popular. These tools gain new and advanced features daily, transforming the world’s landscape, businesses, and markets. AI tools are easily accessible due to their affordability and simplicity of use. Based on conversational interaction with chatbots, the straightforward usage model encourages users to adopt these tools. Chatbots generate text, images, videos, and source code and synthesize or summarize other texts for users, streamlining and accelerating numerous activities.

On 25 March 2025, OpenAI introduced the image-generation feature for its GPT-4o model. This

functionality became a native part of GPT-4o (OpenAI, 2025b), utilizing the model's extensive knowledge base to create images through natural conversation (OpenAI, 2025a). This marks a significant advancement compared to previous AI image generation methods. According to OpenAI, the new generator addresses challenges previously too complex for AI. Examples of generated visuals showcased by OpenAI include a wine glass containing a small amount of wine, an image with an invisible elephant, graphics with embedded text, and mathematical patterns. GPT-4o also enables users to create images based on described sketches (including hand-drawn ones) and can analyze and learn from user-uploaded images (*Economic Times*, 2025).

On the same day, when OpenAI extended the GPT-4o model by new feature, Grant Slatton, a software engineer from Seattle, generated an image based on a photo of himself with his wife and dog, transforming it into graphic image inspired by Studio Ghibli using GPT-4o, and shared the picture on platform X (Slatton, 2025). Within seven days, his post garnered approximately 49.2 million views, over 45,000 likes, 5.7 thousand shares, and 17 thousand bookmarks (as of 1 April 2025). His post sparked the Ghibli Trend (Ghiblification), the first large-scale social media viral utilizing AI. Users began massively generating Ghibli-style images based on their photos. The trend involved public figures, brands, and private users, with posts appearing across social media platforms. The phenomenon reached an enormous scale, with hashtags referencing Studio Ghibli—such as #ghibli, #ghiblistyle, #chatgptghibli, #ghiblivibes, #ghiblitrend, #studioghibli, #ghiblistudio, and #ghibliart — numbering in the hundreds of thousands. OpenAI's creator, Sam Altman, wrote on 27 March: "it's super fun seeing people love images in chatgpt. but our GPUs are melting" (Altman, 2025a). He also announced upcoming usage limits for the tool. In response to this post, Altman received over 7,000 comments, most of which were GPT-4o-generated memes referencing the situation, showing melting OpenAI servers, Altman calling for help, and visuals inspired by the Ghibli Style.

On 30 March at 7:02 AM, Sam Altman appealed to users to limit generating images with GPT-4o, stating: "can yall please chill on generating images this is insane our team needs sleep" (Altman, 2025b). On March 31, Altman further remarked: "We added one million users in the last hour" (Altman, 2025c). The viral Ghibli Trend not only caused a massive surge in OpenAI's user base but also increased the global recognition of Studio Ghibli. At the same time, it highlighted pressing issues such as the irrational use of resources required by generative AI (GenAI), which are often employed on a large scale, not for automation or productivity but for creating humorous content like images and videos. According to Midjourney's 2023 statistics, 68 percent of its users utilized the tool for entertainment, while only 32 percent used it for practical applications (Wilson, 2023).

This phenomenon brings into sharp relief the significant environmental costs associated with the widespread adoption of AI technologies. The key environmental burdens of artificial intelligence include substantial energy consumption, high water usage, and a considerable carbon footprint (Yu, *et al.*, 2024). Training and operating large AI models demand vast amounts of electricity, often rivaling the energy usage of entire countries and contributing to increased greenhouse gas emissions. Moreover, data centers supporting AI require enormous volumes of water for cooling purposes (Z. Wang, 2025). These factors are now recognized as major sustainability challenges accompanying the sudden surge in AI usage triggered by viral trends (Q. Wang, *et al.*, 2024).

Another critical issue was the ethical and copyright concerns tied to artificial intelligence generated content (AIGC), particularly in light of Studio Ghibli co-founder Hayao Miyazaki's well-documented disapproval of AI-generated art. In a 2016 documentary by Kaku Arukawa, Hayao Miyazaki described AI-generated creations as "disgusting" and stated, "I strongly feel that this is an insult to life itself" (Arukawa, 2016; Bauer, 2025; Hou, 2023). Despite these concerns, OpenAI has yet to clarify whether it holds the necessary licenses or if the generated images violate Studio Ghibli's copyrights.

Therefore, the main objective of this work was to analyze the media narrative surrounding the Ghibli Trend based on an examination of news titles between 25 March and 2 April 2025. This analysis illustrates not only the thematic scope associated with the Ghibli trend, but above all, the sentiment of the press narrative.

In terms of a fulfilled gap, this study addresses the insufficiently explored intersection between AI-driven image generation and its socio-cultural implications, with attention to press narratives, whether oriented toward click-driven popularity or fostering ethical discourse.

We developed three research questions (*RQs*) for this research:

RQ1: To which thematic areas did the titles of articles analyzing Ghibli Trend refer?
RQ2: What sentiment characterized the analyzed statements?
RQ3: Are there observable trends linking the sentiment of statements to the thematic area they pertain to?

The structure of this paper is as follows: Section 2, literature review, explores key issues related to AI-generated image creation, including the impact of this practice on artists and associated ethical considerations. It also provides a brief overview of Studio Ghibli and examines the use of AI-generated images in social media campaigns, establishing a broad theoretical context for the article. Section 3, Methods, details the research procedure. Section 4, Findings, presents the results of the study. Section 5, Discussion, provides an in-depth interpretation of the study's findings within the broader context of media coverage of the Ghibli Trend. It examines how the analyzed headlines reflect both the fleeting nature and the societal significance of viral phenomena. It considers the influence of legacy media on public perceptions, highlights the ethical challenges inherent in reporting on AI-generated trends, and explores the impact of journalistic practices on the quality and ethical framing of information. Section 6, Conclusion, includes concluding remarks on this research.

Literature review

Generating images and videos with AI

Generative AI tools have evolved rapidly, providing technologies for producing diverse types of content such as text, images, videos, 3D visuals, audio, and gaming (Chamola, *et al*, 2024). For example, tools that allow for dubbing a film in another language while synchronizing an actor's lip movements or using AI-powered avatars enable the creation of realistic multilingual videos without hiring multiple actors to record the same video. This can be particularly valuable for creating educational materials (Lind, 2025; Badawy, *et al*, 2025). Generating facial images based on descriptions or rough sketches can be used to develop police composite sketches (Bell, *et al*, 2024) and support medical applications (Javan and Mostaghni, 2024; Pierce, 2024).

AI can also be applied in product design (Tang, *et al*, 2024), prototyping, and visualizing solutions in industries such as automotive (Lee and Huang, 2024; H. Park, *et al*, 2024), robotics (Christiansen, *et al*, 2024), landscape architecture (Zhou and Xiang, 2024), and fashion (Zhang and Liu, 2024), significantly reducing the time needed for drafting designs. These tools further empower individuals without graphic design skills to execute projects, increasing a pool of potential contributors to specific tasks. They also support UX and IT system design, including e-commerce platforms (Zhang and Liu, 2024). However, individuals designing with GenAI must possess domain expertise to verify whether AI introduces non-relevant content into a given project (Campo and Leach, 2022).

People without professional experience can also engage in creating art. However, research indicates that they must have an adequate level of digital literacy to generate precise prompts that yield satisfactory results (S. Kim, *et al*, 2025). Solutions are also emerging that help users build precise and comprehensible input data for models (H. Kim, *et al*, 2024). The ability to generate commercial graphic works (Califano and Spence, 2024) can streamline the creation of materials such as educational content (Strzelecki, *et al*,

2024) or marketing assets. However, creators must be sensitive to issues related to plagiarism (Doyle, 2024).

Impact on artists

A notable use of GenAI tools is their application by artists in creating generative art. Artists must have a deep understanding of artistic movements and the works of other creators in order to avoid violating copyright (Li, *et al*, 2025). While researchers have highlighted that using AI tools for art creation, including cartoons and animation, represents a form of human-computer collaboration (Chen, *et al*, 2024), many creators perceive generative AI art as theft, arguing that these works are products of learning from existing art (Goetze, 2024). On the other hand, the use of AI tools to create graphics raises concerns about treating these tools as co-authors. This, in turn, brings up the issue of collaboration, understood as a concept that invokes rich psychological terms. Researchers emphasize that, for now, none of the available AI tools meet the conditions to count as an artistic collaborator (Anscomb, 2025).

In the art world, the use of AI to generate artistic works is a widely debated topic. This is exemplified by the high-profile case of Boris Eldagsen's work "Pseudomnesia: The Electrician," which won in the creative photography category at the annual Sony World Photography Awards in 2023, sparking discussion about the benefits and risks of supporting creative work with AI tools (Aszyk, 2024). The contest organizers admitted that the author misled them, as he did not disclose the full extent of AI's involvement in creating the submitted image (Glynn, 2023). Ultimately, the artist refused to accept the award, explaining that the submitted piece was not a photograph but an AI-generated image, his intention to provoke a debate about AI's role in photography (Hausken, 2024).

At the start of 2024, artist Jon Lam shared on his platform X profile a list of nearly 4,700 visual artists, directors, graphic designers, and animators whose works were used by AI tool creators, including Midjourney, to train the models (Yang, 2024). Among the listed names was Hayao Miyazaki, creator of Studio Ghibli. In November 2023, this list was used as evidence in a lawsuit against Midjourney, Stability AI, DeviantArt, and Runway AI, highlighting both the dissatisfaction of creators with the use of their artistic work for AI training and copyright infringement practices. While creations based on cinematic works and utilizing GenAI tools often go viral and gain rapid popularity — such as the trailer for the non-existent film *Barbenheimer*, created by merging trailers from *Barbie* (2023, director Greta Gerwig) and *Oppenheimer* (2023, director Christopher Nolan) (Goldman, 2023b) — the issue surrounding the use of resources understood as art (in this case, cinematic art) persists.

Artists' concerns about using AI tools in creative work were reflected in the Hollywood strike in 2023 (Goldman, 2023a). One of the demands of screenwriters, actors, and other individuals in the film industry was prohibiting the use of their likenesses to generate images and videos through AI. The agreement, signed on 8 November, aimed to protect actors from the unauthorized use of their likenesses by AI. Creating "digital replicas" and using them in film productions without the artists' knowledge was prohibited (CyberDefence24, 2023).

Regulations on artificial intelligence in the U.S. and EU (as of March 2025) have focused on countering practices that harm users or infringe upon their rights. In the U.S. and EU, using AI for "social scoring," *i.e.*, evaluating individuals based on personal traits or behaviours, has been prohibited (Ailance, 2025; Digital Government Nederlands, 2024) Additionally, both regions have restricted the use of AI in emotion recognition and biometric data processing (Ailance, 2025; Aszódi, 2025). Regulations regarding AI usage concerning personal likeness and copyright in the U.S. and EU include several key prohibitions. In the U.S., works generated solely by AI cannot be protected under copyright law, as significant human creativity is required. Furthermore, unauthorized use of a person's likeness, voice, or name (as in deepfakes) is prohibited by law (Mathur, 2025). In the EU, using AI to generate content that infringes on copyright without the consent of a given owner has been banned, including the obligation to disclose data used to train AI models (Software Improvement Group, 2025).

AI-based actions on social media

The capabilities offered by AI tools have encouraged managers to seek new ways of creating engaging marketing (Hermann, 2022). AI technology has equipped marketers with new possibilities for efficiently generating materials, tools enabling personalization, and analytics that allow for faster strategic decision-making (Madanchian, 2024; Labib, 2024; Kumar, *et al.*, 2024). Additionally, it has been utilized in chatbots and virtual assistants providing 24/7 customer service (Madanchian, 2024). Marketing efforts by brands have also introduced computer-generated imagery influencers, whose popularity is three times higher than that those of human influencers (El-Deeb, 2024).

AI tools have already been used to execute numerous, often successful, marketing campaigns such as Grandes Vinos (Grandes Vinos, 2024), Heinz, Nike (Deusens Hyperxperience, 2024), and Virgin Voyages (Jain, 2023).

In 2021, MyHeritage, a platform offering genealogy tree-building, relative searches, and DNA testing, announced the launch of the Deep Nostalgia feature. This feature allowed users to animate faces from historical photos while enhancing their quality (Conaghan, 2024). According to statistical data, in less than a month, 33 million people had used the image animation feature, and two months later, the number had risen to 80 million (Kidd and Nieto McAvoy, 2023).

In 2025, ByteDance launched the multimodal model OmniHuman-1 (Lin, *et al.*, 2025), which transforms a single photo and an audio track into a video, bringing the characters in the image to life. The release of this tool led to mass video generation on TikTok, showing its viral potential.

Ethical issues related to AI-generated videos and graphics

The concept of AI-for-social-good, explored by Hermann (2022), assumes that AI can address social challenges. Unfortunately, AI tools, when analyzing large datasets containing historical biases (Ness, *et al.*, 2024; de Almeida and Rafael, 2024; Doyle, 2024), may contribute to customers discrimination (Hermann, 2022; Ness, *et al.*, 2024) and by replicating biases, including racial or religious prejudices (De Almeida and Rafael, 2024; Doyle, 2024). A system trained on specific data carries certain values and ideologies, influencing cultural meanings and visual representation (Laba, 2024; Bucher, 2018), since AI can only understand the world to the extent represented by the data implemented into the system (Labib, 2024). As a result, it may present events with certain biases. While tools are equipped with mechanisms to avoid negative stereotypes, their algorithmic operation can have the opposite effect, reinforcing stereotypes (Skilton and Cardinal, 2024).

Legal implications are also significant in the context of data used to train models. Many GenAI tools have been granted unrestricted access to search the Internet, generating artificial intelligence-generated content based on information from Web sites that may not provide licenses for creating derivative works. Additionally, Web scraping methods are employed, with data being collected and stored in databases that later serve as training platforms for algorithms (Chaparro and Ramírez, 2024). This raises legitimate concerns regarding copyright issues.

Furthermore, AI can be used for disinformation, creating misleading advertising content, manipulative persuasion strategies in marketing, which can only be countered by consumer digital literacy (Qadri, 2025), and messages steering consumers toward harmful decisions (Oshadi Karunanayaka, *et al.*, 2024). Graphic and video generators, used widely to create deepfake videos and fake images, are gaining popularity on social media. The subjects of fake images are often politicians and other public figures, like Donald Trump, Emmanuel Macron, or Elon Musk (Hausken, 2024). Some images gain popularity due to their absurd nature. However, there are also highly realistic fake images. Their viral spread can lead to mass disinformation. Therefore, developing methods to detect AI-generated graphics is crucial for combating fake news and disinformation (D. Park, *et al.*, 2024).

Studio Ghibli

Studio Ghibli was founded in Tokyo in 1985 by Hayao Miyazaki, Isao Takahata, and Toshio Suzuki (Lioi, 2015). Ghibli's first official work was *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* (天空　城　　, 1986) (Denison, 2018). From the beginning, those hand-drawn graphics, rich in details and emotional depth, distinguished Studio Ghibli's animations. The films often created a unique collage of fantastical elements with realistic narratives, generating emotional stories that explored human experiences (LaMarre, 2009). Additionally, the tales addressed environmental issues, human relationships, connections between humans and nature, and the challenges of growing up (Valverde Maestre, 2023).

Hayao Miyazaki is one of the most influential animation directors in the world, renowned for his unique artistic and narrative style. The success of *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (風　谷　　, 1984) led to the creation of Studio Ghibli. Miyazaki is the creator of many works, such as *My Neighbor Totoro* (　　, 1988) and *Princess Mononoke* (　　姫, 1997), which have earned acclaim from critics and audiences worldwide (Napier, 2023).

A milestone in the studio's development and global visibility was the production of the fairy tale *Spirited Away* (千　千尋　神隠　, 2001), which won the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature in 2003, becoming the first Japanese production in history to achieve this honour. In 2024, another Miyazaki film, *The Boy and the Heron* (君　　生　　), also won an Oscar in this category. These successes solidified Ghibli's position on the international stage and sparked greater interest in Japanese animation (Valverde Maestre, 2023).

Studio Ghibli's uniqueness lies primarily in each film's *auteur* nature. The Ghibli Trend, characterized by the mass processing and generation of images in the style of this Japanese animation, contradicts the idea of the originality of animation rooted in the craftsmanship of its creators and the individuality of the studio's leading animator. The Ghibli Trend, fuelled by ChatGPT 4o, paradoxically turned the most non-digital contemporary style into a form of entertainment that led to significant resource consumption, counter to the principles of sustainable development.

Method

This study analyzed press reports identified via Google News during the week following the emergence of the Ghibli Trend. The research draws on frameworks examining technological interventions in society and culture (Bucher, 2018; Kidd and Nieto McAvoy, 2023; Natale, 2021), including studies of algorithms and user acceptance.

A quantitative content analysis was conducted, supplemented by sentiment analysis, to identify the main narratives presented in press coverage. The analysis focused on article titles, as headlines often exhibit clickbait characteristics and strongly influence reader engagement (Pengnate, *et al.*, 2021). Themes related to emotional resonance and ethical, legal, or technological implications were coded inductively, following the approach of Kidd and Nieto McAvoy (2023).

To ensure neutrality, the Google News search was performed in English on a clean virtual machine (Oracle VirtualBox) from Poland, minimizing personalization effects (Cordeiro, *et al.*, 2024; Haim, *et al.*, 2018). The keywords used reflected trending social media hashtags: ghibli, ghibli style, chatgpt ghibli, ghibli vibes, ghibli trend, studio ghibli, and ghibli art. This resulted in 1,788 articles retrieved from Google News. After removing news items published outside the study period of 25 March to 2 Apri (54 entries) and duplicate entries (974 entries), a dataset of 760 articles was obtained.

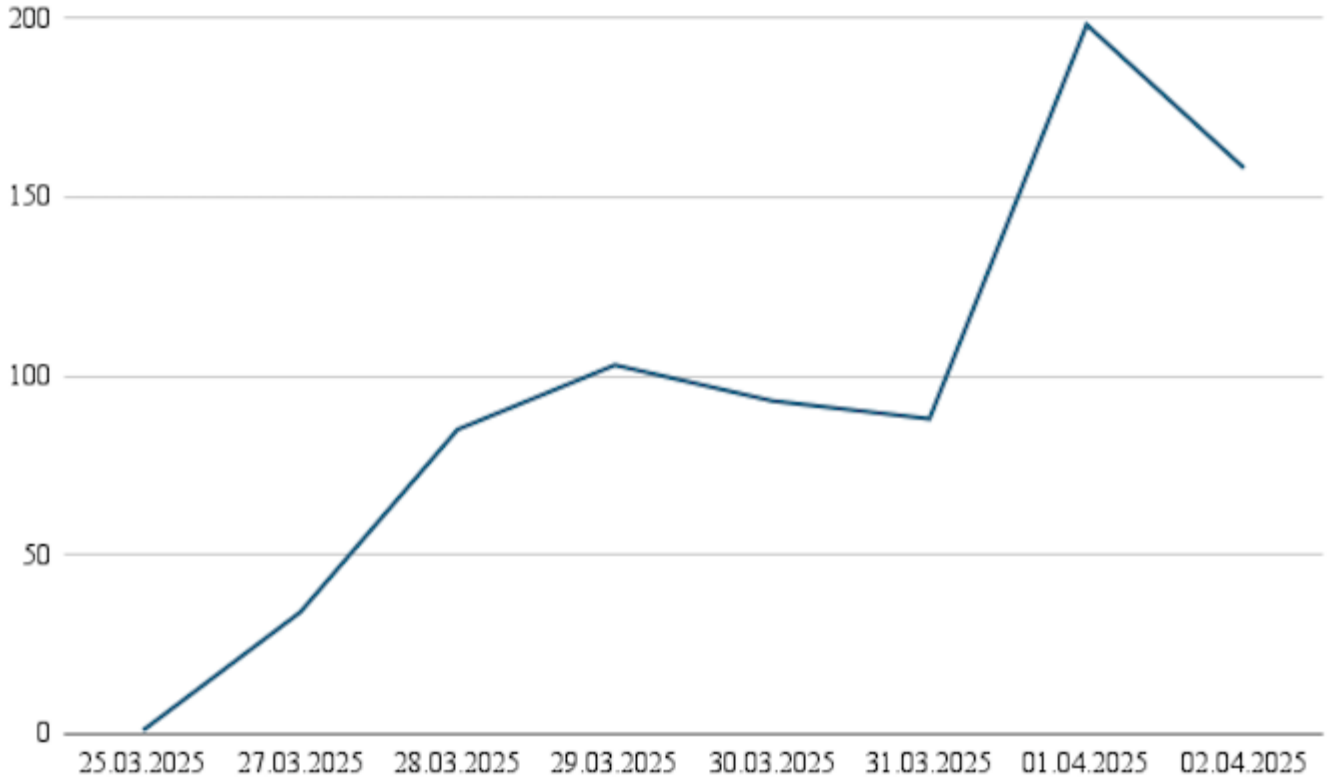

Figure 1: Article distribution between 25 March and 2 April.

Each title was assigned 1–4 thematic codes from a set of 24, later grouped into six broader categories: technology, business and law, usage, opinions, reception, and culture. Sentiment was classified as positive, neutral, or negative. All bibliographic references remain unchanged.

Findings

First topic group — Technology

total of 265 codes were assigned to the “Technology” category, with the largest group consisting of codes related to “technical issues” (90). A tendency toward a dominant neutral or negative sentiment was observed in articles marked with the codes: “AI errors”, “privacy”, “AI risks”, and “technical issues”. On the other hand, statements related to “tool development” exhibited a positive sentiment. The fluctuations in the neutral sentiment for articles in this category could be seen throughout the entire study period, while a significant increase in positive and negative sentiment began on 31 March 2025. Figure 2 illustrates sentiment trends over the study period.

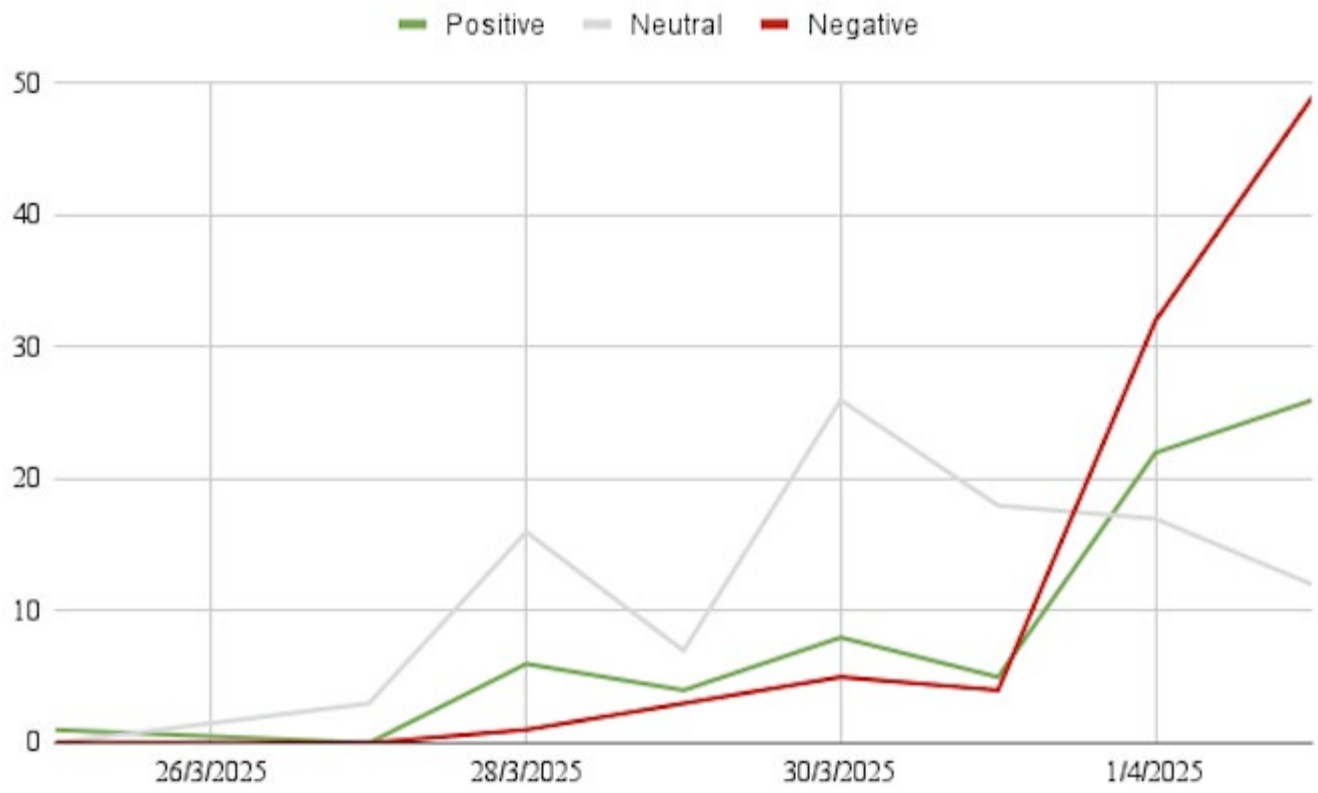

Figure 2: Technology related articles — Time distribution and sentiment.

Examples of articles' titles qualified for this category were, for instance: "Studio Ghibli AI trend overwhelms OpenAI" (technical issues, negative sentiment); "Ghibli-style AI art now free: Generate unlimited images with ChatGPT without paying" (tool development, positive sentiment); "AI goes wrong: Cloth turns into baby, coconut becomes head in ChatGPT's Ghibli images" (AI errors, negative sentiment).

The titles of articles marked with the code "tool development" focused primarily on the possibility of using ChatGPT-4o to create images in the style of Studio Ghibli.

The titles of articles marked with the code "AI errors" primarily referred to "visual hallucinations", which involved adding stylized figures to photos not present in originals. The most common terms used to describe this phenomenon were "ghostly figures," in a predominantly negative tone.

In article titles marked with the code "AI risks", issues related to providing data to the model, including personal images, global dependency on GenAI tools, and replacing humanity with technology, were discussed. The tone of these statements was predominantly negative.

Second topic group — Business and law

A total of 155 codes were assigned to the "Business and law" category, with the largest group consisting of codes related to "copyright" (77). This category was dominated by statements marked with a negative sentiment, with a steady upward trend. Sentiment trends for titles in this thematic group are presented in Figure 3.

Examples of news titles included in this category are: "ChatGPT's Studio Ghibli-style images show its

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creative power — but raise new copyright problems" (copyrights, neutral sentiment); "Indian brands find their Ghibli glow" (business, positive sentiment); "Is your ChatGPT-powered Ghibli-style portrait destroying the planet?" (ecology, negative sentiment).

In the largest group of articles marked with the code "copyright", not a single title was found that could be assigned a positive sentiment. Regarding copyright issues, text focused on violations by OpenAI, potential lawsuits, and the need for additional legal protection for artists, referred to as "consent tools".

Titles marked with the code "debate" addressed the use of GenAI for entertainment, frequently presented polemical responses to content published by Sam Altman on platform X, and discussed the issue of publishing content on social media (primarily in the context of Ghibli Trend) without holding copyright to such materials. In this group, statements with a negative sentiment predominated.

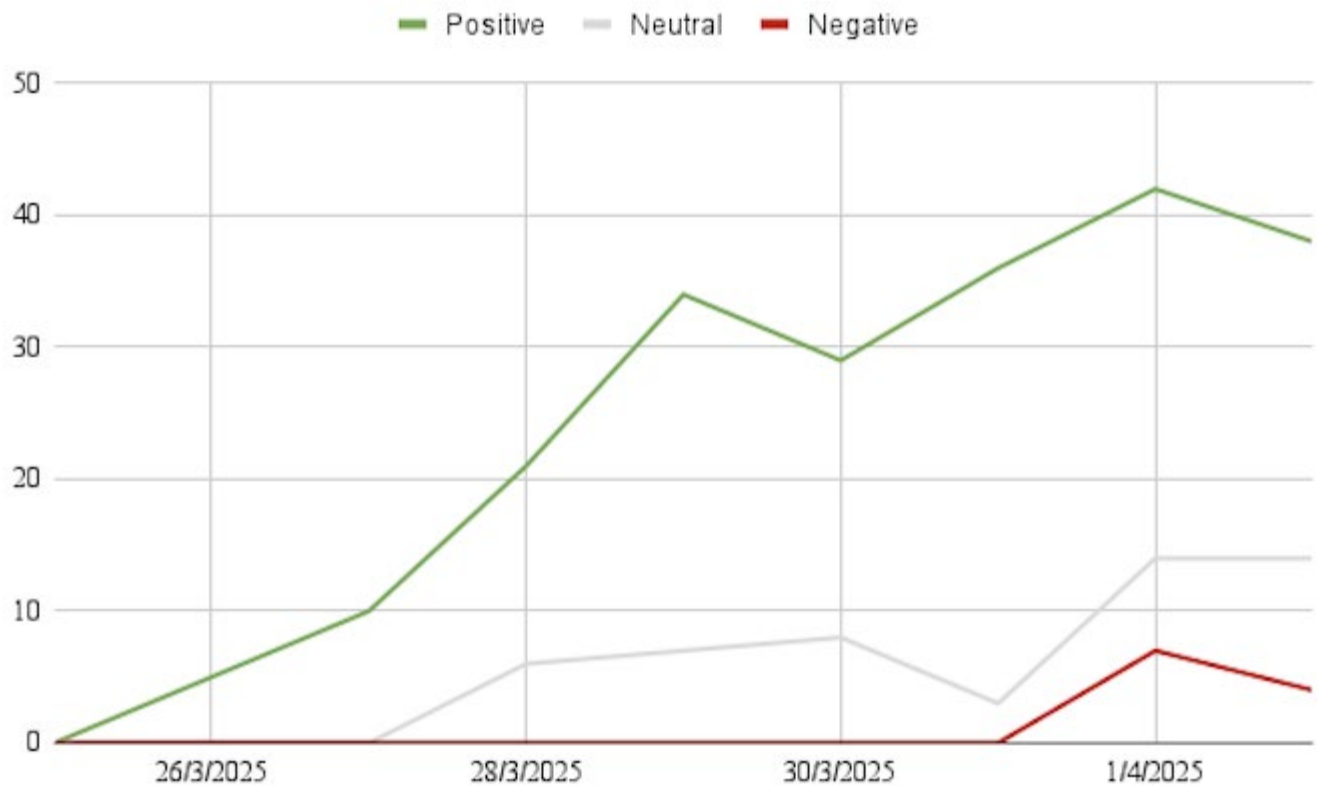

Figure 3: Business and law related articles — Time distribution and sentiment.

Titles marked with the code "business" primarily referred to profit and loss forecasts for both OpenAI and Studio Ghibli, the use of Ghibli Trend as a marketing tool, and the dramatic rise in the value of Solana Meme Coins cryptocurrency. In terms of sentiment, statements with positive, negative, and neutral sentiments were even distributed.

This thematic area also included titles marked with the codes "ecology" (6 titles) and "trend creator" (12 titles). For articles marked with "ecology", the statements carried a negative sentiment, addressing environmental issues and resource consumption. Conversely, for articles marked with "trend creator", the sentiment was either positive or neutral, with an emphasis on profiling Grant Slatton, the trend initiator.

Third topic group — Usage

A total of 273 codes were assigned to the "Usage" category, with the largest group consisting of codes related to "guides" (147). Those articles were primarily instructional, containing prompts allowing ChatGPT-4o users to stylize their photos as Ghibli anime. The dominant sentiment for statements in this category was positive.

Examples of news titles included in this category are: "New Trend Emerges Creating Studio Ghibli Images With AI" (creativity, neutral sentiment); "How to Create Ghibli Style AI Images with ChatGPT" (guides, positive sentiment); "Tired Of ChatGPT Errors While Generating Ghibli-style Images? Try These Alternatives Instead" (alternatives, negative sentiment).

For titles marked with "creativity," an even distribution of statements with positive and neutral sentiments was observed. These articles addressed the impact of GenAI on creative work and the qualities of Japanese animation itself.

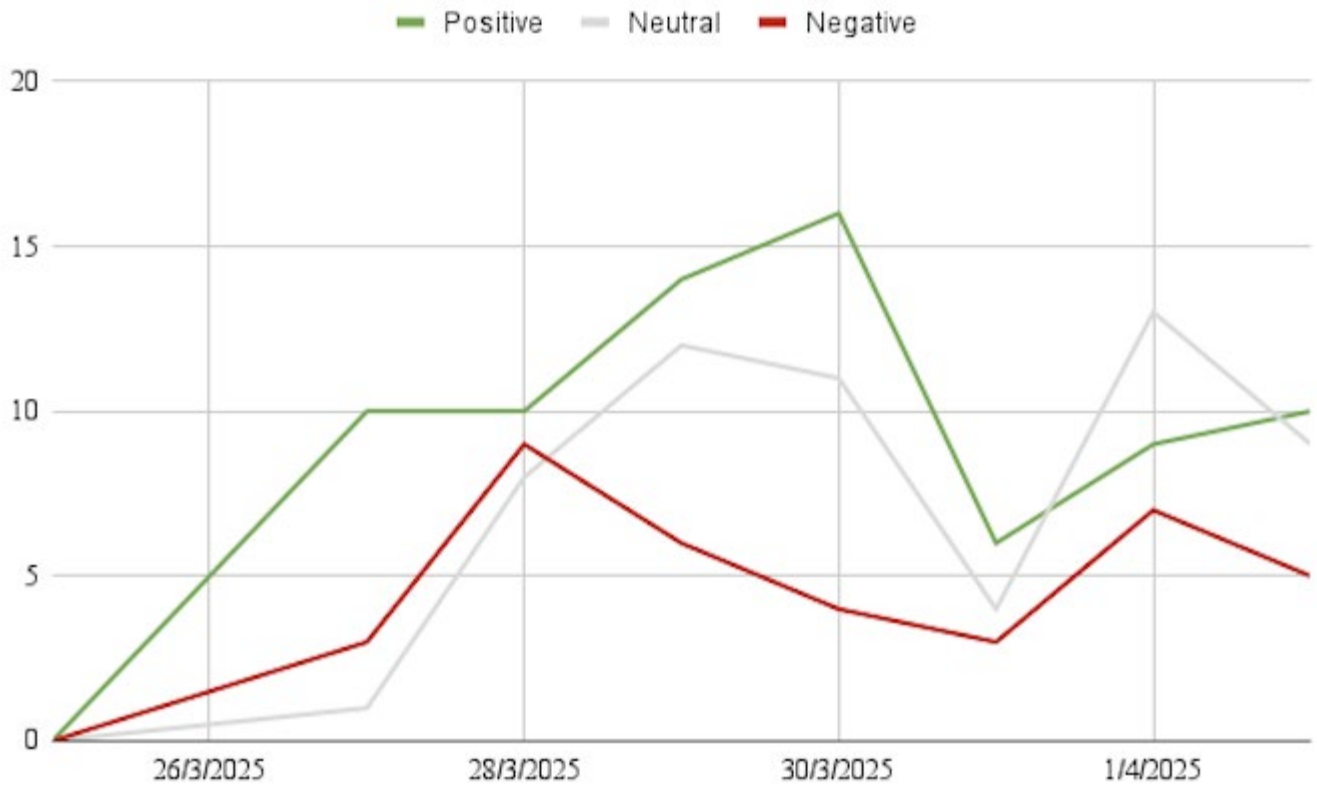

Figure 4: Usage related articles — Time distribution and sentiment.

The final subcategory consisted of titles marked with the code "alternatives". Titles in this group predominantly had a positive sentiment and focused on presenting alternative tools for photo stylization (*e.g.*, Grok) or their rankings.

As shown in Figure 4, the analyzed titles within the "Usage" thematic group exhibited a steadily increasing

positive sentiment over the study period. At the same time, titles with a negative sentiment were virtually absent until early April.

Fourth topic group — Opinions

A total of 167 codes were assigned to the "Opinions" category, with the largest group consisting of codes related to "AI criticism" (98). As illustrated in Figure 5, this group was characterized by negative sentiments, significantly dominating over others throughout the analysis.

Examples of news titles included in this category are: "Wholeheartedly Embracing the Studio Ghibli AI Trend as Art Dies Today!" (AI criticism, negative sentiment); "AI-generated 'Ghibli' animations are impressive. But are they art?" (creators' opinions, neutral sentiment); "ChatGPT AI art trend: Celebrating or stealing Ghibli's charm?" (ethics, neutral sentiment).

The titles marked with "AI criticism" focused on legal and ethical issues related to Ghibli Trend and references to Hayao Miyazaki's stance. None of the titles in this group had a positive sentiment. The second-largest group of titles was marked with the code "ethics" (52). Two focal points of public debate were observed. First, the discussion revolved around the human factor as a *sine qua non* condition for creating art. Second, concerns were raised regarding authorship (including in the context of copyright violations). Most titles in this group carried a negative sentiment.

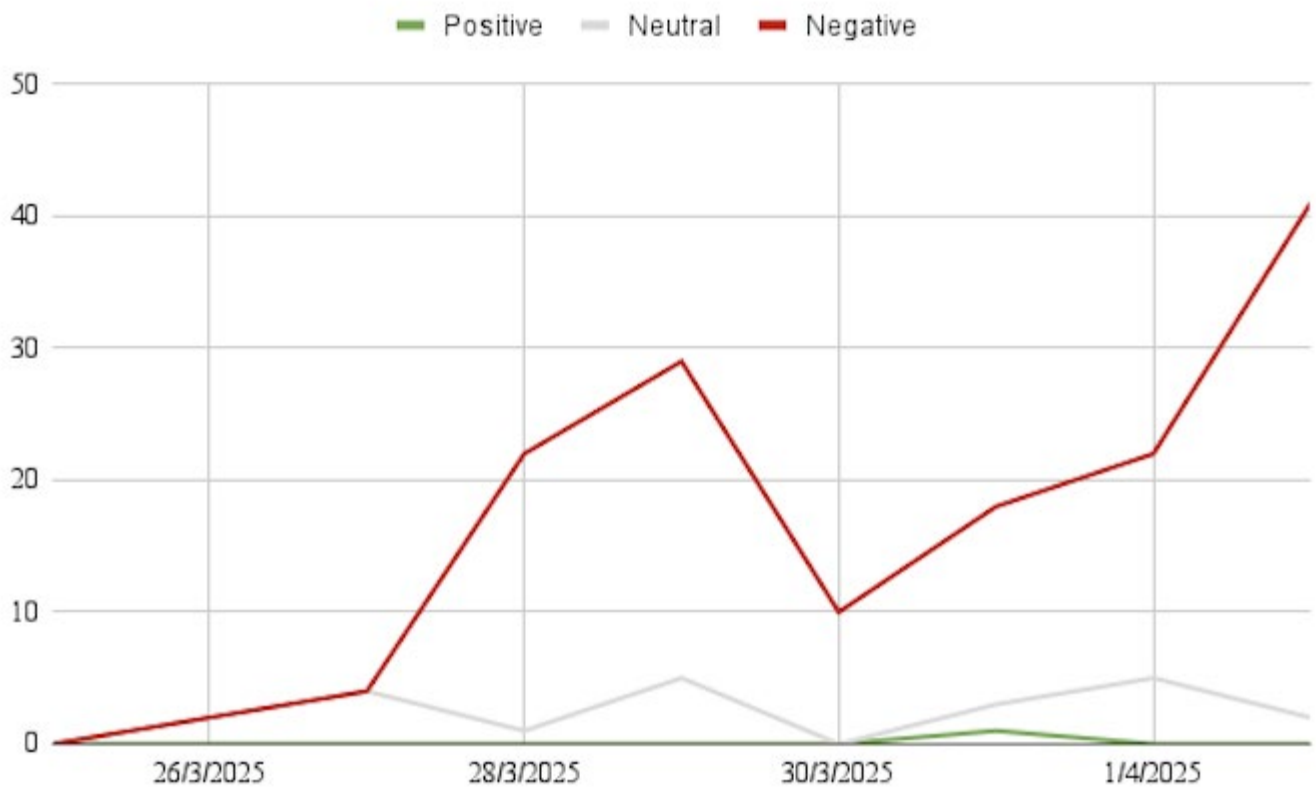

Figure 5: Opinions related articles — Time distribution and sentiment.

A similar pattern was observed in the final group of titles in the "Opinions" category, marked with the code

"creators' opinions". Artists who voiced their opinions primarily addressed concerns about the threats AI tools posed to their industry when used to create graphic works. They also questioned the quality and aesthetics of these inventions. The dominant sentiment for titles classified in this group was negative.

Fifth topic group — Reception

A total of 286 codes were assigned to the "Reception" category, with the largest group consisting of codes related to "popularity" (112). As described in Figure 6, this group of titles was dominated by a positive sentiment, with a significant increase observed after 1 April.

The examples of news titles included in this category are: "'Utterly tasteless': White House joins Studio Ghibli trend but internet slams it. Here's why" (participation of public figures and celebrities, negative sentiment); "One Million Users In The Last Hour: ChatGPT's Ghibli Trend Breaks The Internet" (popularity, positive sentiment); "Should we be concerned about the Studio Ghibli AI trend?" (reaction, neutral sentiment).

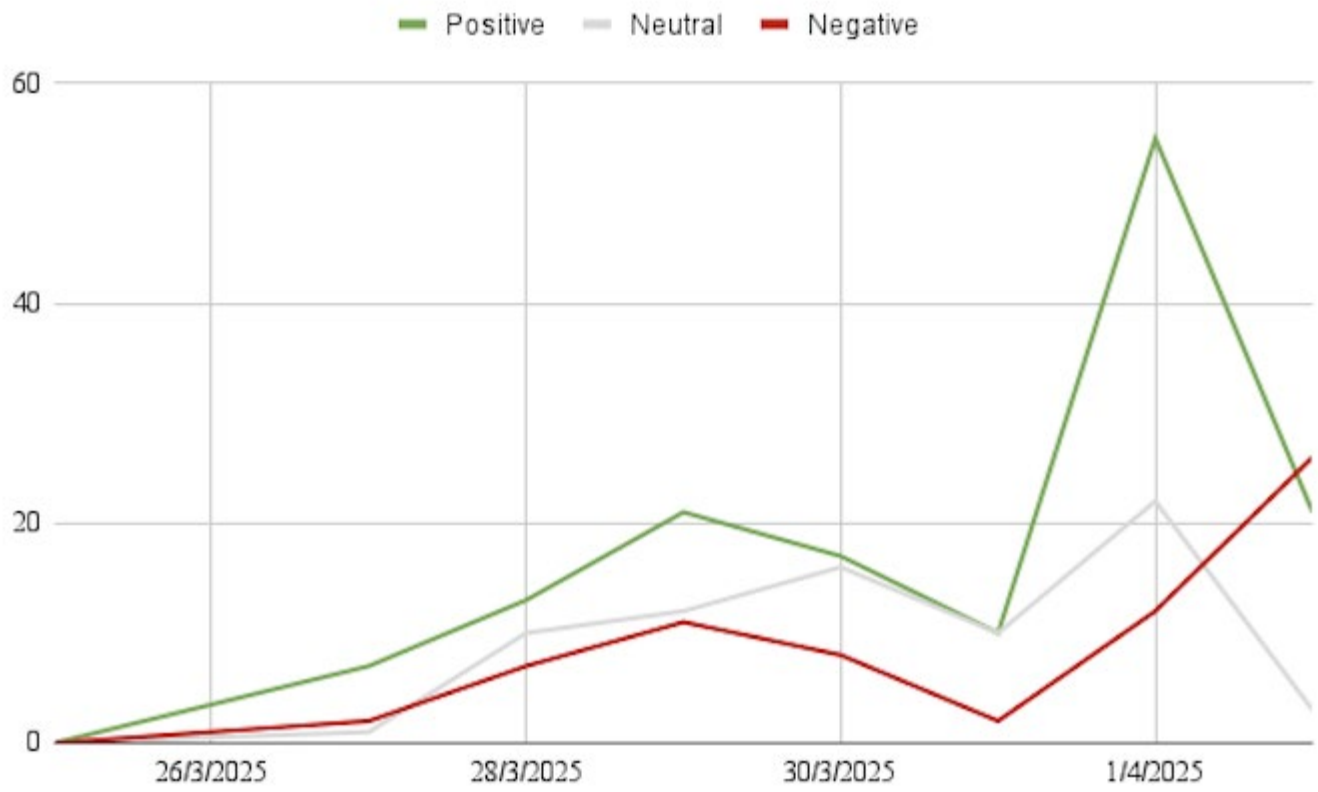

Figure 6: Reception related articles — Time distribution and sentiment.

Titles marked with "popularity" carried a positive sentiment. They primarily referred to the number of ChatGPT-4o users generating Ghibli-style images, the popularity of AI tools, and their use in graphic design.

This category also included titles marked with "participation of public figures and celebrities". The sentiment of these titles was evenly distributed between negative and positive. Articles provided examples

of public figures who generated Ghibli-style images and instances where these images were used.

The final group of titles were marked with the code “reactions”. Here, the dominant sentiment was negative. Articles addressed topics such as Sam Altman’s reaction to the trend’s popularity, responses and comments from well-known individuals, including graphic artists, and summaries of Internet users’ statements about the trend.

Sixth topic group — Culture

A total of 170 codes were assigned to the “Culture” category, with the largest group consisting of codes related to “pop culture” (89). Titles in this category predominantly exhibited a positive sentiment. These sentiments were evenly distributed over time, consistently outweighing those with neutral or negative sentiments throughout the study period, as shown in Figure 7. Additionally, this was the only category where statements with a neutral sentiment showed a clear upward trend.

Examples of news titles included in this category are: “Ghibli-Style Images And Animation Trend Takes Over” (trend explanation, positive sentiment); “What Studio Ghibli’s founder thinks of all your AI-generated cartoon photos” (Miyazaki, neutral sentiment); “Brands, Celebs clamber onto the Ghibli AI trend, the internet’s latest obsession” (pop culture, positive sentiment).

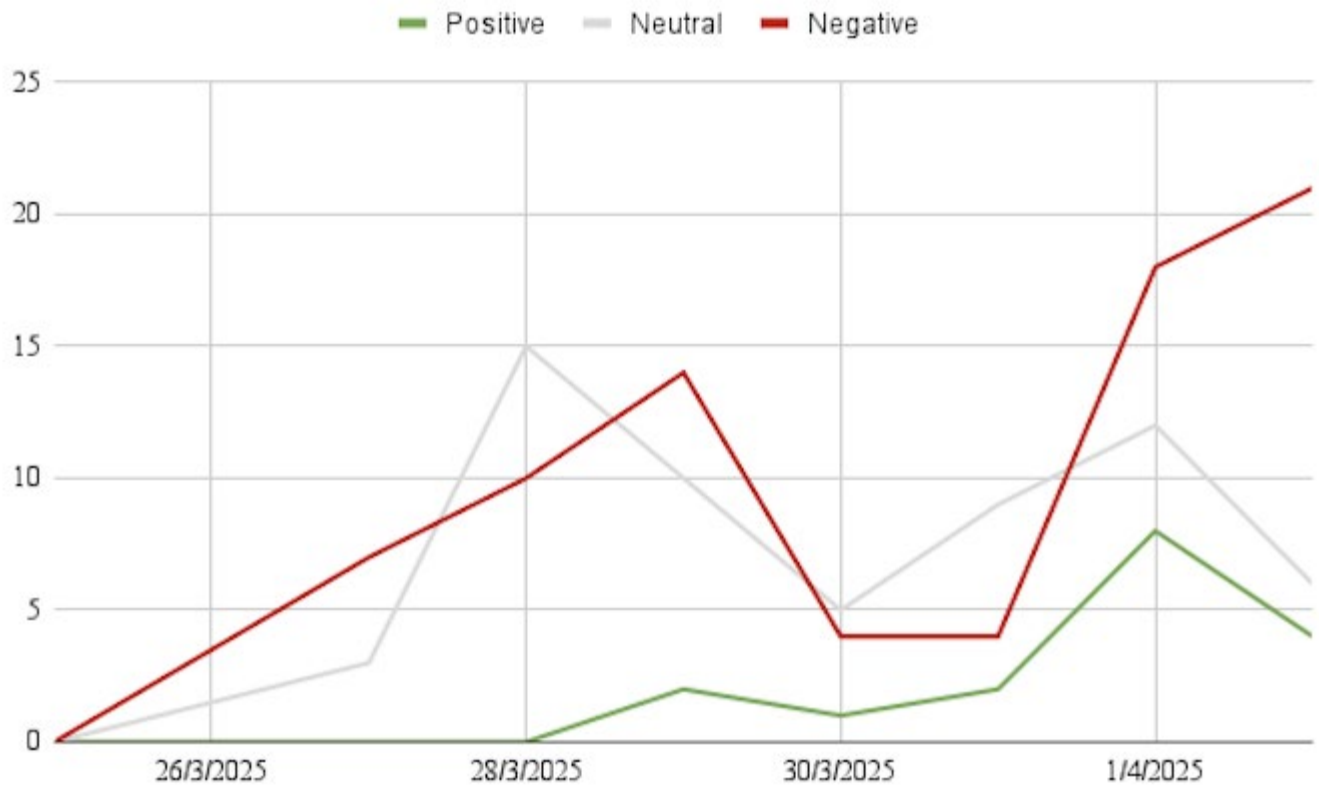

Figure 7: Culture related articles — Time distribution and sentiment.

Titles in the largest group, “pop culture”, were mostly characterized by a positive sentiment. Articles referred to the style of Japanese animation, describing its distinctive features, rankings, and

recommendations for fairy tales produced by Studio Ghibli. The dataset also included reports about murals inspired by the studio's style, though they were as curiosities. Titles marked with the code "trend explanation" carried either a neutral (3 titles) or positive (16 titles) sentiment. These articles focused on explaining Ghibli Trend and which tool could be used to stylize photos.

This category also included titles marked with "Miyazaki" (45). These articles frequently used the name of Studio Ghibli's creator in their titles. They thematically addressed both the animator's profile, his stance on using GenAI tools in animation, and potential legal actions against OpenAI. The dominant sentiment in these statements was negative.

The final group of titles was marked with "cultural education" (22). Titles in this group carried either a positive or neutral sentiment. They focused on cultural analyses of the Ghibli Trend itself, stylistic differences between the studio's productions and anime, the reasons behind the debate surrounding the trend, and the use of GenAI by artists. The dominant sentiment for this group was neutral.

Discussion

The Google News headlines covering the viral trend of using ChatGPT-4o to stylize user photos in the aesthetic of Studio Ghibli reflected the phenomenon's rapid rise as a major online event, marked by high popularity, intense user engagement, and a remarkable volume of media attention within a single week.

Virality in this context demonstrates a dual nature. It could draw attention to important issues — such as copyright, the boundaries of human-made art, and ethical critiques of AI — yet often falls short of producing lasting societal effects (Sangiorgio, *et al.*, 2025). Driven largely by emotion (Berger and Milkman, 2012) and amplified by media narratives, viral phenomena like the Ghibli Trend tend to be short-lived, quickly replaced by new trends such as AI-generated "starter pack" action figure sets.

The involvement of celebrities, public institutions, and brands, such as McDonald's, in the Ghibli Trend, frequently noted in analyzed articles, supported prior findings that public figures could significantly accelerate and broaden the spread of online content (Igben and Acchugbue, 2024), influencing its popularity.

Although the trend gained significant popularity, it also introduced the potential for ethically questionable content creation. Beyond the typical generation of images based on user prompts or stylistic modifications of existing photos, there were instances where content of a more morally ambiguous nature was observed — such as depictions of violent figures or war criminals rendered in the Ghibli animation style. While it was not possible to definitively state — especially given the absence of such reports in the media during the studied period — whether generating images of this kind negatively affected the Studio's reputation, the practice itself raises clear ethical concerns and appears to conflict with Studio Ghibli's established apolitical and nonviolent artistic ethos.

Shifts in sentiment observed in the headlines indicated changing attitudes toward the phenomenon. While some categories displayed balanced sentiment — suggesting space for dialogue — areas like copyright and ethics were dominated by negative tones, which limited discussion and led to one-sided evaluations. Research underscores that while opposing views can foster discourse, avoiding polarization is crucial for maintaining productive debate (Strandberg, *et al.*, 2019).

Certain thematic categories showed clear sentiment dominance: negative in "Opinions" and positive in "Usage," with these trends remaining stable. Although the social opinion amplification model (SOAM) suggests that polarization often arises gradually (Lim and Bentley, 2022), here it was evident from the start. Only "Technology" and "Reception" showed a late surge in negative sentiment. In "Reception," this shift

correlated with a drop in positive sentiment, indicating evolving public opinion over time.

The analysis revealed that legacy media play a pivotal role in shaping the public's understanding of viral phenomena like the Ghibli Trend. On one hand, by rapidly amplifying such trends, mainstream outlets can contribute to the vacuousness of viral media, prioritizing engagement and entertainment over depth and critical reflection. This was particularly evident in the use of sensational headlines and emotionally charged narratives, which may attract attention but risk trivializing complex ethical and cultural issues generating tabloidization (Diez-Gracia, *et al.*, 2024).

On the other hand, legacy media also possess the capacity to highlight the ethical implications of the blind use of generative AI. When journalistic coverage moves beyond surface-level reporting to critically examine topics such as copyright, artistic integrity, and the societal impact of AI-driven content, it can foster a more informed and ethically aware public discourse (Zhao, 2024). However, the balance between these two orientations is delicate and often influenced by economic pressures, audience expectations, and the rapid news cycle.

The dynamics of virality intensify ethical dilemmas faced by journalists in the digital age. The need to be first and to maximize reach can lead to shortcuts in verification, oversimplification, and a focus on what is trending rather than what is significant or accurate (Oso, *et al.*, 2024). This environment challenges traditional journalistic values — such as accuracy, objectivity, and public trust — and raises questions about the responsibility of the media in shaping societal understanding of new technologies and cultural shifts.

The analysis of news articles covering the Ghibli trend revealed a clear dichotomy in media orientation, oscillating between clickbait-driven narratives and ethically focused reporting. Several headlines and article excerpts displayed hallmarks of clickbait, such as sensational language, promises of shocking revelations, or exaggerated claims about the trend's impact on popular culture. These pieces often prioritize reader engagement over substantive discussion, framing the Ghibli trend as a viral phenomenon without deeper context. Importantly, clickbait content has been shown to affect core journalistic values, including accuracy, objectivity, and public trust (Rahman, 2023). Moreover, clickbait practices can undermine the credibility of news, eroding audience confidence in media reporting (Ghanem, *et al.*, 2020). Conversely, other articles adopted a more ethical perspective, critically examining the implications of AI-generated content, particularly in relation to copyright concerns and the responsibilities of both creators and platforms. These reports typically offered nuanced reflections on the broader societal and cultural ramifications of AI-driven image generation, highlighting issues such as intellectual property rights and the ethical use of creative works. Additionally, clickbait headlines are often subject to algorithmic amplification, which makes them even more visible and prominent online, as platform algorithms tend to favor content that drives user engagement (Lischka and Garz, 2023). By juxtaposing these two orientations, this study underscores how journalistic coverage can either contribute to the superficiality of viral trends or foster a more informed and ethically aware public discourse.

Conclusions

This study examined the media narrative surrounding the Ghibli Trend in titles of articles published on Google News between 25 March and 2 April 2025.

Due to the analysis, six main thematic areas covered by the articles' titles were identified (*RQ1*). For each area, different thematic groups were established. In each group, a dominant sentiment tendency was discovered (*RQ2*), although each contained positive, negative, and neutral statements.

The sentiment observation revealed that although it had been changing during the analysis period, there

were thematic groups with rather stable sentiment, reflecting attitudes towards issues. Opinions on art and ethics were overwhelmingly negative. Criticism of AI tools was predominant. Similarly, articles addressing copyright issues reflected negative sentiment, which indicated an awareness of potential infringement. Business-related topics, however, exhibited only neutral or positive sentiments. Similarly, articles addressing cultural impacts and public reception of AI tools and the trend demonstrated mostly positive sentiment within the analyzed period. Most titles reflected a positive view of AI tool development, especially in practical applications. Negative sentiment appeared mainly in content addressing technical issues (*RQ3*).

This study has a number of limitations, including a reliance on a single source (Google News), a short analysis period, and no data on the exact number of generated images. However, observing AI-related trends offers valuable insight into social reactions and could inform future research on digital behavior and cultural shifts.

The Ghibli Trend, sparked by an AI update, generated unexpected user engagement and widespread debate. The mass sharing of Ghibli-style images illustrates generative AI's significant effects on legal, ethical, cultural, and social spheres. Whether users are ready for this transformative influence remains an open question.

About the authors

Paulina Rutecka is an assistant professor in the Department of Informatics at the University of Economics in Katowice (Poland).
Direct comments to: paulina [dot] rutecka [at] uekat [dot] pl

Karina Cicha is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Design and Analysis at the University of Economics in Katowice (Poland).
E-mail: karina [dot] cicha [at] uekat [dot] pl

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