



Generative AI in the creative sector



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Exploring the value and
potential of creativity
in Aotearoa

Creative 
Futures

Introduction and summary

This report aims to provide insights for industry and government that will help those considering how these Generative AI tools are currently impacting the creative sector.

There is a knowledge gap about how the current use and impacts of AI technology in the creative sector in Aotearoa, and the short-to-medium term implications. Extant research, industry discourse, and government policy on the impact of AI in the creative sector is future-focused and/or concerned with international trends. Our research responds to this gap by exploring how Generative AI tools are actually being used by practitioners now.

This report summarises pilot research exploring perceptions, applications, and impacts of Generative AI technologies – including machine learning tools, Generative AI, and large language models – within the creative sector in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The findings presented here draw on a series of interviews conducted in late 2025, with ten creative practitioners based in Aotearoa.

Interviewees worked in a range of creative capacities, with disciplinary experience across cinematography, textiles product development, screen production, composition, music performance, screen composition (film & TV), sound editing (film & TV), social media management, arts advocacy and community engagement, and graphic design.

All interviewees had some level of awareness of / engagement with AI in the creative sector, and a wide spectrum of attitudes – these ran from active philosophical opposition to AI, where one noted “I have resisted the engagement with AI on every level”, to those who used AI tools enthusiastically as a key part of their day-to-day operations.





Summary of findings

- Among interviewees Generative AI tools were most commonly used for low-value administrative tasks, followed by ideation and experimentation. Interviewees noted that much of this labour would have been unpaid and/or unbillable.
- Interviewees were cautious in deploying Generative AI tools in final production work without rigorous quality assurance reviews / human oversight.
- There is a lack of clarity around the ownership of Intellectual Property in relation to outputs of Generative AI tools.
- Generative AI tools were reported as a time saver, but not a cost saver. Interviewees report productivity gains derived from using Generative AI tools, but not increased profitability.
- Some creators actively chose to exclude Generative AI tools from projects centered on Te Ao Māori due to concerns over cultural misrepresentation and data sovereignty.
- The market and labour impacts of Generative AI tools are difficult to separate from longer term structural trends and COVID impacts.
- Interviewees were concerned about displacement of jobs due to adoption of Generative AI tools but could not point to specific examples of where this has happened to date.
- Interviewees suggested that Generative AI was most likely to displace the type of low paid or unpaid labour used to establish professional credentials and networks.



Understanding

While the majority used, or had explored, Generative AI tools, interviewees had varying levels of understanding of what is meant by the term ‘Generative AI’.

Some interviewees were explicit about not knowing what AI was or how it worked.

Some felt that terms like ‘Generative AI’ were not well understood in the creative sector, and that blanket terms were used to encompass all applications of AI which led to poorly nuanced perspectives.

Others made confident pronouncements that revealed limited understanding, or misunderstandings, of the material requirements for generative models like Veo, including human data annotation, content moderation and the physical infrastructure, capital and environmental inputs required to build and maintain data-centres.

In some cases, interviewees identified tools as Generative AI that were not related to the field.

Interviewees typically described Generative AI as a tool that analyses patterns and data to generate “new” or “synthetic” material, and had an understanding of the process of giving prompts to generate an outcome.

Interviewees were familiar with, and often concerned about, the use of training data to develop generative models but were generally unable to describe how machine learning functions.

There was a tendency to anthropomorphise AI, for example referring to what a large language model “knows”, “believes”, “thinks” etc. when that isn’t what these systems do.

There was no real familiarity with specific technical terms such as Artificial Neural Networks, Transformer Architecture or General Adversarial Networks and in general the technical process of ‘what was happening’ when interviewees used AI tools appeared opaque.

This doesn’t mean interviewees don’t understand how to use the tools they are employing, but speaks to a general trend where ‘Artificial Intelligence’ has come to signify an unhelpfully broad range of technologies.

For example, there are significant differences in scale and application between an on-device machine learning tool that assists with isolating and cleaning up audio, an



in-house large language model used to conform writing to a style-guide, and a proprietary subscription based model for generating video and images.

This makes coherent discussion of its uptake and impacts difficult, not least because users themselves may be unable to differentiate what the tools they are using, or not using, are doing ‘under the hood’.



Application

The most commonly reported application for Generative AI tools was in automating or assisting in administrative tasks. Uses included calendar / diary management, client communication, SEO, project management, managing client lists, identifying target audiences, collating information on demographic profiles, generating meeting summaries, and so on.

After administrative tasks, generative models are frequently used for ideation, pre-visualisation, and pitching, allowing creatives to prototype ideas. There was a sense that this significantly sped up ideation, prototyping, and development processes, where uses included script breakdowns, editing screenplays, storyboarding, stem splitting, interview transcripts in factual content, social media.

Even within creative practices there were no ‘standard’ tools, and several interviewees described not having an “off the shelf” solution to their particular needs. This led interviewees to rely on a constantly changing mix of offerings from different vendors, which often changed when new generative models were brought to market.

In both cases there was a sense that interviewees usually found this type of work burdensome and not particularly enjoyable – some described this labour as “not everyone’s favourite thing to do” or “not the best use of your time”. In general interviewees described this work as “unpaid” and or low-value work.

Some interviewees described their use of generative tools as a “sounding board”, where they could experiment with different ideas with fast turnaround – one described this as “high velocity”, where they saw this as a collaborative iteration process that forced them out of their own head and presented them with new ideas – to this end, one referred to AI as a “circuit breaker”.

While interviewees saw the benefit of AI as an administrative or planning tool, they were generally hesitant to use it in the execution of creative work.



Drawbacks and concerns

Many spoke about AI-generated outputs as lacking humanity – common phrases were “cold”, “soulless”, “emotionless”, where they saw AI as having “functional workflow use”, but not being creative in itself and/or lacking sophistication and nuance compared to human creativity.

Some interviewees noted they worked with clients who saw the use of Generative AI as a risk to their reputation / brand. Others noted that IP laws in Aotearoa lack clarity in relation to the output of Generative AI tools and that ambiguity regarding who owns AI-generated outputs, and inconsistent international legal frameworks, is a barrier to broader commercial adoption.

Others referred to uncertainty around how the use of Generative AI tools would be viewed by funding bodies if disclosed. An interviewee in the screen sector, for example, noted that funding applications had recently begun requiring the disclosure of AI use in the development of their application, and that this led to a feeling of unease of whether this would jeopardise their chances or being successful.

In relation to client or public facing work all interviewees stressed the need for human quality assurance (QA), requiring someone with domain expertise reviewing and refining AI outputs to ensure they meet professional standards and avoid errors or “hallucinations”. Many interviewees said they “didn’t trust” the outputs of Generative AI models, pointing to persistent glitches, lack of consistency, false claims etc. that they had witnessed in AI content that made them hesitant to let AI tools produce work “all on its own”. Others described chain-of-thought processing, and being able to interrogate and ‘redirect’ Generative AI outputs, as essential to maintaining coherent outputs.

There is an interesting tension here between interviewees recognising the outputs of Generative AI may be inherently untrustworthy, and an assumption that the users’ domain expertise will be sufficient to ameliorate any risks associated with this. Some interviewees felt it was simply too risky to use AI in certain contexts – one interviewee stated “you need humans for the higher-risk stuff”.

Productivity

Interviewees who had incorporated Generative AI tools into their core operations typically reported an increase in the amount of work they had completed over the last twelve months or an increased capacity to take on additional work.



Some noted that this had changed their working patterns, particularly those who freelanced – where they might previously had spent five days on one job, they were now doing one job in one day, every day for five days.

These self-reported gains need to be explored further as some felt the review and oversight required by Generative AI tools actually used up more of their time – one noted “I waste time fixing things”. In other cases using Generative AI tools made tasks more difficult or convoluted than they would be unassisted; this was due to the unsuitability of available tools, or because of needing to hand-off work between tools to produce an acceptable outcome.

Notably increased speed and quantity of work completed with Generative AI tools did not equate to increased profitability. Rather, the cost of access to Generative AI tools means interviewees reported effectively running to stand still. One interviewee noted that, due to the increased speed of their work while using AI tools, their firm’s output and revenue was at an all time high, while profits remained largely unchanged.

Many interviewees observed that demand for faster turnaround times and tighter budgets was a long-term trend and related to structural challenges and/or changes in their sector that predate widespread availability of Generative AI tools.

These included a highly competitive market for a small number of jobs, shrinking creative workforces, creative talent moving overseas, reduced budgets, lingering COVID impacts, less international investment, financial crises, cost of living, and the growth of in-house creative teams.

Many noted the relatively small scale of the creative sector in Aotearoa compared to the US, and how this impacted budgets, timelines, and ultimately viability and profitability.

Significantly, interviewees reported that much of the work that they were using Generative AI tools for would have been “unpaid” labour that they would have volunteered to ensure creative projects were completed / or happened.

This reflects the substantial amount of volunteer labour across the creative sector in Aotearoa and that many creatives choose to pursue careers and projects that are less financially rewarding - effectively subsidising commercial and funded production costs in order to pursue creative outcomes.

In this way, some felt that AI enabled creatives in Aotearoa to work more efficiently in ways that challenged these previous obstacles and enabled work that would otherwise be impossible due to cost.



Displaced labour

Many interviewees were concerned by the potential of AI to displace the creative workforce, and spoke to anecdotal examples of where they had already seen this happening across the sector both in Aotearoa and internationally. Most interviewees were concerned for the future of the workforce, but felt unsure what the full scope of this would look like, and the wider flow on effects for unemployment and the national economy.

Interviewees did not have specific examples where the use of Generative AI tools had led to a reduction in paid roles within their own organisations or was attributed to layoffs by their competitors. However, several interviewees noted that particular types of work had been displaced and the focus of roles within their organisation may have shifted away from strictly creative work towards higher level conceptualisation, project management, consultancy and advisory work.

Interviewees who primarily worked as contractors speculated they may have seen less work due to others' use of Generative AI tools, while those working in larger organisations noted that some external contractors such as photographers or videographers may have been employed less frequently for quick turnaround / low value work.

Several interviewees pointed out that the general financial climate since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted the creative workforce and that these changes were more significant than the uptake of Generative AI tools. In the design sector in particular interviewees suggested many major clients also now employed in-house creative teams which had reduced or replaced their reliance on external contractors and agencies.

Established practitioners felt secure in their jobs, but worried that early career creatives are more likely to be impacted by the broad uptake of Generative AI tools. In particular they suggested that Generative AI was most likely to displace the type of low paid or unpaid labour used to establish professional credentials and networks. Several interviewees spoke to the need for emerging creatives to be skilled and critically engaged with AI tools in order to meet the demands of the future creative workforce.



Devaluing creativity

One of the main criticisms of the use of Generative AI tools was that they devalue, or will lead to a devaluing of, creativity.

Many interviewees were concerned that increasing financial constraints would mean that cheap generative content would be prioritised over work done by humans.

This fits within a long history of automation across media / technological forms and associated shifts towards smaller 'efficient', 'agile' and 'entrepreneurial' production teams expected to deliver persistent productivity gains.

A second issue is that AI was discussed as making work that felt inauthentic, fake, or soulless where quantity is valued over quality. Many interviewees described a strong, widespread aversion to "AI slop", content that feels inauthentic, overly synthetic, or devoid of human emotion.

Several interviewees raised concerns around the use of unlicensed creative works as training data for generative models and that the government had not yet made moves around protections for creatives that they had observed overseas.

Data sovereignty and tikanga Māori

A recurrent theme in interviews was concern over Generative AI appropriations and misuse of Māori imagery (e.g. tohu, tā moko), mātauranga Māori (e.g. iwi affiliations, tikanga), and the ethics of generative imagery of maunga, awa, and whenua.

Generative AI models were described as consistently failing to accurately represent specific cultural nuances, such as tā moko appearing as scribbles or substituting Pacific people for Māori. Because of this some creators actively choose to exclude AI from projects centered on Te Ao Māori.

Interviewees noted that the infrastructure needed to sustain AI-use long term wasn't yet available in Aotearoa, where major data servers were located overseas. This created problems for data sovereignty from a Te Ao Māori perspective, particularly the need to keep sensitive data on New Zealand soil or in controlled environments rather than on international public cloud servers.





Areas for further research

This pilot research suggests several areas for further enquiry.

In the first instance there is an obvious and urgent need to understand the experience of early-career practitioners as they seek to establish professional credentials and networks in competition with Generative AI tool uptake.

Related to this, further work is needed to understand if and how established professionals – particularly those managing creative teams – consider their use of Generative AI tools in relation to early-career practitioners. Furthermore, it will be necessary to better understand how they conceptualise and manage their employees' relationship to Generative AI tools that may be threatening their own, or others, career pathways.

There is also a need for quantitative assessments of, if and where, the value from any productivity gains associated with Generative AI tool use are being realised, especially if this is being realised offshore, and what implications this has for the ongoing operation of the creative sector in Aotearoa New Zealand.

More broadly, a wider and more granular survey of the use of Generative AI tools might helpfully examine relationships between annual hours worked, gross income, profits or other proxies for productivity and/or volume of work.

Similarly it may be useful to explore the uptake and use of Generative AI tools among creatives of different disciplines, career stages and generations, as well as other factors that inform 'rational' uptake of these tools.

The uptake and types of Generative AI tools available vary across the domains within the creative sector, such as screen production, visual design, games and music.

Future enquiry would benefit from comparison across these domains and clearer distinctions around:

- What type of creative work is being undertaken?
- What type of tools are being used?
- Where in the production chain?
- To what particular end?



- Where is the value from productivity gains being realised?

A key limitation of this study was relying on participants' own descriptions of how they used Generative AI tools and self-reported productivity gains. Future research might helpfully explore what creatives say vs what they do, particularly focussing on where public narratives around AI benefits and risks intersect with actions / behaviours.

