Collective Agency in Art-making: Towards Community-centric Design of Text-to-Image (T2I) AI Tools

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Abstract

Text-to-image (T2I) AI tools are trained on vast datasets of existing images and artworks. We identify that existing ethical standards and regulatory safeguards for these tools largely lie within the Western neoliberal realm. They assume that artistic creativity originates from individuals rather than in collectives or social environments, ownership is an individual concern rather than shaped by communities and shared cultural traditions, and compensation should be based on individual claims rather than acknowledging collective contributions to artistic knowledge. In this paper, we counter these assumptions by theorizing 'collective agency' as a critical conceptual lens to rethink artists' community-centric roles in relation to these tools. Drawing from our nine-month-long qualitative interventions with diverse Bangladeshi artist groups, we find that these artists manifest cultural resonance, co-creation, and sense of recognition through their art-making practices which fosters collective agency among them. This empirically grounded account of collective agency in our study posits practical design and policy implications, such as incorporating artists' solidarity, community-centric data stewardship, and collective bargaining mechanisms in ethical development of T2I AI tools to reclaim artists' control over their creative practices in the AI age.

Introduction

Text-to-image (T2I) AI tools have sparked intense debates around intellectual property (IP) and copyright infringement since their market inception. These tools, trained on vast datasets of existing images and artworks, incorporate styles, motifs, and techniques of human artists, often without compensation by devaluing their creative labor and dignity as artists (Zeilinger 2021). Ethical and legal safeguards such as consent mechanisms or copyright laws exist, although sometimes ineffective (Murray 2023); we identify that they largely operate under the Western neoliberal realm of artistic production. They assume that creativity is an individual 'skill', artworks are 'products' and ownership of these artworks exclusively belongs to the artist who produces them; therefore, compensation should be based on the artist's individual claims to keep them thriving in the economic competition. However, such neoliberal ideologies (Harvey 2007) hide structural injustices created and amplified by the global big techs, and shift the burden on the artists.

In this paper, we propose a novel theoretical direction of 'collective agency' as a critique of the neoliberal presumptions of competition and self-interest in the AI art realm. Such notion of agency helps us better understand how communities become motivated in working towards their shared goals, often opposing or resisting dominant power structures in society. We conceptualize collective agency by drawing from a range of philosophers, sociologists, STS and feminist scholars and ground it in our robust empirical work (see (Charmaz 2015) for grounded theory approach). We conduct a nine-month-long qualitative intervention with diverse Bangladeshi art practitioners, including art and architecture students, design professionals, Mehendi/Henna and Alpana artists, and rickshaw painters. Our artist groups come from both marginalized and stable economic backgrounds and practice mundane, traditional art forms significant to Bangladeshi culture with their varying level of formal and informal training. By deeply engaging with these communities, we find that these artists exercise collective agency in their relational and community-centric art-making practices that manifest through cultural resonance, co-creation and sense of recognition within their specific social-material contexts.

Our theoretical and empirical account of collective agency offers critical vocabulary and nuanced, culturally situated insights around artistic productions in relation to AI, particularly in/for Global South contexts. In contrast to treating artists as isolated individuals negotiating their rights in an asymmetrical, often unjust neoliberal economy, our work highlights artists' solidarity, community-centric data stewardship, and collective bargaining mechanisms in design and policy mechanisms around ethical development of T2I AI

tools. We discuss these implications along with some speculative interventions at the end of this paper.

Related Work

AIES community has remain vigilant around the reputational damage, financial loss, plagiarism, and copyright violations of professional artists since the inception and popularization of T2I tools, and advocated for legislation requiring companies to disclose training data and resources to avoid such harms (see (Jiang et al. 2023)). Experts in the field increasingly suggest that these tools extract value from artists' creative labor, often without compensation, but we find that these discussions around consensual use of artistic works for AI development address only personal ownership and artists' individual autonomy (Goetze 2024). A thread of literature also identifies the limits of conventional data rights and protection concepts, such as informed consent forms' ineffectiveness in facilitating participants' agency beyond data collection (Jing, Berger, and Becerra Sandoval 2023) and their inadequacy for models trained in publicly available data (Huang and Siddarth 2023). Even larger-scale governance-based solutions, including consortium-based funding to monitor tech companies and structures intends to safeguard data ownership on individual level (Huang and Siddarth 2023). In general, there is a gap in literature regarding community-centric engagement with artistic production and how such engagement can provide practical understanding for addressing privacy and data rights concerns around AI-art.

Such community-centric approach appears more necessary as AI technologies are restructuring society and increasingly exposing people to systemic injustice. Lack of institutional arrangements works as an obstacle to ensure the needs, concerns, and experiences of all parts of societies to be equitably heard and recognized in the AI design processes. Researchers, particularly highlighting Global South contexts, show that the absence of cultural and geography-specific training data can result in severe representation crisis and harm marginal artists' creative endeavors with T2I models (Mim et al. 2024; Qadri et al. 2023; Naggita, LaChance, and Xiang 2023; Ghosh et al. 2024; Qadri, Mirowski, and Denton 2025). Scholars argue that tech companies facilitate cultural hegemony (Brown et al. 2024) by developing these models without community inputs and their active participation (Suresh et al. 2024). However, companies remain reluctant to address these resource-intensive processes due to high costs and a lack of incentives for transparency (Groves et al. 2023). They prioritize their business interests through their extractive data collection process which may further marginalize these population groups due to their unequal decision-making power (Hemment et al. 2023). Failing to solve such representation problems, many companies are now using synthetic data, which introduces new challenges such as obfuscation of data lineage, difficulties in enforcing consent-based frameworks, and problems in model deletion and auditing. Whitney et al. identify such tendencies as 'participation washing' and suggest that they misrepresent real-world social dynamics and devalue communities as data subjects (Whitney and Norman 2024).

Above discussions highlight that the problems of inclusive AI development are complex. While the models need to be representative to be better responsive and useful, existing ethical instruments to shape such inclusive design are not community-centric. Ajmani et al. recently propose 'data agency theory' (DAT) as a solution-centric approach to such problems by suggesting that group-based justice is crucial in designing with and for the communities or social groups affected by data (Ajmani et al. 2024). They highlight some clear measures such as community participation, channels for questions, transparent feedback mechanisms, and avoidance of excessive or unnecessary data to reduce the risk of exploitation or unintended use. Similarly, Payal Arora introduces the 'creative data justice framework' for Global South stakeholders, focusing on the relationship between creative labor and data rights (Arora 2024). To challenge the existing power imbalances in global data governance, she necessitates the need to ethnographically engage with communities to understand their indigenous and care-centric data practices. In our paper, we extend this line of work by providing a novel theoretical understanding around artists' agency by engaging with diverse Bangladeshi artist communities. Our work provides situated, nuanced understanding around how these communities perceive and perform their agency which influence the ownership of their work and suggest way forwards for protecting their creative rights in the AI age.

Conceptual Framework

We conceptualize our study first by exploring how neoliberal ideas fall short in understanding collectivity in human agency and then examining how community-centric artistic practices enable such collective subjectivities to emerge among art practitioners. In the following subsections, we discuss these notions.

Limits of neoliberal conception of agency in AI

Neoliberal ideologies consider human agency as a form of 'entrepreneurial selfhood' (Howie and Campbell 2016), driven by individual effort and choices (Harvey 2007; Larner 2003; Ganti 2014). Policies informed by such ideologies reduce state interventions (Yeung 2000) and focus on markets for resource allocation (Evans, Richmond, and Shields 2005), with cut-throat economic competition driving innovations in society (Buch-Hansen and Wigger 2010). Although individuals are depicted as 'free agents' (Gershon 2011), structural inequalities (Navarro 2007), systemic oppressions (Mentan 2016), and precarities (Schram 2015) limit the capacity of people to act freely within neoliberal realms, putting disproportionate burdens placed on marginalized communities (Bush 2007; Brown and Baker 2012).

The current AI industry is built on and runs through such neoliberal logic. AI tools like chatbots (Chong et al. 2021; Pizzi, Scarpi, and Pantano 2021; Castillo, Canhoto, and Said 2024), personalized assistants (Maedche et al. 2019), and self-tracking health devices (Sharon 2017; Feng et al. 2021) are often marketed as giving users 'more control' or 'better agency' over their lives. Such promises often obscure how

user agency is restricted by proprietary platforms (Srnicek 2017), surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2023), and opaque algorithms (O'neil 2017). Gig Economy platforms often portray gig workers as 'autonomous micro-entrepreneurs', but contrarily, these workers' actions are tightly controlled by algorithmic management, such as performance ratings and algorithm-driven task assignments (Kuhn and Maleki 2017; Lata, Burdon, and Reddel 2023; Giousmpasoglou, Ladkin, and Marinakou 2024; Quirk, Robinson, and Thibos 2020). We identify that when tech platforms collect vast troves of personal data to train AI models for their own profit (Manheim and Kaplan 2019; Sadowski 2020), they extend and reinforce similar neoliberal logic. Unfortunately, the critiques of such practices in scholarly conversations also limit them to individualistic conception of user privacy and consent (Becker 2019; Solove 2002) that hide structural causes of injustice, more intensely in limited resource settings in the Global South, and shift the burden on users to protect themselves.

Agency as a collective dynamic

In contrast to the neoliberal concept of agency, our work conceptualizes 'collective agency' to understand the collective, relational, and structural dimensions of human action. We understand collective agency as the capacity of groups or communities to work together toward shared goals, often against existing power structures. Such mode of agency emphasizes cooperation, solidarity, and interdependence (Gehring and Marx 2023; Kolers 2012; Kitayama and Uchida 2005), by challenging neoliberal assumptions of competition and self-interest (Davies 2016) in agency formation.

We engage with a range of philosophers, sociologists, STS and feminist scholars to build our conceptions and find three conditions that build critical understanding of collective agency. First, collective agency is relational, individuals act within a network of relationships that enable or constrain their capacity to act. In feminist theory, 'relational agency' highlights how marginalized groups' action is often amplified or constrained by power relations, norms, and structures of domination (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000; McNay 2013). Second, collective agency is structurally embedded, people's actions are shaped by social norms, dispositions, and past experiences, which are internalized through their environment (see Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' (Bourdieu 2017, 2018)). Third, collective agency can be materially shaped: agency can be distributed across humans, non-human entities, and material infrastructures and results from interactions among these actors (see Actor-network Theory (ANT) (Latour 2007)).

Historically, collective agency has often been used to challenge systems of domination and inequality such as workers' movements (Cumbers, Nativel, and Routledge 2008), anti-colonial struggles (Bose 2003), and civil rights movements (Morris 1999), which continue till the present day with digital-social movements such as 'Me Too' (Ozkazanc-Pan 2019) and 'Black Lives Matter', (Yang 2016) reshaping social, economic, and political orders and structures. In our work, we use this lens to understand collectivity in art-making practices and how artists' agency intertwines with such processes.

Collectivity in artistic production

Marxist theorists argue that art is shaped by economic factors and class relations (Munro 1960), and can act as a form of resistance against capitalism or ideological hegemony (Gal 1995). Movements like Surrealism (Short 1966), Harlem Renaissance (Huggins 1995), and Afrofuturism (Samatar 2017) emerge from collective dialogues among artists. Feminist theorists critique the myth of the 'male genius' in art history and emphasize the relational, collaborative, and often invisible labor of women in artistic production (Parker and Pollock 2020). Decolonial thinkers highlight how art from colonized or marginalized communities has been exploited or erased in dominant cultural narratives (Said 1993), and argue for more situated and community-centered forms of art-making.

These perspectives show that art, within any social realm, exists and is governed by power relations (Sorokin 2017; Wolff and Wolff 1981; Luhmann 2000), and cultural capital, taste, and recognition can shape production and distribution of art (Quinn, Ploof, and Hochtritt 2012; Thomas 2019). However, dominant Western, neoliberal framing encourages commodification of art (Charnley 2021) emphasizing individual branding and market success over collective or social value (Preece and Kerrigan 2015). As a result, artists consider their art as a product for consumption rather than an artifact or process of social engagement (Thompson 2012). Therefore, we realize the necessity of exploring the collective nature of art-making practices, particularly with the rise of AI's penetration in the world of art-making. Artistic creation involves borrowing, blending, and reinterpreting cultural forms (Sanders 2015). Even while working alone, an artist draws from a shared cultural repertoire of symbols, narratives, and techniques learned through social engagement (Goldbard 2006). Moreover, artists' social upbringing, cultural environment, material resources, funding, and institutional support significantly influence their creative practices (Belfiore 2002), with institutional gatekeeping determining their visibility and legitimacy, privileging certain representations while marginalizing others (Alexander and Bowler 2021).

We explore how such collective agency manifests through artistic production in our research. In the following sections of the paper, we unfold our methodological approach, findings and finally discuss the design implications of our theoretical contributions.

Methods

Over a nine-month period (March - December 2024), we employed a multi-method qualitative approach, combining workshops (Ørngreen and Levinsen 2017), focus group discussions (Hennink 2013), and semi-structured interviews (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik 2021) to explore diverse artistic and design practices in Bangladesh. Our research team consists of academically trained artists, architects, designers, and computer scientists - born and raised in Bangladesh

and experts in critical social science research. In the following paragraphs, we describe our study background, each phase of data collection and our mode of analysis in detail.

Study background

As is common in ethnographic and qualitative research (Higginbottom, Boadu, and Pillay 2013), we began this study with an open-ended objective: to explore the impacts of generative AI tools on a range of visual art practices in Bangladesh. Our participant pool comprised a diverse group of artists and art practitioners, including visual art and architecture students, professional designers, Alpana and Mehendi/Henna artists, and rickshaw painters. Here we need to mention that these art forms were selected not only for their cultural centrality but also for their historical and sociopolitical marginalization in global art and technology discourses. Alpana, a traditional Bengali folk art characterized by vibrant motifs, holds deep ritual and communal significance (Chaitanya 1976); Mehendi/Henna, a decorative body art form primarily practiced by women, features prominently in celebratory and ceremonial contexts (Thakur et al. 2024); and rickshaw painting, which involves colorful oil-based illustrations on rickshaw bodies and roofs, represents a unique vernacular visual language of urban Bangladesh (Mahmud 2022). These communities and their artistic practices are rarely acknowledged in global conversations on art history, digital aesthetics, or AI-based creative production.

Participants were initially recruited through the authors' personal and professional networks. To expand the diversity and reach of the sample, we subsequently employed a snowball sampling strategy (Goodman 1961), wherein existing participants referred others who met the inclusion criteria. Specifically, we included individuals who (1) identified as practicing visual artists, designers, or artisans working in culturally significant Bangladeshi art forms; (2) resided and practiced within Bangladesh; and (3) had some awareness of, exposure to, or opinions about generative AI tools, regardless of direct usage. We also aimed to capture a range of training backgrounds, including formal, informal, and self-taught, to reflect the varied educational and experiential pathways through which artists in Bangladesh develop their practice.

To account for the varied social and epistemic contexts of our participants, we adopted different qualitative methods tailored to each group. For academically trained artists, such as design students and professionals, we conducted participatory workshops that mirrored their familiarity with structured critique and collaborative inquiry. For rickshaw painters, we organized focus group discussions (FGDs), which aligned with their informal, peer-driven modes of expression and encouraged collective reflection. For Mehendi/Henna/Alpona artists, we conducted semi-structured interviews to support individual storytelling, accommodating their personal, often home-based nature of practice, and schedule constraints. This multimodal design ensured that our research approach was inclusive, context-sensitive, and respectful of the diverse ways in which artistic knowledge is produced and shared.

Workshops

We conducted three two-hour workshops at different phases of the study with a total of 26 participants, including undergraduate and graduate visual art and architecture students, practicing architects, and designers in Bangladesh (11 male, 15 female). These workshops aimed to explore participants' art-based career practices and engagements with generative AI tools. To ground the discussions, we first analyzed 20 international news articles published between April 2023 and February 2024, identifying key themes in public discourse around AI-generated art. Positive narratives included enhanced accessibility, creativity, and transformations in the online art market, while concerns focused on copyright infringement, intellectual property violations, artistic devaluation, unemployment, and stereotyping. Drawing on these themes, we crafted six speculative scenarios as short narrative provocations to prompt discussion. For instance, one story featured a young Bangladeshi artist who discovers that a popular online image-sharing platform is using her uploaded artworks to train AI models without consent, sparking conflicting emotions about recognition and exploitation. As participants were not formally trained in computer science, we opened each workshop with simplified diagrams explaining the image generation process in generative AI systems to clarify how training data flows within these models. After this explanation, we invited participants to reflect on how they would feel if their artworks were used to train AI systems, followed by in-depth group discussions centered around the themes raised in the speculative scenarios.

FGDs

To explore the perspectives, challenges, and lived experiences of marginalized rickshaw painters, we conducted two focus group discussions (FGDs) with a total of five participants in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The artists, ranging in age from 29 to 65, each had a minimum of seven years of experience in the rickshaw art industry and demonstrated familiarity with digital art practices. The FGDs were designed to elicit participants' perceptions of generative AI technologies, their conceptual understanding of such tools, and the perceived implications for their artistic work. Given their limited prior exposure to AI systems, we prepared a set of visual cards that illustrated how generative AI operates and its potential applications in visual art production, ensuring accessibility and grounding the discussion in concrete examples. Using a semi-structured format, we explored multiple dimensions: participants' interpretations of AI-generated imagery, their assessments of whether AI could support or undermine their craft, anticipated professional opportunities and threats posed by AI integration, and their views on the ethical use of their artworks as training data. Additional topics included their responses to the emergence of 'prompt artists', their perspectives on the need for AI regulation in the art sector, and their recommendations for designing AI tools that could meaningfully support their practice. Each session lasted approximately two hours and provided rich insight into how traditional artists are navigating the digital turn in contemporary visual culture.

Figure 1: (a) A rickshaw board painted in the inspiration of popular Arabic story of Alif Laila and Jinn adapted to Bangladeshi cultural context. (b) The usual working environment of rickshaw painters. (c) A senior rickshaw painter sharing his experiences during an interview with our field researcher

Semi-structured interviews

Over the course of the study, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 Alpana and Mehendi artists (6 males and 8 females) in Bangladesh to explore their artistic practices, the cultural significance, and the socio-economic dynamics of their work. The interviews, each lasting approximately 45-60 minutes, provided a balance between guided questions and open-ended discussions, allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences, creative inspirations, and the evolving nature of their craft. Our artists represented diverse backgrounds in terms of training, experience, and professional engagement. The conversations included themes such as seasonal demand for their work, community engagement in artwork production, the impact of commercialization, and the intergenerational transmission of artistic skills. The flexible interview format facilitated in-depth narratives, offering rich qualitative insights into the community-centric challenges and aspirations of these traditional artists.

In total, this study generated 14 semi-structured interviews, three workshops, and two focus group discussions (FGDs), resulting in over 100 pages of field notes, 67 photographs, and more than 25 hours of recorded conversations. All sessions were conducted in Bangla and subsequently transcribed and translated into English to facilitate analysis. Prior to analysis, all transcripts were anonymized by removing personally identifying information and assigning pseudonyms to participants to protect their identities. We adopted an inductive approach (Thomas 2006), allowing themes and insights to emerge from the data without relying on predetermined categories. Our team conducted manual open coding (Strauss and Corbin 1990), with each transcript independently reviewed by at least two researchers. Coding was done using structured spreadsheets and annotation templates to identify meaningful data segments, which were then compared and discussed in collaborative sessions to ensure consistency and resolve discrepancies.

Following this, we applied thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2012) to identify patterns and concepts across the dataset. Data segments were grouped based on similarity and relevance, and recurring patterns were synthesized into higher-order themes. We finalized themes through multiple rounds of discussion, guided by their relevance to the research questions, conceptual depth, and recurrence across participant groups. Analytic memos were maintained throughout to document emerging insights and methodological reflections. Regular team meetings ensured analytical rigor and helped verify that no significant data were omitted during the coding process. Finally, we remained reflexive about our roles as researchers familiar with the sociocultural contexts of the communities involved, critically examining how our positionalities may have influenced both data interpretation and theme development. The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the ethics boards of the authors' academic institutions. We did not provide monetary compensations to our participants, since it is often considered inappropriate in Bangladeshi context, as we realize from our own lived and long ethnographic research experience in this social-cultural setting.

Findings

Our findings reveal that collective agency among Bangladeshi artists emerges not as an abstract ideal but as a lived, community-rooted practice shaped by cultural, material, and relational entanglements. We find that, rather than positioning the artist as an isolated creator, collective agency foregrounds how artistic labor becomes meaningful through shared emotions, mutual collaboration, and the demand for acknowledgment within a community. In the following paragraphs, we unpack this interwoven relationship between art-making and agency through three key themes: **Resonance**, **Co-creation**, and **Recognition**. These themes offer a grounded understanding of how collective agency is enacted and experienced in the everyday lives of artists.

Resonance

T2I AI tools, while powerful, are trained on human-produced data, allowing them to identify patterns and mimic human artistic creativity. However, most participants in our study believe AI tools lack the innate ability to experience the world and derive meaning from within. Our participants perceive art-making as a relational process, resonating with personal and communal experiences, emotions, and relationships with the cultural, social, and material world.

Cultural Continuum: Our participants emphasized that their creativity is shaped by a complex interplay of personal memory, cultural heritage, and collective aesthetic values. This inspiration is not solely individual; it resonates through shared histories, religious beliefs, media, and everyday life, constituting a form of collective agency that draws meaning from the cultural world artists inhabit. Maliha (pseudonym, 37, female), a professional Mehendi/Henna artist, shared that although she learned the art form from her mother, her imagination was continuously shaped by her cultural surroundings. Growing up in the 1990s, she observed that Henna designs were predominantly influenced by natural elements such as flowers, leaves, vines, and water. These motifs were commonly passed down informally, reinterpreted within family and neighborhood spaces.

During her high school years at an all-girls school, Maliha became well-known among classmates for her ability to blend traditional Bangladeshi Henna designs with Indian styles she encountered in television dramas. Today, her inspirations have expanded globally through Instagram, where she follows Henna artists from Africa, India, and the Middle East. Yet, she adapts these influences with cultural care:

> *"As a professional Henna artist, I constantly adapt my styles and techniques, drawing inspiration from artists from other countries. I adapt designs to fit our cultural context, such as Indian Henna art, which often incorporates goddesses. In Bangladesh, where many clients practice Islam, I adapt these designs to align with cultural and religious preferences, ensuring a culturally harmonious and respectful Henna art."* - Maliha (pseudonym, 37, female), a professional Mehendi/Henna artist.

We need to bring another example here before summarizing our findings around the cultural continuum. During one of the workshops with architecture students, several participants explained that their designs draw heavily on the everyday visual landscape they grew up with— houses, furniture, trees, and local textures. However, they reported that AI tools often failed to evoke this sense of resonance, as the objects and scenes generated by these systems lacked cultural familiarity. The tree leaves looked foreign; the houses didn't feel like home. As a result, they struggled to feel inspired when using these tools.

In Maliha's case, resonance occurs not simply through aesthetic borrowing but through a dialogic process where collective cultural norms guide what is appropriate, beautiful, or meaningful. This points toward the artist's relational agency, which emerges through her capacity to tune into and adapt across cultural boundaries while maintaining fidelity to local values. Our conversation with the architecture students specifically points out that when this alignment is disrupted, as often happens with AI-generated art trained on distant datasets, artists feel disconnected from the tools, and their sense of agency is diminished.

The Matter of Practice: Our findings show that artistic agency, as experienced by the rickshaw, Alpana, and Henna artists in this study, is deeply entangled with the materials they work with. Materials that do not merely serve as tools but actively shape the form, texture, and meaning of their art. This material connection is not only tactile but social and situated. It is learned through years of hands-on experience, often guided by mentorship and community knowledge.

Rickshaw painters in our study emphasized that although Gen AI tools can generate images mimicking rickshaw paintings, these tools miss the layered crafting techniques that are central to their artistic process. They draw upon a dynamic and often improvised material environment, adjusting designs in real time depending on available paints, surface types, and textures. Rickshaw art involves three to four distinct layers of work, each requiring different pigments, brushes, and drying times. Artists apply one layer after another to achieve the desired visual effect, often relying on sensory feedback and intuitive judgment developed over the years. In our FGDs, they expressed concern that AI systems are not attuned to these layers of labor, nor to the material constraints that shape design choices in rural and urban Bangladesh. One of the senior Rickshaw painters, Selim (pseudonym, 57, male), explained:

> *"AI may handle the visual looks of our artworks to some extent, perhaps easily. But the art-making process is complex, as we often need to customize our design with the materials available at the time we are working. These real-time modifications give our painting a distinct texture that I do not think is possible (at an image-level) if we want to recreate that with AI."* - Selim (pseudonym, 57, male), Rickshaw Painter.

Similarly, Alpana artists emphasized how the texture and appearance of their designs change depending on whether they are working on mud floors, concrete, or paved streets. Rasel (pseudonym, 24, male) shared how his family, originally from a rural village, has practiced Alpana for generations using rice flour or chalk-based pigments, mixed with water and applied using fingers, cloth, or thread. The materials were often improvised based on local availability, and their handling techniques were passed down within the family. When Rasel and his peers now recreate Alpanas in urban homes, they rely on commercially available paints, creating a noticeably different aesthetic. The shift in materials thus not only changes the visual form but also transforms the social and sensory dynamics of the art-making process.

Henna artists also described how material handling is central to their art-making process. Many noted the importance of customizing their own Henna cones using thin plastic sheets and scotch tape to ensure the right pressure and flow. The amount of Henna that comes out, and thus the thickness and detail of each line, is controlled through the artist's hand. This tactile control allows them to express variation, precision, and depth in their designs, something they feel commercial cones or digital tools cannot replicate. The control of material here is not merely technical; it is a site of skill, identity, and ownership over the art.

In each of these cases, what may seem like minor material adjustments are in fact core to the artist's sense of authorship and cultural fidelity. Hence, their connection to materiality is central to their collective agency. When AI systems (that ab-

Figure 2: (a) Henna artist preparing cones manually (b) Pressure on the Henna cones determines the line thickness in Henna design on hand (c) Henna artist exploring Mandala design as a fusion between Indian and Bangladeshi Henna art (d) Women helping each other during Henna art at a Wedding ceremony

stract these processes into pattern replication) fail to account for this embodied, context-dependent interaction with materials, they risk flattening or erasing the very practices that define these art forms.

The Human Thread: A key site where resonance becomes meaningful for artists in our study is through human relationships, particularly those that transmit skill, value, and meaning across time and social contexts. Artistic agency here is not constructed in isolation but emerges relationally, through mentorship, emotional bonds, and culturally embedded forms of care. When such relational ties are disrupted or excluded, such as through automation or AI abstraction, the very conditions of how art is learned, practiced, and made meaningful begin to erode.

During our FGDs, rickshaw painters emphasized the vital role of the *guru-shishya* (mentor-apprentice) tradition in their artistic lives. They stressed that artistic knowledge is cultivated not through fragmented sources, but through long-term, embodied learning from a trusted mentor. Jamal (pseudonym, 29, male), a junior rickshaw artist, reflected:

> *"AI can replicate many people's work, but true artists cannot learn from hundreds of people. They learn from their 'Guru' and their unique style. Our kind of art involves craftsmanship and values. AI can generate flowers that may look like rickshaw paint, but it cannot replicate these qualities. True art requires years of observation, experience, and patience. We don't think AI-generated art can be considered true art."* - Jamal (pseudonym, 29, male), a junior rickshaw artist.

This same ethic of relational resonance appears in the work of Henna artists, where the act of art-making is interwoven with deep cultural care and social symbolism. Rumpa (pseudonym, 26, female), a Henna artist, spoke about the emotional labor involved in designing bridal Henna:

> *"Historically, in Bangladesh, married women begin their new lives in their in-laws' households, adapting to new people and new relationships in a new social environment. This transition requires the bride to demonstrate patience, a willingness to adjust, and significant sacrifices from her previous life. The bridal Henna ceremony represents the bride's readiness to embrace the new, often uncertain, life ahead with resilience and patience. This is mirrored in her sitting still for hours, holding her hands upright as the artist meticulously completes the design, followed by waiting another 6-7 hours for the Henna to dry, and sometimes a full day for the color to fully develop on her hands. AI can replicate my designs, I understand. But henna art is never only about the designs."* - Rumpa (pseudonym, 26, female), a Henna artist.

These accounts show that resonance in artistic practice is often sustained through relationships across generations, between teacher and student, and in the affective bonds between artist and recipient. Such relationships form the social infrastructure of collective agency. AI-generated art, in contrast, abstracts artistic production from these human ties, missing the very relational grounds upon which collective agency is built.

Co-creation

Art-making is considered a community-centric process by almost all of our participants, especially the Alpana and Mehendi/Henna artists. Co-creation, as described by our participants, is not simply about collaboration. Our data reveal how co-creation is a practice through which artistic agency is distributed, negotiated, and sustained within communities. For instance, during the interview sessions, artists shared with us the unique cultural value of making Alpana, as it requires the community to come together to make the art. One artist, Sumaiya (pseudonym, 23, female), says,

> *"I create Alpanas for various occasions (like wedding ceremonies, Eid celebrations, Bengali New Year celebrations, among others) in my neighborhood, drawing designs on floors and walls. For this, I require access to homeowners' surfaces and trust to avoid harming the aesthetic of their property. The process involves enthusiastic neighbors joining in painting the Alpanas. The neighborhood becomes lively with music, and people share refreshments with each other. If the Alpana is on a street, volunteers block off the*

Figure 3: (a) A group of Alpana artists painting on one of the driveways inside a university campus, (b) Group of artists and their artwork during Bengali New Year. Photo courtesy: Maruf Raihan (c) Alpana artists playing with colors on urban streets during the Independence Day

area, redirecting vehicles. As you realise, it's not just about the art, it becomes a true community event." - Sumaiya (pseudonym, 23, female), an Alpana Artist

We have also found a similar essence in the Mehendi/ Henna art-making process. This practice is deeply rooted in the Bangladeshi community and traditions, especially among girls and women within families. It fosters a sense of belonging, passing down artistic skills and traditions from elders to younger members, and sometimes among peers. One of our participants mentions,

"My designs are always changing based on my clients' feedback, suggestions, and preferences while I'm doing the Henna. The shape of their hands, the length of their fingers, even their skin tone, influence how I design. So no two canvases are the same, and neither are my design choices. I see my art-making as a very flexible and collaborative process. Each Henna design is something my client and I create together. Being flexible as an artist is something I learnt from my Aunt, who inspired me in Henna Art." - Rafa, (pseudonym, 25, female), Henna Artist

Similar cases in our study demonstrate how the notion of singular authorship often dissolves into a more collective understanding of ownership in many traditional art-making practices. Our participants prioritize collective ownership of their art-making over individualistic concerns such as plagiarism or intellectual property. Their creative practices are rooted in family ties, community relationships, and cultural traditions, often valued more than personal recognition or economic gain. In this context, authorship is not seen as the outcome of isolated originality but as something that emerges through relational, iterative, and context-aware processes that are deeply embedded in shared experiences and social meaning-making. These are precisely the qualities that AI, in its current form, struggles to replicate.

Recognition

The third element shaping collective agency in art-making, as data revealed, is recognition. But recognition here is not about fame or market visibility. It is a deeply communal act, embedded in relationships, rituals, and shared ways of valuing art. In the kinds of traditional art-making we encountered, recognition emerges through human interaction, passed between generations, and often entangled with care, trust, and time.

Our data reveals that the general acceptance of AI-generated art often mirrors our respondents' deep-seated discomfort with the 'other'. When individuals create art, it is perceived as an expression of themselves or their community. However, when a computer generates art, they do not see these as an extension of 'them'; instead, it is perceived as foreign or separate. This perception arises because they believe AI lacks the human essence that typically shapes art with meaning and emotion. So the recognition of AI-generated art as the 'other' originates from its creation by entities external to the human sphere. We realize the feeling of anxiety and unease among our participants regarding AI-generated art since they challenge the traditional exclusive domain of human creativity and expertise, as well as their dignity. For example, during a workshop, an architect, Lamisa (pseudonym, 28, female), said,

"AI tools can rarely understand what I envision. What I create comes from my mind, my hands, my eyes, and my heart. It will never grasp the precision, the tension, or the finish that I require." - Lamisa (pseudonym, 28, female), Architect

Recognition of artwork is not only about being seen, it is also about how one learns to see. In art forms like rickshaw painting, recognition is earned slowly, through years of practice under the watchful eye of a *guru*. It is not awarded instantly or automatically; it is cultivated in the everyday rhythms of learning, failing, observing, and refining. And it is the *guru*, not a prize or an algorithm, who ultimately validates the learner's readiness to be recognized as an artist. For our participants, this slow, relational form of recognition is what makes art-making not just a skill but a way of belonging. As Selim (pseudonym, 57, male), a senior rickshaw painter, shared:

"It takes at least 20 years for anyone to become a good artist. How is it possible to create art and win awards in a few days using prompts? Does that mean the years of dedication by real artists are meaningless? Are they telling us to leave our line of work?

If so, let AI do everything and abandon our art altogether." - Selim (pseudonym, 57, male), a senior rickshaw painter

Recognition, too, often takes the form of compensation. But even that, in many of these art forms, is collective and relational. Pricing is not fixed; it is shaped by social closeness, trust, and circumstance. A Henna artist, for instance, might do intricate bridal work for free when it's for her cousin or neighbor on Eid. In those moments, the act of recognition is not transactional; rather, it is embedded in bonds of kinship, generosity, and reciprocity. And these bonds cannot be codified into licensing agreements or monetized through platform APIs.

The growing presence of AI disrupts all three of these layers of recognition: emotional, pedagogical, and economic. Participants expressed anxiety over the lack of institutional safeguards to protect their work from appropriation by AI systems. Though many did not speak in formal terms like 'intellectual property', they clearly articulated a moral framework around fairness, authorship, and theft. As Jamal (pseudonym, 29, male), a junior rickshaw artist, put it:

"If someone uploads my artwork to AI, no matter how much I protest, they will continue because they think it's right. But it's exploitation and stealing has become a business. If you want original work, commission us for it. Why steal? They make a bit of money this way, but rickshaw pullers and craftsmen lose out." - Jamal (pseudonym, 29, male), Rickshaw Painter

In this way, we saw how recognition, like authorship and ownership, is deeply relational. It is tied to processes of becoming, of learning, of trusting. It is not simply about visibility, but about being known and valued by the people who understand what such artwork means and why it matters. For our participants, collective agency is sustained through these small but powerful acts of recognition, grounded in human connection, held across generations.

In summary, *resonance, co-creation,* and *recognition* reveal that how agency in art-making acts as a collective dynamic, shaped through relationships with people, materials, and traditions. Resonance grounds artistic expression in lived experience, where cultural memory, bodily knowledge, and sensory familiarity give meaning to creative choices. Co-creation underscores the social nature of making, where authorship is distributed, knowledge is shared, and art becomes a medium for collective presence and belonging. Recognition completes this process by affirming value not through individual acclaim, but through communal trust, intergenerational transmission, and context-specific forms of care and compensation. These three dimensions are not separate; they are deeply entangled. In resisting AI systems that threaten to abstract, disembed, or commodify art-making practices, our participants articulate a powerful politics of collective agency, one that insists on art as a relational, situated, and community-anchored act.

Collective Agency in Design and Policy

Our study illustrates the inherently collective nature of artistic production. Across diverse Bangladeshi traditions, such as Mehendi, Alpana, rickshaw painting, and visual arts, artmaking fosters a sense of collective agency. These practices bring communities together, enabling shared subjectivities and interdependence through culturally and materially grounded experiences. For instance, we have seen that community-centric forms like Mehendi and Alpana encourage co-creation and reinforce belonging, while frequent references to ancestral traditions and reverence for mentors highlight that artistic ownership often resides with communities rather than individuals. Art-making also involves tactile engagement with materials, such as Henna tubes, paints, clay, or wood, producing not only creative output but a direct, embodied sense of control. Through this relational process, artists come to see themselves as agents, emotionally and sensorially connected to both their work and the communities they serve.

Collective agency not only fosters shared ownership of produced artworks among the art practitioners but also encourages them to undertake collective actions for their desired recognition. T2I tools are criticized for displacing traditional labor, raising ethical concerns about intellectual property, as current mechanisms prioritize corporate interests and provide little to no compensation for artists. Art practitioner communities in our study are aware of the cultural production of AI-generated images and deny being disproportionately left out economically. Rather, they ask for active and dignified participation in the overall process, and thus reclaim their artistic control with meaningful creative inputs. Our conceptualizations around collective agency have practical design and policy implications to address neoliberal and individual-centric data practices for T2I AI tools by acknowledging and prioritizing community contributions, particularly for marginalized groups in the Global South.

First, we will look at some user-scale design-level interventions that will help incorporate the broader notion of collective agency in various ways. Artists in our study expressed a clear desire for greater control over how AI systems blend visual styles, noting that current tools often merge motifs without contextual sensitivity, undermining cultural specificity. One design intervention could involve introducing style interpolation sliders or parametric controls that allow users to set thresholds for stylistic blending. Technically, this can be achieved through latent space modulation (e.g., using StyleGAN or diffusion models), where users adjust content-source or cultural reference weights. Regionally specific modules can also be fine-tuned for aesthetic preservation. This aligns with Davis et al.'s work on interactive cocreative systems that prioritize artist agency (Urban Davis et al. 2021), and is informed by explorations like Inie et al.'s 'Designing Participatory AI' (Inie, Falk, and Tanimoto 2023), which emphasizes user participation in generative workflows.

Artists in our study also emphasized that art-making is often a communal act, involving multiple individuals working together, whether it is drawing Alpana on a street or

collaborating on architectural sketches/drawings. To support this collective mode of authorship, a generative AI system should allow multiple users to co-create in real time (McCormack et al. 2020; Rezwana and Maher 2023), each contributing their own inputs, preferences, and feedback while negotiating the evolving outcome. The system can allow each user to input their own prompts, constraints, or style references. Implement prompt layering or priority weighting so that the model can reconcile or alternate between user contributions. For example, artist A might control foreground elements, while artist B influences background style. The system can store all contributions and changes with timestamps to preserve authorship transparency and enable the community to revisit how the final image emerged - a digital trace of collective authorship (Linares-Pellicer et al. 2025).

In addition, our findings emphasize that community-centered art-making processes, the resulting artworks, and the dignity of the artists are deeply intertwined and cannot be treated in isolation. This interdependence calls for the development of respectful, transparent, and culturally attuned consent mechanisms in the construction of AI training datasets. Conventional dataset practices, often based on scraped web content and individualistic notions of copyright, fail to account for communal authorship and cultural specificity. We advocate for the integration of community-approved data governance (Janssen et al. 2020) frameworks, including mechanisms for prior, informed, and collective consent before traditional or culturally embedded artworks are incorporated into AI systems. This approach aligns with the growing call in data ethics and AI governance for participatory data stewardship (Janssen et al. 2020; Kelly et al. 2023) and draws from the model of cultural commons (licensing) infrastructure (Marttila and Botero 2017), which recognizes shared ownership of knowledge and creativity. Implementing these frameworks can help tech companies, legal scholars, and policymakers reimagine copyright systems beyond individual-centric paradigms and toward models that ensure collective recognition, ownership, and compensation, ultimately supporting more just and equitable AI ecosystems for affected communities.

Finally, and more broadly, we urge AI art stakeholders, including technology designers, ethicists, researchers, and policymakers, to recognize that art-making is not merely a product of individual inspiration or technical execution, but a socially embedded, materially grounded, and relational practice. As our findings demonstrate, artistic agency often emerges through collective experience, embodied skill, cultural knowledge, and emotional resonance — elements that cannot be meaningfully captured or replicated through abstract data inputs or pattern recognition alone. Therefore, AI tools designed for artistic contexts must not be positioned as replacements for creative labor, but rather as collaborative instruments that support and extend the creative ecosystems in which artists live and work. This calls for a fundamental reorientation toward designing for collective agency - developing AI systems that enable shared authorship, contextual responsiveness, and inclusive modes of participation. This shift requires moving beyond extractive and efficiency-driven paradigms toward systems that are participatory, accountable, and culturally responsive. Designing for collective agency means embedding artists, not just as data providers or end-users, but as co-creators, decision-makers, and stewards of how AI engages with their visual cultures and communities. By centering these collective dimensions of agency, the AI community has the opportunity to foster technologies that not only uphold the dignity of artists but also actively sustain the cultural, ethical, and communal practices that give art its enduring social life.

Limitations and Conclusion

In this paper, we advance a robust conceptual understanding around collective agency. We introduce the concept, characterize it and explain how it is operationalized through interrelated conditions of cultural resonance, co-creation and sense of recognition. Our study shows how Bangladeshi design professionals, students, Mehendi/Henna artists, Alpana practitioners, and rickshaw painters substantiate collective agency through their artistic practices which are relational, culturally situated, and materially sustained processes. The theoretical contribution of our work is positioned in critical dialogue with Western neoliberal conceptions of agency, which we critique not as a geographic category but as a cultural, political, and ideological construct. While we capture insights from Bangladesh, one of the most marginalized territories in the map of global AI and data practices, we do not discuss how our conceptualization may differ in other contexts, particularly in more capitalistic societies in the Global North. However, our empirical account does not intend to essentialize artistic traditions but to foreground how different epistemological frameworks shape AI ethics discourse around T2I tools. While we discuss some design implications in relation to our theorization, more substantive details might be required for their technical realizations, which we avoid within the limited scope of this paper. We hope future studies in the field will address these limitations by building upon our work.

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