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Generative AI and the Transformation of Elite Valuations in Photography

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Research Article

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Abstract

This study examines how mainstream English-language newspapers evaluated entries in AI photography competitions compared to those in traditional photography competitions between 2015 and 2025. Drawing on Bourdieu's field theory, symbolic capital and boundary construction, the study treats photography competitions as institutional fields where legitimacy is publicly negotiated and views newspapers as cultural intermediaries that translate these negotiations into broader public discourse. Employing a comparative longitudinal qualitative content analysis approach, the study analyzed three corpora constructed using Factiva, comprising traditional competitions, AI competitions, and AI rule controversies, to examine shifts in the evaluation criteria, tone, and timing of newspaper coverage. In traditional competition coverage, newspapers primarily evaluate entries based on established criteria such as technical quality, composition, impact, and social significance. However, in AI-related reporting, the focus shifts to the authorship, information disclosure, fairness, category relevance, authenticity, and public trust. The tone of the reports also varies across different corpora: traditional reports are mostly neutral or supportive, while those in the AI field tend to be more skeptical. Later, as the debate intensified, reports increasingly focused on procedural issues, emphasizing rule changes, disclosure requirements, and institutional oversight. Eventually, the evaluative paradigm shifted from photographic quality to boundary conflicts and formal governance.

1. Introduction

The presence of artificial intelligence (AI) in culture has increased rapidly beginning in the early 2020s as it moves from a position of niche and emerging to a position of importance to culture at large. In this regard, the shift of meaning in the context of the photograph has significant implications. Photography has always held a unique position in the cultural sphere. The meaning of a work of art, its expression and activity, is connected to the technical skill and the conventional visual authenticity (Ray, 2020). Photography remains a strong public association with human authorship even though scholars have shown that photographs are framed and edited. A photograph is much more likely to be understood as a trace of what has happened, a scene that was there or that one really saw. When AI-generated photographs are entered into "traditional" photographic competitions, they introduce new aesthetics and raise questions that challenge basic assumptions regarding the evaluation, classification, and valuation of photography simultaneously (Schofield, 2023). In this sense, AI challenges the social norms that assign cultural value to images. The question is: do the criteria previously used to assess, believe in, and celebrate photographs continue to apply post-AI-generated images whose aesthetics mimic photographs?

The photography competition offers a good lens through which to scrutinize the reconfiguration of an established evaluation framework of a cultural sphere. Contests are frequently contested over questions of authorship, image manipulation, transparency, and fairness. Research on recognition and value assessment indicates that competitions are implicated in value production and stabilization through recognition, legitimacy and prestige accorded to certain works and discrediting others (Childress et al.,

2017). The award systems, the decisions made by the jury and their correspondences make visible the hierarchy of a field and the power relations at play.

Throughout this process, newspaper discourse played a significant role both in driving this debate forward and in shaping how those tensions emerged in practice. The World Photography Awards incident concerns Boris Eldagsen's image *Pseudomnesia: The Electrician*. After labelling his work as part of a process of "promptography", he argued that there should not be direct competition with AI images and photographs. Moreover, he also stated that he wanted to force an open discussion on what the field should now consider photography. In contrast, the organizers stood by this entry arguing the work met the warranty criteria considering information and warranties given. Glynn (2023) remarks that this debate highlighted a widespread public struggle on whether the symbolic boundaries of photography should be extended to include AI-generated images and if so, under what terms. By 2024, such controversy was becoming even more complicated at the institutional level. In Australia, the Brisbane Portrait Prize allowed entries that were "created wholly or partly by generative artificial intelligence." The competition viewed this move as part of the ongoing evolution of contemporary art. Nonetheless, the decision brought up questions about copyright, ownership, what level of contribution from a human is enough to confer authorship and whether photographs taken using a camera and AI-generated images are of a like nature (Taylor, 2024).

Simultaneously, a related case complicated the issue further. Miles Astray, a photographer, was awarded the third prize in the computer-generated imagery category of the competition. His photo was then disqualified as it was apparently not generated by AI. Astray's intention was to demonstrate how easily the audience and judges could be deceived. However, they disqualified Astray's work because of different criteria for each of the category judging (Hern, 2024). As image identification becomes increasingly ambiguous, even authentic photographs risk being flagged as suspicious. There is a need, therefore, for clear, established rules that are used to verify category borders. Newspapers are becoming increasingly important because of these developments. They served as cultural intermediaries. The evaluation of the industry specialist as well as expert got changed into something which general public can understand. They also clarify priorities, impacts, importance and values at stake when images, controversies, categories, rules or standards are challenged. This confers broad social significance upon newspapers. If legitimacy is being renegotiated, then newspapers become the crucial medium through which this renegotiation is manifested.

The paper examines a more general sociological issue – how cultural fields will act with regard to objects they evaluate no longer being stable. The issue is also analyzed within Bourdieu's field theory framework focusing on symbolic capital and boundary making. From this viewpoint, photography contests and photography institutions in the sector give out prestige. The arrival of generative AI has shifted the discussion away from which creation is the best to what is a photographic creation, which photographic creations deserve reward, and how does the field defend itself from technology. The significance of this study is that a technological change disturbs the evaluative order of the cultural sphere. Moreover, the cultural sphere responds to this disruption by challenging boundaries and revising

the criteria of legitimacy. The role that newspaper discourse played in constructing the meaning of controversies and the legitimacy of categories, and the constitution of acceptable recognition. Finally, the paper argues that the debates surrounding AI concerns trust, evidence, authorship and the continuing social authority of the photograph. As this analysis demonstrates, these debates help to socially reconfigure the rules of photography competitions as well as photography study. With the growing significance being attached to the AI in photography and photography competitions, this study will analyze coverage from the mainstream English-language newspapers of photography competitions from 2015–2025. It will also seek to develop three interrelated corpora, coverage of traditional competitions, coverage of AI-generated works and coverage of AI-related controversies and rule changes. This paper will study how newspaper discourse develops when a domain must decide whether its well-established criteria for recognition continue to apply.

2. Literature Review

Value judgments are social processes shaped by institutions, professional conventions, classification systems, and public discourse. Evaluation plays a key role in constructing legitimacy. It marks out what is valued, excellent, authentic or otherwise fit for being recognized in a given social context (Meer & Lamont, 2016). A photography competition is a formal situation where the entered image gets rated and sorted. Some works receive a public stamp of approval while some others are denied such approval. In essence, it functions as institutional mechanism that determine and reproduce their own value criteria within the configurations of photographic culture. Recognition is not merely the product of objective excellence, but rather the result of social processes that elevate certain works, figures, and practices above others. For example, the evaluation of a prize is a procedural and relational process in which publishers, authors, and texts collectively contribute to the formation of legitimacy (Childress et al., 2017). Sapiro (2016) also notes that the patterns by which value is assigned across various fields change over time and in response to broader institutional and historical conditions. All of these arguments demonstrate that the awarding of prizes is part of a mechanism that serves to reinforce hierarchical structures, distribute prestige, and determine which forms of cultural production are worthy of recognition across various fields. Most research on valuation and cultural recognition explains how different fields rank things once a basic framework of legitimacy has been established. However, there is relatively little research on what happens when the objects being evaluated themselves become unstable. Current research does not explain how evaluation criteria are renegotiated when new technologies challenge assumptions about authorship, originality, authenticity, and comparability.

This paper draws on Bourdieu's field theory to analyze the instability in the field of photography. Bourdieu conceptualizes cultural production as a field, that is, a structured arena of struggle in which actors compete over positions, authority, legitimacy, and the power to define valid standards of judgment (Bourdieu, 1993). Bourdieu places cultural works in the social context of their creation, distribution, and assessment, taking into account the functions of publishers, critics, and other middlemen. A photography contest is essentially a mechanism through which the field ranks practitioners, celebrates certain styles, and reproduces or challenges the hierarchy of legitimate image-making. In this context,

symbolic capital has special importance. It refers to a prestige that is widely recognized and legitimate. The social effectiveness of something is created by recognition as a legitimate form of value by others in any field. In the cultural production, symbolic capital can manifest as awards, recognition from elites, critical acclaim, or the authority to define what constitutes best practice (Bourdieu, 1986). Photography competitions grant social legitimacy to some photographic image-making practices. Following shifts in the legitimating rules of the photographic field, the conditions of symbolic capital become unstable. The field theory addresses questions such as who is entitled to determine whether the work produced by AI belongs in the photography category or is classified as assisted by AI, how works like this can be judged, and when this can work or get accepted.

The theory of symbolic boundaries also provides a theoretical foundation for this study. Lamont and Molnár (2002) define symbolic boundaries as conceptual distinctions used by social actors to categorize people, objects, and practices. This distinction defines inclusion, exclusion, and legitimacy. In the cultural field, symbolic boundaries are essential to separate real practitioners from false practitioners and real works from false outputs. The ongoing discussions regarding AI and photography today center often on the question of where to actually draw the line. The debates revolve around photography versus AI image, human creativity versus prompt-based creation, acceptable aid and not acceptable substitute, capturing reality and creating reality. Symbolic boundary theory recognizes that boundaries are historically contingent – they merge from and are transformed by ongoing social interactions and institutional conflicts. With the growing development of new technology and AI in photography, older classification systems become ineffective. Current distinctions are becoming harder to uphold, while new ones aren't yet fully established. Some cases that appear to be simple disputes over whether a work is eligible to compete, actually dispute a classification scheme for the field as a whole.

Photography has long been regarded as a medium with unique cultural significance, consistently entering the public consciousness through discussions about visual authenticity and social reality (RAY, 2020). Photography's ability to directly reflect reality imbues it with a special kind of symbolic power. Thus, once AI intervenes in classical photography, the debates that its mere presence provokes take on a cognitive and ethical aspect rather than an aesthetic one. If photography is just one of many art forms, then AI-generated images might be viewed yet another medium vying for social recognition and exposure. Still, AI photography arguably challenges the assumption that photorealistic images necessarily link to photographic practices and human creativity, given that photography has a potent, fundamental anchoring in the capturing of social reality. The argument on AI photography as opposed to traditional photography runs far beyond an artistic invention. It also discusses how photography retains power and authority in culture and society. However, photography has always had to negotiate the tension between documentation and production, between truth claims and mediation (Schofield, 2023). Over the years of photography, many disruptive forces have made an impact. Rather, it has aggravated those distinctions that have long been engraved in the field. The rise of AI in photography has become impossible to ignore.

Solaroli's (2016) study of the world field of professional photojournalism combines Bourdieu's field-theory with an analysis of digital production and culture. The structure of photography is made up of a hierarchy of signs, professional institutions and mechanisms of recognition. These structures become clear when the conditions of practice are altered using digital production. Consequently, photography is a differentiated field organized by authoritative institutions and the unequal distribution of legitimacy. Technological change affects not only the technology itself but also the criteria by which it is judged. However, most studies focus mainly on professional and traditional photojournalism and its internal dynamics. They did not examine how mainstream newspapers have covered the controversy surrounding AI photography competitions, nor did they explore how newspaper discourse translates technological change into evaluative categories such as fairness, authenticity, and compliance with rules.

Current research on platformization and the changing organization of cultural production are also noteworthy. Nieborg and Poell (2018) argue that platformization has transformed the cultural industries by embedding them more deeply within digital infrastructure, the platform economy, and data-driven governance systems. Generative AI has emerged with this restructuring of cultural production, hence even the study is not limited to the context of the photography competitions, it is still quite representative. AI image generators thus become part of a platform-based ecosystem that embeds the production, dissemination and interpretation of images in an ever-increasing way via digitized, algorithmic systems. The study places generative AI within a structural transformation. It also explains why the debate about AI and photography cannot be divorced from larger issues of digital media and synthetic imagery as well as of automation and platform infrastructure. While scholarship on how the digital age transformed cultural production exists, the legitimating bodies – such as awards committees and newspaper reviews – have not been further examined in terms of what constitutes a legitimate work under these conditions.

Recent scholarship on AI photography suggests it does not seek to exclude AI-generated images from photography as a medium; rather, such work draws upon photography's visual language while redefining its limits. This is the reason why AI-generated images are so disruptive. Photographs generated by the generation, inspiration or synthesis processes by the artist have a visual phenomenon that is inherently distinct from other photographs. This difference challenges people's established notions of photography, creativity, and authenticity (Michael Peter Schofield, 2023). Photojournalism is one of the most powerful photography fields that demands the utmost authenticity. New technologies such as AI are undermining the authority of photojournalism which has been in existence for a long time. The strength of photographs is dependent not just on how the images are displayed, it is also about how far people believe in the regulations of the contest and the institution behind them (Carlson, 2019). Once this trust is shaken, the expression of legitimacy can no longer be based solely on visual presentation. Research on photography contests has been the crux of this since an adjudicator in this case needs to not only decide if an image is good but also if it really belongs to the class it has been entered into.

Besides, research on cultural intermediaries and discourse suggests that symbolic values in the cultural field are often constructed through discourse. Importantly, representations themselves can become part of the process of constructing reputation and legitimacy (Soro, 2021). Cultural objects (material and immaterial) communicate meaning and define what is valuable. Newspapers, critics, and other cultural intermediaries help the broader public understand values by constructing and interpreting cultural objects. When controversy arises in the field of photography, this discourse can organize uncertainty into recognizable categories of judgment. However, earlier studies on cultural intermediaries have mostly focused on critics and art magazines within the broader cultural field. The newspaper as cultural intermediaries have hardly been discussed in the debate on the role of generative AI in the photography competition.

Existing research demonstrates how value assessment operates in the cultural field, how symbolic capital and symbolic boundaries shape legitimacy, how photography is linked to realism and trust, how digital and AI-generated images challenge established assumptions, and how cultural intermediaries help construct symbolic value. However, it fails to examine how mainstream newspapers as intermediaries of elite culture have evaluated entries in AI photography competitions and traditional photography competitions over time. It did not address which evaluation criteria newspapers emphasize in each case, how these criteria shift or evolve over time, and how this discourse evolves as AI transitions to a source of controversy and ultimately to formal regulation. Therefore, this study aims to examine how mainstream newspapers have judged photographic works in AI photography competitions in the last ten years, as compared to traditional competitions, and how these authoritative judging criteria have evolved. In particular, this study addresses that gap by posing three questions. First, which evaluative criteria do major English-language newspapers foreground when discussing AI-related photography competition entries relative to traditional photographic competition entries? Second, what sentiments or stances accompany those criteria? Third, how do these emphases change over time, especially around moments of controversy and rule revision?

3. Methodology

This study adopts a comparative, longitudinal qualitative content analysis of newspaper coverage of photography competitions published from 2015 to 2025. The study aims to examine how mainstream English-language newspapers evaluate entries in AI-related photography competitions compared to traditional photography, what sentiments or stances are reflected in these evaluations, and how the focus of these evaluations has shifted over time, particularly in light of controversies and rule changes. This research focus does not only restrict itself to the mere appearance of certain topics in news, it also rests with the structures of meaning, principles of evaluation and legitimacy issues. The qualitative content analysis enables the systematic consideration of contexts, frameworks, and shades of meaning for the interpretation of recurrent patterns (Mayring, 2014). Longitudinal content analysis is also frequently used to track changing trends in media texts over time, and has been applied in cultural coverage research (Maarit Jaakkola, 2022).

This study employed a longitudinal research method, in order to compare the media coverage over the past decade (2015–2025). It covered several key milestones, including the baseline period prior to the emergence of generative AI, as well as subsequent developments such as AI-related controversies, the emergence of new categories, and the introduction of revised regulations. This study mainly focuses on how debates surrounding AI in the field of photography have evolved over time. It examines not only the content of newspaper reports but also whether evaluation criteria have shifted as AI has progressed from an emerging new technology to a source of controversy, ultimately toward more institutionalized forms of governance. Longitudinal newspaper content analysis is typically effective for tracking changes in the attention paid to long-term issues and shifts in discursive frameworks, particularly when qualitative analysis is combined with limited quantitative data (Opperhuizen & Schouten, 2020). Additionally, this study is comparative in two respects. First, it compares coverage of AI photography competitions with coverage of traditional photography competitions. Second, it compares coverage of AI-generated entries more broadly with coverage that focuses more on controversies and rule changes. This approach not only identifies the content appearing in AI coverage but also captures how the focus of these evaluations differs from the more established language found in traditional competition coverage. In other words, this study examines both differences between corpora and differences over time.

This study used Factiva to construct its corpus, a licensed newspaper database that primarily provides access to major English-language news sources. The newspaper sample framework for this study was drawn from Factiva's "Major News and Business Sources" database. A total of 31 newspapers were selected: 15 from the United States, 13 from the United Kingdom, and 3 from Singapore. These newspapers were selected to capture elite English-language newspaper discourse across three significant media contexts, while maintaining the controllability of the sample framework. Since the primary focus is on the role of newspapers as cultural intermediaries, limiting the corpus to newspapers from Factiva's "Major News and Business Sources" collection ensures consistency in institutional status and editorial visibility across cases, thereby exploring how influential newspaper discourse contributes to shaping the public's understanding of the legitimacy, authorship, and recognition of photographic works. In qualitative media research, when the objective is to examine discourse patterns within a clearly defined cultural context rather than to draw statistically representative conclusions about all media content, it is effective to purposefully select media channels that are influential or analytically significant (Schreier, 2012). The overall timeframe is set from January 1, 2015, to December 31, 2025. This timeframe encompasses both the long-standing tradition of photography competition reporting and the period since 2020, when generative AI has become a focal point of public discourse in the field of image production, thereby allowing for an analysis of continuity and change within a single analytical framework.

Three search terms were used to construct the corpus. The first search term targeted entries in AI-related photography contests, combining photography contest terminology with AI-related terms, such as "image generators" and "text-to-image," as well as the model names, such as "Midjourney," "DALL-E," and "Adobe Firefly," to identify articles about AI-generated or AI-assisted works entered in photography

contests. The second search term targets traditional coverage of photography competitions, excluding AI-related terminology, in order to build a corpus that represents a more mature evaluative discourse. The wording emphasizes aspects such as award evaluation criteria and prize winning. The third search term targets coverage of controversies and rule changes related to AI, combining photography competition terminology and AI-related terms with terms associated with conflict and governance, such as disqualification, backlash, ethics, manipulation, and rule changes. After completing data collection and corpus construction, the first step is to deduplicate the output data. Duplicate and near-duplicate reports are identified by comparing titles, dates, and significant overlaps in wording, particularly in cases where newswire reports or slightly modified versions of the same story appear across multiple media outlets. Whether an article is included depends on its substantive relevance. A report will only be retained for data analysis if the photography contest, entries, winners, judging criteria, controversies, eligibility requirements, or rule changes constitute the main part of the article. The biggest methodological challenge in this study lies in the processing of the data retrieved using the second search term. Even after deduplication, the corpus on traditional photography still contains 4,103 articles. This volume is too large for the close reading approach to qualitative content analysis employed in this study, and it appears disproportionate compared to the other two corpora. Therefore, a reduced comparison corpus was created through stratified sampling strategy. Factiva displays 100 articles per page in its search results. Therefore, this study selected the first article from each page, ultimately getting a close-reading sample comprising 41 traditional photography competition reports. This sampling method was chosen because, when the material comes from periodicals such as newspapers, stratified sampling provides a structured approach that allows for the selection of samples from a large corpus while ensuring a representative distribution of the samples.

The analysis of the text uses qualitative coding along with simple descriptive counts. Qualitative content analysis combines qualitative and quantitative aspects well. Equal importance is placed on systematic category construction and transparent coding procedures (Mayring, 2014). Limited-scale counting was used alongside close reading to make recurrent features visible. Each article was coded according to the evaluative criteria which were foregrounded in the report. The coding frame consisted of seven main dimensions: authorship/originality, manipulation/disclosure, rule-compliance/fairness, craft/technical quality, affect/impact, ethics/public trust, and innovation. The above categories address both categories of the conventional evaluation vocabulary, as utilized in photography, and the new categories of questions raised by generative AI. When a particular category serves as the primary basis for an article's evaluation, debate, or interpretation, that category is flagged as a key focus.

In addition to evaluation criteria, each article was coded on primary position and overall tone. This study employed three main categories of stance: skeptical, neutral/mixed, and supportive/affirmative. Reports that convey skepticism express doubt, unfairness, deceit, illegality, or loss of faith. When a supportive report appears, it means the report proceeds from other description to positive evaluation of new entrant or technological change, for instance, would refer to the entrant as innovative. Neutral or mixed reports combine competing positions or report on these positions without clearly favoring either side. The content analysis in detail is divided into five stages. The process began with conducting a complete

close reading of the corpus and writing a short summary for each report outlining its main case, central claim, and dominant evaluative emphasis. Next, reports were grouped according to the thematic codes above. Third, annual memos were written to follow major turning points as well as consistent themes and potential shifts in language. Fourth, the research conducted a comparison among the three mentioned corpora with one another: traditional competition reports; AI-entry reports; and AI controversy and rule. In the fifth step, simple counting and cross-comparisons were done to validate final qualitative interpretation. For example, one possible quantitative analysis could be the distribution of criteria or stance across the corpora. As a supplementary step, I also conducted lexical presence checks on selected terminology groups, such as authenticity/trust, disclosure/transparency, rules/categories, authorship/ownership, and craft/technique. The checks aimed to determine whether the patterns were common across the corpus or just present in a handful of prominent reports.

This methodological design is well suited to the research questions for several reasons. It is closely related to research questions of comparative, interpretive and temporal types. At the same time, this approach is suitable for media discourse studies as content analysis is a useful method for identifying emerging trends in journalistic and cultural discourse. By relying on three relevant corpora, the study is able to discriminate between the coverage of traditional photography competitions versus the more controversial coverage of AI photography. Additionally, combining close reading with simple counting enriches the interpretation and enhances the transparency of the empirical findings (Maarit Jaakkola, 2022). However, the research methodology also has limitations. Innovative adaptations in technology created several variations and complexities in the terminology related to AI. As such, certain important reports might not have been retrieved. Likewise, the results of the standard photography collection were reduced by stratified sampling. Consequently, the findings, therefore, are not statistically analyzed for the complete corpus of 4,103 articles. Third, a newspaper report can contain more than one frame and therefore the dominant stance can be a matter of interpretation. Fourth is that lexical presence checks can only note the words that are used, but they cannot note all the meanings that are implied.

4. Findings

The findings of this study primarily revolve around the seven coding domains used in the analysis: authorship/originality, manipulation/disclosure, rule-compliance/fairness, craft/technical quality, affect/impact, ethics/public trust, and innovation. It examines the similarity and distinctions of AI coverage and traditional photography competition coverage. The evaluative questions a newspaper editor deems to be more relevant are also dealt with in the report. Earlier the coverage was around routine awards. However, now controversies and rule changes receive extended coverage. These three corpora differ in size and time period focus. The initial search for the AI photography competition corpus returned 59 results. In contrast, the search for traditional photography competition has as many as 5,189 original results (Table 1). This suggests that the traditional corpus constitutes a large dataset covering routine photography competition coverage. The AI photography competition corpus would be a smaller, a smaller, event-driven corpus, as seen in the controversy and rule adjustment in the news.

Table 1
Corpus Overview

Corpus	Raw hits	Deduplicated corpus	Main analytic point
AI photography competition corpus	59	34	Coverage of AI-generated or AI-assisted entries in photography competition
Traditional photography competition corpus	5,189	4,103	Baseline corpus of traditional photography competition reporting
AI controversy/rule-change corpus	65	51	Coverage of backlash, disqualification and rule revision

Since the coding scheme is interpretive at the article level, two presentations of the 7 domains are provided. First, they are reported based on their relative prominence across the three corpora (Table 2). Second, where closely related lexical indicators exist, descriptive percentages derived from article-level term frequency checks are provided as a supplement (Table 3).

Table 2
Relative Prominence of the Seven Domains Across Corpora

Coding domain	Traditional photography competition corpus	AI photography competition corpus	AI controversy corpus
Authorship/originality	Secondary	High	High
Manipulation/disclosure	Low	High	Very high
Rule-compliance/fairness	Secondary	High	Very high
Craft/technical quality	High	Secondary	Secondary
Affect/impact	High	Secondary	Secondary
Ethics/public trust	Low	Very high	Very high
Innovation	Secondary	High	Secondary to high

Table 3
Lexical Indicators Supporting Selected Coding Domains

Indicator	AI photography competition corpus (n = 34)	Traditional photography competition corpus (n = 41)	AI controversy corpus (n = 51)
Authorship/ownership	18 (52.9%)	12 (29.3%)	21 (41.2%)
Disclosure/transparency	18 (52.9%)	10 (24.4%)	34 (66.7%)
Rules/categories	25 (73.5%)	22 (53.7%)	38 (74.5%)
Craft/technique	14 (41.2%)	13 (31.7%)	24 (47.1%)
Authenticity/trust	26 (76.5%)	10 (24.4%)	38 (74.5%)

Tables 2 and 3 together illustrate a clear shift in evaluative priorities across the three corpora. In the traditional photography competition corpus, newspapers typically evaluate images based on aspects such as production techniques, composition, visual impact, and thematic content. In contrast, in the AI photography competition corpus, newspaper shifts their focus to factors like author identity, disclosure of information, fairness, category alignment, and authenticity. Similarly, in the AI controversy corpus, many of these same considerations remain, specifically manifested in rules, disqualifications, category boundaries, consent requirements, and disclosure requirements.

4.1 Authorship and Originality

The first area of analysis examines how newspaper reports describe the creators of photographs, which types of creative processes are deemed worthy of recognition, and whether originality is still understood in traditional photographic terms. In the traditional photography competition corpus, authorship is not frequently mentioned. Reports typically assume that the contributor is a photographer and take it for granted that the photograph is the product of identifiable photographic labor. As a result, discussions and questions regarding the authorship are rare. Reports of traditional photography competitions mostly focus on descriptions of technique, patience, foresight, or professional achievements. For instance, the *Guardian* article “It took me 25 years to get this picture,” highlights the long-term effort, technical expertise, and timing required for Tom Jenkins to capture his World Press Photo-winning Grand National image but does not question the status of that labor as photographic authorship (Khomami, 2017).

In contrast, in the AI photography competition corpus, the discussion around authorship became more explicit and much more contested. In the *Business Insider* report on Boris Eldagsen’s Sony-winning image, Eldagsen described AI image-making process as “co-creation” and “promptography.” He insists that working with AI generators involved refining prompts, developing a complex workflow, and directing the process as an author (Dean, 2023). Simultaneously, the article also makes it clear that because the final image was not captured by a camera in the traditional sense, this claim to authorship has been called into question.

The lexical checks also support this shift. Terms related to authorship/ownership appeared in 18 of 34 AI photography competition reports (52.9%), compared with 12 of 41 retrievable traditional photography competition (29.3%). This shows that authorship was not absent from the traditional photography competition corpus. It became much more visible in AI-related coverage, especially when newspapers needed to explain how the image had been made and whether that process counted as legitimate creative production.

4.2 Manipulation and Disclosure

The second domain analyzes whether newspaper discourses foregrounded image intervention, editing, or the need to disclose process. In the traditional corpus, this domain appeared mostly to explain the detail of the rules and requirements rather than a central controversy. For instance, in the *Orlando Sentinel* photo-contest report, the article stated that the photograph "should not be excessively manipulated," but this criterion appeared at the end of a list of other, more established judging criteria, such as impact, creativity, technical skill, composition, and subject matter (College Park Forum, 2015). In this corpus, manipulation was regulated but not as the main focus of evaluation.

By contrast, disclosure became a major issue in the AI photography competition and AI controversy corpus. In the case of Eldagsen, the focus was on criticizing the AI-generated works he submitted. Even though the images were lifelike, they still exhibited "all the flaws of AI" (Dean, 2023). In The *Guardian*'s coverage of the controversy surrounding the Brisbane Portrait Prize, the focus on human intervention and transparency was more procedural in nature. Artists using AI were required to specify the platforms, phrases/prompts, and specific processes employed during the creative process (Taylor, 2024). The focus here became whether it had been adequately declared and documented. This domain also revealed a clear contrast. Disclosure/transparency terms appeared in 18 of 34 AI photography competition reports (52.9%) and in 34 of 51 AI-controversy reports (66.7%), but in only 10 of 41 retrievable traditional photography competition reports (24.4%). Disclosure was a recurring but secondary issue in traditional competition coverage, but it became a core evaluative concern in AI-related reporting.

4.3 Rule-compliance and Fairness

The third domain discusses how far newspaper reports emphasized eligibility, rule validity, comparability, and fairness toward other participants. In traditional photography competition corpus, while this domain is frequently discussed, it has not received significant attention. Competitions clearly have rules, categories, and judging procedures, but most reports about traditional photography competition treat these as background conditions, assuming by default that they are complete and error-free. Articles assume that entries meet the eligibility requirements and then proceed directly to evaluating image quality or the effectiveness of information delivery.

The situation is markedly different in corpus related to AI photography competition. The report on the Colorado State Fair case by *The Times* discusses the victory of Jason Allen with an image generated by Midjourney. The article also discusses the fierce backlash of professionals and the industry that

followed. For instance, there were concerns that the judges were unaware it had been made by AI. Furthermore, critics compared it to “entering a marathon and driving a Lamborghini to the finish line” (Pavia, 2022). This approach to reporting, which highlights the concerns of the photography industry and the public, places fairness at the center. The debate concerns the comparability of AI-produced pictures to other kinds of artwork under the same competitive circumstances.

As AI-related controversies intensified, coverage increasingly focused on rules and fairness. The *Guardian*'s article on Miles Astray says that the organizers defended the decision to disqualify Miles by making it clear that “each category has specific conditions.” Likewise, the judges also mentioned the fact that the work was indeed a “powerful message” but still “unfair” because of the AI-generated works category (Hern, 2024). The issues raised by most of the reportage of the controversy over AI presence in photography competitions is the same. Firstly, should purely AI generated images be allowed? Secondly, should images captured with camera and AI generated compete in the same category?

This domain was also highly visible in the lexical checks. Although the data suggest that rule-related content is frequently reported in traditional photography competition corpus (53.7%), a closer analysis reveals that the role of rules is discussed differently across various corpora. In traditional photography competition corpus, rules typically serve as procedural background information. In contrast, in reports related to AI controversies, rules become the focus of debate.

4.4 Craft and Technical Quality

The fourth domain is based on traditional photographic standards of excellence including criteria such as technique, composition, exposure, focus, preparation, and skill. One of the most important and stable characteristics of traditional photography competition corpus is this domain. The *Christian Science Monitor* article of Nikon Small World discussed the quality of the entry and photographic performance in the representation of the microscopic world through complex photographic mechanisms (Hinckley, 2015). The report presents that value is usually located in the recognizable form of photographic craft in the coverage of competition on traditional photography.

The meaning of “craft” changed in the AI-entry corpora. It often refers not so much to the camera as to the management of workflows, prompt refinement and digital process. The term “promptography” is explained as requiring skill in *The Daily Telegraph* piece “What AI means for the arts.” According to Saunders (2023), while anyone can hit the shutter button and get a good photo, an artist can always create something of value. This also suggests, from another perspective, that the newspaper does not always portray AI-generated work as effortless. The lexical results are also significant. Even though craft constantly came up in the three corpora of discussion, analysis of their content shows a different meaning. In traditional photography contests, the coverage consolidates evaluative standards. Nevertheless, in news relating to AI, it frequently becomes a point of contention as to whether prompt-based practices qualify as real creative skill sets.

4.5 Affect and Impact

The fifth domain the newspaper discourse foregrounds whether the chosen photograph has emotional power, first impression, resonance, or wider social meaning. For instance, a report by *The Independent* on the winners of the World Press Photo Award stated that their granted photo was not random. It received a winning recognition as they convey messages and emotion of “love,” sameness, gender, and minorities (Wyatt, 2015). Besides, there are also evidence of many traditional photography competitions prioritizing “impact (first impression)” as their foremost judging criteria (College Park Forum, 2015). The coverage of traditional photography competitions emphasizes not just on the technical qualities but also on the emotional and social value of the photographs.

Affect and impact did appear in AI photography competition coverage, but more unevenly. In many articles on AI, emotional or visual aspects are only briefly mentioned before the discussion shifts to issues such as category alignment, information disclosure, fairness, or authenticity. Industry judges and professional photographers do not recognize the emotional expression offered by AI photography. Since this domain is often difficult to capture through fixed or simple lexical checks, the results presented here focus more on specific content analysis. The corpus indicates that affect/impact remains central to traditional competition coverage, whereas in AI photography competition report, it typically serves as a foundation for subsequent discussions on issues such as process, legitimacy, conflict, and classification.

4.6 Ethics and Public Trust

The sixth domain concerns anxiety about truth, manipulation, deception, exploitation and the broader reliability of image in public culture. This domain was the most strongly differentiated between the corpora. In the traditional photography competition corpus, ethics mostly appeared in limits on manipulation. However, in the AI-entry and controversy corpora, trust became one of the most persistent themes. For example, the *Guardian*’s coverage of the fake Pentagon explosion linked AI imagery to manipulation of “the information space” (Clayton, 2023). The issue extended beyond one competition or one award and became tied to a wider problem of public trust in visual media. Across the lexical checks, authenticity/trust language appeared in only 10 of 41 retrievable traditional photography competition reports (24.4%). A related indicator, real/fake/deepfake language, appeared in 73.5% of AI-entry reports and 74.5% of controversy reports, but only 14.6% of traditional ones.

4.7 Innovation

The seventh domain concerns whether newspapers framed new image-making practices as novel, experimental, creative, or worth exploring. This domain appeared in all three corpora, but in different forms. In the traditional corpus, innovation was usually embedded within traditional praise for originality or inventiveness. In the AI-related corpora, innovation was much more visible, but often ambivalent. Some reports presented AI as a new frontier. However, newspaper reports often paired innovation with doubt by noting that while AI was new, it was not unproblematically legitimate.

4.8 Tone and Stance

In addition to evaluative criteria, each article was coded by dominant stance: skeptical, neutral/mixed, or supportive/affirmative (Table 4).

Table 4
Tone and Stance Across Corpora

Corpus	Skeptical	Neutral/mixed	Supportive/affirmative
AI photography competition (n = 34)	19 (55.9%)	11 (32.4%)	4 (11.8%)
Traditional photography competition (n = 41)	7 (17.1%)	21 (51.2%)	13 (31.7%)
AI controversy (n = 51)	25 (49.0%)	11 (21.6%)	15 (29.4%)

The most significant pattern is that the AI photography competition corpus was the most clearly skeptical in tone. Of the 34 AI-entry reports, only 4 (11.8%) were coded as supportive/affirmative. Once AI enters the field of photojournalism, newspapers tended to frame the issue by raising questions about bias, fairness, disclosure of information, inconsistent categorization, or concerns regarding legitimacy. The traditional corpus showed a very different tonal pattern. Reports about traditional photography competition were more likely to be descriptive, respectful, or celebratory. In most cases, the articles did not need to defend the legitimacy of the image or the category itself. They could focus on explaining the image's quality, story, technical difficulty, or emotional significance. Lastly, AI controversy corpus remained strongly skeptical, but it was not as overwhelmingly skeptical as the broader AI-entry set. One reason is that later controversy reporting often included more explicit coverage of institutional adaptation, especially after 2023. Newspapers continued to foreground distrust, backlash, and regulatory concern, but they also reported efforts to accommodate AI through new rules, partial permissions, category distinctions, and formal disclosure requirements.

4.9 Temporal Shifts in Evaluative Emphasis

Over time, the corpora reveal that newspaper reviews have undergone three distinct phases of transformation. During the early baseline period, reviews were primarily represented by traditional competition coverage and more conventional news reports. This also dominated larger, traditional corpora. At that time, newspaper discourse revolved around a relatively stable evaluation framework. Articles mainly focused on craftsmanship, technical quality, composition, subject matter, and emotional or social impact. A second phase emerged around 2022–2023. This is the time when AI-related entries begin to appear more visibly in competition reporting. The focus of evaluation has shifted from the conventional assessment of visual quality to disruptive innovation, uncertainty, and boundary conflicts. At this phase, skepticism is most pronounced, and the primary criteria for evaluation have shifted to authorship, disclosure of information, originality, and comparability. The third phase occurs in 2024–

2025, when discussions on the matter become more institutionalized. While newspaper reports still mention voices of skepticism, such skepticism increasingly focused on issues such as rules, eligibility, and governance.

5. Discussion

This study asked how major English-language newspapers evaluated AI-related photography competition entries relative to traditional photography competition entries, what tone accompanied those evaluations, and how those emphases changed over time. First, the language used in traditional competition coverage tends to be relatively positive, focusing primarily on technical skill, composition, impact, and social significance. Second, once AI-generated works began appearing in competitions, the newspaper coverage shifted focus toward issues of fairness, authenticity, and process legitimacy. Third, subsequent reports on the controversy did not simply perpetuate this skeptical stance, but instead placed greater emphasis on procedural issues, focusing on rule revisions, category classifications, timely disclosure, and institutional reforms. The tone of traditional photography competition coverage tends to be neutral or supportive, whereas AI photography competition coverage takes a more skeptical stance. Subsequently, a new form of skepticism emerged that focuses more on administrative and governance issues, though it remains critical in nature.

Overall, the emergence and application of AI in the field of photography and in photography competitions have altered the criteria newspapers use to evaluate entries. In traditional competition coverage, the primary concern was whether a photograph was sufficiently outstanding to merit recognition. In reports on AI photography, newspapers are increasingly raising the same questions, that is, whether the image belong to that category, whether the process by which it was created sufficiently clear and understandable, and whether the claims regarding its legitimacy were credible.

5.1 From Image-centered Merit to Process-centered Legitimacy

An analysis of newspaper coverage of photography competitions over the past decade reveals that the criteria for evaluation appear to have shifted from a focus on the quality of the image to a focus on the legitimacy of the process. In traditional photography competition coverage, the focus of evaluation has primarily been on the final image and related criteria, such as technique, composition, impact, and meaning. Even when rules or editorial constraints are mentioned, they are typically treated as supplementary notes rather than the main focus of the report. In contrast, in reports on AI, the images themselves no longer seem sufficient as a basis for evaluation. The reports repeatedly examine the image-creation process, whether the use of AI is disclosed, and whether the works should be directly compared with traditional photographs.

Research on value assessment suggests that evaluation is not merely a matter of ranking objects that are inherently comparable. It also involves the social functions of classification and legitimization.

Evaluation relies on classification systems, through which participants determine what constitutes value and by what criteria (Lamont, 2012). Therefore, the analysis presented in reports on AI photography competitions not only evaluates the submitted works differently but also assists the judging system in determining whether the objects under discussion still belong to the same evaluation framework. From this perspective, the controversy surrounding AI photography competitions has been about comparability. The repeated emphasis on fairness in the discourse suggests that the press has consistently questioned whether prompt-based, generator-assisted, and camera-based photography can be judged on an equal footing without distorting the essence of the competition.

5.2 Symbolic Capital Under Conditions of Instability

The findings suggest that competitions not only award prizes but also test the social conditions under which images gain recognition. Within the realm of traditional photography, a photograph's symbolic capital can be conferred through identifiable qualities such as technical skill, visual distinctiveness, or emotional resonance. With the emergence of AI, a visually striking image is no longer sufficient to ensure its legitimacy. Recognition increasingly depends on whether the participant's creative process is valid, whether the category of the work is appropriate, and whether sufficient information has been disclosed. Symbolic capital has become more conditional and is now more closely linked to the rigor and legitimacy of the procedures.

Prize evaluation is a process-oriented and context-dependent practice, and what is considered "official and legitimate" changes with shifts in institutional and historical conditions, as well as with shifts in sociocultural norms (Solaroli, 2016). By reporting on the debate surrounding "collaborative creation," "AI-generated" categories, and the need for separate standards, and by highlighting the conditions under which symbolic value can still be recognized, the press has become involved in this crisis of legitimacy within the field of photography. In the case of Brisbane Portrait Prize, the initial decision to allow works "completed in whole or part by generative artificial intelligence" to compete linked legitimacy to ownership and the contemporary nature of art. However, the subsequent decision to label AI works as "unfair and unrecognized" redefined legitimacy in terms of rule revisions, artist resistance, and a clearer distinction between acceptable uses of AI and works generated entirely by AI (Taylor, 2024).

5.3 Boundary Making as a Practical and Discursive Process

One of the most striking patterns in the corpus is that newspapers consistently organize their coverage of AI around certain distinctions, such as photography versus AI-generated imagery, human capture versus generator-based production, acceptable assistance versus unacceptable replacement, and trusted representation versus the legitimacy of synthetics. Over time, these contrasts gradually evolved into institutional boundaries. The shift from open controversy to rules about disclosure, category separation, and prompt declaration indicates that once symbolic boundaries become unstable, competitors will seek to transform them into enforceable organizational distinctions.

Symbolic boundaries are conceptual distinctions that actors use to categorize objects and practices, and these categories give rise to inclusion and exclusion (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). In the context of this study, it is revealed that, in the field of photography under pressure from new technologies such as AI, these boundaries are publicly negotiated through newspaper discourse. It is worth noting that newspapers did not simply report on these distinctions after the institutions had finalized them. Instead, they were the ones who first brought these distinctions to the public's attention. In the AI photography competition corpus, newspaper discourse repeatedly foregrounded the very distinctions that later became formal competition rules. This shows that newspaper discourse and institutional reform were intertwined parts of the field's effort to restore legibility.

5.4 The Issue of Authenticity and Trust

The strong mention of authenticity and trust in the AI-related corpora illustrates that newspapers were asking how people could know what kind of image it was. This concern about the reliability of classification itself. For example, some real photos have been called into question because they look too much like AI-generated images (Hern, 2024). If visual appearance alone cannot guarantee an image's classification, the field must rely more heavily on declarations, rules, and sources. This is why reports since 2024 have increasingly focused on refining procedures and revising rules. The field has changed to evaluate the evidence attached to the images. According to Schofield (2023), the research on AI and virtual photography highlights how AI-generated imagery challenges people's inherent perceptions of the nature of photography and what it can represent. Once AI entered a field historically closely associated with photographic authority, the focus of the press shifted to verifying its legitimacy.

5.5 From Admiration to Skepticism

Traditional reporting tends to adopt a neutral, descriptive, or mildly positive tone, as the legitimacy of the subject under evaluation is rarely questioned. In contrast, early coverage of AI's entry into the market took a sharply skeptical tone, as the issue was framed as disruptive and threatening. The later controversy reports maintain a skeptical tone, but it become more complex as newspapers increasingly highlighted institutional efforts to regulate the issue. As can be seen, skepticism has not disappeared. It has just taken on a different form. By the end of 2024, many reports no longer focused solely on the crisis of legitimacy as they had before, but shifted to covering institutional changes within the field, such as which AI applications are permitted, what information must be disclosed, how categories are defined, and why trust is so crucial. Therefore, this shift was basically from cultural unease to administrative management.

5.6 Theoretical and Practical Implications

Bourdieu's field theory remains highly useful for understanding technological disruption, but only if the study pays close attention to newspaper discourse as part of the field's classificatory work. Research findings indicate that newspapers do not just describe the redistribution of symbolic capital. They also help construct the language used to justify this redistribution. Soro (2021) argues that symbolic value can be constructed through the expression of reputation and discursive performance. In this research, by

repeatedly focusing on terms such as authenticity, fairness, disclosure of information, and classification standards, the newspaper has made these concepts part of the public's common vocabulary for making judgments.

In fact, when it comes to AI-related photographs, competitions cannot rely only on broad or vague descriptions of creativity. If legitimacy now depends in part on the transparency of the process, then competition design increasingly requires clearer rules for information disclosure, category structures, and the acceptability of AI assistance. Later newspaper corpora indicate that this shift has already begun. For photography competitions that rely on public trust, ambiguity alone can now lead to reputational damage.

6. Conclusion

This paper aims to examine how mainstream English-language newspapers evaluated entries in AI photography competitions between 2015 and 2025 and compare them with traditional photography competitions. In particular, the paper concentrates on which evaluation criteria the papers stressed, the tone associated with such criteria, and how these criteria changed over time or particularly through a period of controversy and rule changes. The results show that newspaper coverage does not treat AI photography like any new aesthetic trend in photography. Instead, AI challenges the convention against which photographers are attempting to legitimize themselves. Traditional coverage of photography competitions by the newspapers largely employs a predictable expressive vocabulary which focuses on skill, technical quality, composition, impact, subject matter, and other public issues. By contrast, once AI photography began receiving competition coverage, the newspapers fairly quickly shifted their focus to authorship, information disclosure, fairness, category alignment, authenticity and public trust. In the lexicon of controversies and rule changes, they became more procedural. This corpus puts more stress on prohibitions, disclosure requirements, category distinctions, and organization efforts to reduce uncertainty. The new evaluative criteria have become: can the image be properly classified? Does it disclose adequate information? Was it created in compliance with the rules? Is it trustworthy as a visual object? This indicates that the technological adjustment disrupts the production process and dismantles the symbolic rules on which the field depends to allocate recognition.

The outcomes of this research have far-reaching consequences for media, cultural, and legitimacy studies. As cultural intermediaries, newspapers actively shape how ordinary people think about acceptable creativity, what image-making practices are worthy of recognition, and which boundaries should certainly be defended or redrawn. In this respect, the study can benefit not only the field of photography and AI research but also concerning the distribution of symbolic capital and the work of boundary making when established categories lose their taken-for-granted stability.

This research has several limitations. To begin with, this study is constrained due to the sample of media. The set of texts was obtained from 31 major English-language newspapers in the US, UK and Singapore from the database of 'Major news and business sources' in Factiva. The study only examines

one aspect of elite discourse, in other words. It does not include magazines for photographers, specialized arts journals, photography forums, social media chatter, platform-based creator communities and non-English-language news media. As a result, the results are primarily about the English-language newspaper discussions, not about the public discussion regarding AI and photography in its fullness. Other media formats may rely on different benchmarks, attach different meanings to authorship or authenticity, or adopt differing degrees of skepticism or openness towards AI.

In addition, this research concentrates on the discourses of newspapers but not on the institutional practices themselves. According to the analysis, newspapers' coverage about photography contests is presented. Furthermore, the analysis does not investigate discussions between the judges, ruleset for the competition, which is the main institutive text, and visual features of the entries. The process of dissemination of legitimacy in the public sphere largely includes media coverage, however, it does not mean to say it is the whole of the competition's decision-making process. The motives which prompt organizers to make rules may only be partially visible in media reporting and the judges' reasoning may be more complex than a published account would suggest. Likewise, this research does not include a visual analysis of winning or controversial entries, so it is not able to assess how specific visual characteristics influenced public reaction to the works.

On the basis of this study, future research could examine how competition organizers, judges, and jury members interpret legitimacy, authorship, and fairness of AI-assisted or AI-generated submissions. This study focuses on newspaper coverage and does not capture internal decision-making processes. Future research could deepen our understanding of how elite discourse within competition institutions frames AI photography. Another research could compare newspaper reports with competition rulebooks, judges' statements, and participants' accounts of the competition process to understand whether media coverage strengthens, oversimplifies or changes institutional standards. Future studies might explore how the boundary dispute varies from field to field: photography, illustration, digital art, and photojournalism, for instance. Has AI caused boundary disputes in all art fields? Or does the scale of the controversy depend on a given field's historical connections to realism and authenticity?

All in all, the debate about the acceptance of AI in photography competitions is not really about the fact of a new technology. Essentially, it also concerns the social principles being reconfigured with regard to the recognition, ranking and credibility of photographs. The question now is not whether AI will produce good work but how a field gets to define which works are eligible.

Declarations

Author Contribution

Zhiyu Wang conducted the data sourcing and analysis, wrote the main manuscript text, prepared table 1-4, and reviewed the manuscript.

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