AI and Creativity in the Arts -- On Whose Terms?

Siok Sian Pek Dorji[1]

"Ping" goes the phone. A WhatsApp message arrives with an attachment - a piece of music dedicated to the building of 108 stupas in the Gelephu Mindfulness City. It is a young friend experimenting with AI. He fed AI information about the project and a riff of a catchy Western pop style phrase with his guitar. The instant result is an upbeat song with a distinctly American female singer's voice.

This is the speed at which generative AI churns out "creative" content - and there's no turning back. For Bhutan, AI is an opportunity that demands careful attention to how it is used, especially at the intersection of AI and creativity.

This raises questions in a country where culture and identity is a pillar of the national vision - Gross National Happiness. What are the ethical implications of adopting AI in art, music, film, writing, design? How do we understand the notion of creativity? Will AI sideline human creativity? AI is being trained by technologically advanced countries, but can Bhutan adopt AI on its own terms?

This article explores how AI is impacting Bhutan's creative industry, looking at the risks and opportunities technology poses for a small country. Can AI complement,not replace, human creativity – and in Bhutan's case, its identity?

Views of artists, writers, film-makers andmusicians, academics and practitioners at the forefront of Bhutan's cultural scene were sought through 12 qualitative interviews. As Bhutan's oral culture adopts this powerful new technology, what policies, strategies, and safeguards can Bhutan put in place?

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The Bhutanese Context

In 2025, the government adopted a National Digital AI Strategy, seeing the need for investment in technology-driven solutions to ensure that the Bhutanese identity and traditions endure the digital era. The Civil Service provided guidelines for responsible generative AI Use (RCSC & GovTech, 2024).

The national education policy and strategic guidelines include broad AI guidelines, with AI and robotics a part of the national curriculum. Educators are being trained in digital pedagogy, content creation, assessment, cybersecurity, and AI-with guiding principles for ethical use, diversity, and representation (Ministry of Education and Skills Development, Dec. 2025) .

The Royal University of Bhutan is drafting AI policies for the university system. The College of Science and Technology and the Department of Culture and Dzongkha development are piloting an app for Dzongkha translation and text-to-speech. The national language and Bhutan's many dialects remain largely absent from existing AI tools, making AI-assisted creativity in Dzongkha and local languages challenging.

Creativity and AI

Bhutan is beginning to use algorithmically created versions of text, images, and videos which sometimes look real. Such synthetic media - created or modified by algorithms - is commonly found in Bhutanese social media, and many are experimenting with apps like ChatGPT and Tiktok for work and entertainment.

People who prompt AI to create pictures and drawings, designs and music, require a sensitivity and imagination to capture the content they want. Human creativity is about lived experiences, expression, and imagination.

A study in Denmark's Aalborg University points out that some creative professionals define creativity through characteristics like initiative, intention, the ability to have feelings, self-awareness, experience and inspiration(Inie, Falk, and Tanimoto, 2023). Participants state that

generative AI can neither replicate nor draw on life experience, emotions, or memories to inspire creations, unlike humans.

AI is all about machine learning and can, at best, only render some interpretation of an artist's or creative person's prompt. The originality or creativity of the idea comes from their inner expression.

Bhutanese Perspectives

Bhutanese interviewed for this article acknowledge that times are changing and AI is replacing the human touch.

Human relations matter in Bhutan, a largely oral society. AI enhances productivity and creativity and will have an impact on human connections and cultural processes. In short, AI makes creative processes more utilitarian, functional, and even transactional. This has come a long way from the origins of Bhutanese creativity, where traditional art or music were largely narratives with a spiritual message, and the motivation of creating art was not just for the market.

Bhutanese artists, story tellers and designers confirm that human creativity is a critical process, even if it is not necessarily immediate or perfect.

"Some people like me enjoy doing it the old way," says artist Asha Kama. "My enjoyment is the struggle or the challenge that I face while creating something." For him, the creative process is much more important than the result. (K. Wangdi, personal communication, May 12, 2026)

Author Kunzang Choden says creativity requires "hard work and sweat… it has to come out from the heart onto the page until you're happy with it." Being "old school", she uses the thesaurus and dictionary:

> "AI is almost mechanical. Thinking is what we need, not just robotic imitation of what everybody else is doing." (K.Choden, personal communication, May 13 , 2026)

"The creative process is not only about the idea you're putting in the work, but also trying to bring out what you feel into the painting, or music.

It is something that AI will never replace," says Kuenga Zam, a civil servant who dabbles in amateur art. (K. Zam, personal communication, June 10, 2026)

The speed of AI is changing design processes and the " slow, mindful process" of creativity is gone, according to blogger/ photographer Karma Lhari.

> "AI eliminates the experience of people who would sit and consult, the ones who would actually come up with colours and trends in a more intentional process. Suddenly the machine and you are lumped together. Users can give a generic paragraph of what it wants and the designs just appear on ChatGPT, and we just copy that. Most of the mills in India are doing that (referring to Bhutanese textiles)."
> (K. T. Wangchuk Lhari, personal communication, May 6, 2026)

There is a realisation that human judgement remains central to AI use. It is something that Bhutan would have to master.

The president of the US AI company, Anthropic (known for creating Claude), Daniela Amodie, told ABC News: "Things that make us more human will become more important instead." This suggests that policies and guidelines - designed to support cultural content and identity - will be essential to ensuring that diverse contexts are preserved rather than absorbed into a homogenised global culture.

Literature Review

Using technology in art is not new, but generative AI is reshaping the creative sector faster and more pervasively than any earlier technology. This section draws on research and discussions on AI's impact on global culture and the creative industries in Asia to draw lessons relevant to Bhutan.

Historian-philosopher Yuval Harari talks of countries facing an "identity crisis" when "AI immigrants" -- referring to the pervasive AI technology - changes their culture. Speaking at the 2026 World Economic Forum, Harari asks if the world will "value the sovereign power of people to think in the future" and posits that cultural identity will be lost if society hands over critical thinking to machines (Harari, 2026).

The homogenisation of creative output is a common finding in studies. (Anderson et al, 2024).

Daryani et al. (2025) warn that large language models now shape culture at a pace and scale no earlier technology has. Their study shows LLMs actively influencing how people communicate and organise knowledge, and describes a feedback loop, where AI-generated content is fed back into the training data for future systems -- progressively standardising human expression over successive generations.

A 2024 Study by the International Confederation of Societies of Authors and Composers (representing over 5 million creators) found that music and audio-visual creators risk losing 24% and 21% of their revenues by 2028 as generative AI substitutes human work, while revenues for AI providers grow dramatically. The report calls on policy makers to safeguard creators' rights and enforce transparency.

The Human-Centred Computing Group at Aalborg University, Denmark, warns that generative AI models are trained on copyrighted material without crediting original creators - and that AI-generated outputs are now displacing the professionals whose work were used to train AI. The Group argues that if we value human creative work - art that moves people and engages with lived experience - the systemic undermining of original creators must be addressed.

Meanwhile AI researcher Virginia Dignum of Umeå University, Sweden argues that unique human traits will never be fully replaced, no matter how advanced AI becomes (Dignum, 2025).

UNESCO supports this by taking a position at the intersection of culture, technology and ethics. Its report on AI and culture (UNESCO, 2025) highlights the need to preserve cultural pluralism and sovereignty, and recommends that "algorithmic homogenisation and platform dominance" must be countered. The report states that human creativity, cultural diversity and sustainability must shape technology - not the other way around.

These studies have implications for Bhutan as AI penetrates societies faster than we are able to prepare for it. Experience across the world shows alliances of creative professionals campaigning against big technology

companies – accusing them of stealing original work and changing creativity. Others call for compensation for using creative work to build AI competency. These experiences provide some insight into the paradox of using AI in the creative field.

Bhutan currently has little regulatory framework to protect its traditional and rigsar music nor its small film and creative industry. It is time to adopt ethical provisions in an age where voice, music, pictures, and words are easily cloned and replicated.

Cautionary Lessons

Over-reliance on use of AI carries other serious risks. Research from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Lab shows that heavy dependence on AI changes how the brain operates, a phenomenon researchers call "cognitive atrophy" (Kosmyna et al, 2025).

This weakens critical thinking and the ability to evaluate information and solve problems thoughtfully -- the result of what researchers term cognitive offloading, where mental tasks are gradually transferred from human to machine (Gerlich, 2025). The risk, simply put, is to use it or lose it.

Of particular concern are findings on younger users. Psychiatrist Dr Zishan Khan, who works with children and adolescents who rely heavily on AI in their homework, warns: " I see that over-reliance on these LLMs can have unintended psychological and cognitive consequences, especially for young people whose brains are still developing." He cautions that neural connections that help people access information, memorise facts and build resilience will weaken with increasing AI use.

This is pertinent to Bhutan, where the younger generation uses AI in an environment with low awareness. The minimum age for most generative AI tools is 13. Some European countries have raised the minimum age to 16. Parental consent is needed for users aged 13-17; Claude's minimum age is 18 years. With age limits poorly observed, Bhutan needs to urgently address and enforce these boundaries, and ensure they are well-communicated to students and parents.

Bhutan's Responses

As Bollywood, the Korean Wave, and other external forms of creative narratives penetrate Bhutan's creative fields, what can Bhutan learn from the Asian region?

Film Production

Neighbouring India and China are experiencing fast growing micro-drama industries capturing worldwide viewers. Reports (New York Times, May 2026) indicate increasing AI-generated content that is produced with no cameras, no actors, no team members. In India, AI-generated micro-dramas and story-based shorts are projected to reach USD 4.5 billion by 2030. Actors in the region are training AI to create their avatars.

A downside is that China is facing a backlash from actors as jobs are being taken over by AI-generated actors with likeness to real actors. This has led to the introduction of rules (in 2026) requiring people to give consent before their digital avatars are used.

At a Thimphu literary festival last year, a local filmmaker talked about people's shorter attention span, and the increasing interest in making micro-dramas. Local filmmakers find AI useful, especially for scripting in English, for subtitles, and to correct language (based on interviews).

Another filmmaker observes that AI "acts like a boss". Lotay Tshering notes that when AI is asked to correct sentences, AI adds to it and changes his thought: "I always have to redirect him (AI)". Tshering concludes that "AI uses information fed by humans, it can enhance creativity but it doesn't have a mind for original creation. It's always someone else's". (L.Tshering, personal communication, May 13, 2026)

Often, that someone else is not Bhutanese. Documentary film producer, Pelden Dorji cautions: "It is not actually Bhutanese, it's something different. If you truly depend on AI, then your creativity is dead; it is no more yours."

A risk emerges: "When AI does it, it's so beautiful, you forget your culture and tradition, you stick to AI creativity." (P. Dorji, personal communication, May 4, 2026)

Music Production

Originality and authenticity are questioned when AI is used. In terms of music, Bhutan's contemporary popular music has always sought to balance tradition and outside influence, and AI use is expanding this shift.

Some musicians use AI to download music arrangements. They write a few lines of lyrics, hum a tune, and put them on AI to generate a fully backed music piece.

Singer and composer, Ugyen Pandey believes that Bhutan cannot relegate our compositions fully to LLMs. A challenge is that many Bhutanese are self-taught, or natural singers; thus the comparison of Bhutanese music to Western music. While there is appreciation for new music arrangements, people do not realise that some music arrangements are "not quite Bhutanese". (U.Pandey, personal communication, May 4, 2026)

Professionals point out that AI tends to create more Western-like music because of what it is been "trained" on. Music producer, Choeying Jatsho from M-Studio, believes that AI is not ready to work with traditional Bhutanese music. There are things AI cannot do, such as ad libbing in Bhutanese melodies. (C. Jatsho, personal communication, May 4, 2026)

Ethnomusicologist and performer, Jigme Dukpa, notes that existing AI programmes cannot reproduce traditional musical instruments. There's a theoretical and practical difference between Western and Bhutanese music. Bhutanese string instruments have no frets, compared with Western instruments, thus their tonal output is different.

Western electronic keyboards are tempered instruments while Bhutanese traditional music, played on the damnyen and chiwang for example, are non-tempered instruments with microtones.

Dukpa believes that if young musicians keep turning to AI to create music, one could very well change the cultural context of music in Bhutan. Popular music today already uses largely electronic sounds.(J. Dukpa, personal communication, May 4, 2026)

As AI becomes this generation's new musical instrument, Bhutanese must learn to use it and "Bhutanise it as much as they can" (J. Dukpa, May, 2026). Traditional and contemporary music education is required for Bhutan to maintain its cultural heritage and to avoid cultural homogenisation with the emergence of technology.

More recently, AI has taken popular Bhutanese songs and re-rendered them for online media, receiving much wider viewership. So Bhutan is soon likely to enter into discussions on copyrights and use of original content, as AI use increases.

Writing and Design

Kunzang Choden believes that: "AI is producing prototypes. There is no physical or mental effort. It's a template." (K. Choden, May 13, 2026).

Animation company, iBest, uses AI for support and believes in the need for the user to be the gatekeeper. Tharchen, the CEO, says: "People usually don't care how it's done. AI can be used to refine our work – but it may not really represent Bhutanese nuances. People who create content must take extra responsibility and accountability when using AI to ensure that the piece of work represents local nuances." (Tharchen, personal communication, June 18, 2026)

Copyrights are another concern, especially digitising Bhutanese textiles. "A problem is that when AI copies kishuthara (textile), even if it democratises fashion, the money is not staying in Bhutan; the profit benefits the mills outside the country." says Karma Lhari.He suggests the need to overcome reluctance to critique and for constructive feedback in a small society, to enable Bhutanese artisans to grow beyond mediocrity to higher levels of creativity or craftsmanship. (K.T.Wangchuk Lhari, May 6, 2026)

Bhutan's creative sector is heading to another genre of work with artists and technology collaborating.

Respondents note a leaning towards listening to live music, instrumentation, watching theatre, and buying handicrafts, even with an increase in digitised AI content and designed wares. Lhari observes that Bhutanese, and visitors

to Bhutan, appreciate what is created by someone's hands with the "flaws and mistakes intact". (K.T.Wangchuk Lhari, May 6, 2026)

Concluding Thoughts

AI use in Bhutan is in a nascent stage. In facing a predicament of how to balance AI use with how much real effort goes into writing, film, art, and music, users should understand cognitive atrophy and cultural homogenisation.

Many creative professionals have not considered the longer-term impacts of AI use, and there is inadequate discussion on ethical usage and copyrights. Like teachers being primed to use AI in schools to educate parents and adults, there is the need for better oversight, transparency, and accountability.

In a country with a shortage of young professionals, AI and Gen AI can support the creation of creative content. The steady enforcement of clear policies and guidelines will ensure AI does not homogenise Bhutanese identity and culture, and enable Bhutan to adopt technology on its own terms.

Much of Bhutanese culture - folk songs,*lozey*, the oral stories and history- exists in forms and languages AI cannot yet access, process, or share. As people turn to AI for research and information, the tradition of sitting with elders to discuss ideas is at risk of disappearing. In this sense, AI is threatening Bhutan's oral traditions and cultural practices.

AI will dominate the landscape. Hence, policy and literacy matters not just for those in governance but for all citizens.

Balancing the Influence of AI

Bhutanese professionals note the need for AI literacy that balances technical skill with critical thinking and creativity. Bhutan can help its young people question, interpret, and responsibly shape the technology they use. Such education begins at home and school.

Professionals observe that young Bhutanese lack grounding in traditional music, arts, and culture, making them more likely to lean on AI for creative content. Bhutan can build this creative foundation early so the next generation is familiar with local cultural contexts. Without it, professionals note that much of Bhutan's creative output will remain amateur and mediocre.

A risk with AI is its emphasis on speed, which makes it harder for creators to stay original. AI works in a business context, but what about continuing to make the effort to create as a process of expressing our views, experience, emotions, or even just as an offering (as in Bhutan's traditional spiritual art and music)? Many are falling into the trap of turning to the machine to create. It is time to consider enforcing - and explaining - age limits and ethical AI use among students and parents.

As large language models write, compose music, make films and design, global lessons and respondents' feedback share some strategies that Bhutan can adopt to keep its culture authentic. AI cannot just be a productivity tool, especially in terms of the creative field. Suggestions include the following:

Culture and Documentation

- Train Bhutanese to recognise and appreciate the traditions, history, and origins of their creative arts.
- Document and digitally archive the arts - traditional dance, music, art, zorig chosum - to better preserve authentic styles and delay cultural homogenisation. Research and develop databases.
- Then develop local AI tools based on these archives, training AI on Bhutan's own instruments and sounds so they are not lost to AI's Western bias. At the same time consider how to balance providing more accurate AI tools with the challenges of copyrights, transparency, attribution of creative work etc.
- Introduce copyright protections and governance systems to safeguard original Bhutanese work.
- Include creative arts consultations and considerations in taking the National Digital AI Strategy forward.

Education and Creative Development

- Introduce the creative arts in schools and community centres, and support centres for music, dance, and the arts
- The humanities, literature and history and cultural studies enable Bhutan to understand diverse perspectives while grappling with the use of AI.
- Promote skills and talent, and the professionalisation of the creative arts; open up spaces for professional feedback and critique
- Train Bhutanese to use AI ethically and responsibly without letting it take over the creative process. Use AI as a tool while keeping Bhutanese imagination at the centre of content creation. Create Ethics councils or groups for AI use.
- Foster critical thinking and open inquiry in an AI-driven world.
- Continue to emphasise original creativity and to create "new" - not just to maximise what there is already.
- Extend digital literacy capacity to include parents, working adults, and youth
- Create space for collaboration between tradition and the evolving creative arts, producing hybrid content grounded in Bhutanese identity
- Encourage open discussion among arts practitioners about the challenges and opportunities of generative AI

These interventions need coordinated action among AI developers, policymakers, social scientists, artists, and civil society. At the centre of it all is provenance – knowing where Bhutan comes from, culturally and historically. This awareness is what will allow Bhutan to evolve with AI while ensuring that what it creates still carries the unmistakable essence of Bhutanese identity, adding to the beauty of a diverse world.

But a dilemma remains. If Bhutan feeds AI with its creative content, then are we opening it up to the world to reproduce and reinterpret Bhutanese culture? Can we maintain our freedom to make the effort to create artistic expressions? Can Bhutan maintain its human qualities and adopt AI on its own terms?

AI use: Claude AI (Anthropic) was used to search for and identify recent studies and publications relevant to AI use in the creative field. It was also used to assist with formatting and verification of citations in accordance with APA 7 conventions. The writing and content are the work of the writer.

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Interviews were conducted with 12 persons listed below between May and June, 2026:

Ugyen Pandey (Musician and singer, 4.5.26)
Choeying (M-Studio, Thimphu, 4.5.26)
Jigme Dukpa (Ethnomusicologist, performer, 4.5.26)
Pelden Dorji (Film-maker, 4.5.26)
Lotay Tshering, (Film-maker, 13.5.26)
Karma T. Wangchuk, Lhari (Blogger/photographer, 6.5.26)
Azha Karma, (VAST founder, 12.5.26)
Kunzang Choden (Author, 13.5.26)
Kuenga Zam (Civil servant, 9.6.26)
Sony (Designer, May, 2026)
A. Gurung (College student, 8.5.2026)
Others: G. Chua (Journalist, 6.6.26)