

What Do We Mean by GenAI? A Systematic Mapping of The Evolution, Trends, and Techniques Involved in Generative AI

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ABSTRACT

Artificial Intelligence has become a focal point of interest across various sectors due to its ability to generate creative and realistic outputs. A specific subset, generative artificial intelligence, has seen significant growth, particularly in late 2022. Tools like ChatGPT, Dall-E, or Midjourney have democratized access to Large Language Models, enabling the creation of human-like content. However, the concept 'Generative Artificial Intelligence' lacks a universally accepted definition, leading to potential misunderstandings. While a model that produces any output can be technically seen as generative, the Artificial Intelligent research community often reserves the term for complex models that generate high-quality, human-like material. This paper presents a literature mapping of AI-driven content generation, analyzing 631 solutions published over the last five years to better understand and characterize the Generative Artificial Intelligence landscape. Our findings suggest a dichotomy in the understanding and application of the term "Generative AI". While the broader public often interprets "Generative AI" as AI-driven creation of tangible content, the AI research community mainly discusses generative implementations with an emphasis on the models in use, without explicitly categorizing their work under the term "Generative AI".

KEYWORDS

Artificial Intelligence, Content Generation, Generative AI, Generative Models, Machine Learning, Systematic Literature Mapping.

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I. INTRODUCTION

ARTIFICIAL Intelligence (AI) has evolved as an enthralling topic, attracting the attention of researchers, industry experts, and the general public alike. Its growing popularity may be ascribed to its capacity to produce realistic and creative results and its accessibility, which has far-reaching ramifications in fields such as medicine [1-3], education [4], [5], art [6], [7], music [8], [9], marketing [10], [11], software development [12], [13], among several other areas.

While AI has experienced a surge in popularity in recent years, a particular approach within it has undergone explosive growth during the final months of 2022: the field of generative artificial intelligence or GenAI [14].

The introduction of applications such as ChatGPT¹, Dall-E², or Midjourney³, which make Large Language Models (LLMs) [15], [16] accessible to end-users, has set a milestone in the application of

artificial intelligence to content generation, enabling wide audiences to effortlessly engage in the creation of human-like texts, realistic images, and even music [17].

But what do we exactly mean when we refer to GenAI? What types of content were being generated prior to the emergence of commercial tools like ChatGPT? And for what purposes?

Before diving into the complexities of generative AI, it is crucial to understand the precise meaning and scope of this term, as well as taking a closer look at the content generation processes that existed prior to putting these approaches in the hands of consumers. By investigating these factors, we can shed light on the underlying objectives and motivations driving the adoption of generative AI solutions.

Taking a closer look at the terminology, the word "generative" is defined as "(being) able to produce or create something". If we apply this definition to AI, every model can be technically considered as generative, as they always "produce or create something", whether in the form of numerical predictions or internal rules. However, not every content generation driven by AI is, or has been, considered as Generative AI.

In fact, the term 'Generative AI' has been applied more precisely to models that may produce new, previously unseen information dependent on the data on which they were trained. These models are developing fresh, human-like material that can be engaged with and consumed, rather than just numerical forecasts or internal rules.

¹ <https://chat.openai.com/>

² <https://openai.com/dall-e-2>

³ <https://www.midjourney.com/app/>

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The lack of a globally agreed definition of ‘Generative AI’ can result in misunderstanding and misinterpretation. For example, as mentioned before, some may claim that a simple decision tree model that creates rules based on incoming data is a type of Generative AI.

However, the AI research community reserves the term ‘generative’ for more complex models that can create high-quality, human-like material, unlike discriminative models (such as decision tree models), which are trained to predict probabilities of labels given observations [18]. Some examples of the so-called generative models [19] are Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs) or Variational Autoencoders (VAE), among several others (Fig. 1).

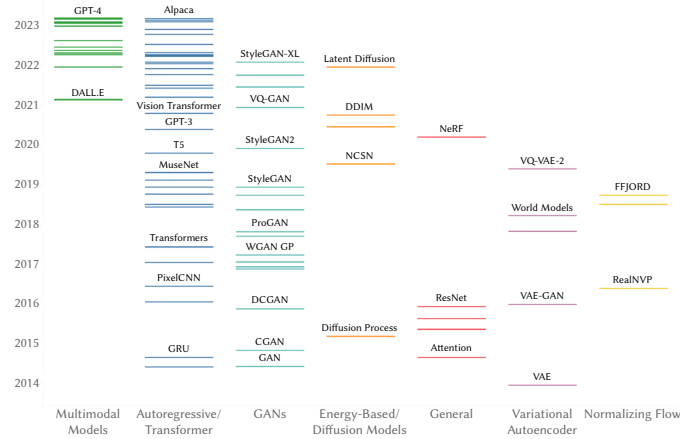


Fig. 1. Timeline of generative models by type. Elaborated by the authors. Source data from [20]. High-resolution version available at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8165255>.

But although generative models have already been differentiated from discriminative models by their internal processes and the probabilities they estimate [19], is Generative AI restricted to the use of these kinds of models? Is the underlying model characteristics crucial in affirming that content has been generated through Generative AI? Or do the nature of the content and the ultimate objective hold greater significance?

Without a clear definition, researchers may use the term ‘Generative AI’ to refer to various methods to generate content, leading to confusion and misunderstanding. This can stymie research on this subject, making comparing and contrasting various results difficult.

Furthermore, this ambiguity might make it difficult for industry experts and the general public to comprehend what Generative AI is and what it can achieve, leading to unrealistic expectations or fears about its capabilities, which can affect the adoption and acceptance of this technology.

This work aims at providing an analysis of AI-driven solutions for content generation to further define and delimit the meaning and use cases of Generative AI. This analysis has been carried out through a systematic approach, specifically a systematic literature mapping [21]. A systematic mapping provides a structured framework to thoroughly evaluate existing research in the rapidly evolving field of Generative AI, as well as to identify patterns, and spot potential gaps. It focuses on the extent of the subject rather than its depth, which is crucial in emerging and fast-paced domains. This process aids in establishing clear definitions and boundaries within the field, reducing ambiguity, and fostering a consistent discourse.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. Section II describes the methodology followed to conduct the systematic mapping, while Section III details the review process. Section IV presents the results obtained from the previous steps. Finally, sections V and VI discuss the results and provide a summary of our main findings.

This study adheres to the systematic literature review guidelines established by Kitchenham and Charters [22] and the mapping study guidelines set out by Petersen [23], [24]. Specifically, the process is structured around three core stages: planning, conducting, and reporting the findings.

The initial phase involves establishing the primary goal of the review, followed by its development. The main objective of this review is to collect and analyze the existing studies related to the application of AI in content generation, considering the following dimensions: the generated content, the objective of the content generation, the type of models employed and the application domains.

Once the objective has been defined, it is necessary to complete the next two phases, planning and conducting. In these, we define a set of mapping questions (MQs) that will help characterize Generative AI, the inclusion/exclusion criteria, and the search strategy.

A. Mapping Questions

We defined five mapping questions that characterize the AI-driven content generation landscape.

- **MQ1.** How many studies have been published over the years?
- **MQ2.** Who are the most active authors in the area of AI-driven content generation?
- **MQ3.** Which kinds of algorithms and techniques are employed to develop AI-driven content generation applications?
- **MQ4.** Which domains are applying AI-driven content generation to support their studies?
- **MQ5.** What kind of applications were published before and afterwards the popularization of ChatGPT?

These mapping questions are also set to answer the following research question by analyzing the results from the data extraction: **RQ. What do researchers understand by Generative Artificial Intelligence?**

B. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To discard irrelevant works (in terms of the scope of this paper) from the search results, a set of inclusion criteria (IC) and a set of exclusion criteria (EC) are defined, being the **inclusion criteria** as follows:

- **IC1.** The paper’s main objective is the application of content generation (data, images, text, sound, etc.) through artificial intelligence **AND**
- **IC2.** The artificial intelligence solution technical details are identified and described **AND**
- **IC3.** The field in which the solution was applied is identified and described **AND**
- **IC4.** The paper is not a review, survey, or comparative analysis **AND**
- **IC5.** The paper is written in English **AND**
- **IC6.** The paper is published in peer-reviewed Journals, Books, or Conferences **AND**
- **IC7.** The paper is accessible.

The following items refer to the **exclusion criteria** applied:

- **EC1.** The paper’s main objective is not the application of content generation (data, images, text, sound, models, etc.) through artificial intelligence **OR**
- **EC2.** The artificial intelligence solution technical details are not identified nor described **OR**

- **EC3.** The paper is a review, survey, or comparative analysis **OR**
- **EC4.** The field in which the solution was applied is not identified nor described **OR**
- **EC5.** The paper is not written in English **OR**
- **EC6.** The paper is not published in peer-reviewed Journals, Books, or Conferences **OR**
- **EC7.** The paper is not accessible.

These criteria aim at discarding works that are not focusing on generating content through AI. In this sense, we reject studies to benchmark different models, reviews, and works that do not generate tangible content. Following the discriminative and generative models' distinction [18], [19], we want to analyze solutions that generate new data instances in a non-deterministic manner, excluding the outcomes from forecasting, labelling, or classification approaches.

C. Search Strategy

The first step to extracting relevant works for the purpose of this paper is the selection of electronic databases. In this case, two electronic databases are selected: Scopus and Web of Science (WoS). These databases are chosen according to a set of requirements:

- It is a reference database in the research scope.
- It is a relevant database in the research context of this mapping study.
- It allows using similar search strings to the rest of the selected databases and Boolean operators.

An initial search using only the term “generative artificial intelligence” was carried out in these databases. However, this preliminary search yielded a small set of results focused on surveys, editorials, or discussions about the applicability of Generative AI approaches in different domains, such as education.

Given that significant AI-driven content generation applications were not retrieved through this initial search, it was necessary to identify which concepts, approaches or tools are widely associated with Generative AI, to finally collect research literature about these approaches.

Due to the increased accessibility of generative models to consumers after the release of OpenAI's ChatGPT, we analyzed search trends related to “Generative AI” in Google Trends. In this case, we observed that most of the related searches included commercial tools such as “ChatGPT”, “Dall-E”, or “Midjourney”.

Given this trend, we decided to perform another preliminary search, including wildcards to enclose derivations, and the NEAR operator to retrieve works where the terms joined by this operator are separated by an interval of explicitly specified words.

This operator is very handy in this context because we are focused on generative processes driven by AI, so the term related to generation must be near AI-related terms (such as deep learning, machine learning, and so on). This new search was structured as follows:

(“machine learning” OR “deep learning” OR “artificial intelligence” OR “AI” OR “AI-” OR “DL” OR “DL-” OR “ML” OR “ML-”) NEAR/0 (“generat”) OR (“ChatGPT” OR “Midjourney” OR “Dall-E” OR “Dalle” OR “StableDiffusion” OR “Stable Diffusion”) NEAR/1 (“generat*”)*

However, including specific tools would bias the results, as it is nearly impossible to include every released generative AI tool to date. On the other hand, executing a search with the first part of the search string only (*“machine learning” OR “deep learning” OR “artificial intelligence” OR “AI” OR “AI-” OR “DL” OR “DL-” OR “ML” OR “ML-”) NEAR/0 (“generat*”)*) collected a great set of works, but included an unmanageable quantity of noise, including several articles that were not related to AI-driven content generation.

To overcome these issues, we decided to define further the terminology. As mentioned in section II.B, we want to analyze solutions that generate new data instances in a non-deterministic manner, so we opted to focus on works that explicitly generated content through AI, including images, text, video, audio, sound, etc. We also included terms related to transformations between different types of content, such as text-to-image transformations (e.g., Midjourney and Dall-E).

Once every concept was identified, the specific query strings for each chosen database were specified using their query syntax.

1. Web of Science

TS=(("image generation" OR "text generation" OR "video generation" OR "audio generation" OR "sound generation" OR "3D generation" OR "content generation" OR "code generation" OR "dataset generation" OR "data generation" OR "text to text" OR "text-to-text" OR "text to image" OR "text-to-image" OR "text to audio" OR "text-to-audio" OR "text to video" OR "text-to-video" OR "text to code" OR "text-to-code" OR "text to 3D" OR "text-to-3D" OR "audio to text" OR "audio-to-text") AND ("artificial intelligence" OR AI OR "deep learning" OR "machine learning"))

2. Scopus

TITLE-ABS-KEY(("image generation" OR "text generation" OR "video generation" OR "audio generation" OR "sound generation" OR "3D generation" OR "content generation" OR "code generation" OR "dataset generation" OR "data generation" OR "text to text" OR "text to image" OR "text to audio" OR "text to video" OR "text to code" OR "text to 3D" OR "audio to text") AND ("artificial intelligence" OR AI OR "deep learning" OR "machine learning"))

Additionally, we limited the search to **journal articles published over the last 5 years** to analyze recent, established, and complete research works. Using this approach, we collected the final set of articles to analyze and outline the landscape of AI-driven generative solutions.

III. REVIEW PROCESS

The data-gathering process to conduct the present Systematic Literature Mapping has been divided into different phases in which various activities are carried out. The PRISMA 2020 [25], [26] guidelines were followed for data extraction.

Once the search was performed (on May 17th, 2023), the paper selection process was carried out through the following steps:

1. The raw results (i.e., the records obtained from each selected database) were gathered in a GIT repository⁴ and arranged into a spreadsheet. A total of 3295 papers were retrieved: 1835 from Scopus and 1460 from Web of Science.
2. After organizing the records, duplicate works were removed. Specifically, 1332 records were removed, retaining 1963 works (59.58% of the raw records) for the next phase.
3. The maintained papers were analyzed by reading their titles, abstracts, and keywords and by applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria. A total of 1332 papers were discarded as they did not meet the criteria, retaining 631 papers (32.14% of the unique papers retrieved) for the next phase.
4. The selected 631 papers were finally characterized following the mapping questions. For each paper, the following information was collected:
 - a. Content being generated by the AI technique (text, images, code, etc.)
 - b. AI model type employed (transformers, generative adversarial networks, etc.)

⁴ <https://github.com/AndVazquez/slm-gen-ai>

- c. Objective of the AI content generation (data augmentation, image enhancement, text summarization, text translation, style transfer, etc.)
- d. Domain of application of the AI-driven content generation

Fig. 2 shows the PRISMA 2020 [25], [26] flow diagram detailing the data extraction process. The dataset containing the works collected in every phase, along with the 631 selected and characterized works, is available at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8162484> [27].

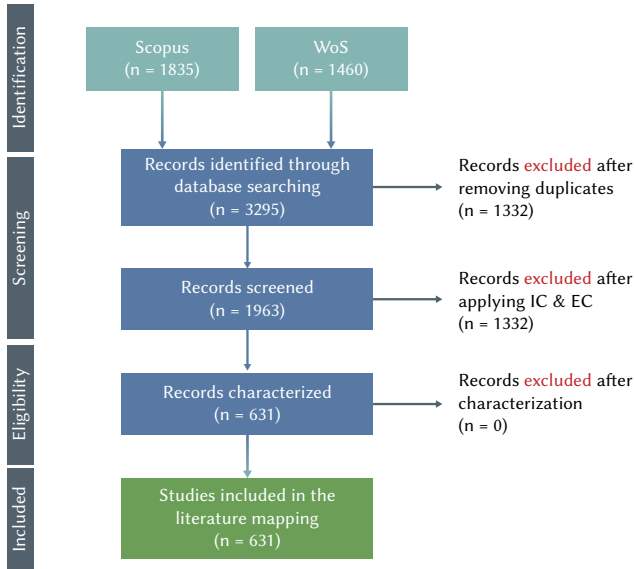


Fig. 2. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of the literature mapping. High-resolution version available at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8167557>.

IV. RESULTS

The following results have been obtained from the analysis of the obtained records. For a comprehensive review of the records, including title, authors, abstract, and characterization, please refer to the “Characterization” sheet of the provided dataset: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8162484> [27].

A. How Many Studies Have Been Published Over the Years?

The first mapping question aims at inspecting the temporal landscape of AI-driven content generation. Over the last five years, we can clearly see an increase in the number of works published.

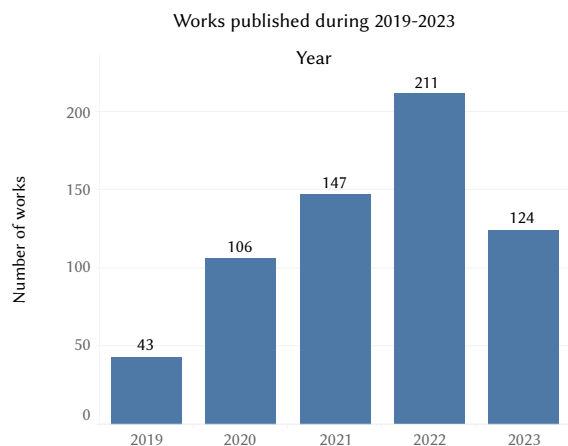


Fig. 3. Number of works published over the last five years. High-resolution version available at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8167574>.

It seems that this trend will continue throughout 2023, with 124 articles already published in the first 5 months of the year (Fig. 3).

B. Who Are the Most Active Authors in the Area of AI-driven Content Generation?

We performed an analysis and normalization of the authors involved in the 631 articles retrieved. This analysis allows us to identify influential authors that likely guide the research direction.

TABLE I. MOST PROLIFIC AUTHORS

Articles	Authors
3	Yang, Yang; Chen, Peng; Li, Yibin; Yoon, Hyunsoo; Togo, Ren; Pang, Zhiqi; Ogawa, Takahiro; Haseyama, Miki; Li, Wei; Fujita, Hiroshi; Schlaefler, Alexander; Scarselli, Franco; Fabelo, Himar; Andreini, Paolo; Bianchini, Monica
4	Byun, Yung-Cheol

Most authors (2493) have only published one article in the context of this literature mapping, while 169 have published more than one article. Table I displays the most prolific authors from the records retrieved during the data extraction process.

C. Which Kinds of Algorithms and Techniques Are Employed to Develop AI-driven Content Generation Applications?

As introduced, one of the main concepts of Generative AI is using certain models. But are these models limited to generative models? Or are discriminative models being employed to generate content?

Each article’s primary AI model or technique was identified to answer this question. Fig. 4 shows a clear tendency to use GANs for content generation, followed by encoder-decoder networks (such as Autoencoders) and other types of neural networks. We also found several solutions based on Transformers [28], [29].

Finally, the remaining methods have been grouped under the category “others,” which include hidden Markov methods, evolutionary algorithms, and Bayesian models.

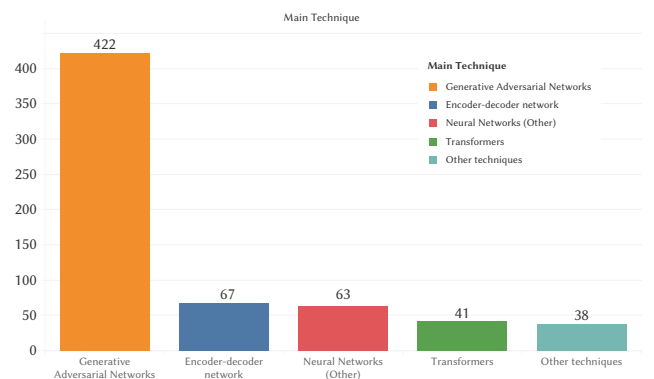


Fig. 4. Number of works grouped by AI technique employed. High-resolution version available at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8167582>.

It is important to clarify that although Transformers are encoder-decoder networks, we have decided to include them in a separate category. This separation allows us to analyze the impact of the release of ChatGPT, which is a transformer-based solution, on the usage of this particular model type.

Fig. 5 illustrates the evolution of the number of works utilizing these models. There is a growing trend in adopting Transformer-based solutions, which could be attributed to the recent popularity of GPT models.

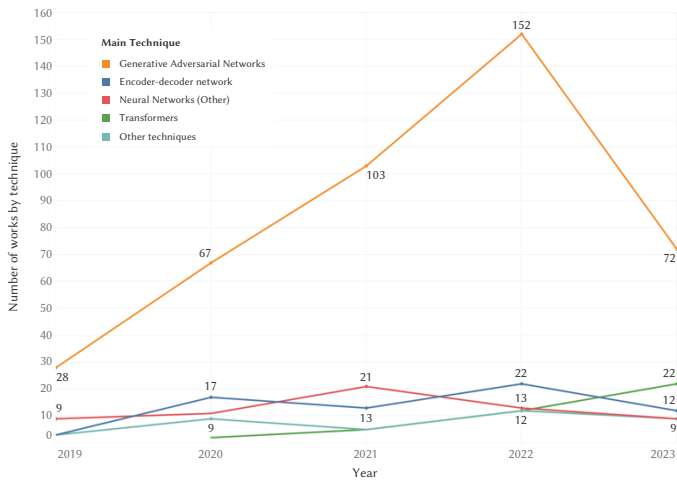


Fig. 5. Number of works grouped by AI technique employed. High-resolution version available at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8167600>.

D. Which Domains Are Applying AI-driven Content Generation to Support their Studies?

Another interesting insight regarding generative AI solutions is identifying which domains or fields of study benefit from generative models' outputs.

The main domain of application was extracted from each article. Fig. 6 shows that the principal domains in which generative AI is being applied are medicine and computer vision. Other domains include natural language processing (NLP), machine learning, remote sensing, art, software/videogames development, and cybersecurity.

But for what purposes is AI-driven content generation being used in each domain? This analysis allows us to better understand how and with what objectives generative artificial intelligence is being used in each field of study.

Fig. 7 breaks down the main content generation tasks by domain. It is possible to see that generative AI (and, specifically, Generative Adversarial Networks) is supporting data augmentation in most domains, but especially in medicine. Sample generation provides a minimally intrusive, fast, and effective method to augment or balance

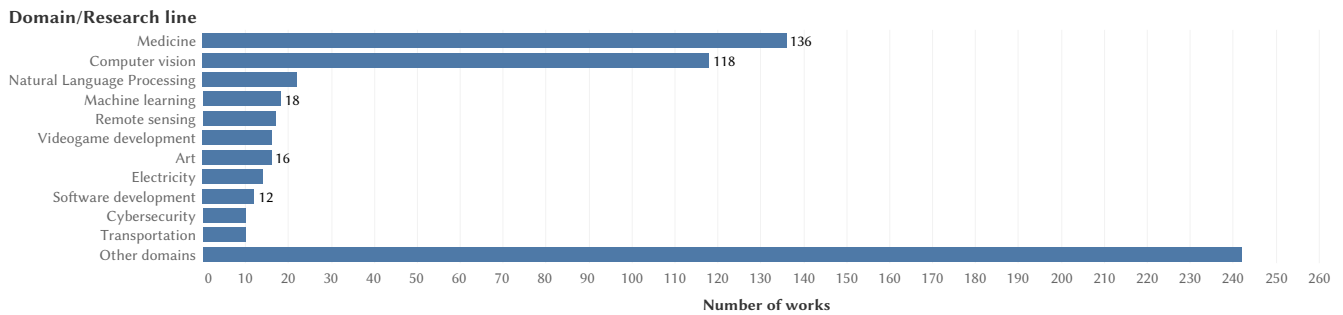


Fig. 6. Number of works grouped by domain of application. High-resolution version available at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8167627>.

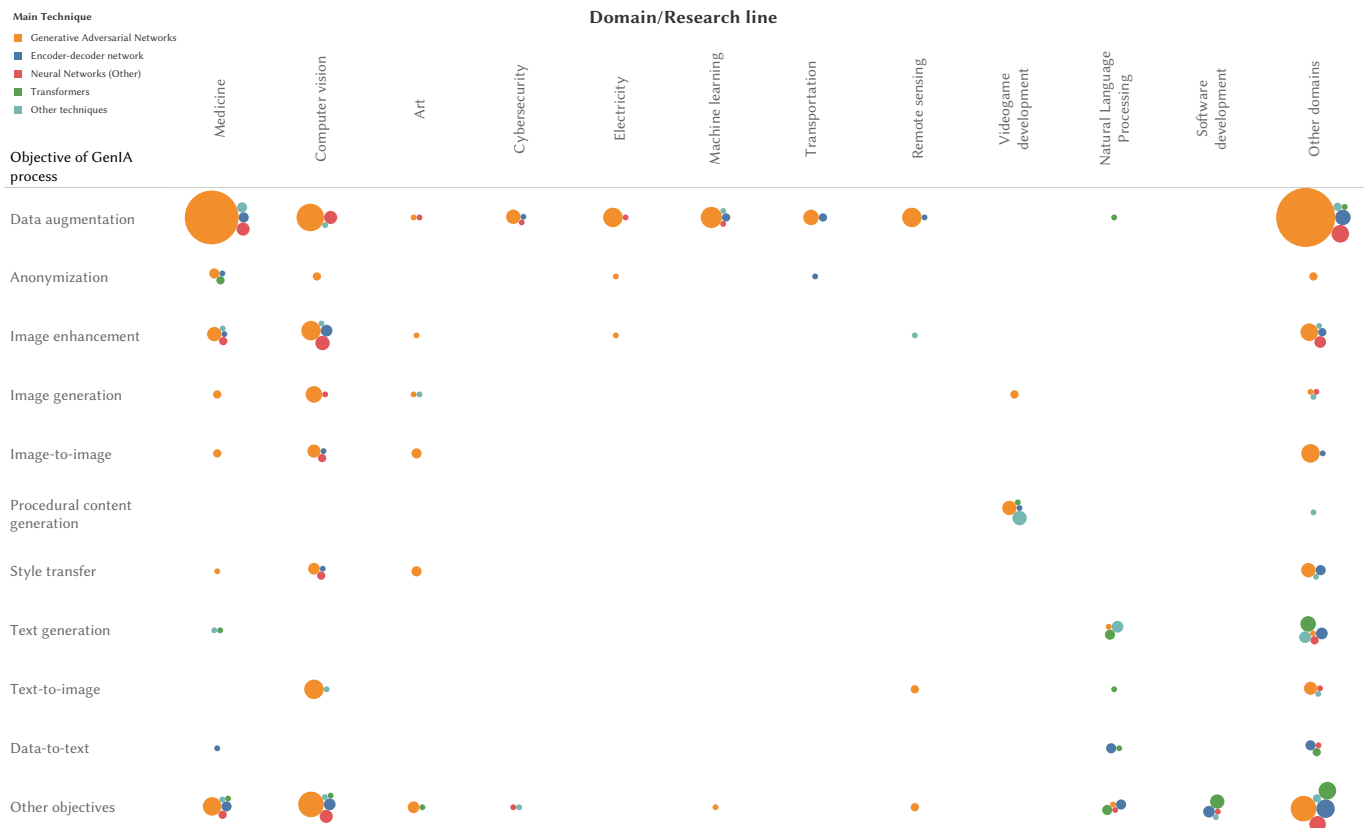


Fig. 7. Number of works grouped by objective, domain and AI technique employed. High-resolution version available at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8167632>.

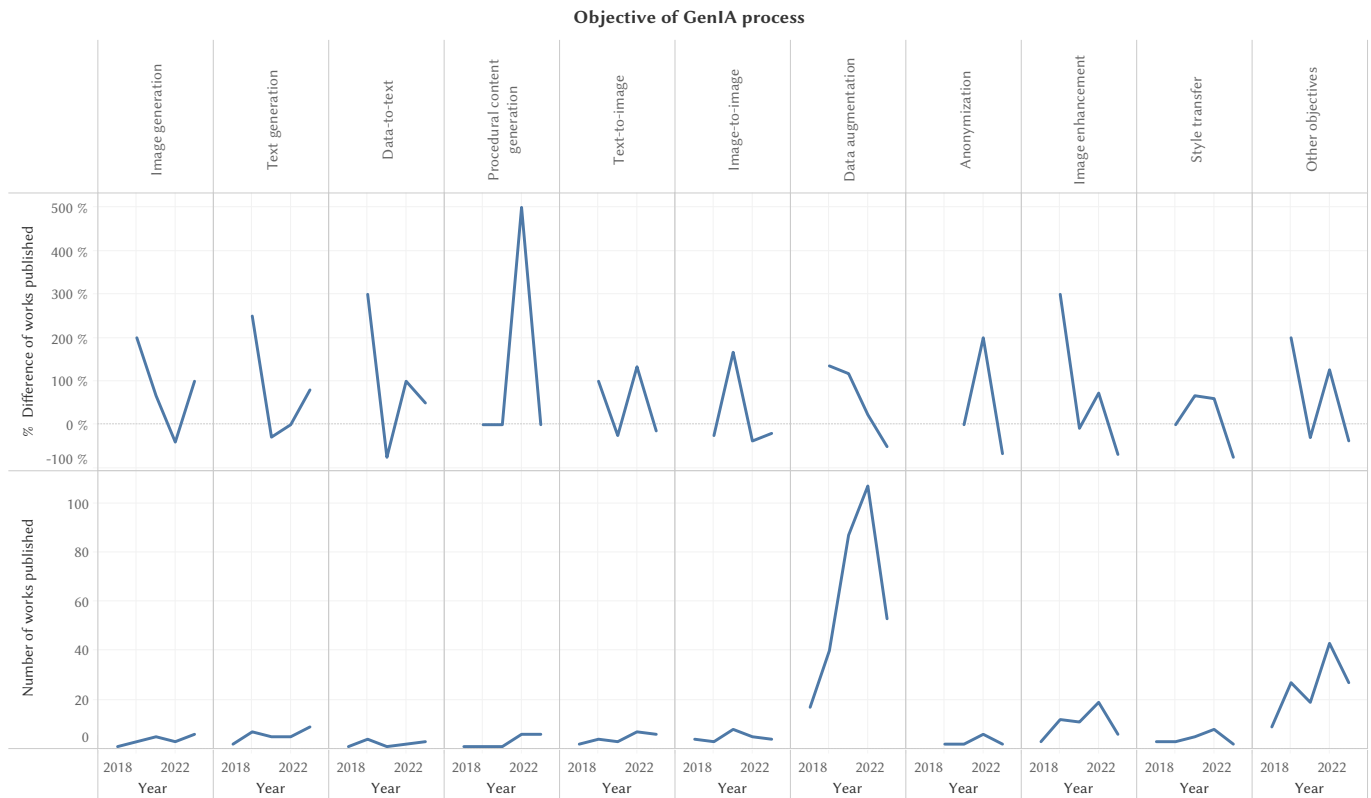


Fig. 8. Difference and number of works published over the years grouped by the objective of the generative process. High-resolution version available at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8167647>.

datasets that will subsequently be used to train or fine-tune complex models in each area (e.g., with the aim of diagnosing or segmenting images in the case of medicine).

Another interesting objective of AI-driven content generation is anonymization. By generating new samples, AI can preserve both crucial information and privacy. On the other hand, we also found several objectives related to image processing, including image enhancement (increasing the image resolution, completing missing or damaged parts, or even colorization), style transfer, and text-to-image translations.

Finally, we can also find specific objectives such as procedural content generation in the field of videogame development, and text generation (mostly related to the NLP area).

E. What Kind of Applications Were Published Before and Afterwards the Popularization of ChatGPT?

This question is focused on analyzing the trends in generative AI after the release of ChatGPT⁵, which has significantly reshaped the landscape of AI-driven communication [30], [31]. We have computed the trend of the top tasks supported by AI and compared it over the last five years (Fig. 8).

Although our analysis has covered only the first five months of 2023, we observe a growing trend in text and image generation tasks. This may be influenced by the release of commercial tools for these tasks (ChatGPT, Bing chat⁶, Midjourney, Dall-E, etc.), although it is too early to draw robust conclusions about this.

Additionally, we examined the number of works published annually, segmented by the type of content being generated (such as images, data, text, etc.). It can be observed that images and data

(referring to tabular, geospatial, time-series, or network data) are the types of resources most frequently generated (see Fig. 9).

However, the same trend observed in Fig. 8 is evident for text content. The number of works focused on generating text (spanning activities like human-like text generation, summarization, translation, etc.) has been increasing over the past two years, unlike most other types of generated content analyzed.

Fig. 10 summarizes the main findings of this literature mapping. We can see that Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs) are the preferred generative model in several domains for a wide range of tasks, especially for data augmentation and image-related tasks.

V. DISCUSSION

A. What Do Researchers Understand by Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI)?

The concept of “Generative AI” has been in use for several years, but it wasn’t until the mid to late 2010s that it gained widespread recognition. This surge in popularity was in sync with the rise and acceptance of generative models like GANs in the AI research community.

These models, pioneered by Ian Goodfellow and his team in 2014 [32], were crucial in bringing the term “generative AI” into the spotlight.

However, the term gained broader recognition beyond the research community recently. By inspecting Google Trends, we can see that users became interested in this concept around November and December 2022 (Fig. 11), which aligns with the release of ChatGPT and other commercial tools.

Thus, although generative models have existed for several years, the term “generative AI” has only gained popularity with the widespread availability of tools aimed at the general public.

⁵ Launched on November 30, 2022.

⁶ <https://www.bing.com/>

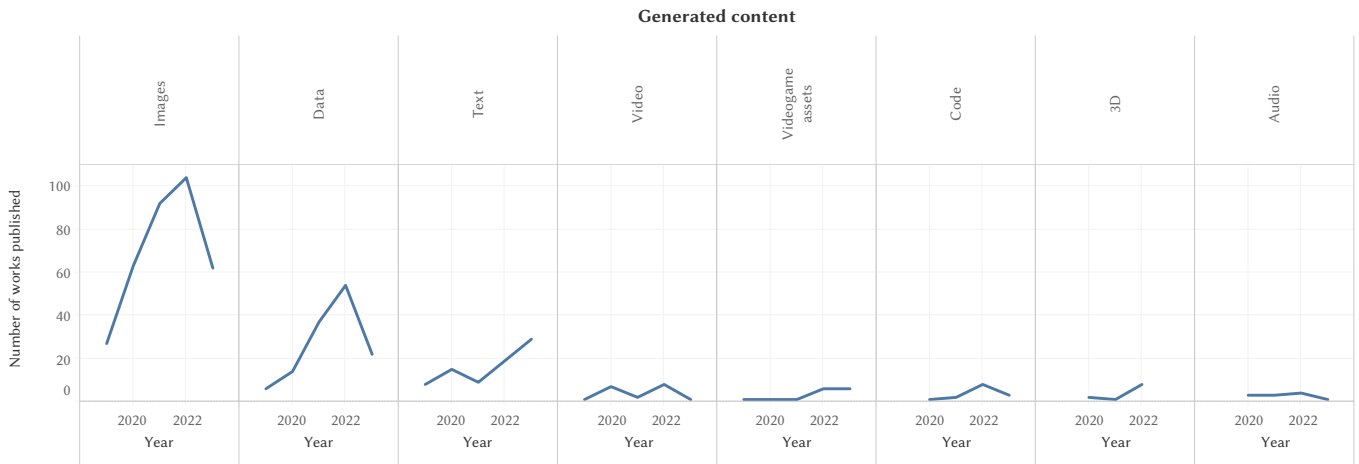


Fig. 9. Number of works published over the years grouped by generated content type. High-resolution version available at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8167655>.

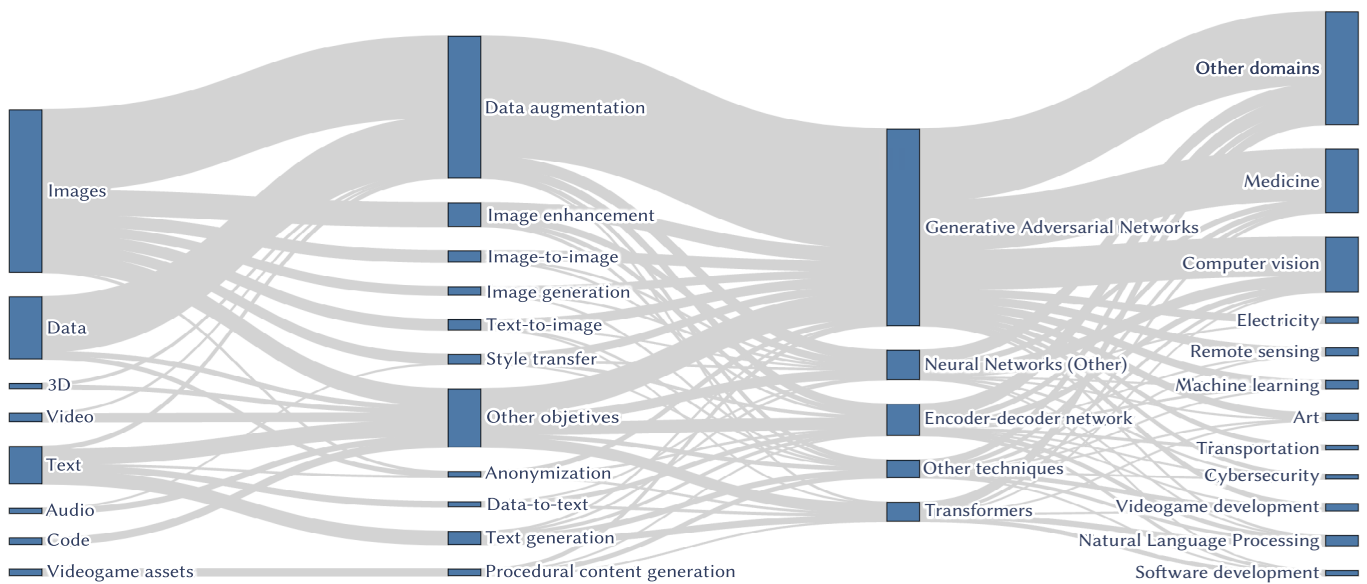


Fig. 10. Relationships among the generated content type, task, AI technique, and application domain in the retrieved works. High-resolution version available at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8167662>.

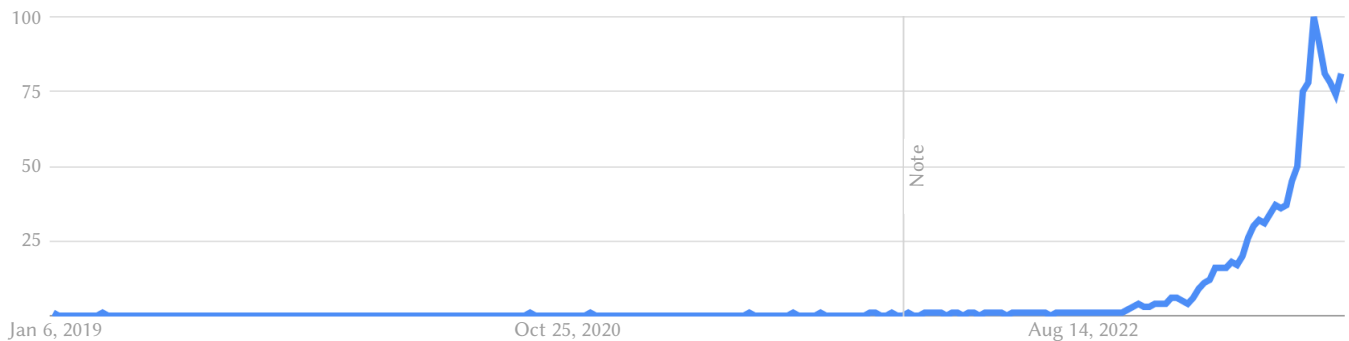


Fig. 11. Worldwide interest over time in the term “Generative AI”. Source: Google Trends, <https://bit.ly/44IzLmI>.

But what does the research community understand by Generative AI? After retrieving and analyzing 631 articles published between January 2019 to May 2023, we obtained a curated set of real-world applications for AI-driven content generation. These solutions included generating a wide variety of resources (images, tabular data, 3D models, videogame assets, etc.) to support different tasks in several domains. What they do have in common is that every solution

employed **generative**, not discriminative models, which could drive the definition of the term Generative AI.

If we further analyze the keywords employed by the researchers to refer to their solutions, only 1 work from 2023 includes the term “Generative AI” (record no. 615 from the “Characterization” sheet of the mapping dataset, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8162484> [27]).

effectively. Understanding Generative AI as a data-driven tool rather than an omnipotent solution helps set realistic expectations of what it can accomplish. This viewpoint can facilitate us to successfully integrate AI into different domains without expecting utopian results, minimizing the disappointment that may occur when AI does not perform as anticipated.

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