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AI is transforming the fashion industry by putting real people out of their jobs. With this transformation, AI continues to deepen existing power imbalances, affecting economic security, bodily autonomy, authentic representation, and models' labor rights. Although AI offers benefits from the customer perspective, the reality of models watching themselves be replaced by computer-generated figures is devastating for the artistic side of the industry. Even though AI-generated models can bring benefits such as increased visual diversity, the line becomes blurred when companies could simply hire real, diverse models instead. With artificial intelligence still new, many conflicts have already arisen, leading to the exploitation of many models.

Regarding AI being used as a tool of labor exploitation, a study done by Cornell University went into depth about the damage that can be done. Three researchers interviewed twenty-one models about their thoughts on AI entering the fashion industry, creating a safe space for them to express their concerns. A single photoshoot or booking can allow companies to capture body scans and measurements that are later manipulated through AI.¹ When companies repurpose a model's likeness and alter it using AI, the process is often referred to as "Frankensteining."² Because many models' contracts are vague or incomplete, companies can use AI with few restrictions.

¹ *Fashion's Data Doubles: How AI Is Reshaping Modeling Work*. Cornell University.

² *AI Could Have Terrifying Impacts On Fashion Models, New Research Shows*. Teen Vogue.

Because models often do not see their contracts, agencies sign on their behalf and often fail to advocate for their interests regarding AI usage. A model spoke up, saying, *“I absolutely feel like the more I speak up, the less work that I get, and the more I’m kind of gaslit.”*³ Either way, models risk losing their jobs whether they speak up or remain silent. When a model speaks up, they risk losing work, but if they remain silent, they are still vulnerable to being replaced. If models were able to see their own contracts, it would reduce confusion about their rights and clarify their agency’s role.

An example of a company actively using AI twins is H&M, which aims to create digital twins for 30 real fashion models. Although H&M claims that models or their agencies will own the rights to their digital twins, other companies may not adopt such protections. These contracts can become legally murky, and it remains unclear whether compensation for digital-twin work will be lower than compensation for real-life modeling. Since AI models are new, it remains unclear whether this practice will evolve into a fair system or an exploitative one. The modeling industry is already difficult to enter, and AI adds yet another layer of competition.

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³ *Fashion Data Doubles: How AI Is Reshaping Modeling Work.* Cornell University.

⁴ *H&M Knows Its Models Will Be Controversial.*

AI can manipulate a model's body to sexualize their likeness without the model's consent. These models do not receive compensation even when their AI-generated twin is used to produce profit. Brands increasingly treat models as data sources to create AI-generated versions of them. The AI model featured in Guess's August 2025 Vogue spread—a flawless, white, blonde figure—contradicted decades of progress toward better representation. Both the choice of a white AI model and the marketing teams' reasoning reinforce narrow beauty standards that persist in the industry.

When reflecting on the Guess model in Vogue magazine, the AI figure is shown with flawless skin, a curvy body, perfectly fitting clothing, and an idealized smile. Individuals have fought long and hard for equity, yet the two-page spread in the magazine does not reflect that progress. This campaign was designed by Seraphinne Vallora, a London-based AI-driven marketing agency. Andrea Petrescu, co-founder, stated that there were no technical limitations to creating diverse models, but that she simply followed directions from clients. Petrescu states that she *"saw what works best with the public. We saw what people responded to,"*⁵ which points back to what society still perceives as standard beauty.

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This shift toward AI-generated models concentrates power and profit in the hands of brands, allowing them to bypass the costs and complexities of working with real people. While

⁵ *Your Favorite Model? Thanks To AI, They Might Not Be Real.* CNN Style.

⁶ *AI-Generated Models Now Appear In 'Vogue' Magazine.* PetaPixel.

AI increases efficiency for companies and convenience for consumers, it also enables the exploitation of human models' images, reinforces harmful representations, and amplifies long-standing inequities in an already underregulated labor environment. With the job market already unstable, AI's increasing role in replacing human labor threatens workers across many industries. Fashion and modeling once centered on an artistic process that conveyed authentic storytelling. When companies use AI-generated models to tell a story, the authenticity of that narrative is diminished.

Before digital technologies reshaped the field, fashion expertise was understood as a specialized craft accessible only to those with extensive training and insider knowledge. In Bourdieu's terms, the forms of capital that once structured the fashion industry have fundamentally transformed. Cultural capital, once rooted in mastering techniques and aesthetic knowledge, now appears in digital competencies such as data-driven trend analysis and influencer marketing. Social capital, once built through exclusive networks and high-society events, has been democratized through social media, where anyone can cultivate visibility and access. Economic capital, formerly rooted in the slow, highly curated production of luxury goods, now operates through fast, globalized supply chains responsive to rapidly shifting trends. And symbolic capital, once tied to classic heritage labels worn by elite consumers, increasingly hinges on digital fluency and online influence, shaping what is perceived as aspirational or authoritative. In this context, AI fashion models become another mechanism through which these transformed forms of capital are consolidated and leveraged.

When brands attempt to represent "diversity" through AI models, the issue highlights the deeply rooted intersectionality that has always shaped the fashion industry. Taking Kimberlé Crenshaw's view on intersectionality into account, different identities position individuals

differently in terms of their likelihood of being marginalized. Many women are speaking out about exploitation, yet women of color are disproportionately affected. Women of color are the biggest contributors to fashion. Eighty percent of the world's seventy-four million textile workers are women of color, yet they remain underrepresented and face disproportionate exploitation.⁷ When AI-generated models are used, it raises the question of whether companies are simply using AI-generated women of color to give the appearance of diversity. If companies genuinely cared about diversity, they would hire real women of color rather than relying on AI-generated versions of them. There are already limited job opportunities for women of color in fashion, and AI makes it even harder for them to secure those roles.

When brands use AI to display diverse body types, it raises the question of why they do not simply hire real models of diverse sizes. Felicity Howard is a plus-sized model and has been in the industry for more than a decade. She worries that AI models have the potential to undermine years of work toward more diversity in the industry, and that it “*feels lazy and cheap*”⁸. Although the industry has made progress since the 2010s toward including more size diversity, AI-generated models make it harder for plus-size models to earn commissions and secure opportunities. It is a slap in the face when companies would rather use a computer-generated model to showcase diversity in sizes, instead of commissioning models of different sizes to represent the brand.



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⁷ *Intersectionality In Fashion Studies*. Media Journal Portfolio.

⁸ *Does This Look Like a Real Woman? AI Model In Vogue Raises Concerns About Beauty Standards*. BBC News.

⁹ *Your Plus Size Fashion 2024 With AI Generated Curvy Women*. WeShopAI.

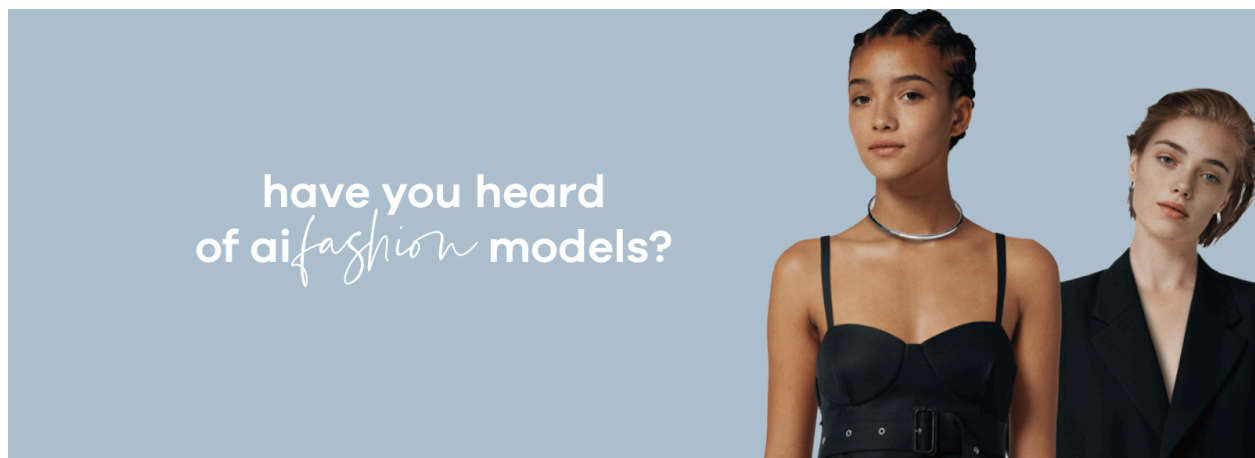
With economic insecurity rising, models, makeup artists, and photographers are struggling to maintain steady work as AI replaces aspects of their labor. As prices rise, companies are turning to cheaper AI alternatives, which results in increased job loss across these professions. A model named Shereen Wu faced the real-life consequences of AI being thrown into the fashion industry in October 2022. Wu was walking a runway for a well-known designer at the Art Heart's Fashion Week, in exchange for exposure.¹⁰ Instead of getting the exposure she needed, she found that on the designer's Instagram, he had kept her body in the photo but replaced her face with an AI-generated one. As a Taiwanese American model, her face had been replaced with a white woman's, and her ethnicity had been completely erased. Not only were her hours of preparation erased, but the work of the hairdresser and makeup artist was also disregarded. She walked for exposure she did not get, and she ultimately lost agency over her own image because of the lack of necessary protections.

Although fashion companies, social media platforms, and tech institutions are aware of this issue, they benefit from AI because it lowers production costs and increases online engagement—even when the content is controversial. Photoshoots become far less expensive, and brands gain more visibility on social media. When something becomes controversial, it still attracts views—and brands profit from that attention. A fine line emerges between representation and misrepresentation. If a company uses an AI-generated Black woman, it may end up misrepresenting an entire community.¹¹ Although cultural appropriation is not necessarily illegal, audiences looking at these campaigns can feel that way when companies could have just hired a model to represent a specific community. Beauty standards are always evolving, but readers of magazines and viewers of ads cannot compare themselves to these images because the models

¹⁰ *Model Shereen Wu's Response To AI*. The Model Alliance.

¹¹ *AI-Generated Models Shake Up The Fashion Industry And Raise Concerns*. PBS News Weekend.

are not real and are engineered to look perfect. Psychologically, this can be harmful because real people may compare themselves to unrealistic AI-generated figures.



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In conclusion, AI-generated models are extremely harmful to the modeling industry. Models are now facing more severe exploitation than ever before. Models of color are increasingly being pushed out of the industry and denied genuine representation. With models' bodies now being used without permission and brands gaining broader access to their likeness, a divide emerges regarding how much models truly understand about their contracts and their agency's role. Trust is foundational to the fashion industry, and seeing a model who reflects one's own identity strengthens that trust. Now, when looking at websites, ads, or campaigns, it is difficult to know whether the model is real or AI-generated. Although beauty standards have never been perfect, one constant has always remained: both the viewer and the model were human.

¹² *The Rise Of AI Fashion Models.*

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