It's a Kind of Magic (or not)?
Ai's technological imaginary and the symbolic structures of fashion narration.

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Abstract

Questo articolo approfondisce la relazione dinamica tra immaginario e tecnologia nell'era dell'Intelligenza Artificiale, illustrando come l'immaginario tecnologico dell'IA non sia un'entità indipendente, ma piuttosto un prodotto del processo creativo insito nell'immaginario sociale. Inoltre, l'intento è di esplorare come le strutture simboliche dell'immaginario socioculturale contribuiscano a plasmare i regni immaginari dell'IA. La diffusa integrazione dell'IA generativa nella moda ha introdotto l'IA visuale, offrendo nuove vie per l'espressione creativa e sfidando al contempo la costruzione del panorama immaginario del settore (Banerjee et al. 2022). Ciò solleva alcune domande critiche: in che misura le narrazioni della moda sono diventate materiale su cui l'IA si forma e si sviluppa? Quali narrazioni innovative introduce l'IA? In che modo l'IA sta influenzando le percezioni tradizionali del corpo e della bellezza? Confrontando 882 copertine dell'archivio digitale di Vogue Italia (1964-2024) con le immagini della rivista di moda prodotta dall'IA Copy Magazine (da agosto 2023 in poi), questa ricerca analizza le rappresentazioni e le narrazioni per determinare se l'IA perpetua o sovverta gli stereotipi di bellezza e di genere, e in quale modo la normatività della moda influenza la produzione visiva dell'IA.

This paper delves into the dynamic relationship between imaginary and technology in the era of Artificial Intelligence, illustrating how AI's technological imaginary is not an independent entity but rather a product of the creative process inherent in the social imaginary. Additionally, it explores how the symbolic structures of sociocultural imaginary contribute to shaping the imaginary realms of AI. The widespread integration of generative AI in fashion has introduced visual AI, offering new avenues for creative expression while challenging the construction of the sector's imaginary landscape (Banerjee et al. 2022). This prompts critical inquiries: to which extent fashion narratives have become the nourishment of AI? What innovative narrations does AI introduce? How is AI influencing traditional perceptions of the body and beauty? Comparing 882 covers from Vogue Italia Digital Archive (1964-2024) with visuals from the AI-produced fashion magazine Copy (August 2023 onwards), this research analyzes representations and narratives to determine if AI perpetuates or subverts beauty and gender stereotypes, and how the normativity of fashion influences AI's visual output.

1. Introduction: from traditional fashion media to AI-driven imaginaries

Fashion and media have always shared a deeply interconnected trajectory, with each influencing the other's development. From the earliest illustrated periodicals of the 18th century to the immersive, multi-platform formats of today, fashion magazines have acted not only as communicators of style but as producers of cultural meaning and shared imaginaries. This contribution investigates how the relationship between fashion, media, and technology has evolved, with particular attention to the emergence of artificial intelligence as a new agent of image production, aesthetic mediation, and cultural narration (Morean 2006; 2017).

This study investigates the evolving role of fashion magazines as cultural intermediaries, focusing both on legacy print publications (e.g., Vogue, which have incrementally adapted to digital infrastructures) and on emergent, AI-mediated formats (such as Copy Magazine). We approach these magazines as institutional actors situated within the field of cultural production (Bourdieu 1993), where symbolic boundaries are negotiated, aesthetic hierarchies are constructed, and cultural capital is circulated. Within this context, artificial intelligence emerges not merely as a tool of technical automation but as a non-human actor (Latour 2005) whose increasing presence challenge established epistemologies and regimes of representation in fashion media (Ferrero-Regis 2015). We argue that the integration of AI destabilizes normative conceptions of creativity, authorship, and mediation, foundational categories that have historically structured both the production and consumption of fashion (McRobbie 1998; Entwistle 2009). In doing so, AI introduces new dynamics into the field, compelling a rethinking of agency, authority, and value in an era of algorithmic cultural production (Striphas 2015; Beer 2016).

In recent decades, the evolution of the media ecosystem has hastened, restructuring how fashion is communicated, transmitted, and consumed. The rise of social media platforms in the early 2000s had already disturbed the erstwhile top-down fashion communication model exercised by long-established elite gatekeepers such as mag-azines, designers, and industry experts (Mohr 2013; Chu, Seock 2020). Instead, it allowed for the emergence of more participatory and decentralized forms of influence where influencers, bloggers, and consumers themselves were engaged, active agents of fashion discussion and aesthetic meaning-making (Rocamora 2017; Chetioui et al. 2020; D'Aloia, Pedroni 2021). Such changes not only altered the speed and scope of fashion communication but also eroded established hierarchies of cul-

tural expertise within the fashion system. Maga-zines such as Vogue Italia have been responding to these changes by amplifying their footprint on multiple types of media platforms and re-thinking their editorial strategies (Pedroni, Mora 2023). They have started to apply transmedia and omni-channel approaches to address more effectively audiences that are highly segmented and extensively scattered. This involves the use of an integrated combination of print, web, video, and social media content to tell stories in different forms and connect with consumers where they reside. Under this evolving media environment, fashion magazines are no longer static units of media but serve as flexible cultural spaces that facilitate old-style authenticity with the interactive and fast-paced logic of digital media (Colucci, Pedroni 2021).

In this context, AI represents a further turning point: its increasing accessibility in the creative industries (Giri et al. 2019) opens new questions not only on the aesthetics of fashion imagery, but on its ethical implications, cultural reach, and symbolic codes. From the design process (e.g. Balenciaga collections by Demna Gvasalia), to virtual influencers like Lil Miquela (Drenten, Brooks 2020; Bitencourt et al. 2021; Mortara, Roberti 2022), to AI-generated campaigns and avatars, artificial intelligence is altering every phase of the fashion chain (Giri et al. 2019), including image production and editorial visual culture. As AI intervenes across these interconnected phases, fashion media are compelled to reconfigure their visual and narrative grammars, adapting to new forms of machinic creativity, algorithmic aesthetics, and post-human authorship.

This transformation driven by artificial intelligence builds upon a broader shift already underway: the transition from traditional to digital media has profoundly altered how fashion is produced, communicated, and consumed (Tortora 2015). At the core of this shift lies the visual. Fashion photography and visual imagery have long functioned as a central semiotic system through which fashion constructs meaning, circulates values, and communicates ideological frameworks (Rocamora 2009; Evans 2013; Barthes 2020b). Fashion images do not simply reflect reality - they actively shape it, contributing to the formation of identities, the reinforcement of social norms, and the production of aesthetic regimes (Goffman 2010; Calefato 2010).

This paper situates itself within the debate on the mediatization of fashion (Rocamora 2017; D'Aloia, Pedroni 2021), aiming to explore how AI technologies influence both the visual language and narrative structures of fashion magazines. Following Barthes' Fashion System [1967] (2020b), we acknowledge the central role of magazines in codifying and circulating fash-

ion signs. However, while Barthes' analysis remained grounded in textual and photographic paradigms rooted in materiality and realism, today's media environment introduces a hybrid space where the virtual displaces the real, and AI alters both the production and perception of images.

This shift introduces new complexities. AI-generated imagery tends to be "global-native": lacking historical anchoring, local specificity, or socio-cultural nuance, it risks reproducing homogenized, hyperreal visual patterns, disconnected from the social imaginaries that once differentiated fashion narratives by geography, class, race or gender. These dynamic recalls what Han (2022) refers to as "non-thingness" - a loss of referential depth both in the factual and symbolic world. Yet these new imaginaries are no less powerful: they continue to shape desire, identity, and belonging.

As Castoriadis (1987) suggests, the social imaginary is not a mere reflection of material life, but an autonomous source of meaning-making. Fashion images, in this sense, constitute a visual interface between cultural codes and symbolic aspiration. They do not merely depict clothes or bodies but construct aesthetic and ideological frameworks (Entwistle, Wissinger 2012), showing how fashion images condition our understanding of gender, beauty, and embodiment. The inclusion of AI in this process raises new questions about authorship, standardization, and the reproduction of bias, by intentionally showcasing hyperreal, overly "perfect" bodies as a way to provoke critical discourse.

To address these transformations, this study presents a comparative analysis of two fashion magazines: Vogue Italia, representing the traditional model, a print-born, institutionally legitimized publication that has adapted to digital and transmedia strategies while maintaining editorial authority; and Copy Magazine, founded in 2023 by Carl-Axel Wahlström, which operates as an AI-native, experimental platform, merging human editing and algorithmic generation to challenge fashion norms.

The analysis is based on a visual dataset composed of 135 AI-generated images from Copy Magazine's website and Instagram posts; 882 covers from Vogue Italia Digital Archive (1964-2024).

Through this comparison, we examine how AI absorbs, reworks and reframes the stylistic codes, visual representation logics, and cultural narratives inherited from traditional fashion media. The focus is not so much on what these photographs depict, but on how they function in the broader cultural landscape, as tools of persuasion, identity creation, and ideological dissemination (Goffman 2010; Adams et al. 2015; Ivy 1995).

Ultimately, this chapter submits that mass market fashion magazines such as Vogue Italia, even in the present with AI, remain at the heart of crafting imaginaries and identities. While their formats evolve, their discursive and symbolic roles persist. Understanding how AI modifies their structures is therefore essential, not only for media studies or fashion theory, but for understanding contemporary culture's shifting relationship to image, body, technology, and meaning.

2. Fashion Media Narratives: From Photographic Realism to Algorithmic Imaginaries

Emerging technologies are not merely tools within the fashion value chain; they function as cultural agents that actively shape perceptions of the body, identity, and beauty. Technologies co-produce the ways we represent the world, articulate desire, and construct collective imaginaries (Blumenthal et al. 2003). This makes it essential to conceptualize AI not as a neutral instrument, but as a symbolic and ideological actor in the production of fashion imagery.

This reciprocal dynamic between fashion and technologies becomes especially salient when we consider the centrality of the visual in fashion communication (Khaled, Sharif 2024), and the extent to which fashion's visual imaginary has always operated as a semiotic, cultural, and symbolic system capable of constructing identities, narratives, representations, and imaginaries related to dress, beauty, and the body (De Perthuis 2005).

Historically, photography itself revolutionized fashion media by shifting primacy from the written word to the visual regime (Barthes 2020a). This shift enabled the construction "the spectacular body" (Calefato, 2004), a stylized representation designed to express cultural values, aesthetic codes, and ideological norms. Fashion images thus became part of the social imaginary (Castoriadis 1987), participating in the construction of shared meanings around gender, desirability, and belonging (Ivy, 1995; Strauss, 2006).

For decades, fashion photography has circulated narrow ideals of beauty, generally thin, tall, and light-skinned bodies. These photographs, circulated by magazines and adver-tise-ments, served a normative function as far as gender roles are concerned (Magaraggia 2015) and beauty norms (Ruggerone 2006). This is based on repeated visual "rituals" that in-scribe social hierarchies and performative gender roles (Goffman 2010). These rituals, in addition to this, spilled over from the boundaries of fashion imagery to structuring wider social norms, meanings, and power relations.

However, the last decade has seen the rise of resistance from body positivity and diversity movements that responded to such regimes of visibility. The photographers and creative directors have responded with attempts at diversifying, i.e., various body types, ethnicities, and identities (Gavrikova 2022; Doyle, Moore 2023). Another good example is Cosmopolitan's move to feature plus-size model Tess Holliday on its front page, an edit that earned the magazine both praise and criticism, reflecting the tension between inclusion and resistance to norms (Anschutz et al. 2008; Noor, Noor 2023). But even as photography evolves in response to social criticism, there is an emerging new frontier: AI imagery. Such technology raises new questions: can algorithms, learning from historically skewed data sets, truly engage with more inclusive representations? Or do they risk reinforcing stereotypical aesthetics, masked by technical novelty? Digital technologies in fashion must be read not only as platforms for diffusion, but as agents of mediatization, actively shaping cultural narratives and aesthetic judgments (Rocamora 2017).

From the communicative viewpoint, the rise of AI-generated influencers and virtual models represents another step within fashion discourses. These creatures, born of code and appear as against embodied experience, may reaffirm hegemonic understandings of beauty rather than complicate them. Studies on virtual influencers (Bitencourt et al. 2021; Mortara, Roberti 2022) indicate that they tend to be beautiful by virtue of hyper-perfection, a trait that, while beautiful at the image level, may further aggravate the difference between real and idealized bodies.

This has been met with the pandemic driving consumers to change their behavior, bringing about virtual spaces for consumption and interaction, such as virtual fitting rooms, virtual spaces, and game spaces (Tran et al. 2023; Lee, Xu 2020). Here, the body is not only clothed but constructed digitally, blurring the lines between physical materiality and algorithmic design. In this context, collections such as Balenciaga Fall 2021, created under Demna Gvasalia's direction, mark a new frontier in hybrid creativity, where AI intersects with fashion, gaming, and speculative aesthetics (Kim, An 2021; Varini 2023).

They are parallel to the increased gamification of fashion itself, where avatars, skins, and virtual wearables circulate across online platforms once associated with subcultures (Gee 2006; Beil et al. 2018) but now appropriated by mainstream fashion brands in an effort to engage younger and digitally native consumers. This encounter between fashion and vid-

eogames is not only commercial: it is highly symbolic, insofar as it participates in a change of regime in the visualization and narration of the body in virtual space (Noia, Varini, 2025). Lastly, the fashion system continues to oscillate between traditional regimes of representation and the experimental possibilities of digital and AI communication. While the digitization of fashion has been extensively explored (Rocamora 2016; Akram et al. 2021; Noris et al. 2021; Torregrosa, Sabada 2023), the impact of generative AI in the visual rhetoric of fashion is itself a nascent and contentious field of research. Platforms like Instagram have already redirected the logic of fashion communications (Chetioui et al. 2020). AI adds a further level of complexity, however: not only does it distribute content, but also generates it, and thus poses urgent questions of authenticity, bias, authorship, creativity and ethics.

As fashion images continue to be one of the primary means through which bodies are seen, appreciated, and admired, it's all the more urgent to ask how AI systems produce and circulate visual norms. Do we have the democratization of representation, or the recentralization of aesthetic power in the guise of algorithmic objectivity? The solution lies in critically examining how media, technology, and fashion co-create new imaginaries, and how these imaginaries, in turn, form our understandings of identity, gender, and cultural value.

3. Comparative Case Study: Vogue and Copy Magazine as Two Models of Fashion Media

To explore shifting dynamics of visual culture in fashion, this study, as already noted, focuses on two symbolic case studies: Vogue Italia and Copy Magazine. The titles above symbolize distinct but symbiotic paths toward fashion media development and how they demonstrate how extant print histories and emerging AI-facilitated practices co-exist and interact with each other.

This preference is related, on the one hand, to the international position of Vogue Italia (Cappetta et al. 2001; Sergio 2015), a traditional print fashion medium, in sharing stories, photographs and meanings concerning fashion and body (Piccolo 2019). Secondly, Vogue Italia offers the possibility to explore the history of the magazine through its digital archive: with the rise of digital communication, introducing new actors such as influencers, bloggers, and content producers (Rocamora 2016; Esteban-Santos et al. 2018), as well as new channels of communication, Vogue Italia has adopted an omni-channel strategy, expanding its reach through websites, newsletters, apps, social media, as well as through the digitization

of its archive, while maintaining the prestige and editorial rigor of its print origins. This evolution illustrates how legacy media adapt to new technologies without relinquishing their established aesthetic and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, Wacquant 2013).

In contrast, Copy Magazine[1] emerged as a digital-native, experimental project, positioning itself as the first fashion magazine generated by artificial intelligence. Established in 2023 by Swedish creative director Carl-Axel Wahlström, Copy Magazine is the first AI-powered fashion magazine in the world. Wahlström wanted Copy to be an experimental website for exploring the potentials and limits of AI in fashion media (Bartlett et al. 2013). The content of the magazine is created with the help of AI tools, but Wahlström stresses the need for human involvement; every image created with AI is carefully edited and retouched, with some taking as much as ten hours of work, to create the look they want. Copy Magazine is placed at the intersection of fashion and technology, using AI not just as a tool of creativity but also as a fully AI-produced editorial product, aiming to function as a communication agency that leverages AI for innovative brand storytelling.

Despite its technological orientation, Copy continues to publish in print, signaling the persistent symbolic value of traditional media formats in the digital age. Its hybrid identity (as both magazine and tech lab) makes Copy a compelling example of how fashion communication can simultaneously disrupt and reference established conventions.

By placing Vogue Italia's trans medial transformation of a print tradition against Copy Magazine's innovation driven by artificial intelligence, this study captures the nuanced tension between tradition and disruption in emerging fashion media.

This comparative analysis offers the potential to more thoroughly explore how visual and narrative modes evolve amidst technological upheaval, and how these chang-es impact broader cultural meaning, identity, and power structures within fashion.

The case of Copy Magazine, in relation to Vogue Italia's visual material, offers the possibility to verify how the representations, narratives and images proposed by traditional fashion magazines are reinterpreted and incorporated by AI. The values, images and representations of the fashion industry, although hinged on a Eurocentric and Western focus associated to the capitalist and consumers society (Aspers, Godart 2013), are increasingly part of global social imaginaries (Alma, Vanheeswijck 2018). While cultural variability is present

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[1] https://www.ccooppyy.com/magazine/

(Mora, Pedroni 2017), fashion and the relevance of its most influential players remains a phenomenon of systemic dimensions (Calia 2021).

Building on this selection of cases, the following analysis has close engagement with the editorial practices, visual logics, and cultural alignment of Vogue Italia and Copy Magazine. The opposition not only refers to conflicting approaches of authorship, creativity, and address to the audience but also to shared investments in visuality as a key site of meaning-making in the fashion field. By this double lens, the research questions the changing role of fashion media as cultural intermediaries (Maguire, Matthews 2010), how they disrupt and re-shape traditional aesthetical and ideological paradigms through technological innovation.

4. Methodology

The article compares two corpora of visual material in order to analyse the extent to which traditional fashion narratives continue to be material on which AI is formed and developed, to explore their narratives and to try to probe how AI is influencing traditional perceptions of the body and beauty. The methodology adopted in this chapter employs digital methods (Addeo et al. 2024) combined with a grounded approach (Cutcliffe 2000; Dey 2004). The material thus sampled and collected online (Paoli, D'Auria 2021) was then subjected to a visual analysis (Rose 2001; Pink 2008). The coding process was carried out directly from the sampled material, arriving at the definition of recurrences and dissonances between the two corpora of images. Given the visual nature of the data analysed, it was necessary to apply a structured coding process; in fact, the development of the codebook in turn followed a grounded approach (Strauss, Corbin 1994; Belgrave, Seide, 2019), with the aim of minimising arbitrariness and bias (Wall et al., 2014). The construction of the coding scheme involved several iterative cycles of analysis (Eugeni, 2004; Konecki, 2011), ensuring a systematic and reflexive approach to the data (Gobo, 1993). The first set of material consists of the covers of Vogue Italia from its first issue in October 1964 to December 2024. The choice of Vogue Italia' materials is due to several reasons. Firstly, Vogue is the most important fashion magazine in the world, disseminating representations and images related to fashion and femininity since the beginning of the last century (Kuipers et al., 2017). In particular, Vogue Italia, among its various national editions, is a point of reference for international fashion, a platform of global resonance for Made in Italy. Secondly, with the digital archive, Vogue Ita-

lia makes it possible to explore its history over time. Increasingly used by brands and magazines to immerse users in history, digital archives are also a fruitful tool for social and cultural research. Thus, the digitalisation of the entire Vogue archive, which took place on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the magazine in Italy, made it possible to analyse the entirety of the magazine's covers, a total of 882.

The decision to study magazine covers is multifaceted, yet all the reasons arrive at the same conclusion that they are, in essence, cultural artefacts (Lyman, Kahle 1998; Smiraglia 2008). Firstly, the cover occupies a unique place of prominence in the magazine. Being the face of the magazine, it forms the crucial first impression, shaping the reader's perceptions and expectations. As Click and Baird (1983: 204) argue, 'it is the face of the magazine', a gateway to its contents. A good cover not only has to draw attention but also establish the character and personality of the magazine, which gives continuity and recognition issue after issue. Magazine covers are lighthouses, instantaneously recognizable beacons that beckon readers and hold not only economic value but also important cultural and social significance. Even in an age of digitalisation, the significance of magazine covers in print is indubitable. Even as the print media world evolves, that magazines continue to be online is testament to the enduring influence of their covers. In such a context, more than ever before, it is important that print covers are eye-catching, bold in composition and creativity, and narrative.

In cases where a magazine's circulation depends on both newsstand sales and mail distribution, the cover as a point of purchase has greater significance. But whether the magazine competes on the newsstand or on the coffee table, what is shown on the cover is a product of editorial decisions that influence popular culture and suggest who wields power and influence (Johnson, Christ 1988).

Thus, the analysis of Vogue Italia's covers from a historical point of view does not only allow the identification of changes in the use of the image and photography as a form of fashion representation: through the covers it is possible to reconstruct the social and cultural evolution of the country, since meanings, messages, models and discourses pass through the image. The second body of material consists of the posts published on Instagram and the images on the Copy Magazine website (a total of 135 items). The two corpora of material were analysed visually using the same grounded approach, and the codes thus produced were then compared and uniformed. The aim was to identify representations of gender

(male/female/other), body (conforming/non-conforming), diversity (race/age) and clothing (sexualising/non-sexualising) in the images.

5. Data Analysis

5.1. First level of coding

The first code developed concerned gender, ethnic origin, and the number of subjects portrayed. This first level of coding has limited bias, as it is fairly objective and does not require interpretation by the researcher. The results of this first operation are shown in the tables below (Table 1.).

	Female	Male	Total
Vogue Italia	1013	36	1049
Copy Magazine	115	3	118
Total	1127	39	1167

Table 1. First level of coding of the two magazines analyzed according to category: Gender.

As we can see from the initial data shown in Table 1, the gender ratio is extremely disproportionate in favor of female subjects (or subjects with feminine connotations). Most of the subjects are represented in portraits with a single subject, with the exception of 98 covers of Vogue and 9 images in Copy, which depict subjects in pairs or groups.

The second element of this introductory coding was the aspect of racialization, as mentioned above. Again, for clarity, we will try to illustrate the phenomenon using tables.

	Female C	Female B	Female A	Total	Male C	Male B	Male A	Total
Vogue Italia	920	84	9	1013	33	3	0	36
Copy Magazine	68	24	23	115	3	0	0	3
Total	988	108	32	1127	36	3	0	39

Table 2. First level of coding of the two magazines analyzed according to the category: Ethnic Origin.

As can be seen quite clearly from the data in Table 2, the majority of the characters represented belong to the "Caucasian" category, both for female and male models. With regard to ra-

cial representations, stereotypes are present and predominant (Abraham, Appiah 2006). For example, characters identifiable as 'Afro' feature recurring references to hip hop culture and dreadlock-inspired hairstyles. This is quite evident graphically in several cases, a phenomenon that is quite common in the media landscape of yesterday and, above all, today (Ash et al. 2021).

5.2. Second level of coding

Having presented this first level of coding, which is more objective and less subject to cultural or perceptual bias (Ostroot, Snyder, 1985), we decided to continue with a second level. All the characters' bodies were coded according to their conformity or non-conformity with the models and standards of physical beauty promoted by mainstream fashion (Dwyer 2004; Entwistle 2023).

	Conforming (F + M)	Non Conforming (F + M)
Vogue Italia	1013 + 36	0 + 0
Copy Magazine	112 + 3	3 + 0
Total	1164	3

Table 3. Second level of coding of the two magazines analyzed according to category: Conformity

As can be clearly seen from Table 3, the ratio between bodies defined as 'Conforming' to mainstream fashion styles and those defined as 'Non-Conforming' is skewed in favour of those aligned with certain pre-existing styles and images. The 'Non-compliant' category includes all bodies that do not fully adhere to the ideals of aesthetic beauty, connoted by gender and widespread in Western culture, such as youth, thinness, performativity, muscularity and sexualisation. Among these, there are only three subjects who do not meet the criteria of thinness or youth.

A subsequent level of analysis of the characters coded in the 'Conformity' category consists of three particularly recurring aspects: muscularity, thinness and sexualisation. The

same can be said for thinness, which is present in almost every image, with the exception of the two mentioned above in Copy Magazine.

The aspect of thinness and thin bodies (Volonté 2021; Fixsen et al. 2023) within the images in the sample can, at most, be subject to different levels of intensity, which can be found widely in both samples.

As for the female characters present in this coding, we find a certain recurrence, both in terms of physical conformation and photographic composition, which is very consistent with traditional advertising images (Dimitrieska, Efremova 2020). The same applies to the coding criterion of sexualization, especially with regard to female bodies. Although the phenomenon is widespread, we note the recurrence of its most acute manifestations, as illustrated in Table 4.

	Higly sexualised (F + M)
Vogue Italia	267 + 27
Copy Magazine	32 + 0
Total	326

Table 4. Second level of coding of the two magazines analyzed according to category: Sexualization

The phenomenon is particularly pronounced in the sample of female characters, again with varying degrees of intensity. The phenomenon of the sexualization of female bodies in the media is well known and present in the literature (Herndon 2020), as is the stereotyping of these bodies. Bodies that are canonically considered conforming and desirable tend to be thin, high-performing, and Caucasian (Biefeld et al. 2021), and these aspects are also confirmed within the sample under examination.

There is a recurrence of skimpy clothing, nudity, unnatural or provocative poses, and extremely stereotyped bodies with a particularly strong emphasis on shape. In the majority of cases coded within this category, the phenomenon is repeated with the same dynamics (Santoniccolo et al. 2023). The phenomenon of the sexualization of the female body, in addition to being a distinctive feature of mediated communication and advertising (Ward, 2016), is also a characteristic of the fashion system (Attwood 2005; Edwards 2020; Vänskä 2020). This aspect, among the

various discussed here, is extremely consistent and continuous with mainstream communication in the fashion industry, including in the visual communication of Copy Magazine.

5.3. Third level of coding

While the first level of coding simply reports the data, the second level introduces an interpretative dimension. The image is no longer just to be looked at, but must instead be 'read' (Kress, Van Leeuwen, 2020), as it is conceived as a 'visual text, a fabric of signs whose configurations and correlations are functional to a project of interpretation aimed at the viewer' (Eugeni, 2004). The image becomes a meta-text, creating a multidirectional relationship between the viewer, the object of the gaze, and the reflective sum of this dynamic relationship. At this point in the analysis, we must therefore embark on a process of interpretation and decoding, born in and with the previous levels of observation. What we intend to do here is to identify recurring categories within the sample under examination in order to develop a third level of coding linked to the imaginary, according to the conception attributed to it by Castoriadis (1987). Starting from these assumptions, we will proceed to describe, based on the images analyzed. These interpretive categories directly emerged from the repetitive patterns of gender representation, racialization, conformity, and sexualization in the first two level of the coding process that revealed long-lasting themes requiring additional conceptual exploration.

5.4. Brief visual history of Vogue Italia's covers

The analysis of the photographic material of Vogue Italia reveals several evolving aspects. Indeed, the construction of the image and the representation of models and fashion have developed over time. The most significant change is marked by the change of artistic direction from Franco Sartori to Franca Sozzani in 1988, the year in which Vogue Italia presented a half-length subject on the cover for the first time, instead of a close-up or close-up face. This change in representation is linked not only to the evolution of fashion, which is no longer an artistic object or ornament, but a part of everyday life. It is also linked to the evolution of the increasingly present and leading role of women in society. The most contemporary covers mix the representations of Sartori and Sozzani with current sensitivities, increasingly linked to new themes: body positivity, inclusivity, intersectionality, environment. In this panorama, women are undoubtedly the main subject of the covers. However, in line with social and cultural

changes, the representation of the female body changes throughout the history of Vogue Italia. Thus, with the first cover designed by Steven Meisel, under the direction of Franca Sozzani, we move from the representation of the face, which characterised the covers of the first twenty years of Vogue Italia under the direction of Franco Sartori, to a different representation in which not only the face but also the body becomes an arena of meaning, a place where new sensibilities and new needs, not only individual but also social, can be played out and expressed: women entering the working world, the body as an instrument to claim freedom and individual expression (Noia et al. 2023; Mora, Noia 2024). However, the evolution of the covers of Vogue Italia in the post-Sozzani era, with the artistic direction of Ferdinando Verderi (from July 2019 to July 2021), marks the entry of new languages, in particular that of creativity and the production of fashion as a craft. The covers do not always or exclusively show the female body, but a mixture of elements (collages, fabrics, poor materials, drawings, illustrations, etc.) (see Fig. 1, Fig. 2, Fig. 3). Further changes came with the transition from the leadership of Emanuele Farneti and the art direction of Ferdinando Verderi to Francesca Ragazzi, the current editor-in-chief. The covers of the Ragazzi era mark the entry of other themes into the fashion discussion, and a more pluralist and inclusive representation in terms of diversity (of body, race and age). The most recent period of Vogue Italia covers therefore seems to represent new sensitivities, also from a more pop point of view (see the covers dedicated to pop and rock stars who cross different worlds and languages between fashion, music and cinema: Lady Gaga, November 2021; Zendaya, July 2022; Rosalia, November 2022; Maneskin, December 2022) that appear related to fashion, while maintaining precise references to art and looking to the future. (see Fig. 5, April 2022). Vogue Italia is the story of a group of men and women, each of whom has left his or her mark on Vogue Italia, each of whom has forged a new path through time, through social and cultural upheavals, and through the collective needs and desires that are reflected in the world of fashion and fashion communication. On the other hand, the contrast with the communication of Vogue, a traditional player in fashion communication, offers the opportunity to reflect on the persistent stereotyping, sexualisation and conventions related to the body and clothes carried out by these new technological sophistications, whereas traditional fashion communication seems to evolve towards a greater representation of difference and inclusiveness.

Fig. 1. Vogue Italia. Cover October 2019.
Photo: Vogue Italia Archive

Fig. 2. Vogue Italia. Cover January 2020.
Photo: Vogue Italia Archive

Fig. 3. Vogue Italia. Cover January 2021.
Photo: Vogue Italia Archive

Fig. 4. Vogue Italia. Cover April 2022.
Photo: Vogue Italia Archive

5.5. Description of Copy Magazine visual material

Analyzing the cover of Copy Magazine is significant because they present its digital and print issues together, highlighting a communication approach that still operates in both analog and digital realms simultaneously, reinforcing the centrality of transmediality in contemporary fashion communication. But who gets covered by AI? Despite the peculiarities and innovation potentially inherent in this new fashion magazine format, the data seems to convey a tendency to adhere to traditional photographic styles and compositions. Most of the subjects represented (most of them female) are placed in the centre of the image, echoing a conventional fashion symbolism in which the body serves as a canvas for adornment. This suggests a perpetuation of the notion that women are primarily seen as decorative objects, reinforcing traditional gender roles.

Fig. 5. (From left to right)
Vogue Italia, Cover January 1966 (Source- Vogue Italia Archive);
Vogue Italia, Cover November 2021 (Source- Vogue Italia Archive);
Copy Magazine, Cover August 2023 (Copy Mag Cover).

Analysing the visual material of Copy Mag, it is possible to highlight certain characteristics that the magazine created with AI shares with the representations offered by traditional fashion magazines (see Fig. 5, a comparison between two famous Vogue Italia covers and the cover of Copy Magazine).

Of the total number of images, we therefore see a strong prevalence of white women with a look that conforms to the stylistic features of western fashion that we could define as mainstream. At this juncture, the comparison of the two bodies of material under examination is particularly interesting.

Historically analysing the covers of Vogue Italia from this point of view allows us to highlight an evolution in representing ethnic diversity which accompanies the evolution of Italian society. In the Sartori era, only two covers featured black models (December 1977, February 1980, with Amalia Vairelli re-portrayed by Peter Lindbergh, shown in Fig. 6). On the other hand, the representation of ethnic diversity increased with Franca Sozzani, with 20 covers featuring non-white models. A new approach to the representation of beauty was consecrated in July 2008 with the Black Issue, an issue dedicated not only to beauty but also to black professionalism in the fashion world (see Fig. 7).

The covers of the post-Sozzani period show the change in the narrative, with a plural narrative characterising the last few years, in which, out of 73 covers from February 2017 to December 2024, 15 represent non-white models.
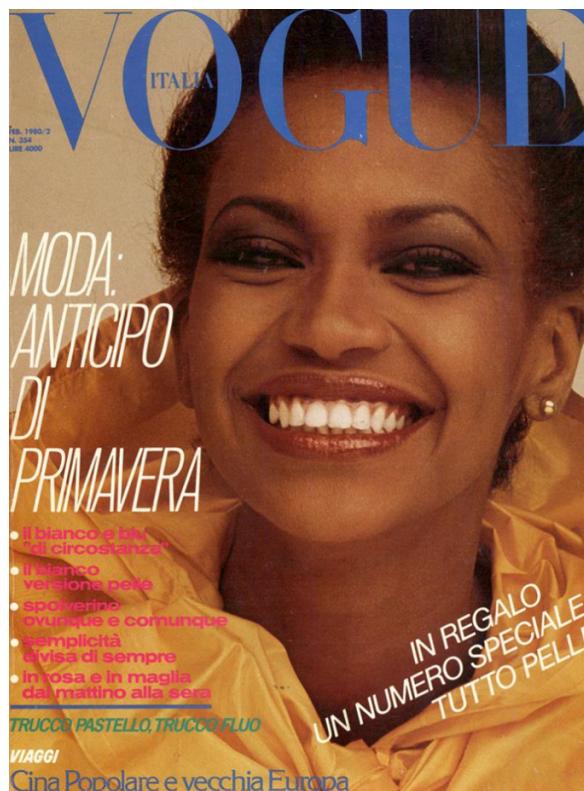

Fig. 6. Vogue Italia. Cover February 1980.
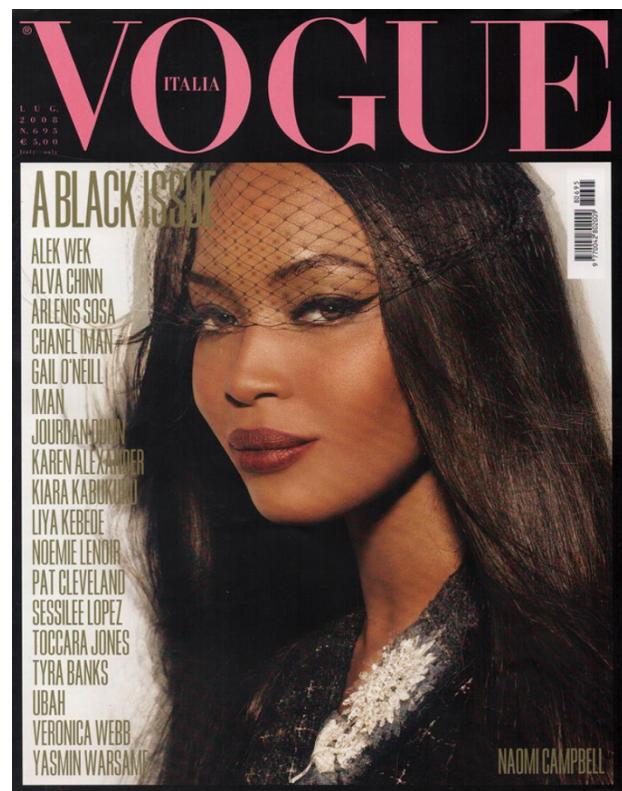Photo: Vogue Italia Archive

Fig. 7. Vogue Italia. Cover July 2008.
Photo: Vogue Italia Archive

Thus, looking at the Copy materials, one of the most recurring compositions is the close-up with the model directing her gaze straight into the camera lens, a very recurring composition also in mainstream fashion communication. This representation seems directly related to the traditional representation of the face on the cover, which characterised the first twenty

Fig. 8. AI generated picture of a female models

years of Vogue Italia until the first cover of the Sozzani era. Furthermore, in Copy AI generated pictures, there is a certain recurrence of retro and 1980s-inspired aesthetics and styles, and this can be seen not only in the make-up and clothes, but also in the grain and filters applied to the photographs, which convey a more vintage mood. The accentuated sexualisation of women is also a very recurrent element (an example of this phenomenon is shown in Fig. 8).

In fact, from the 135 elements examined, a not so well-balanced ethnic differentiation of the models represented seems to emerge, in line with what happens in traditional communication; in one post a body that does not conform to beauty standards is represented, recalling the narratives linked to body positivity (see Fig. 9).

In another, on the other hand, the portrait of a mature woman (see Fig. 10), which again seems to go hand in hand with the attempt to represent different fashion canons no longer exclusively linked to youth, affirming the power of being beautiful by re-appropriating one's body at any age. However, most of the posts show bodies that are not only conformist, but also highly sexualised.

Fig. 9. AI generated picture of a female models

Fig. 10. AI generated picture of a female models

The representation of the covers of Vogue Italia, from this point of view, appears to conform to a narrative of fashion discourse still strongly anchored to the idea of conforming bodies (Raja 2023), both from an aesthetic point of view and from a generational and performative point of view. In fact, only three covers out of the total number of documents analysed show mature women (the covers dedicated to Lauren Hutton in October 2017, Donatella Versace in March 2022 and Isabella Rossellini in October 2023), and only one cover features the Paralympic athlete Yoko Plebani (January 2022) showing a non-conforming body (but still linked to the performance dimension). Despite a scarce representation of these alternative models to conventional fashion canons, it is important to emphasise that these covers are set in the time horizon of recent years, in which new sensitivities and demands for representation in fashion are emerging, which Vogue Italia welcomes and to which Vogue Italia responds, demonstrating a sensitivity to these new social demands and instances.

6. Conclusions

The comparison highlights several interesting aspects that allow us to reflect on how fashion magazines continue to promote representations, narratives and stylistic elements linked to the body and fashion. The images analysed in Copy Mag seem to strike a balance between different aspects, between the aesthetics of the old and the new body, between the physical and the digital.

On the one hand, Copy seems to adopt an aesthetic, cuts, poses, stylistic choices, themes and narratives inspired by traditional fashion communication. This suggests that fashion magazines remain an essential reference point for fashion discourse and continue to

play a central role in shaping and suggesting aesthetics, visual identities, narratives and representations that are echoed in wider cultural spaces, including new forms of media communication and artificial intelligence. In this sense, Copy Magazine does not merely imitate, but rather reiterates fashion's long-standing visual codes, demonstrating that even within innovative technological practices, the weight of fashion's historical imagery continues to exert a strong influence (Ghighi, Sassatelli 2018). The magazine also seems to recall the transmediality strategies that have influenced fashion media in recent years, particularly through its hybrid distribution model that combines social media engagement with traditional print circulation (Slevin 2013).

From another perspective, the bodies depicted in this AI-generated magazine reflect the dominant online aesthetics, particularly those prevalent on social and digital platforms (Afful, Ricciardelli 2015; de Vaate et al. 2020). These often emphasise sexualised features and provocative clothing, particularly for female bodies, thus enhancing the performative dimension of body representation (Varini 2024). These visual trends raise critical concerns about how artificial intelligence, trained on datasets permeated by decades-old visual biases, can reproduce - consciously or unconsciously - obsolete or exclusive ideals. Rather than disrupting the status quo, the result often aligns with historical models of fashion representation that marginalise diversity and nuance (Marcinowski 2022).

As we have moved on from certain research questions, it seems appropriate here to discuss certain aspects in more depth, in particular the dimensions of gender, bodies, diversity and clothing.

As far as gender is concerned, both magazines analysed present a primacy towards subjects connoted as feminine (or hyper-feminine). The vast majority of the images analysed consist of single, female characters, often in frontal positions. This stylistic feature, typical of the language of the mainstream fashion magazine, is reproduced and repeated, not only within Copy Magazine, but also within Vogue Italia, despite, as we have already noted, innovative openings within it.

As far as bodies and their representations are concerned, again there is a reconfirmation of dominant aesthetics and Eurocentric canons of beauty. Most of the subjects are Caucasian, thin or extremely thin. The non-Caucasian bodies depicted, however, adhere to aesthetic canons that are not peculiar to other cultures or ethnic groups, they always remain

faithful to Western beauty standards (Dimitrov, Kroumpouzos 2023), traditionally imposed within the fashion industry.

While local beauty standards never disappeared, globalisation has seen extensive diffusion of Western standards, especially through media, that have had a significant influence on beauty standards worldwide. The media have led the way in disseminating Western beauty, incorporating the standards into other cultures at the cost of most times eliminating indigenous beauty standards (Conrad 2021).

Traces such as high eyebrows, strong eyes, high cheekbones, tiny nose, and narrow face - all common to Western Caucasian faces - have become the global standard of beauty across the world (Cunningham et al. 1995). This standard, heavily influenced by fashion and media representations, has contributed to a long-standing issue of underrepresentation and misrepresentation of BIPOC models in fashion. Fashion magazines, which have historically presented a narrow, homogenised definition of beauty, continue to uphold these beauty standards, often to the exclusion of diverse representations of race and ethnicity (Cusumano, Thompson 1997).

If, regarding aspects of non-Western representations, the phenomena we are witnessing is a kind of assimilation and reworking, with regard to non-conforming bodies and diversity, the discourse becomes even more complex. Within Vogue there are attempts to address political themes and issues through fashion images (Edwards 2010), but at the level of representations of non-conforming bodies there are no relevant variations from the magazine's historical standards. The same can be said for Copy, within which we only have two images, out of the total of the entire database, that can be considered non-canonical with the aesthetic languages of fashion magazines: a curvy model, an elderly subject.

Sexualisation is another relevant aspect. This dimension is not only exacerbated by the exposure of the bodies, but also by their clothing. Most of the clothes worn in the images, especially in the case of Copy Magazine, have a style that enhances the models' shapes, their thinness, their bodies shape. The direction of the glances, the position of the lips, everything goes to reproduce those fashion aesthetics typical of the supermodel season where women's sexuality was taken to the extreme and used as marketing leverage (Haug 1999).

Also missing in this analysis is more reflective scrutiny of how sites such as Copy Magazine produced by AI would impact or reshape the broader trends of fashion media, particularly in representation, diversity and creative ownership. The magazine's utilization of AI-

generated images raises questions about how much artificial intelligence can respond to or reflect social complexity and cultural multiplicity. There is an urgent question as to whether AI in this context is pushing fashion forward or reintroducing an aesthetic circle that leads back to sweetened and unrealistic representations of beauty.

Future research should also focus on the evolution of the role of the art director and the transformation of fashion professions in the AI era. Traditionally, people such as editors and creative directors have not just managed the visual and artistic aspects of magazines such as Vogue Italia but also drove the socio-political claims of representation in fashion (Faria et al. 2019). Although this role is increasingly being outsourced with, or substituted by, algorithmic processes, it is essential to question how human sensitivities, particularly the culturally attuned and moral sensitivities, can be distributed alongside generative models.

From this viewpoint, the photographs that are composed with artificial intelligence appear paradoxically modern and retrograde. Technologically refined, as they might be, they often imply beauties dressed in a démodé manner, aesthetically advanced but having nothing to do with the problems of contemporary society. This separation is one that is particularly apparent at a time when the fashion system is being asked to answer for its past of omission and turn towards more inclusive and sustainable modes of representation. From this perspective, fashion images generated by AI pose to aestheticize the past and close their eyes to the present imperatives of visibility, multiplicity and fairness.

Furthermore, examining Copy Magazine through the lens of 'global natives' - those individuals who have grown up in digitally saturated and culturally diverse environments (Bennett et al. 2008) - raises further questions about the effectiveness of AI in reflecting hybrid identities and life experiences. Can a machine, trained on selective and historically skewed datasets, accurately represent the layered realities of global culture? Or is it lost into a homogenized, Western ideal that diminishes the richness of intercultural diversity?

Finally, the cross-roads of outdated forms such as fashion magazines and emerging technologies such as generative AI is cross-roads of ideology and creativity. At one level, such a crossing can open new stories, new visual selves, new paradigms of aesthetics and democratized production (Schröter 2019).

On the other, it requires a rigorous critical lens to ensure that innovation does not come at the expense of representational depth and ethical responsibility. As the boundaries

between human and artificial creativity blur, the stakes for fashion representation - who is seen, how they are portrayed and what ideologies are conveyed - become even more significant. Therefore, Copy Magazine should not only be seen as an aesthetic experiment, but also as a case study on the socio-cultural implications of artificial intelligence in contemporary visual culture. The challenge for the future will be to drive these tools towards greater inclusivity, reflexivity (Krause 2021) and creative plurality in global fashion media.

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