Gen Z's Perception of Social Media Profile Pictures from a Baudrillardian Perspective and Fashion Magazine Cover Images of Digital Habitus

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Abstract The significance of portraiture as a mode of visual communication and expression has remained unabated through the ages. The extent to which portraiture meets this expectation is often debated. Who is responsible for interpreting an image has become an important question. This study analyzes personal profile photos on social media and fashion models' magazine cover images based on the framework of the analysis of hyper-realism in fashion from the perspective of digital habitus.. This study offers alternatives and solutions to social change by examining various social problems such as lack of identity, digital vulnerability, and digital habitus that are prevalent in the present digital society from the perspective of hyperreality-based fashion acceptance.

Keywords Gen Z, Digital habitus, Simulation, Profile portrait, Fashion model

Introduction

In the early 2000s, the new media society ushered in the era of personal media, where social media and UCC became the norm. The subsequent Web 3.0 era brought virtual prototypes such as metaverses, VR/AR, and XR into our daily lives, and life became even more rapidly and substantially digitalized. The expansion of the digital age allows everybody to become a creator through the use of metaverse technologies and digital platforms. The endless possibility of designing, creating, using, and selling products has erased the distinction between producers and consumers, and ushered in the era where everybody designs what they want (Manzini, 2015).

With everybody having become a creator, the ways of expressing oneself demanded diversity; thus, the digital natives, Generation Z (Gen Z) users, believe in expressing their personal gender and identity. This is because digital habitus, where a person has multiple selves as opposed to a single personality, has become common in the digital society, especially among the Gen Z (Curtis et al., 2019). Digital creations by ordinary people in the digital environment have brought about changes in fashion. For example, the role of fashion leaders, which was previously played primarily by traditional fashion experts and models, has been taken over by various ordinary creators (Lee, 2022). Due to the high level of digital technological advancement, the realm of sublime art, which was once singularly reigned by the masters, has become accessible to the general public. It is now possible to produce results that surpass the handwriting of past masters with the technical mastery of digital media.

The change in the paradigm is also evident in self-portrait-making, which developed in the process of popularizing the concept of ideal beauty by various fashion experts in the past. Self-portrait-making by fashion experts,

representing idealized beauty, was transformed into profile pictures as an art of self-expression by the general public in the digital era, ushering a new chapter in expressing one's identity (Lee, 2023). People digitize and put out images that represent them by developing various digital habitus that involve exhibiting themselves on social media. The result is often a mirror image of the real self that is gradually blurring the line between the real and the virtual.

The research questions of this study are as follows: First, we explored the nature of digitized images using Baudrillard's theory of simulacra, the most prominent theoretical framework for analyzing digital works. Second, based on the stages of simulacra, we derived a framework for the comparative analysis of Gen Z users' profile photos and images of fashion magazine cover models. Third, we evaluated the attractiveness of personal profile photos and images of fashion magazine cover models by artificially manipulating the digitalization stage and comparing them. Finally, we analyzed the digital habitus of modern people in the current media era through their personal profile photos on social media and images in fashion magazines, examined the evaluation of images by others according to the level of digitization, and identified ways in which social media users can positively communicate with others.

Theoretical Background

Gen Z and Digital Media

Born in the 1990s and being adolescents in the 2000s, this generation grew up with the ubiquitous Internet, which is a life entirely different from that of the previous generation. They can be referred to as digital natives with a digitally centered identity (Dolot, 2018). To them, the world of digital media, with its free and rampant use of the Internet, smartphones, and laptops, is a natural and familiar environment (Bascha, 2011; Tulgan, 2013). Gen Z has a strong desire to explore and experience the virtual world. They actively use social network platforms such as Tik Tok, Instagram, and Twitter. In the process of evaluating and engaging with online posts, they form their own identity and assess their worth in the society (Curtis et al., 2019).

Gen Z actively uses social media platforms for instant messaging, recognition, and sharing, and uses their images in a variety of media platforms to create a diverse habitus. Mediatized digital avatars is the first dimension of publicness —the presentation of the self; however, this presentation of the self is not new. In modern society, communication with others through digital platforms is mediated by the self (Moore & Hancock, 2022), which involves using messengers on social networking platforms, watching videos, searching for news and information, and forming communities (Curtis et al., 2019).

In the digital environment, Gen Z users actively interact and communicate with each other through social media to share information, form opinions, and influence (Stahl & Literat, 2023). High interest in professional photography among social media users can also be observed in the current climate of rapidly increasing popularity of AI profile pictures, particularly among Gen Z users. Recently, AI profile pictures have gained considerable attention, and the acceptability of processed profile pictures has been debated. As the debate continues over the use of AI profile pictures outside social media and in official documents, AI-generated profile pictures are becoming increasingly popular among Gen Z users (Dwivedi et al., 2023). The use of computer-generated images and virtual assistants with human-like facial features (often the physical features of an infant), such as round faces and large eyes, is rapidly increasing among Gen Z, particularly because these quickly attract the attention and appreciation of others, regardless of kinship and race (Olson & Marshuetz, 2005; Todorov, 2006). Thus, the profile picture plays a key role in expressing the user's self and representing the user in the virtual environment (Strano, 2008). For Gen Z social media users, profile pictures are increasingly becoming more than just signboards for introducing themselves and communicating with others.

With the recent expansion of digital media, the significance of profile pictures as a means of visual communication and expression has become increasingly important. In particular, the role of profile pictures as a means of finding the validation of other Gen Z users is frequently discussed. Questions are also often raised about the interpretation of profile pictures and who actually is the

sufbject of interpretation (Wango, 2020). The origin of profile pictures can be traced back to the late 1830s when it was a concept in photography related to creating real-world images (Taylor, 2018). With the emergence of digital media, profile pictures have gone beyond their traditional role of expression and commemoration to play an important role on social media platforms. As the role of profile pictures evolved, they assumed a variety of meanings for modern people (Wango, 2020). They helped liberate visual art and the ways in which users want to express and communicate. Thus, digital avatars are in many ways the most authentic behaviors of social actors in the digital space, where social actors do not exist as actors themselves but as representations of the social groups to which they belong (Romele & Rodighiero, 2020).
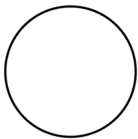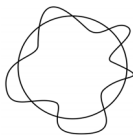
Digital Habitus of Profile Photos and Fashion Images

Baudrillard's simulation theory explains the fundamental process of image digitization. In his 1981 book *Simulacra and Simulacrum*, Baudrillard (1929-2007) outlined the theory of simulacra, in which a simulated image replaces reality; he argued that the simulated image produces a hyperreality that is more realistic, as there is no longer anything real to simulate. Baudrillard (1994, 2016) described simulacra as involving four successive stages of an image. The hyperreality that culminates from Baudrillard's simulacrum is a digital image that is more realistic than the real object (see Table 1). Baudrillard's simulacrum is often used as an interpretive theory for various contemporary digital images (Lee, 2023). As a result of the process of creating the simulacrum, hyperrealism provides artistic clarity to digital images as a product of the digitization process. The hyper-realistic digital artwork undergoes a process in which the motives and criteria for its creation involving improving upon the details contained in the photograph and creating a new artwork that is more sophisticated and contains finer details than the original photograph (Wango, 2020).

Digital imagery has become a modern habitus. Habitus is a term coined by Bourdieu (2016) to encompass the idea that individual tastes are determined by socio-cultural

Table 1. The sign order divided into four stages of simulation by Baudrillard

Signifier = Signified		Signifier ≠ Signified	
Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
It is the reflection of a profound reality	It masks and denatures a profound reality	It masks the absence of a profound reality	It has no reaction to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum
• Reflection of deep realism • Reproduction of reality • Origin and signs of reality	• Deformation of the origin • Modification of reality • Origin and signs of second-hand truth	• Original image in human imagination (the origin disappears) • Absence of realism and objectivity	• Image unrelated to the origin • Absence of an object authenticity

Data sourced from Lee (2023)

circumstances such as background, environment, values, mood, religion, ideas, power, and class. Digital images have become the habitus of the modern person. Self-portrait making in the digital age can be interpreted from the perspective of Baudrillard's (1994, 2016) concept of hyperreality. Baudrillard explains that through the four stages of simulation, digitized images reach hyperreality as they are reborn as new entities. Through mass media, people can easily and quickly access various images, one of the many ways in which the development of digital technology has had a significant impact on modern society. The creation of virtual images that transcend time and space and are more real than real things suggests that virtual images are reproduced in a form that lacks the essence of the original, unlike traditional reproduction or imitation. This phenomenon can be explained by Baudrillard's simulation theory, which argues that in modern society, the real is lost under a plethora of images that are transformed according to the order of the simulacra and reborn as hyperreality (Baudrillard, 1994).

Baudrillard (1994, 2016) described simulacra as involving four successive stages of an image. The hyperreality that culminates from Baudrillard's simulacrum is a digital image that is more realistic than the real object. The first stage involves creating a good image. The second is evil. In the third stage, a form is created that represents a magical order. The final stage is when the simulacrum is complete, which no longer represents the form depicted by the external image. The entire process can be summarized as follows: the first stage is a reflection of the profound reality; the second stage is an obscuration of the profound reality; the third stage is an absence of the profound reality; and the fourth stage is pure simulacra in itself, unrelated to reality (Table 1).

Methods

Research Design

This study examines how the Gen Z presents their digital avatars through their social media profiles and how their images are perceived by others through the simulacrum. In addition, it examines the characteristics of the perception and attractiveness of digitalization through a comparative analysis

of profile pictures of Gen Z users, which are representative images of themselves, and the images of cover models in professional fashion magazines by applying the simulation process. By examining digitized images from the perspective of hyperreality, this study aims to provide alternatives and solutions to various social problems such as lack of identity, digital vulnerability, and multiple personalities that persist due to digital habitus in the current digital society.

The comparative analysis of images was conducted through a quantitative study in which data was collected and analyzed through questionnaires. To compare personal profile photos of ordinary people and cover model images of fashion magazines, 30 personal profile photos were randomly selected from Instagram and Facebook, which have the largest number of Generation Z users, and 30 cover images of fashion magazines published after 2020 were randomly selected and analyzed. The research methods have used as the following:
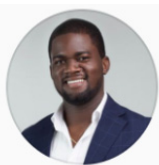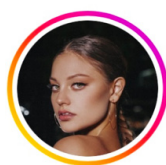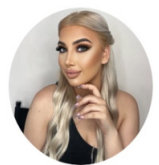
1) We conducted a quantitative study to derive a framework that categorizes the characteristics of digital images into four stages based on the degree of manipulation and simulation in personal profile photos on social media and cover model images in fashion magazines.

2) We conducted a qualitative study using a five-point Likert scale to assess the degree of artificiality of digital images in each stage.

3) Based on the results of the Likert scale, we conducted a comparative analysis of the degree of artificiality in the simulation process using social media profile photos and fashion magazine cover images.

This study was exempted from IRB review by University (PNU IRB/2023_101_HR).

Subjects and Participants of Research Analysis

As part of an initial study for this research, two fashion experts with doctoral degrees or higher participated in the preliminary sampling of personal profile photos (30 among 100) and fashion magazine cover model images (30 among

Table 2. the level of Hyper-reality in profile image and fashion magazine models

Image no	1	2	3	4	5
Profile Personal image					
Fashion Magazine Model image					

100). Thereafter, five final samples of each group were selected that were evenly distributed in each stage of Baudrillard's (1994) hyperreality. Based on the preliminary questionnaire, the final survey questionnaire was completed to analyze the 10 final samples.

The online survey was conducted by selecting 110 people in their 20s who had recently posted a personal profile picture during the three-month period from October to December 2023 from NAVER Band's 20s community, which has the largest number of Gen Z users. In addition, the images were selected for this study covered a wide range of Gen Z users on social media, without distinguishing between gender and race. This is because women have similar preferences for what constitutes female physical attractiveness, and it builds on Tovée and Cornelissen's (2001) findings that men and women use the same visual cues in the same order of importance to judge attractiveness, and that this does not change with changes in viewing angle.

The questionnaire was created using a 5-point scale, and it took approximately 5 min per person to complete. The collected results were kept as data under the responsibility of the principal investigator, and no matching was performed between personal information and the collected information; moreover, personal identification information on the research subjects was not confirmed.

The digital images were simulated according to Baudrillard's (1994) four-step simulation process to evaluate

the manipulation of images. The results were divided into four stages, from the lower stage (stage 1) to the upper stage (stage 4), based on the scores of the Gen Z evaluators. The ten representative samples (five personal profile photos and five images of fashion magazine cover models) finally selected by the fashion experts are shown in Table 2. The degrees of artificiality (1 to 5) according to the simulation stages are shown in Table 3.

Results and Discussion

Profile Picture and Habitus of Gen Z Users

Gen Z, also known as the digital native and tech generation, was born in the digital world and grew up with Internet content. Unlike the other generations, they are highly connected to electronic devices and the digital world. According to Singh and Dangmei (2016), Gen Z members use informal, personal, and direct communication styles. Social media, an important venue for interacting and communicating with others, is an extension of the real world. Their profile pictures on social media reflect "real-life" images and provide information. These characteristics are also reflected in the results of the present study.

As shown in Table 4, Gen Z users are more likely to feel that their profile picture "speaks for itself." In particular,
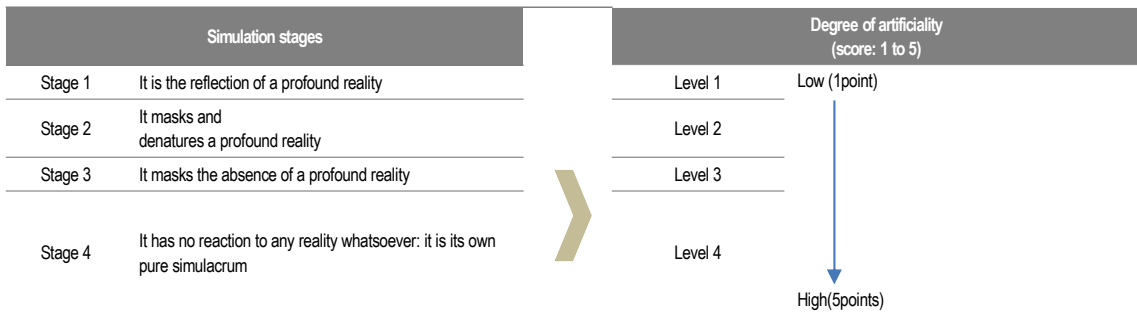
Table 3. Analysis framework

Simulation stages		Degree of artificiality (score: 1 to 5)	
Stage 1	It is the reflection of a profound reality	Level 1	Low (1point)
Stage 2	It masks and denatures a profound reality	Level 2	
Stage 3	It masks the absence of a profound reality	Level 3	
Stage 4	It has no reaction to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum	Level 4	
			High(5points)

Table 4. Correlation of the factors of expressing self-image on social media

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Social media shows me.	1						
2. How closely you match your profile picture	.61***	1					
3. How much retouching your profile picture needs	-.09	-.11	1				
4. Appearance Satisfaction	.24**	.26***	-.10	1			
5. Self-esteem	.23**	.12	-.04	.42***	1		
6. How much you want to be recognized by others	-.04	.02	-.01	-.02	.13	1	
7. The extent to which you consider the evaluations of others	0.6	.04	.01	.31***	.42***	.06	1

**$p<.01$, ***$p<.001$

users who are more inclined to showcase themselves on social media are more likely to report a high degree of congruence between their profile picture on social media and their real-life appearances (.61, $p < .001$). Participants who reported a high degree of congruence between their profile picture on social media and their real-life appearance also reported a high degree of satisfaction with their appearance (.26, $p < .001$). Gen Z participants reported higher self-esteem (.23, $p < .01$) and a greater desire to showcase themselves on social media. Similarly, they are more likely to agree that social media is an extension of real life and that they "show an extension of their real self" on social media. Thus, users who are more inclined to show themselves on social media and those who have a high degree of congruence between their social media and real-life appearances have a high level of satisfaction with their real-life appearance. The Gen Z participants in this study

preferred to maintain the same identity, with fewer gaps between their real-life identity and habitus, and the digitized image of themselves created in their profile picture.

Attractiveness of Gen Z Profile Pictures Based on Simulation Level

Modern people put a lot of effort into managing the impression they make on others. Understanding how people express themselves, particularly through social media profiles, can provide interesting insights. Social psychologists have noted that modern people manage their social media profiles differently depending on their personalities (Segalin et al., 2017). For example, extroverts with pleasant personalities tend to post photos in warm colors and have many people in their photos, reflecting their sociable nature, whereas neurotic people post photos of indoor locations. In this study, the simulation phase of Gen Z users' profile

Table 5. Attractiveness of profile photo according to simulation level

Simulation level	Image no.	Attractiveness	
		Mean (5 point value)	*SD*
1	1	2.84	1.37
2	2	2.93	1.20
3	3	4.12	0.82
	4	4.23	0.89
4	5	2.81	1.25

Figure 1. Attractiveness and hyper-reality level in profile self-image cover image

Table 6. Attractiveness of fashion image according to simulation level

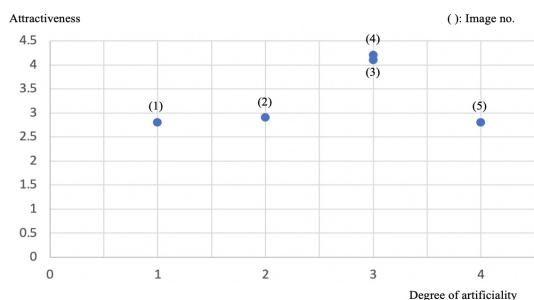| Simulation level	Image no.	Attractiveness	
		Mean (5-point value)	*SD*
1	-	-	-
2	-	-	-
3	1	3.78	1.10
	2	3.53	1.17
	3	3.65	1.24
4	4	3.47	1.15
	5	3.82	1.06
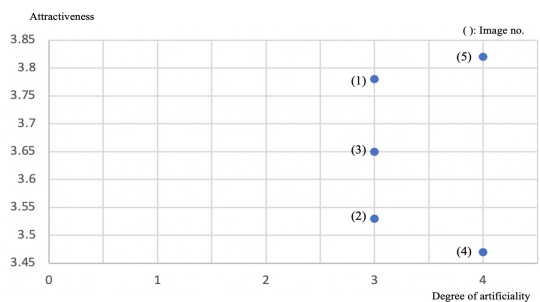
Figure 2. Attractiveness and hyper-reality level in fashion magazine cover image

pictures on social media revealed differences in attractiveness ratings based on the degree of artificiality of the profile portrait images.

As shown in Table 5 and Figure 1, the results of analyzing the profile portraits through the simulation process show that the profile portraits judged to be attractive in Stage 1, which shows a blueprint of the real user's appearance, were judged to be more attractive (*Mean*=2. 84, *min*=1, and *max*=5), but we can see that attractiveness gradually increases as we move to the second stage (2, *Mean*=2.93) and third stage (3, *Mean*=4.12; 4, *Mean*=4.23), where the image correction process of the profile picture is gradually carried out. The attractiveness of the digital profile image increased from Stage 2 to Stage 3 as the simulation process proceeded. However, at Stage 4, the highest level of artificiality due to digitization, attractiveness decreased to the level of Stage 1.

This represents a significant decrease in attractiveness

when the profile picture is judged to have been converted into a completely different image. This can be interpreted as Gen Z social media users feeling a sense of disconnection between the profile picture and the actual user, resulting in a significant decrease in attractiveness. A study comparing digital fashion images to Baudrillard's theory of simulation found that of the four stages of simulation in humans, stages one and two were more likely to utilize the initial image (Lee, 2023). These results are also comparable to the results of this study, which suggests that the outcome of the early stages of simulation may induce more positive favorability.

These findings have important implications for the extent to which the gap between a real person and a

retouched image should be considered when using profile pictures as a medium to express oneself and convey a positive image to others.

Simulation of Fashion Model Images

The images of the models on fashion magazine covers were used in the simulation process. Steps 1 and 2 do not appear in the process. The images of the fashion models were all at Stage 3 or higher. This shows that when Gen Z evaluators look at images of fashion models used in fashion magazines, they assume that basic retouching has been performed. Unlike people's profile pictures, fashion model images are highly altered and hyper-realistic.

The images of the fashion models were evaluated in Stages 3 and 4 of the simulation process. The images in the third stage were characterized by a reproduction of the real world, similar to the photorealism of early hyperrealism. For example, a photo of pregnant Korean fashion model Lee Ha-Ni (Image 3) was judged to be realistic by Gen Z evaluators. However, the cover image of Lee was not rated as a copy of reality in the first or second stages of the simulation. This suggests that even if the images of the models in fashion magazines reflected reality, the evaluators perceived them to be already fabricated. It is interesting to note that even though the images of fashion models were all close to the simulacra with a high level of simulacra (levels 3 and 4), Gen Z raters rated the images of fashion models with simulacra at levels 3 and 4 with a high attractiveness rating of 3.4 or higher (Figure 2).

The characteristic of hyperreality, expressed in the form of a simulacra that is completely disconnected from the material world, emerges in stage 4. Nevertheless, the image with the lowest attractiveness rating (*Mean*=3.47) was the result of the stage 4 simulacrum; however, it was higher than the highest value of 4.23 (Image 4) for a profile picture of a real person (Table 6). Similarly, the attractiveness of fashion model images remains high (above 3.4 in the fourth stage of the simulation). The results did not show an attractiveness value above 4, with a maximum value of 3.82. This is 0.41 less than the real-life profile pictures in Phase 3, which had a modo of 4 or higher.

Stage 4 simulation was a state of fakeness with sensory confusion. Gen Z raters positively approved fashion models in fashion magazines that were altered to look different from their counterparts. Although images of fashion models are presented as digital images predicted by a processed transformation, this transformation is not conveyed as a negative message. Rather, fashion magazines are accepted by Gen Z consumers as a place of possibility where the unreal, illogical, irrational, strange, and surprise are utilized, reflecting hyperrealism. This study confirms that images of cover models in fashion magazines positively pursue highly conscious, non-reductive practices of "artificial enhancement" and "deception as truth."

The results of the simulation phase for fashion models were similar to those for animals, rather than humans, compared to Lee (2023) study analyzing digital images. This suggests that the way people view and evaluate fashion models in general is more similar to the way they evaluate a specific idealized object, or non-person, rather than identifying with themselves in a general way.

Comparative Analysis of Profile Pictures and Fashion Model Images by Simulation Stage

Previous studies have shown that cues in a profile that are difficult to manipulate increase trust and create positive impressions. Using Baudrillard's simulation process, this study analyzes how profile images alone, excluding verbal cues based on objective evidence, can elicit evaluations from others by comparing them with images of fashion magazine cover models. As images are subject to more subjective evaluations than text, we examined whether the artificial manipulation of images affect the evaluation of others.

In modern digital society, ordinary people boast of looks that surpass those of fashion models and express their personal narcissistic desires through social media. In the face of an overwhelming digital culture, fashion goes beyond basic survival to create space for synthesis and regeneration. As a digital image, the fashion magazine cover offers new insights into how early hyperrealism recreated realistic representations of the world. Fashion magazine models display a high degree of hyperreality in fashion images. Although simulacrum images are fake, involving simulation and sensory confusion, the images of models in fashion

magazines elicit a high level of favorability from Gen Z raters. Thus, fashion images can actively and positively utilize hyperrealism, the uncanny and surprising qualities of the unreal, illogical, and irrational, by bringing it into everyday life and using it to engage and intrigue consumers. However, unlike fashion models, profile pictures on social media have been transformed by excessive digitization, leading to negative evaluations from others.

Fashion magazine covers pursue highly conscious, non-reductive practices of "artificial enhancement" and "faking it" to attract viewers' attention and interest. However, profile pictures used by ordinary people can gain much greater favor from others than fashion models if they are used to the extent that they reflect the unique characteristics of the individual. In addition, in the current digital culture, an individual's image can be derived from digitalization and expressed in various personas; however, if it is expressed in the form of an aesthetic image that reflects their uniqueness, they can gain favor and positive evaluation from others.

Conclusion

The proliferation of digital content and the growth of Gen Z, born in the digital era, as the dominant users of media content, have changed the way users interact with each other, not only as content providers but also as content users. This study analyzes Baudrillard's hyperreality, which appears in the process of digital image simulation, by comparing personal profile pictures on social media with magazine cover images that express the public's multiple personas. This study offers a perspective on how to healthily adapt to the digital society that has emerged as a result of the transformation into a digital society by analyzing personal profile pictures on social media based on hyperreality, which is emerging as a social problem, such as lack of identity, digital vulnerability, and multiple personalities.

The results show that in modern digital society, ordinary people boast of their appearance surpassing that of fashion models and express their personal narcissistic desires on social media through digitized images. Unlike fashion

model images, profile picture images on social media can induce negative evaluations from others when presented as fake (simulacra) images through excessive deformation. In contrast, fashion magazine models were more likely to be distributed in Stage 4, which involves a high level of artificial manipulation, through fashion images. As a digital image, the cover models of fashion magazines are allowed to look fake and different from the real world, and it can be seen that readers are somewhat positive about conveying a multidimensional image by forming various avatars. However, it was only when the models demonstrated beauty based on their true essence that they generated a high level of liking and positive responses from Gen Z. Although fashion models can attract consumers' attention by reproducing their realistic appearance, the scope of reproduction is limited; readers expect a third habitus from fashion models that is created by appropriately utilizing artificial manipulation and the reproduction of reality. Therefore, unlike fashion magazines, people can realize through profile portraits that real individuals can induce favorable feelings from others that are comparable to professional fashion models if they present their own habitus based on their intrinsic uniqueness in an attractive way.

In the current digital society, individuals shape the way they present themselves to demonstrate their true identity and beauty by forming a new second identity, the habitus. This study shows that digital images that project the habitus individuals want to pursue through various digital media can induce positive evaluations from others, rather than a blueprint profile that is an exact copy of their actual appearance. In addition, for fashion models, who are commonly considered representative examples of digitalization, readers accept artificial manipulation and positively accept the processing and transformation of various habituses created by such manipulation. In the digital age, the various avatars that have emerged in the process of simulating digital images can be used as places to create differences and newness that differ from the original identity, thus evoking positive consumer interest and favor.

The findings of this study are significant because they provide new insights into how people in the digital age form and perceive images of others. One limitation of this study is

that it does not reflect gender differences in evaluating the attractiveness of digital images. Another limitation of this study is that it does not reflect racial diversity, as the participants in the survey were limited to Koreans. Therefore, we hope that future studies will expand to evaluate digital images not only according to the gender of the user, but also according to different races, and analyze the differences between gender and race.

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