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The aesthetics of falsehood: The image as a tool of visual propaganda in the age of artificial intelligence

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Abstract

The aesthetics of falsehood: The image as a tool of visual propaganda in the age of artificial intelligence

In an era of rapidly advancing generative artificial intelligence, visual language is undergoing a profound transformation: aesthetics is increasingly instrumentalized for persuasion, while synthetic images assume the guise of credible representations of reality. This article analyzes the aesthetics of falsehood as a strategy that enhances the persuasive power of visual disinformation and redefines the epistemological function of the image. It begins from the hypothesis that deepfakes and other forms of synthetic visuality, by mobilizing formal aesthetic appeal — symmetry, harmony, and controlled lighting — expand the reach of disinformation and reshape the epistemic foundations of visual representation, strengthening the link between aesthetics and perceived credibility. The analysis juxtaposes historical forms of visual propaganda with reflections on the contemporary circulation of AI-generated images across social media. It also considers microtargeting mechanisms, recommendation algorithms, and the psychological dynamics of perceiving hyper-realistic imagery. A focus group study with eight participants complements the theoretical discussion; its findings confirm that aesthetic form plays a key role in shaping both emotional response and the credibility attributed to images. The results highlight the need to cultivate visual literacy and to reorient media education toward analyzing form, composition, and the emotional narration of images. In this context, the aesthetics of falsehood emerges not only as a technological but also as a cultural mechanism of influence — highly effective and increasingly challenging to detect.

Keywords: aesthetics of falsehood, deepfake, visual propaganda, artificial intelligence (AI), image ethics, visual literacy

Visual forms of communication, present in culture since antiquity, have played a decisive role in shaping collective imaginaries, emotions, and social decisions. Owing to its immediacy and impact, the image has become one of the most powerful carriers of meaning, and the development of reproductive technologies — from photography through cinema to digital media — has steadily reinforced its epistemological and cultural status. Today, in the era of rapid advances in artificial intelligence (AI), we witness the emergence of a new aesthetic paradigm — the aesthetics of falsehood — which redefines the relationship between the viewer and representation and challenges established categories of truth, authenticity, and referentiality.

AI-based technologies such as generative adversarial networks (GANs)[1] now enable the creation of hyper-realistic depictions of people, places, and events that never existed in reality. Deepfakes[2] — the most telling manifestation of these technological affordances — generate new epistemological, aesthetic, and ethical challenges, thereby strengthening the potential for manipulation in social communication (Leone, 2023, pp. 385–405).

In the context of contemporary visual propaganda, a question arises: whether — and how — it is possible to maintain a distinction between true and synthetic representations in a world where images achieve mimetic perfection, and their synthetic character is perceptually undetectable. Assuming that contemporary AI-generated images redefine traditional cognitive relations between viewer and representation and amplify the effectiveness of propaganda by tapping into psychological mechanisms of visual perception, it is plausible to hypothesize that deepfakes and other forms of synthetic visuality, by leveraging formal aesthetic appeal (symmetry, harmony, appropriate lighting), increase the scale of disinformation and transform the epistemic foundations of the image, reinforcing the link between aesthetics and perceived credibility.

To test this hypothesis, the article examines: (1) historical uses of images in twentieth-century visual propaganda that reveal the foundations of visual persuasion; (2) contemporary practices of fabricating representations with AI that illustrate the evolution of visual manipulation techniques; (3) the aesthetics of deepfakes, considered through the lenses of plausibility and hyperrealism, illuminating the shifting boundaries of perceptual credibility; (4) the dissemination mechanisms for synthetic images in digital media, including recommendation algorithms and microtargeting strategies; and (5) psychological aspects of how contemporary audiences perceive and interpret visual content, with particular attention to first-impression effects, confirmation bias, and difficulties in telling fiction from fact.

A focus group study complements the theoretical analysis, designed to capture how audiences of different ages and media experience respond

1 A type of machine-learning model that uses two neural networks (a generator and a discriminator) competing with each other to create images of the highest degree of realism.

2 Creators of pornography were among the first users of this technology, embedding celebrities' faces into pornographic videos. This practice led to the popularization of the term "deepfake" for these digital forgeries.

to AI-generated images — both emotionally and in terms of the credibility they attribute. Participants' statements and reflections provide insight into mechanisms that condition susceptibility to false visual messages and help explain the role of aesthetics in building the illusion of truth in digital environments. They show how formal attractiveness — harmonious composition, lighting, styling — can increase vulnerability to visual disinformation, while simultaneously redrawing the boundaries between fiction and documentary in contemporary viewing.

The study's results are interpreted in light of the adopted theoretical assumptions, providing empirical grounding for media studies scholarship on new forms of visual falsehood.

Visual propaganda: History and mechanisms of influence

Visual propaganda relies on images as primary carriers of emotions, meanings, and ideological narratives. Its essential objective is to shape social attitudes by triggering emotions and scripting particular ways of seeing the world. In propaganda, the image plays a representational and normative role — it indicates how an idea, figure, or situation should be viewed. As Alicja Waszkiewicz-Raviv defines it, visual propaganda is

> intentionally designed persuasive pictorial communication — one-sided and not necessarily grounded in fact — that solicits immediate, polarized, and unequivocal affective reactions, shaping the attitudes and actions of audiences through static or dynamic media channels. It is a context-dependent, non-objective form of strategic communication that mobilizes all visual means to achieve its goals (Waszkiewicz-Raviv, 2023, p. 281).

A hallmark of propaganda is univocity and the drive to restrict interpretive latitude: recipients are meant to read the message in accordance with the sender's intention (Waszkiewicz-Raviv, 2023, p. 279).

The history of visual propaganda reaches back to antiquity. In the Hellenistic era, coinage functioned as a core channel of ideological messaging; thanks to their ubiquity and symbolic legibility, coins linked rulers with divine attributes. A coin from the reign of Ptolemy III exemplifies a sophisticated iconographic strategy: the ruler is shown with Poseidon's trident (a symbol of maritime dominance), the crown of Helios (a sign of divine power and glory),

and Athena's aegis (an emblem of protection). The reverse bears the cornucopia — an enduring symbol of prosperity and fecundity. Through recognizable religious and mythological motifs, the image created a vision of a powerful ruler able to safeguard his realm and ensure its future flourishing.

In the early modern era, visual propaganda assumed forms suited to prevailing visual languages and to audiences' visual literacy — from woodcuts circulating among commoners to allegorical paintings displayed in churches and palaces. During the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, religious imagery combined didactic with affective functions — meant to move, shock, and lead to particular interpretations of religious experience. In Catholic art shaped by the Council of Trent, the image became a tool of spiritual mobilization, bolstering a sense of the sacred, of heretical threat, and of the need for salvation. In Protestant circles, alongside theological reforms, critical and polemical imagery emerged that commented on clerical abuses and unmasked institutional hypocrisy — for example, Barthel Beham's woodcut *Christ and the Sheep Shed* (1524), in which the pope and his entourage are shown as thieves sneaking into Christ's fold — an unambiguous allegory of spiritual betrayal and corruption (Dixon, 1997). In response, Catholics eagerly deployed allegorical painting as a means of visually reinforcing doctrine and projecting spiritual superiority — for instance, Peter Paul Rubens's cycle *The Triumph of the Church* (c. 1625), depicting victory over heresy and the central place of the Eucharist in the Catholic salvific order. Mobilizing a rich symbolic vocabulary and emphatic visual rhetoric, such works aimed to stir emotions, heighten a sense of peril, and, at the same time, affirm a clear, ordered vision of the world.

After the religious conflicts in which imagery served primarily as a vehicle of doctrinal persuasion and affective impact, modern revolutions assigned a new role to the visual language: forging secular political communities and legitimizing emergent orders. During the French Revolution, republican iconography drew consciously on the classical repertoire of allegorical figures to construct signs of collective identity. Marianne — personification of the French Republic, combining feminine freedom and civic virtue — became central to this visual narrative. Frequently shown wearing the Phrygian cap — a revolutionary symbol of liberation from tyranny — she functioned as an ideological emblem of the new order. Supplanting monarchical insignia, Marianne entered the public sphere — from state seals to artworks and monuments — shoring up the republic's legitimacy by references to ancient models of freedom, reason, and civic community (Agulhon, 1981).

A decisive turning point for visual propaganda came in the twentieth century — the age of mass photography, cinema, and the printed press. The most striking examples of image manipulation emerged in totalitarian systems. In the Soviet Union, photographs were subject to deliberate retouching — individuals purged from political life were erased from the visual record. The classic cases include the removal of Leon Trotsky or Nikolai Yezhov from archival photographs alongside Stalin — acts that symbolically nullify their presence in history.

Figure 1. Visual propaganda in the USSR

Nikolai Yezhov (People's Commissar for Internal Affairs, 1936–1938; far right) and Joseph Stalin walking along the Volga — Don Canal, 22 April 1937, and the same photograph retouched after Yezhov's execution on Stalin's orders (probably in 1940). Source: https://przystanekhistoria.pl/pa2/tematy/propaganda/103975,Dawne-techniki-retuszu-fotografii.html

In the Third Reich, visual propaganda was subordinated entirely to the aesthetics of a totalitarian order. Photographs of Adolf Hitler accentuated his monumentality and closeness to the people, often staged against crowds, flags, or monumental architecture such as stadiums. Heinrich Hoffmann, Hitler's personal photographer, commonly used a low angle to magnify the impression of power and dominance. The aesthetics of chiaroscuro, ritual, the geometry of crowds, and the gravity of gestures served as tools of visual integration that fostered emotional bonding with the Führer.

In the People's Republic of Poland, visual propaganda played a significant role in shaping perceptions of social and political reality in line with the

Communist Party's narrative. Authorities employed a broad array of visual means — posters, murals, press photography, and spatial installations — to promote socialist values and craft a positive image of the state. Posters, often in the Socialist Realist idiom, portrayed idealized workers, peasants, and soldiers, symbolizing national unity and social progress (Lewandowski, 2015, pp. 115–136). They relied on simplified visual language, repetitive codes, and an imposed interpretation, eliciting immediate identification and affective reactions that aligned with the intended message while bypassing deeper reflection. Press photography documented economic and social achievements while selectively presenting reality, subordinated to the official narrative. "Trybuna Ludu," the party's flagship newspaper, set the direction for visualizing reality, and the Main Office of Control of the Press, Publications, and Performances monitored the political correctness of every publication.

Figure 2. Propaganda poster from the PRL period

Source: https://histmag.org/Najciekawsze-plakaty-propagandowe-PRL-Galeria-15486

These examples demonstrate that, in every era, visual propaganda has adopted forms tailored to current technological possibilities and to audiences' visual expectations. Its rhetorical structure, however, remains constant: the image should act swiftly, affectively, and unequivocally.

A new quality of falsehood: Synthetic images

Contemporary visual propaganda, exploiting the exact mechanisms of emotional intensification, now operates not only through photography and film but increasingly through AI-generated imagery. AI technologies enable the creation of synthetic representations which — while maintaining a high degree of aesthetic attractiveness — intensify propaganda through symmetry, purposeful lighting, and hyper-realistic detail. The persuasive power of visual propaganda stems from the immediacy of perception and the capacity to trigger automatic affective responses even before conscious analytical processes come online. Acting faster than text, the image influences intuitive judgment mechanisms and thus fixes attitudes and imaginaries more effectively.

With the development of AI capable of producing images of unprecedented realism, visual propaganda is entering a new phase. Whereas earlier forms of manipulation required specialized tools, significant time resources, and dedicated expertise, today the generation of hyper-realistic yet entirely fictitious depictions have become widespread and readily accessible (Leone, 2023). Visual falsehood present in the digital sphere has therefore assumed a new form, combining heightened technological efficiency with a high level of aesthetic plausibility. As Massimo Leone argues, "over time the false digital image will become indistinguishable from the digital image regarded as true" (Leone, 2023). The progress of machine-learning techniques blurs the boundary between a referential image anchored in reality and a synthetic image that produces an identical effect of reality (Leone, 2023). The image's apparent documentarity sheds its link to factuality and assumes a purely aesthetic dimension — encoded by composition, light, symmetry, and stylistic borrowings from visual culture.

Among the most advanced — and most problematic — tools in this domain are so-called deepfakes[3]: technically complex synthetic videos or images that, using deep-learning techniques, replicate the faces, gestures, and voices of real people to create the illusion of authentic communication. Their impact hinges on the coupling of aesthetic and semantic layers: they are visually

3 Creators of pornography were among the first users of this technology, embedding celebrities' faces into pornographic videos. This practice led to the popularization of the term "deepfake."

convincing and, at the same time, carry specific social, political, or ideological meanings.

Figure 3. Deepfake

AI-generated images: the arrest of Donald Trump. Source: https://x.com/EliotHiggins/status/1637927681734987777

Contemporary manipulation techniques include face replacement, lip-syncing to an alien voice, complete character synthesis, the modification of physiognomic traits, and the generation of comprehensive image profiles for disinformation. As Stojanović Prelević and Zehra note:

> Deepfakes created through face synthesis and the manipulation of facial features generate photorealistic human likenesses that serve to spread disinformation on social media via fake profiles. There are also audio deepfakes that focus on a chosen person's voice, using deep-learning techniques to generate statements never actually made. An example is a Russian deepfake of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky allegedly calling on soldiers to surrender—an illustration of false political propaganda (Prelević & Zehra, 2023, pp. 95–96).

Within this context, visual falsehood operates as a sought-after effect—carefully produced and aesthetically polished. Leone observes that synthetic images mimic the semiotics of reality to elicit the same emotional reaction.

Contemporary visual propaganda — leveraging AI's affordances — takes multiple forms: from synthetic photos of purported events or fabricated persons (e.g., fictitious refugees, protesters, victims, or perpetrators), through video clips staged as news, to concocted materials resembling documentaries, commentary programs, or live broadcasts. Increasingly, the digital sphere features images stylised after the aesthetics of entertainment and pop culture — memes, viral graphics, trailer-like spots, animations, or comics. In this way, propaganda aligns with the logic of so-called 'politainment' — a hybrid of political messaging and entertainment. By generating content adapted to aesthetic conventions familiar from series, advertisements, music videos, or video games, AI enables the dissemination of ideological messages in forms that — visually "Innocent" and culturally domesticated — considerably hamper the detection of manipulation. As Alicja Waszkiewicz-Raviv anticipates, "the image will be treated [...] as the central element of propaganda messages" (Waszkiewicz-Raviv, 2023, p. 277).

The aesthetics of deepfakes: Between plausibility and hyperrealism

With the growing presence of synthetic imagery[4] — especially deepfakes — the cognitive and aesthetic status of the image is changing. As a hyper-realistic representation generated by neural networks, the deepfake becomes a carrier of messages that deploy aesthetic strategies to amplify perceived credibility. We are witnessing a profound transformation of the epistemology of the image: the effect of reality no longer follows from contact with reality but from the aesthetic suggestiveness of representation.

As Stojanović Prelević and Zehra emphasize, the aesthetics of deepfakes encompasses "visual elements, the sound layer, the relation to the audience, the aesthetic experience and aesthetic value itself" (Prelević & Zehra, 2023, p. 95). This raises a key question: which elements make viewers believe an image? Research on the so-called plausibility effect indicates that symmetry, composition, lighting, sharpness, the style of visual narration, and

4 The scale and pace of dissemination of synthetic images is rapidly increasing; according to industry data, in 2023 more than 95,000 deepfakes circulated online. See: Abramova & Goldman Kalaydin, 2025.

conformity with media conventions play a decisive role. Manovich notes that the aesthetic efficacy of AI images depends on factors that go beyond technical refinement: "the credibility of algorithmically generated images also depends on genre conventions" (Manovich, 2018, p. 10). Massimo Leone, in turn, underscores that the face — being a key carrier of communication — becomes the principal battleground of aesthetics: "The face, which many societies have established as a bastion of individuality, will soon be subject to unlimited falsification across all of its digital representations" (Leone, 2023). It is precisely this hyper-realistic face — ideally lit, symmetrical, perfectly synchronized with voice — that triggers an effect of truth, even while depicting an entirely fictitious phenomenon.

In the aesthetics of deepfakes, the boundary between document and simulation shifts radically. A synthetically generated likeness can inspire trust because its form is designed to resonate with cultural codes and viewers' perceptual expectations. What appears familiar, beautiful, and coherent tends to be recognized as true.

Analytically, the persuasive power of deepfakes does not derive solely from technological forgery but, above all, from the deft use of established aesthetic conventions that move the borders of perceptual credibility. The synthetic image does not merely imitate truth; it reconstructs its visual features so effectively that it supplies a message that seems coherent, familiar, and therefore convincing.

Algorithms and microtargeting: Propaganda mechanisms in digital environments

Technological development has not only enabled the generations of high-fidelity images but also created new channels and mechanisms for their mass dissemination. Contemporary visual propaganda, based on personalized content algorithms and microtargeting, can reach specific audiences with unprecedented precision, adjusting both the form and the substance of messages to their aesthetic, emotional, and ideological preferences.

Recommendation algorithms in search engines, social media, and streaming platforms suggest content similar to what users have already consumed, modeling their preferences and directing attention toward aesthetic and ideological patterns that predispose audiences to persuasion and informational

manipulation. By aggregating behavioral data, these mechanisms allow AI to construct an "aesthetic self-portrait" of the recipient — anticipating future choices, tastes, and reactions. As Manovich writes, "the accumulated and integrated data on the cultural behaviors of the masses are used to model our 'aesthetic self,' allowing the prediction of future decisions and preferences — and potentially to steer us toward choices preferred by the majority" (Manovich, 2018, p. 2). At the same time, microtargeting techniques tailor visual content to selected audience segments based on demographic, locational, affective, and worldview data inferred through behavioural analytics. Propaganda thus shifts from mass communication to highly individualized communication, in which the same synthetic image can be processed and presented in multiple forms — headline, GIF, infographic, or clip — depending on the target recipient and their algorithmic profile.

Platform-recommended content is often perceived by users as more neutral or "natural," which makes it particularly susceptible to manipulation. This is especially dangerous in the case of AI-generated images, which, lacking traditional "traces of editing," may be taken for authentic.

Consequently, recommendation systems and microtargeting strategies have become integral components of contemporary visual propaganda. Combined with synthetic images that score highly on perceptual plausibility, they form a new communicative system in which the boundary between information, entertainment, and manipulation becomes structurally blurred.

The psychology of the image: Perception, emotion and the illusion of truth

As a mode of visual communication, the image possesses distinct psychological properties that elicit rapid and robust emotional reactions. By directly addressing the sense of sight, AI-generated synthetic imagery bypasses stages of rational analysis and triggers automatic interpretive mechanisms for recognizing faces, expressions, gestures, and situational contexts. Under conditions of information overload and limited time for verification, the visual form itself often serves as the basis for cognitive judgments of credibility.

Empirical findings corroborate this observation. As Massimo Leone reports, there is evidence that viewing one's digital doppelgänger in virtual reality leads to the encoding of false memories — participants come to believe

they performed actions they only saw in simulation (Leone, 2023). Other experiments reveal that such visual simulacra can shape consumer preferences and health behaviors. This suggests that not only realism but also coupling the image with the recipient's "self" can produce profound cognitive and emotional distortions.

Confirmation bias deserves particular attention in the domain of visual content. When a synthetic image aligns with pre-existing beliefs, it is more readily accepted as true, regardless of its technological genesis. The capacity of images to trigger direct emotional reactions, reinforce entrenched convictions, and ignite processes that yield false memories gives AI-generated visuals a special status in the aestheticization of falsehood. Functioning as tools of persuasion grounded in affective and cognitive mechanisms of reception, these images operate through immediate suggestiveness, exploiting familiarity with cultural visual codes and the aesthetic plausibility of form — plausibility that requires no rational justification to pass as probable.

Verification and informational resilience in the age of the aesthetics of falsehood

Given the increasing availability of AI tools and the rapid growth in the number of synthetic images and videos — especially those of a propagandistic character — informational resilience becomes particularly important. It includes both the ability to identify falsehood and an understanding of how it functions and of the role of aesthetics in building the image's perceptual credibility.

Key tools for verifying visual content include Google Reverse Image Search, InVID[5], and Hive Moderation,[6] which enable analysis of metadata, traces of editing, and the identification of the sources of images circulating online. These tools work well for classic forms of manipulation — montage, cropping, filters — but are less effective against synthetic images generated from scratch, which often lack referential anchors or EXIF[7] data.

5 See https://www.invid-project.eu/ (accessed: 20.03.2025).

6 See https://hivemoderation.com/ (accessed: 20.03.2025).

7 Exchangeable Image File Format (EXIF) denotes metadata recorded by digital cameras (e.g., exposure time, aperture, ISO sensitivity), the camera model, lens used, and other details.

In the contemporary media landscape, audiences find it increasingly difficult to discern the sender's intent and to recognize visual techniques that shape reception. Technical analytical skills alone are therefore insufficient; it is essential to develop visual competencies that allow users to critically examine form, aesthetics, cultural context, and affective force. Rather than limiting itself to warnings about falsehood, visual education should include the analysis of visual strategies — of aesthetics, composition, and narrative — employed in synthetic representations. Particularly important is learning to recognize deepfakes and synthetic faces, whose level of realism can be hard to detect even for specialized detection systems. As a result, societies functioning under conditions of "visual saturation" must cultivate new cognitive and interpretive practices that enable the recognition of falsehood and its aesthetic and cultural deconstruction. At stake are informational truth and cultural resilience against increasingly complex forms of visual manipulation constructed with algorithmic generation and dissemination techniques.

The aesthetics of falsehood through the audience's eyes: A focus-group analysis

To verify the working hypothesis — that "deepfakes and other forms of synthetic visuality, by mobilizing formal aesthetic appeal (symmetry, harmony, appropriate lighting), increase the scale of disinformation and transform the epistemic foundations of the image by strengthening the link between aesthetics and perceived credibility" — a focus group was conducted to analyze responses to AI-generated imagery. The goal was to identify how the aesthetics of synthetic representations influences interpretive and emotional processes and the cognitive value attributed to images, i.e., their presumed truthfulness.

The study involved eight participants who differed in age, gender, professional experience, and media competencies. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 56 years (the oldest participant was female) and were evenly split by gender (four women, four men). Three were at the beginning of their careers, two held managerial positions, and three worked in mid-level roles; tenure in the labor market ranged from under two years to more than two decades. Professional backgrounds clustered in marketing/PR, journalism, and education, with one participant working as a freelance artistic creator. Media

proficiency varied: two self-identified as basic users, three as intermediate users, and three as advanced or professional users engaged in cross-platform production, analytics, or moderation. All reported daily use of digital media and online news across multiple platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, and messaging apps).

Five carefully selected images — both synthetic and photographic — were shown without disclosing their provenance prior to discussion. The set included portraits (including an emotionally charged image of a child), social scenes (protests), and images stylized in the magazine and advertising aesthetics. This design enabled capturing the complexity of visual reception in situations lacking contextual information.

Figure 4. The child's portrait used in the focus group

Source: Platform X

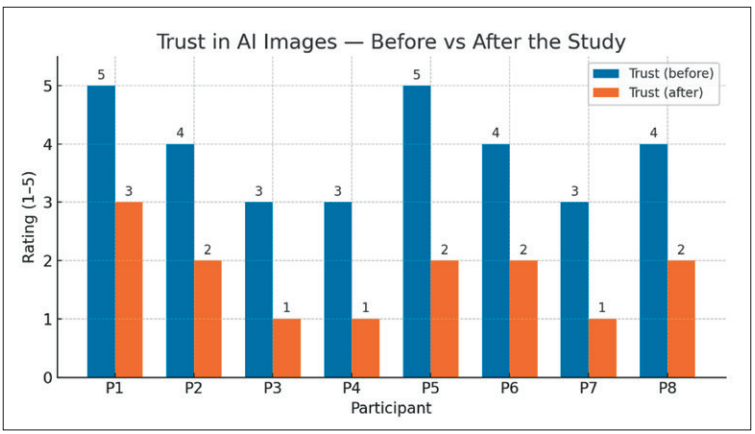
An analysis of participants' statements reveals a clear tendency to equate aesthetic attractiveness with credibility — at least at first contact with an image. Images were described as "professional" (P3), "perfectly composed" (P2), "advertising-like" (P7), or even "too ideal" (P5). Counterintuitively, such features did not arouse suspicion; instead, they initially strengthened the belief in authenticity. One participant noted that "a neat composition, good light and color make the image look like a social-campaign shot — and then you trust it more" (P7). Another added: "yes, aesthetics works — if something looks good, it automatically seems true" (P8). Thus, visual attractiveness ceased to function solely as an aesthetic property and became a signal of

credibility — simplifying reception and prompting swift, automatic judgments that bypassed deeper analysis. The images that elicited the strongest emotional reactions were the child's portrait and a protest scene — both AI-generated. In these cases, participants reported empathy, compassion, and being moved, with emotional responses preceding any assessment of authenticity.

These depictions also induced an unconscious identification with the portrayed situation. As P5 admitted: "the child's portrait was particularly difficult — you do not know whether to cry or to check the source," while P6 observed: "I felt empathy, and only later wondered whether that was fair." Such accounts demonstrate that synthetic images operate not only through formal resemblance to photography but also through the direct arousal of affective reactions that precede critical verification.

Post-focus questionnaire data confirm these observations. The mean self-reported intensity of emotions elicited by the images was 4.3/5, while declared trust in AI images fell from 3.9/5 before the session to 1.7/5 afterwards.

Figure 5. Trust in AI images — before and after the focus group



Source: author's own elaboration

This indicates growing caution toward visual messages and greater awareness of aesthetics as a tool of persuasion. Participants admitted that they had

rarely questioned "beautiful images," assuming professionalism and trustworthiness. "Aesthetics lulls vigilance — an image looks authentic but is synthetic" (P4); "Overly beautiful photos now arouse my distrust" (P5); "I trust professional images, but now I know it is not enough" (P3) — these remarks testify to a change in how form and content are correlated in visual judgment.

Consequently, 7 out of 8 participants acknowledged that their perception of image credibility shifted during the discussion. They pointed out feelings such as empathy, compassion, being moved or unease, which simultaneously weakened the impulse to scrutinize sources and context. As one participant noted: "Aesthetics is also a tool of influence," and another added: "I no longer believe that a realistic look equals truth." The questionnaire further showed that average trust in AI-generated images dropped to 1.7/5 after the session. At the same time, all concluding statements expressed a need for visual education, understood as the ability to recognize aesthetic strategies of manipulation. The change encompassed both attitudes toward images and interpretation strategies. Participants noticed that a "pretty image" might merit more suspicion than an imperfect one, and that the aestheticization of form does not guarantee truth but can convincingly mimic it.

It appears necessary to rethink the paradigm of media and visual education. Traditional approaches based on detecting technical errors (retouching, photomontage) prove inadequate in a world where falsehood can be generated ex nihilo — beautiful, credible, and suggestive. Visual education in the twenty-first century should therefore focus on cultivating competencies for the critical reception of images, including the analysis of composition, styling, emotional messaging, and aesthetic means that shape perceived credibility. Understanding how images construct meaning and trigger reactions enables audiences to interpret visual content — AI-generated included — more consciously.

Summary and general conclusions

The analysis presented here reveals the scale and complexity of the transformations reshaping contemporary visual culture under the influence of generative AI. By approaching the aesthetics of falsehood historically, technologically, and psychologically, and by adding an empirical analysis, we captured a shift in the relation between image and epistemological function. The image

ceases to be a vehicle of referentiality and becomes an aesthetic structure engineered to imitate indices of truth and to elicit emotional engagement.

Contemporary forms of visual propaganda produce images devoid of visible traces of manipulation — polished aesthetically and culturally familiar. The analysis of deepfakes has shown that their efficacy stems not only from hyperrealism or technical difficulty of detection but above all from their capacity to emulate visual codes present in advertising, reportage, social campaigns, and pop culture. Aesthetics — traditionally seen as a domain of taste or composition — acquires a cognitive-decisional function: what is aesthetically pleasing often gets recognized as authentic.

In relation to the hypothesis, it should be stated that it has been empirically confirmed. The findings indicate that formal aesthetic appeal — understood as technical quality, compositional harmony, appropriate lighting, and styling — constitutes a significant factor strengthening perceived image credibility. At the same time, by acting on the emotional plane, such images effectively disrupt cognitive processes, leading to the mistaken conflation of aesthetics with truth. Participants stressed that deepfakes and other forms of synthetic visuality can be challenging to distinguish from documentary materials, and that their attractive form may enhance their persuasive power — often surpassing images anchored in reality. The results thus show that the aesthetics of falsehood is a technological, cultural, and cognitive phenomenon that shapes how viewers see, interpret, and attribute truth status to images.

AI-generated content, when visually persuasive, can convert aesthetic fluency into presumed credibility, shaping judgments before verification occurs. This mechanism carries clear ethical stakes: it challenges informed consent in public communication, heightens susceptibility to manipulation, and risks harm to individuals and communities portrayed or targeted. Ethical responsibility, therefore, extends beyond accuracy to encompass transparency, non-maleficence, respect for persons, and accountability across the production–distribution chain (creators, institutions, platforms).

Media education addressing visual misinformation should translate these duties into practice. Programs should: combine comparative reading of real and synthetic images to slow perception and make reasoning explicit; develop basic platform literacy that shows how recommendation systems shape exposure and trust; and establish straightforward verification routines using publicly available sources — reverse-image searches, checks against independent

reporting, and simple place/time corroboration — with internal-consistency tests of light, shadow, texture, and genre cues when metadata is absent. Transparent labeling and brief contextual notes should accompany any use of synthetic imagery, linking technical scrutiny to reflection on representational risk and audience impact.

At the institutional level, clear policies for synthetic visuals are required: transparent labeling and context notes by default; brief risk assessments and pre-publication review for high-impact materials; minimization of sensational exemplars; documented procedures for correction and redress; and periodic staff training. Consistent with the focus-group results, short, well-scaffolded activities that slow perception increase vigilance; combined with these standards and remedies, they align pedagogy with the current risk profile of visual misinformation while upholding integrity, dignity, and public trust.

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