

Model says her face was edited with AI to look white: 'It's very dehumanizing.'

By Alaina Demopoulos, *The Guardian*, November 4th, 2023

A Taiwanese American model says a well-known fashion designer uploaded a digitally altered runway photo that made her appear white.

In a TikTok about the incident that has been viewed 1.8m times in the last week, Shereen Wu says Michael Costello, a designer who has worked with Beyoncé, Jennifer Lopez, and Celine Dion, posted a photo to his Instagram from a recent Los Angeles fashion show. The photo depicts Wu in the slinky black ballgown that she walked the runway in – but her face has been changed, made to appear as if she is a white woman.

Erik Rosete, a fashion designer and president of Art Hearts, said the organization could not afford to pay all the models it takes to put on shows for over 30 designers. “We’re all doing this for exposure, and to take that away from anybody is taking away their time and their dignity,” he said.

While the origin of the altered runway photo is unknown, Wu believes someone – she doesn’t know who – used AI to create the white face that covered hers.

Ten years ago, models complained about their bodies being photoshopped to an emaciated degree. In 2009, for example, Filippa Hamilton spoke out when the Ralph Lauren brand altered her image, slimming her hips to the size of her head. Now, the fashion world faces issues of how to ethically use AI, a technology that has been shown to bake racist and sexist stereotypes into the imagery it creates.

Earlier this year, Levi’s announced that it would use computer-generated models on its website in an effort to include a diverse range of ethnicities. Critics of the decision said that if brands truly wished to enrich people of color, they should hire human models.

For Susan Scafidi, academic director of Fordham’s Fashion Law Institute, changing a real model’s ethnicity with AI is another part of this evolution.

“The modified image of Shereen spotlights the possibility that an AI program that has absorbed mainstream beauty preferences may erase the race of a model altogether, turning back the clock on the fashion industry’s progress toward diversity on the runway,” Scafidi said. She said Wu and other models had little recourse in these situations: copyright law protects photographers whose work is altered without permission, but it does not extend to the models they shoot.

Wu said: “I hope people can understand how hurtful it is to have your work stolen from you. It’s very dehumanizing. The very thing that makes us human is our ability to create something beautiful, and to have this beauty be twisted into something that can potentially be ugly is a terrifying thought.”

As Sinead Bovell, a model and tech commentator who wrote about the ethics of AI models for *Vogue* in 2020, put it: “[Wu] was erased from the digital world, which matters because the digital world is a real place for models. It leads to real economic and visible pathways.”

This is not the first controversy attached to Costello’s name. [...]After his threat of legal action over her viral Tiktok, Wu contacted the Model Alliance, an advocacy group for fashion workers, which referred her to a lawyer.

“For over a decade, we’ve heard from models who have walked into a store or browsed a company’s website only to find that their image has been heavily manipulated or otherwise used without their informed consent or compensation,” Sara Ziff, founder of the Model Alliance, said. “Unfortunately, Shereen’s experience is one of the many examples of why models need protections as workers.”

Ultimately, as Ziff said, “AI technology may be new, but the problem of models’ images being misused is not.”