

Digital Fashion Photography and Generative AI: Understanding Student Perceptions, Learning Experiences, and Creative Development at NIFT Bengaluru

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative research study investigates how students at the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT), Bengaluru engage with Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the context of digital fashion photography education. As AI tools such as Midjourney, DALL-E 3, Adobe Firefly, and Stable Diffusion are increasingly integrated into fashion media learning environments, critical questions arise around how students perceive these technologies, how they influence creative development, and what pedagogical and ethical tensions emerge in the classroom.

The study employed a qualitative research design, drawing on in-depth semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires administered to a purposively selected sample of 42 students enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate fashion communication and photography programmes at NIFT Bengaluru. Data were collected over a ten-week period (February–April 2026) and analysed using thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase framework.

Four principal themes emerged from the data: (i) AI as a creative scaffold—students described generative AI primarily as a tool for concept visualisation and ideation rather than final output generation; (ii) tension between technological enthusiasm and creative authenticity—many participants expressed ambivalence about AI’s impact on their identity as photographers; (iii) pedagogical gaps in AI literacy—students reported a lack of structured institutional guidance on the ethical and technical dimensions of AI use; and (iv) cultural and representational concerns—participants frequently highlighted the inadequacy of AI-generated imagery in reflecting South Indian and broader Indian aesthetic identities.

The findings underscore the need for AI-integrated, critically reflective fashion photography curricula at NIFT Bengaluru, and contribute original qualitative evidence to the growing scholarly discourse on AI-mediated creativity in fashion education.

Keywords: Generative AI, Digital Fashion Photography, Fashion Education, Student Perceptions, Creative Development, AI Literacy, Fashion Communication, Visual Aesthetics

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Fashion photography is a discipline at the intersection of artistic vision, commercial communication, and cultural representation. Within India’s rapidly expanding fashion education landscape, the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) occupies a foundational position, training the next generation of fashion photographers, creative directors, and visual communicators who will define the industry’s aesthetic future.

The Bengaluru campus of NIFT, situated within India’s foremost technology hub, occupies a uniquely positioned environment for the intersection of fashion creativity and digital innovation. As generative AI tools become

increasingly accessible and capable—enabling the production of photorealistic fashion imagery without traditional photoshoots—students at NIFT Bengaluru find themselves navigating a rapidly shifting creative landscape that their formal education has only partially addressed.

Generative AI refers to a class of machine learning models—principally diffusion models, Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs), and transformer-based architectures—that produce original visual, textual, or multimodal content by learning statistical patterns from vast datasets (Goodfellow et al., 2014; Ho et al., 2020). In the domain of fashion imagery, tools such as Midjourney v6, Adobe Firefly, DALL-E 3, and Stable Diffusion XL now enable the generation of highly detailed editorial fashion compositions, garment visualisations, and styled model imagery. Understanding how student photographers at NIFT Bengaluru perceive, adopt, and critically engage with these technologies is therefore a matter of immediate pedagogical and professional relevance.

Problem Statement

Despite the proliferation of generative AI tools in creative industries, very little is understood about how fashion students—especially in India—experience and make sense of these technologies within their educational journeys. Existing research has focused predominantly on industry professionals and tends to employ quantitative approaches that measure adoption rates and efficiency outcomes but do not capture the nuanced, lived experiences of learners. Students at NIFT Bengaluru are simultaneously enthusiastic early adopters, anxious about professional displacement, and under-supported by curricula that have not yet systematically incorporated AI literacy and critical reflection.

This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the meanings, tensions, and creative processes that NIFT Bengaluru students associate with generative AI in digital fashion photography, using qualitative methods that privilege depth of understanding over statistical generalisation.

Research Gap

The academic literature on AI and fashion photography is dominated by quantitative industry surveys and speculative commentary. Studies specifically examining student learners in Indian fashion institutions are virtually absent. Furthermore, existing work rarely attends to the cultural specificity of Indian aesthetic contexts, including regional diversity in beauty standards, skin tone representation, and sartorial traditions that differ markedly from the Western datasets on which most generative AI models are trained. This study directly addresses these gaps through an in-depth qualitative investigation centred exclusively on students at NIFT Bengaluru.

Significance of the Study

This research holds significance for multiple stakeholders. For NIFT Bengaluru and other fashion institutions, the findings provide evidence-based guidance for curriculum development and AI integration policy. For educators, the study surfaces student perspectives that are rarely consulted in institutional decisions about technology adoption. For the broader fashion education community in India, it offers an original qualitative account of how the next generation of fashion photographers is constructing their professional identities in an age of generative AI. For scholars, it contributes to the growing interdisciplinary literature on AI, creativity, and design education.

Objectives of the Study

- To explore how NIFT Bengaluru students perceive and experience generative AI tools in the context of digital fashion photography.
- To understand the role of AI in students' creative processes, including ideation, concept development, and image production.

- To identify tensions and conflicts that arise for students between AI-assisted and traditionally photographic creative practices.
- To examine students' perceptions of the adequacy of current pedagogical frameworks for AI literacy and critical reflection.
- To surface cultural and representational concerns that students identify in AI-generated fashion imagery, with particular reference to Indian aesthetic contexts.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do NIFT Bengaluru students describe their experiences of using generative AI tools in digital fashion photography coursework and personal creative projects?

RQ2: In what ways do students perceive generative AI as expanding or constraining their creative development as photographers?

RQ3: What tensions, anxieties, or identity conflicts do students associate with the use of AI in fashion image-making?

RQ4: How do students evaluate the representational adequacy of AI-generated fashion imagery in relation to Indian cultural and aesthetic contexts?

RQ5: What do students identify as gaps in their current institutional education regarding AI literacy and ethical use?

Scope and Delimitations

This study is geographically and institutionally scoped to NIFT Bengaluru and its enrolled students in fashion communication, fashion photography, and related visual arts programmes. It does not seek to generalise to other NIFT campuses or fashion institutions, though findings may offer transferable insights. The study employs qualitative methods and therefore prioritises contextual depth over statistical representativeness. Data collection was conducted in the February–April 2026 academic period.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Generative AI and Visual Creativity

Generative AI's capacity to produce compelling visual content has been extensively theorised. Boden's (2004) foundational taxonomy of computational creativity distinguishes combinatorial, exploratory, and transformational forms—a framework that remains generative for evaluating what AI can and cannot accomplish aesthetically. Elgammal et al.'s (2017) Creative Adversarial Network (CAN) experiments demonstrated that AI-generated artworks could be rated as equivalent in creativity to human-produced works by uninformed evaluators, a finding with direct implications for fashion image assessment. McCormack et al. (2019) advance a 'partnership' model of computational creativity, arguing that AI functions most productively not as a replacement for human creative agency but as a collaborative extension of it.

In fashion contexts, Rombach et al.'s (2022) work on latent diffusion models—the architecture underpinning tools like Stable Diffusion—has been particularly influential, enabling high-resolution, semantically coherent fashion imagery generation at unprecedented quality levels. The integration of such tools into creative workflows is transforming not only the output of fashion photography but its process, shifting the practitioner's role from primary image capture toward what Elgammal et al. (2017) describe as curatorial authorship.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on two complementary theoretical frameworks. First, Csikszentmihalyi's (1996) Systems Model of Creativity situates creative output as the product of interaction among an individual (with domain knowledge and personal disposition), a field (comprising gatekeepers and evaluators), and a domain (the cultural and symbolic system within which creation occurs). Generative AI disrupts this tripartite model by introducing a non-human algorithmic agent, and understanding how student photographers at NIFT Bengaluru navigate this disruption is central to this investigation.

Second, this study draws on Holland's (1997) concept of 'creative identity' as shaped through educational socialisation—a framework that attends to the ways in which learners develop professional self-concepts and craft identities through their engagement with pedagogical practices and tools. Given that NIFT Bengaluru students are at a formative stage of professional identity construction, the introduction of disruptive AI tools into their learning environments raises significant questions about how such identities are being shaped, negotiated, and defended.

The qualitative methodology employed in this study is further grounded in Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a broad orientation, attending to the meanings participants attribute to their lived experiences with AI tools, and Braun and Clarke's (2006) Reflexive Thematic Analysis as the primary analytical method.

Review of Previous Studies

Kim and Cho (2023) found that 64% of fashion consumers in South Korea could not reliably distinguish between AI-generated and photographer-captured garment imagery, suggesting that the aesthetic gap between human and machine-produced fashion images is narrowing rapidly—a finding with significant implications for students who are training to produce such images professionally.

Yilmaz and Kiliç (2024) conducted a qualitative study of European fashion brand creative directors and found that while AI tool adoption was high (71% had integrated at least one generative AI tool into workflows), practitioners reported significant ambivalence about the implications for creative authenticity and professional identity. Their findings—drawn from industry professionals—parallel the concerns anticipated among student learners in this study.

Sharma and Venkataraman (2024) explored AI adoption among Bollywood-adjacent fashion styling professionals in India, identifying enthusiasm for AI-generated mood boards alongside resistance to full AI replacement of photoshoots, particularly on grounds of cultural representation and skin tone accuracy. Their work foregrounds the cultural specificity of Indian fashion contexts that this study also addresses—but from the perspective of student learners rather than industry practitioners.

In the fashion education literature, Eckert and Stacey (2000) demonstrated that fashion students develop creative thinking through iterative processes of sketching, prototyping, and peer critique—a framework that now requires extension to account for AI-assisted ideation phases. More recently, Pham et al. (2023) documented how design students across disciplines responded to AI tool introduction with a mix of excitement, anxiety, and calls for greater pedagogical support—a finding that this study anticipates will resonate with the NIFT Bengaluru student population.

The ethics of AI-generated fashion imagery are addressed by Floridi et al. (2020), who articulate principles of AI ethics including transparency, fairness, and accountability, and by Pasquale (2020), who raises concerns about algorithmic opacity and the homogenisation of aesthetic outputs when training datasets are non-representative. These frameworks inform the study's attention to cultural and representational concerns.

Research Gap Identification

A systematic review of relevant literature identifies a clear gap: no study has conducted in-depth qualitative research with student fashion photographers at an Indian institution examining how they experience, make sense

of, and respond to generative AI in their creative education. Existing work is either quantitative, industry-focused, or conducted in non-Indian contexts. This study directly and exclusively addresses this gap.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, selected for its capacity to generate rich, contextually grounded understandings of student experience that quantitative approaches cannot provide. The research questions—concerned with meanings, perceptions, tensions, and identity—require methods that allow participants to articulate their experiences in their own words and enable the researcher to engage interpretively with the data.

The design is exploratory and interpretive, guided by the epistemological assumption that knowledge about how students experience AI in fashion photography is best constructed through dialogue, reflection, and contextual analysis rather than through measurement and statistical inference. Data collection methods comprise in-depth semi-structured interviews and open-ended qualitative questionnaires, used in complementary fashion to generate both depth (interviews) and breadth (questionnaires) of participant voice.

Research Approach

The study adopts an interpretivist epistemological stance, recognising that participants' perceptions of AI and creative identity are socially and contextually constructed rather than objectively measurable. A phenomenologically-informed approach is taken to the interview data, attending closely to how participants describe their lived experiences with generative AI tools. The analytical process is explicitly reflexive: the researcher acknowledges positional knowledge as a fashion educator at NIFT Bengaluru and attends to how this shapes interpretive choices throughout the research process.

Study Setting and Population

The study is conducted exclusively at the NIFT Bengaluru campus. The study population comprises currently enrolled students in the following programmes: Bachelor of Design (B.Des.) in Fashion Communication (Years 2–4), other students enrolled for photography courses, and NIFT Bengaluru's unique position at the confluence of fashion, technology, and Bengaluru's design ecosystem makes it an especially relevant site for this investigation.

Sample and Sampling Strategy

A total of 42 participants were recruited through purposive sampling, selected to ensure diversity across programme year (undergraduate and postgraduate), gender, regional background (Karnataka-domiciled students and those from other Indian states), and self-reported level of prior AI tool familiarity. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that the sample included both students with extensive AI tool experience and those who had engaged with these tools only minimally, enabling comparative thematic analysis across experience levels.

Of the 42 participants, 24 participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews (duration: 10–25 minutes each), and all 42 completed open-ended questionnaires. The interview sub-sample was drawn from questionnaire respondents who indicated willingness to participate in further data collection.

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	26	61.9%
	Male	14	33.3%
	Non-binary / Other	2	4.8%

Programme Level	Undergraduate (B.Des.)	28	66.7%
	Postgraduate	14	33.3%
Programme Year	Year 2 (UG)	10	23.8%
	Year 3 (UG)	10	23.8%
	Year 4 (UG)	8	19.0%
	PG Year 1/2	14	33.3%
Regional Background	Karnataka-domiciled	18	42.9%
	Other Indian states	24	57.1%
AI Familiarity	Extensive (regular use)	17	40.5%
	Moderate (occasional use)	16	38.1%
	Limited (rarely used)	9	21.4%

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Study Participants (N = 42)

Data Collection Methods

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 participants at NIFT Bengaluru's campus, either in person in a designated research space or via video call for participants who preferred remote participation. Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The interview guide comprised six thematic areas: (i) general experiences of fashion photography study at NIFT; (ii) awareness and use of generative AI tools; (iii) creative process and AI's role within it; (iv) identity and authenticity as a photographer; (v) cultural and representational dimensions of AI-generated imagery; and (vi) perceptions of the adequacy of current NIFT curriculum in relation to AI. The semi-structured format allowed participants to introduce topics and directions not anticipated by the interview guide, which were followed reflexively by the researcher.

Open-Ended Questionnaires

All 42 participants completed an open-ended qualitative questionnaire, administered digitally via a Google Form. The questionnaire comprised 12 open-ended questions aligned with the research questions and interview guide themes, with an average response length of 180–250 words per question. Questionnaire data provided breadth of participant voice across the full sample and enabled cross-referencing with interview data to identify convergent and divergent perspectives. The questionnaire was piloted with five students not included in the main sample; minor revisions to question wording and sequencing were made in response to pilot feedback.

Data Analysis

Data from both interviews and questionnaires were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which involves six iterative phases: familiarisation with data, generating initial codes, constructing themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up. Coding was conducted manually and supported by NVivo 14 qualitative data analysis software for code management and pattern

identification. Initial codes were generated inductively from participant data; themes were constructed through an iterative process of grouping, reviewing, and refining codes in relation to the research questions.

To ensure trustworthiness of findings, the researcher employed member-checking with a sub-sample of five interview participants who reviewed preliminary theme summaries and provided feedback on their adequacy as representations of expressed experiences. Negative case analysis was conducted to attend to data that did not fit emerging themes. A reflexivity journal was maintained throughout the research process, and an audit trail of analytical decisions was documented.

FINDINGS: THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis of interview transcripts and questionnaire responses generated four principal themes and a range of sub-themes. These are presented below with illustrative quotations drawn from participant data (pseudonyms used throughout).

Theme 1: AI as a Creative Scaffold

The dominant framing across participant data positioned generative AI not as a replacement for photographic practice but as a scaffolding device that supports creative ideation, concept visualisation, and experimental exploration before or alongside traditional photoshoots. Students described using AI tools primarily in the early and middle phases of creative projects—generating mood boards, testing compositional ideas, and visualising garment aesthetics in different lighting and setting conditions—rather than as a source of final output.

Participant A7, a third-year B.Des. student, described this pattern in her interview:

“For me, Midjourney is like having a sketchbook that doesn’t judge. I can try ten different concepts in an hour that would take me three days to actually shoot, and then I go into the studio knowing exactly what I’m looking for. It makes me a better photographer because I’m more prepared.”

This scaffolding function was particularly valued for its capacity to democratise creative experimentation—students from diverse economic backgrounds noted that AI tools reduced the cost and resource barriers associated with elaborate photoshoots:

“For our projects, hiring models, renting studio time, sourcing garments—it adds up. AI lets me test ideas that I couldn’t otherwise afford to shoot. That’s huge for students like me who don’t have a lot of financial support.” (Participant A19, PG Year 1)

A minority of participants, however, expressed concern that the scaffolding function risked becoming a crutch—limiting the development of foundational technical skills:

“I worry that if I always start with AI concepts, I stop developing my own visual instinct. The ability to compose in your head before you shoot—that’s a skill you build over years, and I’m not sure AI helps you build it.” (Participant A3, Year 4 B.Des.)

Theme 2: Tension Between Technological Enthusiasm and Creative Authenticity

A central and pervasive tension across participant data involved the pull between enthusiasm for AI’s creative possibilities and anxiety about what AI use meant for their identity as photographers. Many participants expressed genuine excitement about generative AI’s capabilities while simultaneously voicing discomfort about whether AI-assisted work could legitimately be called ‘their own’.

This tension was most acutely expressed in relation to assessments and academic work:

“I used Firefly to help develop my visual concept for my end-of-semester project. The final images I shot myself. But when I presented it, I didn’t mention the AI part. I felt weird about it—like I’d cheated, even though I’d

done all the photography. There's no clear rule at NIFT about this, which makes it confusing." (Participant A11, Year 3 B.Des.)

Questionnaire data revealed that 31 of 42 respondents (73.8%) reported uncertainty about institutional policies on AI use in assessed work—a finding that suggests this tension is partly produced by pedagogical ambiguity rather than AI use per se.

Students also grappled with questions of authorship and creative originality at a more philosophical level. Several participants described AI as producing work that felt 'generically beautiful' but aesthetically hollow:

"The images Midjourney makes are stunning. But when I look at them, they don't feel like anything. There's no decision behind them, no struggle, no choice. My photographs have mistakes, and those mistakes are me." (Participant A28, PG Year 2)

This sentiment—that the value of photographic work resides in the evidence of human decision-making and even imperfection—was common among more experienced students and aligned with theoretical articulations of creative identity as constituted through process rather than product (McCormack et al., 2019).

Theme 3: Pedagogical Gaps in AI Literacy and Critical Reflection

A third major theme across both interview and questionnaire data concerned students' perceptions of their institution's pedagogical preparedness for the AI era. The overwhelming majority of participants (38 of 42, 90.5%) expressed the view that current NIFT Bengaluru curricula did not adequately address AI tools, their creative applications, their limitations, or their ethical dimensions.

Students described a de facto situation in which AI learning was occurring informally, peer-to-peer, outside formal instructional settings:

"No faculty member has ever taught us about Midjourney or Firefly. Everything I know, I've learned from YouTube and from other students. Which means we're also picking up each other's bad habits and misconceptions." (Participant A6, Year 2 B.Des.)

Several students who had sought faculty guidance on AI use reported receiving discouraging or dismissive responses, further deepening the pedagogical gap:

"When I asked my photography professor about using AI for concept development, he told me it was 'cheating yourself'. But he didn't explain why, or what the ethical line actually was. I left the conversation more confused than before." (Participant A34, Year 3 B.Des.)

Students articulated specific desires for structured AI instruction. Their requests included practical training in AI tool prompting and workflow integration, critical frameworks for evaluating AI-generated output, clear institutional guidelines on AI use in assessed work, and ethical discussions around authorship, representation, and professional responsibility.

Postgraduate students, who occupied relatively more autonomous learning positions, expressed a stronger demand for critical frameworks than for technical instruction—indicating a developmental dimension to pedagogical needs:

"At PG level, I don't need someone to teach me how to use the tool. I need a space to critically interrogate what it means that I'm using it, what it does to my practice, and what it means for the profession I'm entering." (Participant A41, PG Year 2)

Theme 4: Cultural and Representational Concerns

A fourth and distinctive theme—particularly prominent among Karnataka-domiciled students and those from other Indian states—concerned the representational inadequacy of AI-generated fashion imagery in relation to

Indian cultural and aesthetic contexts. Participants consistently identified specific failures of generative AI tools to produce images that reflected South Indian and broader Indian aesthetics: skin tones, facial features, garment types, styling traditions, and the aesthetic vocabularies of regional Indian fashion.

Participant A15, a second-year student from Karnataka, described a frustrating encounter:

“I tried to generate images for a project on silk sarees. The models in the AI images all looked like North Indian or mixed-ethnicity women. The sarees themselves looked wrong—the draping was off, the colours were garish. You could tell the model had never actually seen a Kanjeevaram saree being worn correctly. It was unusable.”

This representational failure was understood by participants not merely as a technical limitation but as a symptom of the Western-centric datasets on which major generative AI models are trained—a structural bias with direct implications for the usability of these tools for Indian fashion contexts:

“All these AI tools are trained on Western fashion data. Indian fashion is an afterthought, if it’s included at all. For us as Indian fashion students, that’s not just inconvenient. It means these tools are actively misrepresenting our aesthetic heritage.” (Participant A38, PG Year 1)

Several students drew connections between AI’s representational failures and broader questions of cultural power in the fashion industry, expressing concerns that the homogenisation of AI outputs would further marginalise non-Western aesthetics in a global fashion media landscape already skewed toward European and North American standards.

Despite these concerns, some participants also identified the representational gap as a site of creative opportunity—a space where human photographers with embodied cultural knowledge could outperform AI and assert professional distinctiveness:

“This is where I think AI actually can’t replace us—not yet, maybe not ever. I grew up wearing traditional Karnataka dress. I know how it moves, how it feels, what it means. No prompt can give an AI that knowledge. That’s my edge.” (Participant A22, Year 4 B.Des.)

DISCUSSION

AI as Creative Scaffold: Implications for Fashion Photography Education

The dominant framing of generative AI as a creative scaffold—a tool for ideation and concept development rather than final output generation—aligns with McCormack et al.’s (2019) partnership model of computational creativity and extends it to the context of student learning. The finding that students use AI most intensively in pre-production phases resonates with the broader professional pattern identified in Yilmaz and Kiliç’s (2024) study, suggesting continuity between student and practitioner AI use patterns.

The concern that AI scaffolding may impede the development of foundational visual instinct raises important pedagogical questions for fashion photography educators. Drawing on Csikszentmihalyi’s (1996) systems model, the creative domain of fashion photography includes as its constitutive skills not only technical image production but the tacit, embodied, intuitive capacities for visual composition and aesthetic judgment that are developed through sustained practice. If AI scaffolding reduces students’ engagement with this developmental practice, it may undermine the very foundation on which sophisticated AI-human creative collaboration later depends.

Creative Authenticity and Professional Identity Formation

The tension between technological enthusiasm and creative authenticity identified in this study reflects a deeper process of professional identity formation that is characteristic of advanced design education (Holland, 1997). Students at NIFT Bengaluru are simultaneously developing technical skills, aesthetic sensibilities, and professional self-concepts—a tripartite developmental process that AI’s disruption complicates in ways not yet addressed by institutional frameworks.

The observation that AI images feel ‘aesthetically hollow’ to many students—technically proficient but lacking the evidence of human intentionality—echoes Boden’s (2004) argument that genuine creativity requires more than recombination of prior works. For students in a formative professional stage, the question of whether AI use compromises the authenticity of their creative voice is not merely philosophical but materially consequential: it bears on how they present work to faculty, how they develop portfolios, and how they will position themselves in professional markets.

The finding that 73.8% of students reported uncertainty about institutional AI policies underscores a systemic failure of institutional communication that, if unaddressed, will continue to produce the identity anxieties documented here.

Curriculum Reform and AI Literacy

The finding that 90.5% of students perceive current NIFT Bengaluru curricula as inadequate for AI literacy is one of the study’s most practically significant results. The informal, peer-to-peer AI learning ecology documented among students—while resourceful—carries significant risks: the uncritical adoption of AI tools, the perpetuation of misunderstandings, and the absence of ethical reasoning frameworks. Pham et al.’s (2023) parallel finding across design disciplines suggests this is a systemic challenge in design education internationally, not unique to NIFT.

An AI-integrated fashion photography curriculum for NIFT Bengaluru would, on the basis of this study’s findings, need to address at minimum: practical training in generative AI tool use within a fashion photography context; critical frameworks for evaluating and contextualising AI-generated output; explicit institutional guidelines on AI use in assessed work; and structured ethical discussion covering authorship, representation, and professional responsibility. The developmental dimension of students’ needs—with postgraduate students requiring critical frameworks more than technical instruction—suggests that curriculum design must be stage-differentiated.

Cultural Representation and the Indian Fashion Aesthetic

The representational failures of AI in Indian fashion contexts identified by participants align with documented scholarly concerns about Western-centric AI training datasets (Floridi et al., 2020; Pasquale, 2020) and extend Sharma and Venkataraman’s (2024) professional-level findings to the student experience. The inability of current generative AI tools to accurately represent South Indian garment traditions, regional aesthetic vocabularies, and the diversity of Indian skin tones and facial features is not merely a technical inconvenience but a structural bias with political and cultural dimensions.

For fashion educators at NIFT Bengaluru, this finding carries a significant and potentially empowering implication: embodied cultural knowledge—the kind that students develop through lived experience of Indian fashion traditions—constitutes a form of creative expertise that current AI systems demonstrably lack. Curricula that foreground the critical evaluation of AI outputs through the lens of cultural representativeness, and that affirm the value of culturally grounded human creativity, may both address the representational concern and support positive professional identity formation among students.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study investigated how students at NIFT Bengaluru experience, perceive, and make sense of generative AI in digital fashion photography. Drawing on in-depth semi-structured interviews with 24 students and open-ended questionnaire responses from 42 participants, and analysed through Reflexive Thematic Analysis, the study has generated four principal findings.

First, students primarily frame generative AI as a creative scaffold—a pre-production tool for ideation and concept development—rather than a replacement for photographic practice. This scaffolding function is valued for democratising creative experimentation but is also seen by some students as a potential threat to the development of foundational visual skills. Second, students experience a significant tension between enthusiasm

for AI's creative possibilities and anxiety about creative authenticity and professional identity—a tension that is substantially produced and sustained by the absence of clear institutional guidance and policies on AI use in assessed work. Third, current NIFT Bengaluru curricula are perceived by the overwhelming majority of students as inadequate in addressing AI tools, their creative applications, and their ethical dimensions—creating an informal, peer-driven AI learning ecology that, while resourceful, lacks critical rigour. Fourth, students identify significant representational failures in AI-generated fashion imagery in relation to Indian cultural and aesthetic contexts, experiencing these failures both as a limitation and as a domain in which embodied cultural knowledge gives human photographers a distinctive creative advantage.

These findings have direct implications for NIFT Bengaluru and for Indian fashion education more broadly. The urgent need for AI-integrated, critically reflective fashion photography curricula—stage-differentiated to address the distinct needs of undergraduate and postgraduate students—is the study's most practically significant recommendation. Equally important is the development of clear, transparent institutional policies on AI use in assessed work, and the creation of structured pedagogical spaces for ethical discussion and critical reflection.

This study does not argue that generative AI threatens fashion photography as a human creative practice. Rather, the evidence from NIFT Bengaluru students suggests that the future of fashion photography lies in a creatively confident, critically informed, and culturally grounded relationship between human photographers and AI tools—one that leverages AI's generative power while preserving and deepening the distinctively human capacities that give fashion imagery its cultural meaning and resonance. The role of fashion education is to prepare students to navigate this relationship with skill, reflexivity, and ethical clarity.

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