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FROM AUTHENTICITY TO GOVERNANCE

A Systematic Review of Artificial Intelligence and the Reconfiguration of the Visual Ecosystem on Social Media

MACARENA CORTÉS-VÁZQUEZ [1,2]
macarena.cortes@universidadeuropea.es
ALICIA RODRÍGUEZ VILLÁN [1,3]
alicia.villan@universidadeuropea.es
[1]Universidad Europea de Madrid, España
[2]Escuela Universitaria de Osuna, España
[3]Universidad de Nebrija, España

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ABSTRACT

The spread of AI-generated and manipulated images on social media has transformed contemporary visual culture, affecting trust in images, identity formation, and digital power relations. This study provides a systematic review of scientific literature (2018–2026) on the social, cultural, and political impact of AI within visual social media ecosystems, following the PRISMA protocol. Empirical qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method studies were examined, focusing on algorithmically produced, modified, or managed images and videos. Findings highlight recurring mechanisms: erosion of visual trust, aesthetic homogenization, intensified identity performativity, automated engagement, and power asymmetries linked to algorithmic moderation. An integrative model and a replicable research agenda are proposed.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary digital visual culture is undergoing a process of structural transformation driven by the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI). In particular, the recent development of generative models capable of producing, modifying, and distributing hyperrealistic images has profoundly altered the conditions of symbolic production, media circulation, and social reception of the visual in social networks. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have become environments where images not only represent but also constitute a central device for identity construction, political persuasion, and economic capitalization.

In this new ecosystem, artificial intelligence must be understood not only as a technical tool but also as a sociocultural force that redefines the communicative ecology. In the field of journalism and media, Peña-Fernández et al. (2023) warn that algorithmic automation is reconfiguring both information production processes and the dynamics of public trust, displacing traditional frameworks of visual authority and verification. AI is thus inserted into a media system where visual authenticity is becoming increasingly problematic.

One of the main emerging challenges is the erosion of trust in digital images. The proliferation of synthetic content—deepfakes, images generated by GANs, or videos manipulated by AI—weakens society's ability to distinguish between the real and the fabricated. Nightingale and Farid (2022) demonstrated that AI-synthesized faces can be indistinguishable from real ones and even generate greater perceptions of trust, raising critical implications for deception and manipulation in digital environments.

Along the same lines, recent experimental studies confirm that AI-produced images directly affect credibility and social behavior. Monahan et al. (2025) found that users tend to trust real images more than artificially generated images, with measurable effects on the intention to donate in charitable contexts. These findings underscore that algorithmic visuality is not neutral: it transforms the mechanisms of legitimacy and social trust.

The crisis of visual authenticity becomes particularly significant in highly political contexts, such as armed conflicts and contemporary propaganda. García-Huete et al. (2025) analyze how generative AI facilitates the creation of manipulated war images, where specific color patterns increase the perception of authenticity and enhance the circulation of disinformation on social media. This phenomenon confirms that synthetic images operate as an instrument of geopolitical and cultural power.

At the same time, the digital visual ecosystem is undergoing exponential growth in disinformation. Aïmeur et al. (2023) point out that social media is a particularly vulnerable space for the spread of fake news, as AI techniques are not only used to detect it, but also to generate it in an increasingly plausible way. This dual use of artificial intelligence intensifies the problem of "information disorder" and amplifies the social impact of visual manipulation.

Faced with this situation, platforms have begun to deploy detection and algorithmic moderation strategies. Ara et al. (2024) compare the mechanisms implemented by Facebook/Instagram, TikTok, X, and YouTube to identify AI-generated images, revealing a field that is still fragmented between automation, human supervision, and community participation. These differences reflect growing tensions between technological governance, institutional regulation, and social responsibility.

From a cultural perspective, artificial intelligence is also reconfiguring the processes of symbolic transmission and aesthetic homogenization. Yang et al. (2025), in a systematic review of deep learning and cultural images, argue that algorithms expand the scope of global cultural transmission but introduce critical risks such as bias, limited reliability, and visual standardization processes. This connects to broader debates about how AI can intensify aesthetic standardization and condition dominant cultural representations.

Likewise, the visual ecosystem on social media has become a central space for identity performativity. The rise of figures such as virtual influencers is a paradigmatic example of how AI not only modifies images, but also subjects and forms of digital agency. Laszkiewicz (2023), in his systematic review, identifies virtual influencers as an emerging phenomenon that transforms theories of marketing and authenticity in social environments.

On an economic and corporate level, AI is profoundly transforming branding, visibility, and engagement strategies. Varsha et al. (2021) demonstrate, through bibliometric analysis, that artificial intelligence is reshaping branding through recommendation systems, communication automation, and big data analysis on social media. Complementarily, Maldonado-Canca et al. (2024) emphasize that, although AI optimizes personalization and user experience in corporate networks, it also poses ethical challenges such as algorithmic biases and lack of transparency.

The growing sophistication of visual manipulation also requires strengthening the critical skills of citizens. Sanchez-Acedo et al. (2024) show that even trained young people have difficulty recognizing hyper-realistic deepfakes, highlighting the urgent need to reorient media and information literacy in the AI ecology.

Recent literature reveals an expanding but still fragmented field, where research on visual trust, disinformation, performative identity, algorithmic branding, cultural transmission, and platform governance converge. However, there is still a lack of integrative frameworks capable of systematically connecting the levels of automated visual production, algorithmic circulation, social reception, and institutional regulation.

Therefore, this article presents a systematic review of the scientific literature published between 2018 and 2026, with the aim of understanding in a structured way how artificial intelligence is reconfiguring the visual ecosystem of social networks. In particular, the study aims to analyze in an articulated manner the social, cultural, and political impacts of algorithmically generated, manipulated, and moderated images, addressing the contemporary crisis of visual authenticity and emerging new models of digital governance.

In this sense, the general question guiding the work can be formulated descriptively as follows: how is artificial intelligence, through the synthetic production of images, their algorithmic circulation, and their automated moderation, transforming the conditions of authenticity, trust, identity, and power in the contemporary visual ecosystem of social media?

In this context, the overall objective of this systematic review is to analyze how artificial intelligence is reconfiguring the contemporary visual ecosystem of social media, addressing its implications for image authenticity, public trust, identity construction, and emerging models of algorithmic governance. To achieve this purpose, the study is structured around several specific objectives:

- Identify and systematize scientific output published between 2018 and 2026 on images and videos generated, manipulated, or managed using artificial intelligence on social platforms.
- Examine how the literature addresses the erosion of visual credibility and the growing difficulty in distinguishing between authentic records and synthetic content;
- Analyze the sociocultural effects of visual automation on identity performativity, visibility economies, and aesthetic homogenization on social media;
- Describe the main algorithmic mechanisms involved in the circulation of images, including recommendation systems, engagement automation, and content moderation;

- **Explore the power asymmetries derived from the governance exercised by digital platforms through automated infrastructures;**

- Propose an integrative model that connects visual production, algorithmic circulation, social reception, and institutional regulation, providing a replicable research agenda to guide future studies in the field of social sciences and visual culture in the age of artificial intelligence.

2. Methodology

The epistemological foundation underlying any systematic review rests, in essence, on meticulous work involving the location, compilation, and subsequent refinement of research through an exhaustive methodological protocol, the ultimate purpose of which is to provide solid, empirically supported answers to predefined questions about a specific phenomenon of interest (Pardal-Refoyo & Pardal-Peláez, 2020). This methodological framework not only allows us to map the chronological evolution of scientific knowledge in a specific field, but also to accurately examine the thematic areas explored, emerging trends, the main epistemic agents involved, and the most relevant contributions and limitations of the selected studies. It also makes it possible to identify prospective trends on the horizon of research, as you have pointed out.

In order to ensure traceability, methodological consistency, and reproducibility of the process, this study rigorously adheres to the principles of the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) Statement, conceived in 2009 as a normative reference for optimizing the design, execution, and presentation of systematic reviews and meta-analyses (Moher et al., 2009). In consideration of the dynamic nature of scientific standards and the need to reduce the biases inherent in this type of inquiry, this statement was updated in 2020, incorporating methodological improvements that strengthen its applicability and accuracy (Page et al., 2021, p. 792).

In line with these guidelines, the present research carried out each phase of the process with a level of scrutiny aimed at ensuring the internal consistency and validity of the findings obtained.

2.1. Delimitation of the object of study and time frame

The first stage consisted of rigorously defining the object of study: the social, cultural, and political impact of artificial intelligence on the production, circulation, and reception of images on social media. This approach includes phenomena such as algorithmically generated images, deepfakes, automated moderation of visual content, and the dynamics of trust and governance that emerge in the contemporary visual ecosystem.

The time frame for analysis was set between 2018 and 2026, with the aim of covering the period of most intense expansion of generative models and algorithmic technologies applied to digital visual culture. The bibliographic compilation phase was completed in the first quarter of 2026, thus consolidating an updated and representative corpus of recent scientific production.

2.2. Formulation of the research question

In a second phase, the research questions were formulated and validated. These questions constitute the backbone of the systematic analysis and the core of any comprehensive review process (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006; Siddaway et al., 2019). These questions guided the selection, extraction, and synthesis of the studies, addressing the need to understand how artificial intelligence is transforming the conditions of visual authenticity, social credibility, performative identity, and algorithmic power on social media.

2.3. Strategy for searching and selecting documentary sources

The third stage of the methodological itinerary was aimed at constructing a rigorous and replicable search strategy based on the identification of key descriptors capable of capturing the conceptual intersection between artificial intelligence, social networks, and the transformation of the contemporary visual ecosystem. In line with the PRISMA guidelines, this phase constitutes a pivotal moment in the systematic review process, as it determines both the breadth and relevance of the initial corpus located.

First, the main semantic nuclei that structure the object of study were delimited. These descriptors were selected for their recurrence in recent scientific literature and their ability to represent the central dimensions of the research: algorithmic image production, platform-mediated circulation, and digital visual culture.

In this way, three fundamental blocks of keywords were established:

- ***Block 1: Artificial intelligence and visual automation: artificial intelligence, generative AI, deep learning, deepfake, AI-generated images***
- ***Block 2: Social media and digital platforms: social media, online social networks, digital platforms, algorithmic moderation***
- ***Block 3: Visual culture and authenticity: visual culture, digital imagery, credibility, authenticity, trust***

In a second phase, these terms were articulated using Boolean operators to connect synonyms and terminological variants, as well as to ensure broad but conceptually coherent coverage. The following operators were mainly used: AND, to link different dimensions of the phenomenon (AI + social media + visual culture); OR, to integrate semantic equivalences within the same conceptual block.

This logic made it possible to avoid excessive restrictions and, at the same time, reduce the thematic dispersion derived from the polysemy of the term “artificial intelligence” in fields outside visual culture.

Finally, after an initial phase of exploration and progressive adjustment—due to the semantic breadth of the field and the heterogeneity of approaches detected in the initial results—a homogeneous search equation was consolidated and applied to the three selected databases: “artificial intelligence AND social media AND visual culture.”

This formula was chosen because of its ability to focus the corpus on studies that specifically address the relationship between algorithmic automation, the circulation of images on social platforms, and cultural transformations associated with digital visuality.

The search was conducted in international and national scientific repositories considered benchmarks for their quality and reliability in social sciences, communication, and interdisciplinary studies:

- Scopus, for its broad coverage of research on artificial intelligence applied to socio-technical environments.
- Web of Science (WoS), as a high-impact international repository in social sciences and digital communication.
- Dialnet, with the aim of integrating relevant scientific production in the Spanish language, especially related to media literacy and visual culture.

2.4. Inclusion and exclusion criteria: PICOS model

The next phase was structured around the PRISMA model, systematically applying inclusion and exclusion filters under the methodological umbrella of the PICOS model (Morejón-Llamas et al., 2024). This model allowed us to refine the initial corpus and ensure that the selected studies directly addressed the research objective.

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria applied (PRISMA–PICOS)

PICOS Dimension	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
P (Problem)	Studies on AI applied to images and videos on social media	Research on AI not linked to visual culture
I (Intervention)	Empirical studies (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed) on algorithmic visual production/manipulation	Publications without defined methodology or without visual analysis
C (Context)	Digital social platforms and algorithmic moderation	Contexts outside the social media ecosystem
O (Outcomes)	Impacts on authenticity, trust, identity, and visual governance	Exclusively technical outcomes without social or cultural dimension
S (Study Design)	Peer-reviewed articles between 2018–2026	Preprints, grey literature, non-peer-reviewed proceedings

Source: Prepared internally.

After applying these inclusion and exclusion criteria, articles that did not meet the research objective were eliminated, as were those not written in English or Spanish.

2.5. Search results by database

The systematic application of the search equation described above allowed us to identify an initial corpus of 76 records in total, from various academic databases. First, 30 articles were found in Scopus using the formula "artificial intelligence AND social media AND visual culture." After applying the previously defined inclusion and exclusion criteria, the number of studies selected was reduced to 12, as these were considered the most relevant to the research objectives.

Second, 36 articles were obtained from Web of Science using the same search equation. However, after the filtering and review process, only 11 papers were considered relevant for the final analysis, as they directly matched the study's focus.

Finally, the search in Dialnet yielded a total of 10 results. Of these, 7 articles met the established filters and were incorporated into the final corpus. In this way, the process allowed the initial sample to be refined and a selection of studies to be made that was tailored to the purposes of the systematic review.

Table 2. Initial search results and final selection

Database	Applied Query	Initial Results	Final Selection
Scopus	**"artificial intelligence AND social media AND visual culture"**	**30**	**12**
Web of Science		**36**	**11**
Dialnet		**10**	**7**
Total		**76 records**	**30 articles (8 duplicates)**
			Total = 22 articles

Source: Prepared internally.

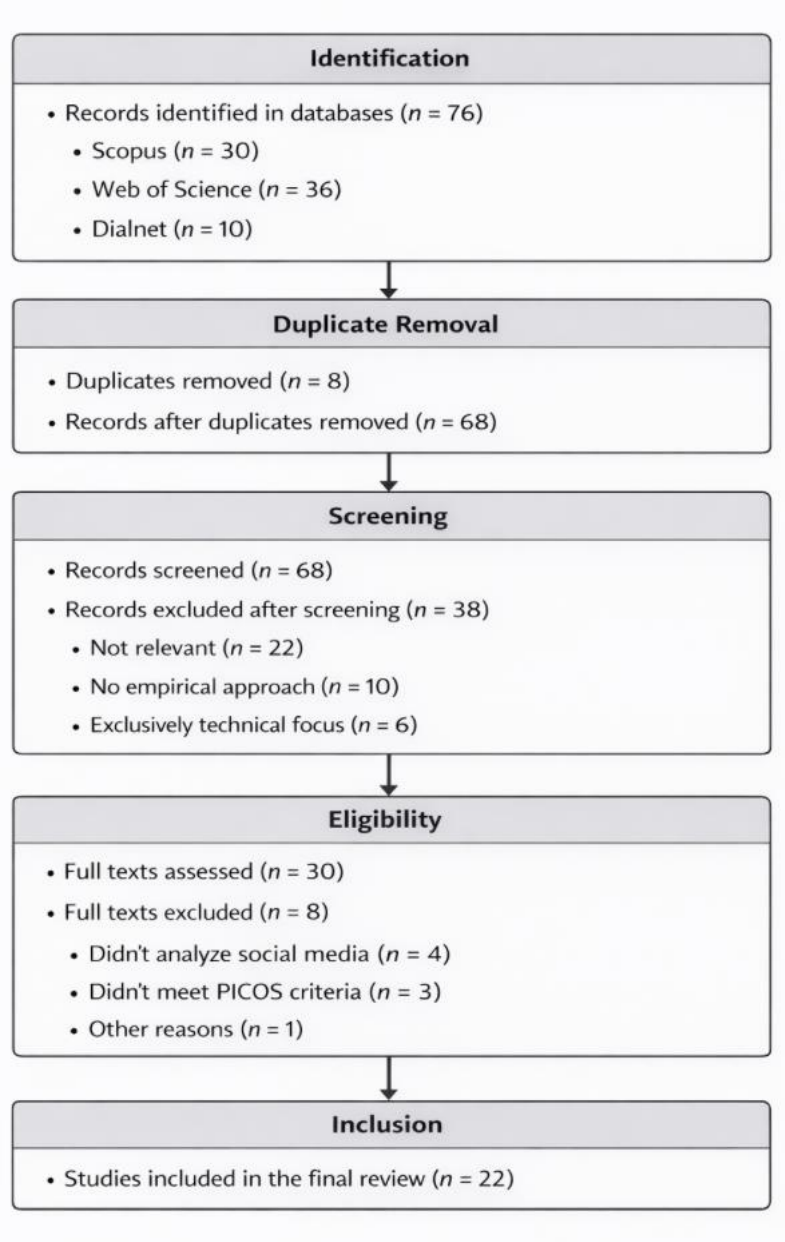
The selection process was carried out in two consecutive phases (screening and eligibility), following PRISMA 2020. First, 76 records were identified in the Scopus (n = 30), Web of Science (n = 36), and Dialnet (n = 10) databases. Next, duplicates were eliminated (n = 8), resulting in 68 unique records.

In the preliminary screening phase, the titles and abstracts of the 68 records were reviewed to determine their suitability for the study objective and the defined PICOS criteria. As a result of this screening, 38 records were excluded for not meeting the inclusion criteria, based on the following main reasons: (a) thematic irrelevance with respect to AI and the visual ecosystem in social networks (n = 22), (b) absence of an empirical approach or lack of explicit methodological analysis (n = 10), and (c) exclusively technical approach without a sociocultural or communicative dimension (n = 6).

In the eligibility phase, 30 articles were evaluated in full text. After this comprehensive reading, eight studies were excluded because (a) they did not analyze social networks or social platforms as the main context (n = 4), (b) they did not fit the PICOS framework (n = 3), or (c) they presented other causes for exclusion (e.g., absence of results related to the research object) (n = 1). Consequently, the final corpus consisted of 22 articles included for synthesis and analysis.

The final corpus thus consisted of a total of 22 scientific articles, which constitute the empirical and analytical basis on which this systematic review is based. In order to ensure the transparency, traceability, and reproducibility of the study selection process, the systematic review was conducted following the guidelines established by the PRISMA 2020 statement (Page et al., 2021). Within this framework, a flowchart was developed to visually summarize the different phases of the procedure: initial identification of records in databases, elimination of duplicates, preliminary screening by title and abstract, eligibility assessment through full-text reading, and final selection of studies included in the final corpus.

Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart of the study selection process



Source: Prepared internally.

As shown in Figure 1, the search process identified a total of 76 records in Scopus, Web of Science, and Dialnet. After removing 8 duplicates, 68 documents were screened, of which 38 were excluded for not meeting the criteria of thematic or empirical relevance. Subsequently, 30 full texts were evaluated, and 8 were finally excluded because they did not conform to the PICOS model or did not specifically address the visual ecosystem in social networks. Consequently, the final corpus consisted of 22 scientific articles, which form the analytical basis of this review.

In order to reinforce the robustness of the review and reduce bias in the synthesis, a methodological quality assessment of the included studies was performed. Given that the corpus integrates qualitative, quantitative, and mixed designs, a cross-sectional instrument compatible with diverse methodologies was used, applying criteria of internal validity, design consistency, sampling adequacy, analytical transparency, and consistency between questions, method, and results.

Based on this assessment, each study was classified according to its overall quality (high/medium/low) and the main sources of bias risk were identified, particularly in: (a) selection and sample representativeness biases (e.g., studies based on very specific populations

or contexts), (b) measurement bias (e.g., unvalidated perception/credibility instruments or limited information on their reliability), (c) interpretation bias (e.g., unjustified causal inferences in descriptive designs), and (d) bias derived from platform data dependency (e.g., access limits, algorithmic opacity, or changes in moderation policies).

Quality assessment was not used as an additional exclusion criterion, but rather as an interpretive weighting criterion: findings were discussed by prioritizing evidence from studies with greater methodological consistency and, where appropriate, explicitly stating limitations associated with designs with a higher risk of bias.

3. Results

In order to provide a structured overview of the analyzed corpus, a summary table is presented below that includes the studies selected in this systematic review in accordance with the PRISMA protocol. This table summarizes the main articles published between 2018 and 2026 that address the production, manipulation, circulation, and algorithmic moderation of images and videos using artificial intelligence on social platforms. It includes key data such as authorship, year of publication, methodological approach, and main thematic contributions, allowing for a comparative identification of recurring trends in the field, as well as the diversity of empirical and conceptual approaches.

This systematization constitutes the starting point for the analysis of results developed in the following section, which examines in a structured manner the impacts of AI on visual authenticity, public trust, identity construction, and emerging dynamics of algorithmic governance.

Tabla 3. Summary of the selected documentary corpus (2018–2026)

Author(s)	Year	Journal	Main Findings
Anani, P. W. et al.	2024	Cogent Arts & Humanities (Taylor & Francis)	Introduce the concept of "filtered reality" in Ghana. The use of filters is not only deception but a social norm for achieving an "ideal self" and aesthetic conformity.
Arıcan, S.	2024	Dinbilimleri Akademik Araştırma Dergisi	Proposes integrating AI into Religious Culture and Ethics education, adapting moral teaching to new digital languages without losing human reflection.
Bai, X. et al.	2024	IEEE Access	Analyze the image of the city (Nanjing) using Big Data. Urban perception is no longer physical but defined by visual "hotspots" on social media.
Bautista Saucedo, F. & Guzmán Olguín, G.	2025	Cuaderno 202 (Univ. de Palermo)	Case study on Tijuana: generative AI reinforces negative stereotypes (violence, border wall) and eclipses local cultural diversity due to biased internet data.
Demir, A.	2025	Eskiyeni	Examines the "Continuous Publication" model in academic journals, contextualizing the current speed of scientific knowledge dissemination.
Dwivedi, U. & Misra, M.	2025	International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction	Analyze interactive games on Netflix. Interactivity is a persuasive tool where user "exploration" is guided by predefined algorithmic architectures.
Elyamany, N. et al.	2025	AI & SOCIETY (Springer)	Forensic study of Lil Miquela. Identity on social media is an "algorithmic performance"; virtual influencers generate engagement through semio-pragmatic strategies without biological existence.
Farhaoui, Y. et al. (Eds.)	2025	Springer (Lecture Notes in Networks…)	Technical compilation on AI and Data Science, including studies on Vision Transformers to detect engagement and algorithms to identify fake accounts.
López Delacruz, S.	2023	Hipertext.net	Generative AI operates as "pastiche" and "retromania." Paradoxically, the abundance of synthetic images produces a "cancellation of the future" by recycling past aesthetics.

Murillo-Ligorred, V. & Ramos-Vallecillo, N.	2025	Communiars	Pedagogical proposal for teacher training: using deepfake analysis to move from passive criticism toward creativity and critical thinking.
O'Halloran, K. L.	2022	Visual Communication	Social semiotics theoretical framework. Whoever controls "semiotic systems" (code/AI) controls meaning. Relationship between materiality and meaning in the digital era.
Peña-Cáceres, O. et al.	2025	Visual Review	Identification of repetitive linguistic and visual patterns in ChatGPT-generated theses. Challenges for academic integrity and originality in higher education.
Pérez Nanclares, C. & Del Blanco García, F.	2025	Visual Review	Generative design in architecture democratizes creation but promotes global aesthetic homogenization, transforming architectural visual culture.
Ramírez Mercado, M.	2025	Cuaderno 202 (Univ. de Palermo)	Visual culture in virtual editorial design still relies on Gestalt theory to create emotional connections, now mediated by digital interfaces.
Román Jaime, M. V.	2025	European Public & Social Innovation Review	Comparative ethics (Japan vs. West). Through manga/anime (Pluto), shows how Japan integrates AI as a moral agent, contrasted with Western fear of simulation.
Sun, W. et al.	2024	Visual Review	Analysis of Victorian queer cinema (Sarah Waters) on OTT platforms. Digital environments diversify imaginaries and deconstruct taboos about sex and desire.
Thomas, R. J. & Thomson, T. J.	2025	Digital Journalism (Taylor & Francis)	AI visualizations of "journalists" reproduce anachronistic and Western stereotypes. Training data biases fossilize professional roles.
Vaccari, C. & Chadwick, A.	2020	Social Media + Society (SAGE)	Political deepfakes generate "widespread uncertainty." The main harm is not successful deception but erosion of trust in any news (cynical effect).
Winters, R. M. et al.	2019	Ergonomics in Design (SAGE)	"Sonification" strategies for social media. AI translates visual features into audio, making the visual ecosystem accessible for visually impaired users.
Yang, Q.	2025	Alexandria Engineering Journal (Elsevier)	Use of Machine Learning (ANN, SVM) to model visual identity. Social media shapes visual culture through predictable patterns (94% accuracy in ANN models).
Yao, Y.	2025	IEEE (IoTAAI Conference)	Proposes a culturally adaptive generative AI framework for cinema. Criticizes lack of local nuance (Cantonese culture) in current models.
Yeilaghi, N. & Mou, Y.	2025	Javnost - The Public (Taylor & Francis)	Concept of "Digital Deification." Synthetic images of Trump construct a superhuman/mythical persona. AI serves authoritarian propaganda by blurring reality and fiction.

Source: Prepared internally.

Next, a critical analysis of the results obtained in this research is carried out. Artificial intelligence (AI) is no longer conceived solely as an emerging technological innovation, but has established itself as a structural infrastructure that profoundly reorganizes contemporary visual culture. Far from merely automating the production of images or videos, AI is transforming the regimes of visibility, authenticity, and representation on social media, progressively shifting the classic notion of "referential truth" toward a logic of "performative truth" that is standardized and algorithmically optimized.

In this sense, the findings of the systematic review allow us to argue that AI operates simultaneously as an engine of visual innovation and as a device of cultural control, generating a central dialectical tension between global aesthetic homogenization and the emergence of new forms of identity resistance, critical literacy, and ethical governance. The main results are presented below, organized according to the specific objectives of the study.

3.1. Systematization of scientific production (2018–2026): from deepfakes to automated ecosystems

In relation to the first specific objective—to identify and systematize scientific output published between 2018 and 2026—the literature reviewed shows a clear conceptual evolution, marked by three main phases.

First, between 2018 and 2020, an approach focused on the epistemic threat of deepfakes predominates. Initial studies conceptualize visual AI as an external disruptive force capable of eroding democratic foundations by creating "widespread uncertainty" in the public sphere (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020). At this stage, the problem is framed in terms of a crisis of information trust and institutional vulnerability.

Subsequently, between 2021 and 2023, a cultural and semiotic shift takes hold. AI is no longer understood solely as a tool for manipulation but is interpreted as an aesthetic regime based on repetition. López Delacruz (2023) introduces the notion of "pastiche" and "retromania," pointing out that generative AI does not produce future imaginaries but rather recycles pre-existing aesthetics, causing a visual "cancellation of the future." Automation is then interpreted as a machine of cultural recombination that limits creativity to the algorithmic archive.

Finally, between 2024 and 2026, scientific production shifts toward a structural and integrated understanding of AI as educational, urban, identity, and academic infrastructure. Its biases in the representation of peripheral cities (Bautista Saucedo & Guzmán Olguín, 2025) are analyzed, its influence on collective visual identity through machine learning (Yang, 2025), and the urgency of visual literacy training for teachers in the face of the proliferation of deepfakes (Murillo-Ligorred & Ramos-Vallecillo, 2025). In addition, repetitive linguistic and visual patterns are identified in AI-generated academic writing, revealing its ability to standardize even intellectual production (Peña-Cáceres et al., 2025). This accelerated change is consistent with the dynamics of continuous publication that attempts to keep pace with the dizzying speed of technological development (Demir, 2025).

3.2. Erosion of visual credibility: simulation, patterns, and authenticity crises

The second specific objective—examining the growing difficulty in distinguishing between authentic records and synthetic content—is confirmed as one of the dominant themes of the corpus.

The results show that the boundary between the real and the artificial has become culturally porous: not only because of the technical sophistication of AI, but also because simulation has become integrated as an everyday practice of symbolic production. Yeilaghi and Mou (2025) demonstrate that in the political sphere, AI facilitates processes of "digital deification," where veracity loses its centrality in the face of the mythical effectiveness of the visual narrative.

However, this crisis of authenticity takes culturally differentiated forms. Román Jaime (2025) contrasts Western anxiety about simulation—centered on the deception of deepfakes—with the Japanese perspective, where AI is ethically thought of as moral coexistence, influenced by Shintoism and represented in manga and anime (Astro Boy, Pluto). Thus, authenticity is not eroded uniformly, but according to specific cultural frameworks.

In the educational and academic sphere, credibility shifts toward the problem of intellectual authorship. Peña-Cáceres et al. (2025) identify that theses generated with ChatGPT present repetitive patterns, lacking discursive nuances, forcing a redefinition of what constitutes authentic intellectual production. In response, Murillo-Ligorred and Ramos-Vallecillo (2025)

propose integrating critical analysis of deepfakes into teacher training, using falsity as a pedagogical tool to strengthen critical thinking.

3.3. Sociocultural effects: identity performativity, stereotypes, and economies of visibility

The third specific objective—to analyze the sociocultural effects of visual automation—reveals that AI simultaneously produces diversification and standardization.

In terms of identity, the review shows that digital identity has become performative, mediated by algorithms and detached from the biological body. Elyamany et al. (2025) illustrate this with Lil Miquela, a virtual influencer whose influence is real despite her lack of physical existence. Similarly, Sun et al. (2024) show how OTT platforms allow for narrative diversification, as in the queer cinema based on Sarah Waters, where digital visual culture can deconstruct historical taboos. However, Anani et al. (2024) warn that, for most users, the dominant trend is toward a "filtered reality" that seeks to fit into global standards of beauty and visibility.

With regard to cultural homogenization, the findings are compelling. Bautista Saucedo and Guzmán Olguín (2025) demonstrate that when requesting images of "Tijuana" in generative models, the results reproduce clichés of violence, migration, and the border, rendering everyday life and culture invisible. This is linked to the professional stereotypes detected by Thomas and Thomson (2025) and the reproduction of hegemonic architectural patterns pointed out by Pérez Nanclares and Del Blanco García (2025). Taken together, AI acts as a machine for confirming biases, reducing cultural complexity to globalized imaginaries.

Finally, Ramírez Mercado (2025) argues that even classical principles of visual perception such as Gestalt continue to operate, but are now algorithmically instrumentalized to maximize engagement, sacrificing originality in favor of retention.

3.4. Algorithmic mechanisms: recommendation, engagement, and behavioral prediction

In relation to the fourth specific objective—to describe the main algorithmic mechanisms involved in image circulation, including recommendation systems, engagement automation, and content moderation— the results of the review confirm that visual circulation on social media no longer responds to spontaneous or purely social logic, but rather to highly sophisticated algorithmic architectures that organize, hierarchize, and predict the contemporary visual experience.

The reviewed literature agrees that images do not simply "circulate": they are actively processed, filtered, and redistributed through automated systems that transform digital platforms into behavioral prediction environments. Farhaoui et al. (2025) detail how Deep Learning models—including architectures such as CNN and classification methods such as SVM—have ceased to operate solely as visual recognition technologies and have become infrastructures for measuring behavior. In other words, algorithms not only identify patterns within an image, but also anticipate affective responses, future preferences, and cultural consumption dynamics.

From this perspective, visual AI functions as a semiotic surveillance system: it translates aesthetic experience into quantifiable data and reintroduces it into the recommendation cycle. This finding connects directly with the work of Yang (2025), who confirms that neural network models can predict with 94% accuracy how visual trends on social media shape the collective identity of groups. The image, therefore, is no longer just a representation, but an active instrument of social modulation.

Likewise, the review shows that these algorithmic mechanisms do not operate solely at the individual level, but also spatially and territorially. Bai et al. (2024) reveal that the "image of the city" is constructed algorithmically through visual hotspots on social media, as in the case of Nanjing. In this model, the algorithm decides which places are visible, touristic, and symbolically relevant, while other urban spaces remain invisible. This implies that AI not only reconfigures personal identities, but entire geographies of representation.

In this context, visual circulation becomes a process of automated governance of symbolic space: platforms determine which images are amplified, which are relegated, and which disappear through algorithmic moderation systems. Although the reviewed corpus emphasizes the risks of cultural control, it also identifies emancipatory uses. Winters et al. (2019) show how AI can deconstruct images into semantic data to "sonify" them, expanding digital accessibility for people with visual impairments. This shows that algorithmic mechanisms are not inherently oppressive, but rather dependent on the ethical and political frameworks that guide their implementation.

In summary, the results allow us to conclude that visual AI on social media operates as a predictive infrastructure that automates engagement, structures visibility, and transforms the image into a vector of cultural and affective control (Farhaoui et al., 2025; Yang, 2025; Bai et al., 2024).

3.5. Power asymmetries and algorithmic governance: visual colonialism and the dispute over what can be represented

The fifth specific objective—to explore the power asymmetries derived from governance exercised by digital platforms through automated infrastructures—finds strong support in the reviewed literature. The findings show that AI not only produces images, but also distributes symbolic power in a profoundly unequal manner.

The governance of the contemporary visual ecosystem is configured as a form of semiotic control: whoever designs the algorithms defines the conditions of what is visible. O'Halloran (2022) establishes that semiotic power resides in whoever programs the system, since the algorithmic architecture determines which signs, bodies, territories, and identities acquire cultural legitimacy. Thus, AI is not neutral, but rather a normative device.

This dimension becomes particularly evident when examining the cultural biases incorporated into training data. Yao (2025) criticizes dominant models for reproducing Western imaginaries, calling for culturally adaptive systems for cinema and global visual production. In this sense, AI operates as a mechanism of cultural standardization that can impose "algorithmic colonialism," where the peripheries are represented from external databases.

A striking example of this asymmetry is the finding by Bautista Saucedo and Guzmán Olguín (2025), who demonstrate that peripheral cities such as Tijuana have no control over their digital representation: generative systems reproduce clichés of violence, migration, and borders, reinforcing stigmas. This result confirms that visual governance is not only technological but also geopolitical: global platforms produce imaginaries that directly affect the collective identity of subalternized territories.

The review also highlights that these asymmetries cannot be resolved solely through legal regulation, as the dispute is cultural and pedagogical. Arıcan (2024) suggests that the integration of AI into moral education is essential to train citizens capable of coexisting ethically with artificial agents. Complementarily, Murillo-Ligorred and Ramos-Vallecillo (2025) insist on the need to train teachers to dismantle visual lies, incorporating the analysis of deepfakes as a critical strategy.

Algorithmic governance therefore appears to be one of the central challenges of the contemporary visual ecosystem: it is not just a question of controlling technologies, but of democratizing the symbolic infrastructure that defines what can be represented (O'Halloran, 2022; Bautista Saucedo & Guzmán Olguín, 2025; Yao, 2025).

3.6. Integrative model: the synthetic reality cycle as a replicable research agenda

In response to the sixth specific objective—to propose an integrative model that connects visual production, algorithmic circulation, social reception, and institutional regulation—the systematic review allows us to articulate a theoretical framework called the "synthetic reality cycle."

This model emerges from the cross-sectional integration of the 23 texts analyzed and seeks to offer a replicable agenda for future studies in social sciences, visual culture, and platform studies. The cycle describes how AI reconfigures visual reality through four dynamic phases:

1. Biased input

The first phase corresponds to the moment when reality is captured in the form of data. However, this capture is not neutral: it is permeated by cultural, geographical, and epistemic biases. Bautista Saucedo and Guzmán Olguín (2025) show how models reproduce stigmatized imaginaries about Tijuana, while Thomas and Thomson (2025) highlight persistent professional stereotypes. Bai et al. (2024) demonstrate that even the urban image is constructed from selective patterns of visibility. Thus, the algorithmic input already contains structural inequalities.

2. Homogenizing processing (Throughput)

In the second phase, algorithms process data looking for patterns of maximum engagement. Farhaoui et al. (2025) explain how Deep Learning systems operate as predictive infrastructures, while Yang (2025) confirms their ability to shape collective identities. This processing tends toward aesthetic repetition, connecting with the logic of "pastiche" described by López Delacruz (2023).

Peña-Cáceres et al. (2025) even identify repetitive linguistic and visual patterns in AI-generated academic texts, evidence of profound cultural standardization.

3. Performative manifestation (Output)

The third phase corresponds to visible results: synthetic images, filtered identities, and persuasive narratives. Anani et al. (2024) describe the trend toward filtered realities, while Elyamany et al. (2025) exemplify the emergence of virtual influencers such as Lil Miquela, entities without biological bodies but with real social agency. Here, the image ceases to be a reflection and becomes an algorithmic performance.

4. Resistance and adaptation (Feedback)

Finally, society responds through processes of literacy, ethical regulation, and cultural reappropriation. Murillo-Ligorred and Ramos-Vallecillo (2025) propose critical education in the face of deepfakes, while Arıcan (2024) emphasizes moral training. Román Jaime (2025) and Yao (2025) highlight the need for culturally situated frameworks, and Winters et al. (2019) show inclusive possibilities through semantic accessibility. Resistance is not external to the cycle, but rather a constitutive part of its dynamics.

4. Conclusions

This systematic review, developed under the PRISMA protocol, leads to the conclusion that artificial intelligence is profoundly and structurally reshaping the contemporary visual ecosystem of social media. Far from being limited to a technical innovation applied to the automated production of images, AI has established itself as a cultural infrastructure that simultaneously transforms regimes of authenticity, conditions of public credibility, forms of identity construction, and emerging models of algorithmic governance.

In response to the general question that guides this work—how does AI, through synthetic production, algorithmic circulation, and automated moderation, transform the conditions of authenticity, trust, identity, and power?—the results show that visual culture on social media is undergoing an ontological shift: the image no longer functions as a referential record of reality but has become an algorithmic performance optimized for attention and engagement. This transformation implies that the contemporary problem no longer lies solely in specific

falsification, but in the cultural integration of the synthetic as a habitual environment of visual experience.

First, with regard to the objective of systematizing scientific production between 2018 and 2026, a clear evolution of the field was identified: from an initial stage focused on deepfakes as an epistemic and democratic threat (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020), to more cultural approaches that interpret generative AI as pastiche and aesthetic repetition (López Delacruz, 2023), to a recent framework that understands AI as a structural infrastructure integrated into urban, educational, and academic life (Demir, 2025; Murillo-Ligorred & Ramos-Vallecillo, 2025; Peña-Cáceres et al., 2025). This trajectory shows that AI has ceased to be a marginal phenomenon and has become a constitutive condition of the contemporary visual ecosystem.

Secondly, the review confirms that one of the most significant effects is the erosion of visual credibility. The difficulty in distinguishing between authentic records and synthetic content generates a crisis of confidence that affects both the political and educational spheres. In the public sphere, AI can facilitate processes of mythification and "digital deification," where veracity loses centrality in favor of narrative effectiveness (Yeilaghi & Mou, 2025). In the academic sphere, repetitive linguistic and visual patterns are detected in AI-generated texts, forcing a redefinition of the criteria for authorship and intellectual authenticity (Peña-Cáceres et al., 2025). Thus, the contemporary crisis is not only technological, but also epistemological and cultural.

Thirdly, the findings show that visual automation produces ambivalent sociocultural effects. On the one hand, AI-amplified social networks open up new possibilities for visibility and identity diversification, as illustrated by virtual influencers (Elyamany et al., 2025) or the circulation of queer narratives on digital platforms (Sun et al., 2024). However, on the other hand, these same systems tend to reinforce global aesthetic homogenization and a "filtered reality" oriented toward normative canons of representation (Anani et al., 2024). AI therefore acts as a simultaneously productive and reductive force: it multiplies images but flattens cultural differences.

Fourth, the study concludes that visual circulation is governed by predictive algorithmic mechanisms that automate engagement. Algorithms not only recommend images, but also classify, hierarchize, and anticipate future behaviors using deep learning models (Farhaoui et al., 2025). This predictive dimension even extends to the construction of collective identities, where visual trends can be algorithmically shaped with high precision (Yang, 2025). In addition, urban and territorial visibility is also mediated by systems that determine which spaces "exist" symbolically for the user (Bai et al., 2024). As a result, digital images no longer circulate freely: they circulate under automated control architectures.

Fifth, the review shows that these transformations generate profound power asymmetries. Algorithmic governance exercised by digital platforms concentrates semiotic power in those who design the systems (O'Halloran, 2022). Biases in training data reproduce dominant Western imaginaries, shaping forms of algorithmic colonialism (Yao, 2025). Examples such as the stigmatized representation of peripheral cities show that entire communities lose control over their own public image (Bautista Saucedo & Guzmán Olguín, 2025). In this way, AI not only reconfigures images, but also cultural and geopolitical hierarchies.

Finally, as its main contribution, this review proposes an integrative model called the "synthetic reality cycle," which connects four dynamic dimensions: biased intake, homogenizing processing, performative manifestation, and resistance/adaptation. This framework allows us to understand how AI articulates visual production, algorithmic circulation, social reception, and institutional regulation in a continuous process. Likewise, the model offers a replicable agenda for future studies, highlighting the need for interdisciplinary approaches that integrate semiotic analysis, algorithmic auditing, critical visual literacy, and governance studies.

The evidence reviewed allows us to affirm that the contemporary battle for visual culture on social media is not merely technical, but deeply ethical, political, and semiotic. AI not only automates the image: it automates the conditions of the visible, the credible, and the representable. Therefore, the social sciences and visual culture studies must place algorithmic governance, critical education, and cultural diversity at the center of understanding and guiding

the future of the visual ecosystem in the age of artificial intelligence (Murillo-Ligorred & Ramos-Vallecillo, 2025; Arıcan, 2024; Winters et al., 2019).

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