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Making-up on mobile: The pretty filters and ugly implications of Snapchat

ABSTRACT

What happens when the fashionable beauty ideal – typically considered unattainable – becomes instantly attainable for the masses with the mere tap of a touchscreen? As the widespread use of Snapchat’s popular but problematic Lenses has shown, responses are mixed and critiques abound. The social media platform Snapchat introduced Lenses – commonly known as face filters – in 2015. These filters apply virtual accessories and edit facial features, enabling users to incorporate augmented reality technology into their daily sartorial practice. Through this ‘digital adornment’ users experiment with creativity and self-expression, as with cosmetics and clothing, while forging social connections. However, Snapchat’s filters frequently spark controversy by slimming the jawlines and noses, enlarging the eyes and lips, and smoothing and lightening the complexions of millions of users. These effects have caused users to consider the powers of self-fashioning and question the standard of beauty being presented. By examining the observations and opinions presented in the online fashion, tech and news media, this study explores the problematic nature of Snapchat’s beautifying filters. It traces users’ dismay at how Snapchat, originally praised as a space for authentic, unfiltered self-presentation, became a force for aggressively perpetuating fashionable but exclusionary beauty ideals. It presents the range of reactions to these face-perfecting filters, from satisfaction and guilt to insecurity and body dysmorphia. It also explores the connection between face filters, cosmetics and feminine beauty ideals in a celebrity-led, self-image-saturated culture, with reference to brand-sponsored filters.

KEYWORDS

Snapchat
social media
augmented reality
selfies
face filters
cosmetics

INTRODUCTION

I was sitting on my couch, taking a selfie for my best friend when it hit me: With this filter on, is there anything I can do to actually look unattractive? It was 7 or 8 pm, hours after work, and what was left of my makeup merged into the sloppy bun on top of my head. The resulting aesthetic couldn't have been further from the polished, fashionable person I'd been at 8 am that morning. The Snapchat filter I'd picked – all gold twinkles and gently fluttering butterflies – was a blatant attempt to cover up the pimple sprouting from my cheek [...]. But as I looked at those bronze cheekbones, clearly stolen from [Keira] Knightley and glued to my face by some kind of technological magic, something snapped inside me. Pulling my chin backward like some kind of demented turtle, I pushed my chest forward to create five or so rippling chins. In the gold filter, I still would have passed for a *Sports Illustrated* model. It was strangely maddening.

(Arata 2016: n.pag.)

Written for *Elite Daily*, an online news outlet targeted at millennial women, editor Emily Arata's reflections on an evening of selfie-snapping reveal the wondrous and troublesome qualities of Snapchat's most popular feature: face filters. She admits to selecting a filter not only for its whimsical design but also for its airbrushing effects. The filter served as a quick substitute for makeup, removing Arata's flaws and reinstating her 'polished, fashionable' appearance after-hours (2016).

The social media platform Snapchat introduced face filters – officially called Lenses – in September 2015 (Snapchat Inc. 2015). These filters apply virtual accessories and modify facial features, enabling users to incorporate augmented reality into their daily sartorial practice and self-presentation. When looking into a smartphone's front-facing camera, a user can augment her selfie with an amusing design that instantly edits the image within the camera's frame. Filters may beautify and distort the face, apply animal-like features or adorn users in virtual accessories that follow their movements. Through this practice of 'digital adornment' users experiment with creativity and self-expression – as with cosmetics and clothing – while forging social connections and engaging with virtual and augmented reality technologies (Barker 2017).

The 'technological magic' (Arata 2016) behind Snapchat's filters is relatively straightforward. The app relies upon a facial detection tool that recognizes patterns of light and dark pixels as distinct areas of the face. The image within the camera's frame is mapped out with a series of coordinates that identify these areas as eyes, lips and other features. The filters are then aligned with these coordinates so that virtual elements stay in place as a user moves around (Vox 2016). In a matter of seconds, a user can try on different designs before selecting one, capturing a selfie in photo or video format and sending it to a friend. Some filters add virtual makeup alone, allowing users to try on new cosmetic looks. Others apply whimsical accessories – flower crowns, puppy snouts, fluttering butterflies – while also modifying the face beneath. One commonly referred to as the 'pretty' filter contains no dress-up components but presents a beautified image, free of 'flaws'.

Although there is nothing inherently wrong with adding layers of virtual makeup or digitally editing an image of one's own face, some of Snapchat's filter effects have been called problematic. Arata was infuriated to see her face virtually

twisted into something so attractive that the filter's beautifying effects could not be counteracted. By thinning out the face, slimming and shortening the nose, enlarging the eyes, plumping the lips and smoothing out the skin, Snapchat seizes a user's features and morphs them into compliance with a stereotypical form of beauty. It is a highly exclusionary ideal; people of colour find their complexions unnaturally and undesirably lightened by Snapchat's filters.

Each day, billions of images are shared through Snapchat by the app's 186 million users (Statista 2018). With this sort of scale and usage, the act of dressing up in the mirror image of the smartphone is not merely frivolous fun; it has become a global phenomenon. What happens when the fashionable beauty ideal – typically considered unattainable – becomes instantly attainable for the masses with the mere tap of a touchscreen? How do women respond to seeing their faces automatically 'corrected' according to a limited definition of beauty? As the widespread use of Snapchat's popular but problematic Lenses has shown, responses are mixed and critiques abound.

These critiques appear in the online news media across outlets that focus on a range of topics from fashion and beauty to technology, news and youth culture. Staff writers, independent journalists and bloggers experiment with filters, compare before-and-after images, share their reactions and cite conversations happening across social media. Writers variably praise filters' beautifying effects, point out the broader social injustices they represent and caution users against mental health consequences.

By examining the observations and opinions presented in the online fashion, tech and news media, my study explores the problematic nature of Snapchat's beautifying filters. First, I will first trace users' dismay at the evolution of the app and the lack of scholarly attention to its changing features. Next, I will discuss the connection between face filters, cosmetics and feminine beauty ideals in a celebrity-led, self-image-saturated culture. I will reference cosmetic brands that advertise through sponsored filters, capitalizing on Snapchat's ability to grant users the fashionable face. I will then identify the specific filter traits that users find problematic. These include the use of virtual makeup to reinforce outmoded gender stereotypes, sculpting certain facial features, erasing 'imperfections' and whitening skin under the guise of beautification. Throughout, I will cite women who have called these effects 'sexualizing' (Liquido 2016), 'gender-exclusive' (Peres Martins 2017: 20), 'racist' (Jagota 2016, Peres Martins 2017: 20), 'oppressive' and 'disturb[ing]' (Krishna 2016) in the media. The range of consequences that users attribute to face-perfecting filters includes guilt-ridden satisfaction, heightened insecurities, and body dysmorphia. These women attempt to process their feelings towards regularly being confronted with social desirability and the image of perfection. Some have felt 'entangled in a web of disempowerment' (Owens 2018: n.pag.) and violated upon having edited self-images 'forced' and 'thrust upon' them (Staal 2015).

Snapchat's filters have been promoted by the company as fun and playful ways to liven up social communications and self-expression. Yet they have caused users to question and resist the standard of beauty being presented, critically consider the bias of the filters' creators and the sociocultural system in which they operate and confront the powers of self-fashioning.

SNAPCHAT'S EVOLUTION

Initially, Snapchat was used to send 'self-destructing' photos that were viewed for mere seconds before vanishing. Earlier examinations of Snapchat by

computer and behavioural scientists explored the app’s ephemeral nature and its implications for young users (Utz et al. 2015; Piwek and Joinson 2016). Very few studies of Snapchat discuss the app in relation to beauty or the messages of fashion, and virtually none have focused on filters. Scholarship on the standard-of-beauty aspect of selfies has explored body image and eating disorders (McLean et al. 2015; Rajanala et al. 2018) while the literature on social media and fashion has prioritized other photo-sharing platforms like Instagram (Caldeira and Ridder 2017; Shumaker et al. 2017) and fashion blogs (Rocamora 2011). The design, impact and reception of Snapchat’s filters have gone virtually unexamined.

Still, filters deserve scholarly attention. An examination of their popular reception casts light upon the specific fashion messages the app disseminates. These messages revolve around non-inclusive and unattainable beauty ideals, emphasizing whiteness and sexualized femininity. In uncovering such problematic ideals, we may recognize the human influence and cultural biases behind these technologies. By validating women’s concerns and experiences, we may urge users and creators to reconsider the images and ideals being circulated.

Prior to the vogue for face filters, Snapchat users shared a different kind of selfie. Voices in the media ring of disappointment in the app’s departure from being a unique haven for unedited images and unguarded moments. As *Verily* editor Krizia Liquido remembers, ‘[w]hen it launched in 2011, Snapchat had all the potential to be the anti-Photoshop of social media – the one platform where you could share [...] your life as it actually is’ (2016: n.pag.). In the app’s early years, images were shared with one or a few friends. They were ephemeral and relatable, not portrayals of perfection. Snapchat’s ‘value was its intimacy’ (Peres Martins 2017: 21), which *PopSugar* beauty writer Aimee Simeon captured clearly:

[T]here I flaunted my most authentic self. I was comfortable recording my makeup-free trip to the grocery store [...] without the pressure for overly filtered faces or the fear of not getting any ‘likes.’ I posted what I wanted, not caring [...] what I looked like. The platform felt refreshingly real.

(2018: n.pag.)

In a blog post for Amaliah, a space dedicated to the voices of Muslim women, a contributor known as Culture Critic recalled getting hooked: Snapchat use ‘became as routine as brushing my teeth’. Instead of straining to keep up appearances as with other social platforms, with Snapchat ‘you just post – Eat. Snap. Drink. Snap. Laugh. Rewind. Snap’ (Culture Critic 2018: n.pag.).

However, with the insertion of filters into this seemingly natural cycle, she felt there was something uncanny about the omnipresence of the app and the filtered face it reflected:

Snapchat has a way of making you feel as if you were continuously accompanied by your own image. It reminds you, at every turn, of what you look like [...]. Except what is paralleled to you is distorted. Fun-house mirror fabulous. Still you – just passed through layers of algorithms.

(Culture Critic 2018: n.pag.)

This transition from authenticity to algorithmic beauty followed the 2015 introduction of Lenses, a feature billed as ‘A whole new way to see yourself(ie)’. A lighthearted announcement encouraged users to ‘play with’ the different filters as a fun method of self-expression (Snapchat Inc. 2015). The new feature soon became Snapchat’s main draw: ‘What would the app be if you couldn’t flick through the [filters ...] morphing yourself as you go along?’ (Culture Critic 2018: n.pag.).

For student writer Aline Peres Martins, the introduction of beauty-enhancing Lenses marked a noticeable transition:

I remember the day the ‘beauty’ filter came out on Snapchat – the one that ever-so-slightly retouches skin, narrows noses, and gives doe eyes. The filter just barely changed my appearance, but changed it enough for me to notice that I looked ‘better’.

(Peres Martins 2017: 20)

Like others, she grew accustomed to the filtered version of herself and her use of the app changed: ‘Gone were the days of using Snapchat to send ugly selfies’ (Peres Martins 2017: 20). The significance of this shift did not go unnoticed. Peres Martins detected ‘something inherently troubling about normalizing the slightly retouched reality [...] considering the ever-present, sometimes racist, or gender-exclusive filters’ (2017: 20). Similarly, Arata observed that ‘[t]he same social media [platform] that used to provide a way to send an unfiltered selfie to friends has now become a beauty pageant’ (2016: n.pag.).

FACE FILTERS AND THE BEAUTY INDUSTRY

The application of cosmetics has been central in achieving the fashionable face for centuries. But beyond tinted creams, powders and paints, the Digital Age offers other ways to immediately enhance the face. ‘Snapchat filters have become the modern-age version of makeup’, *Metro* writer Funmi Olutoye determined (2018). As such, filters follow trends and reinforce beauty ideals related to those circulated by the cosmetics industry. *NewBeauty* editor Carolyn Hsu used language typically found in makeup ads to explain the effects of the ‘pretty’ filter: ‘[It] smooths fine lines, evens skin tone, adds glow and highlights and contours all in one step. The rosy tint also makes everything look more youthful and helps a lot with [sallow] skin’ (Burhop Fallon 2016: n.pag.).

Like Hsu, many women have referenced the contoured appearance Snapchat’s filters create. Though *NewBeauty*’s Tatiana Bido ‘love[d]’ the results (Burhop Fallon 2016), Simeon watched with discomfort as her ‘rounded cheeks and nose [were] suddenly contoured’ (2018: n.pag.). This chiaroscuro technique has been used as a corrective mechanism in the worlds of stage and screen for centuries. In the early 2010s, cosmetic contouring became mainstream thanks to celebrities like Kim Kardashian (Shapouri 2012). Sculpting the face with makeup provides a sense of security for those wishing to retain control over their image, especially in an age when it is possible for nearly anyone to take another’s photo, digitally manipulate it and publish it online. As lifestyle writer Kashmira Gander explained, ‘[t]he combination of cameras in our pockets [...] and the constant fear of being snapped has dramatically changed how we paint our faces’ (2017: n.pag.). Elements of the resulting fashionable face include ‘contoured skin; plump lips slicked with a matte colour; thick, flawless eyebrows, and cheekbones

glowing with highlighter: it's that airbrushed look that seems to only exist online' (Gander 2017: n.pag.). Gander considered it 'easy to blame' celebrities-turned-makeup-moguls like Kardashian for this 'homogenous' and 'high-maintenance [...] ideal' (2017: n.pag.).

Trend forecaster Jess Smith noted that cosmetic companies have responded 'with marketing and messaging that caters [to] the filtered face' (Gander 2017: n.pag.). Indeed, beauty brands have inserted products into Snapchat's interface, capitalizing on its system of delivering a fashionable ideal to a captive audience. A spokeswoman for L'Oréal – the first beauty company to run a sponsored Snapchat filter – admitted to *AdWeek* that the goal of their eyeliner ad was 'to capitalize on the playfulness of Snapchatters' (Johnson 2016: n.pag.). *Allure* approved of the full face of 'Instagram-worthy' makeup L'Oréal's filter delivered 'sans Insta-level effort' (Hubbard 2016). Beauty brands Urban Decay and Benefit followed suit with sponsored filters promoting lip colour and brow products, respectively. 'In designing its lens, Benefit aimed to squeeze [...] its logo' into 'a prettifying filter that produced flawless faces' (Brown 2016: n.pag.). With Urban Decay's filter, users virtually 'blew kisses in five shades of Vice Lipstick' (Brown 2016: n.pag.). The ad was reportedly 'seen by 27 million unique Snapchatters, who spent an average of 35 seconds interacting with the lens' (Shorty Awards 2017: n.pag.). Likewise, 'Snapchatters chose to play with [Benefit's] Lens 38 million times, spending, on average, 26 seconds engaging with the product', resulting in 'an 18% lift in purchase intent' (Snapchat Inc. 2015: n.pag.).

According to Snapchat, whether users are 'applying a beauty brand's Filter [...] or using Lenses to instantly apply makeup to their selfies, advertising on Snapchat is an opportunity for advertisers to message their customers in creative, fun, and truly unique ways' (Snap Inc. 2017: n.pag.). This language – echoed by Snapchat's sponsors – emphasizes creativity, playfulness and harmless fun. Yet some users are wary of the implications of these virtual makeovers.

PROBLEMATIC FILTER EFFECTS

For women who attribute filter use to a desire to appear made-up, delight is often tempered with complex feelings towards their natural beauty. And not all lipstick-and-lashes filters are well-received; the inclusion of makeup in certain filters has been considered inappropriate, and users articulate frustrations about seeing their skin whitened.

For Liquido, the 'pretty' filter incited a complex process of gaining confidence while igniting insecurities – a process she dismissed as mere vanity:

I'll be honest. When I'm Snapping with a friend and I look particularly tired or unpolished, I'll often use [...] the 'no-makeup makeup' filter, which smooths out my skin [...] as if I'm wearing foundation. [...] I do this out of my own insecurity (I struggled with cystic acne for more than fifteen years), and because, yeah, I'm vain.

(2016: n.pag.)

Two BuzzFeed reporters described similar feelings. According to Ellie Bate:

The weird thing about this [filter] is that it slims down my nose so significantly that it looks completely unnatural, and magnifies my

eyes [...]. I've always disliked my kind of big nose and kind of small eyes, so I can't decide whether I'm happy that Snapchat has given me the opportunity to see myself the way I've always wanted, or mad that they have reassured me that my insecurities are completely legitimate.

(Krishna 2016: n.pag.)

That Snapchat 'is capitalizing on insecurities' has been deemed 'unsettling' (Liquido 2016). This paradigm has inspired uncertainty among users, including BuzzFeed's Tolani Shoneye:

So the pretty filter makes me look more beautiful by clearing my skin [...] and making my face [thinner] – something I didn't think I wanted until now. And it also contours both the bridge of my nose and nostrils. I LIKE MY NOSE, Snapchat! [...] But hey, it's just Snapchat – it's just a bit of fun, right?

(Krishna 2016: n.pag.)

With this final remark, Shoneye second-guessed the significance of the virtual 'fixes' she received, and her defensive feelings towards them.

Filters released on International Women's Day in 2017 were designed with uncharacteristic amounts of makeup, frustrating users with their archaic gender implications. Technology reporter Julia Carrie Wong reported this mishap by contrasting Marie Curie's scientific achievements with the glamorous but irrelevant filter designed in her honor: 'The filter for Nobel Prize-winning physicist and chemist applies smoky eye makeup and lengthens the eye lashes. Curie is best known for her groundbreaking research on radioactivity' (2017: n.pag.). Users voiced their distaste across Twitter, chiding Snapchat with tweets including, 'So did Marie Curie invent smokey eye then?' and 'the marie curie snapchat lens makes ur face thinner and gives u full eye makeup thank GOD wouldn't want to be an unhot scientist' (Wong 2017: n.pag.). These quips hint at frustrations with stereotypes about women in science. Kaitlyn Tiffany took a similar tone in tech outlet The Verge, labelling the filter 'another dumb, avoidable mistake[:] Whoops, again!' (2017: n.pag.).

Beyond makeup-oriented designs, other filters unexpectedly modify the face. Animal-themed filters, which would be adorable on their own, enlarge users' eyes while shrinking their other features to dainty, stereotypically feminine proportions. Users 'don't expect [these filters to] change our facial structures, only add accessories', yet they 'make pretty drastic changes' (Liquido 2016). Even the seemingly silly puppy-dog snout has a beautifying effect. *Time* deemed it 'oddly (and universally) flattering' (Lang 2016); *New York Magazine's* daily news site, *Intelligencer*, characterized this as a 'widely observed but little understood' phenomenon (Malone Kircher 2016). Before-and-after image comparisons reveal that beyond adding animal features, 'the puppy filter [...] smooths your skin, widens your eyes, and visibly thins your face' (Malone Kircher 2016: n.pag.). By covering up the nose – which tends to appear larger in selfies than it does in mirror reflections (Ward et al. 2018), and 'which likely isn't celebrity-level perfect' – the 'perfectly symmetrical' dog snout makes faces more attractive (Malone Kircher 2016).

In addition to modifying facial features, Snapchat filters deliver troubling skin-lightening effects. Briana Owens articulated conflicted feelings towards this outcome in *The Odyssey*:

If you're like me [...] you've probably used [the 'pretty'] filter a gazillion times and noticed the difference in your complexion but you liked the way the filter made you look. You might [have] even questioned if it was wrong to like the way you appeared or brushed it off because you felt some type of awkward internal conflict. Why is that?

(2016: n.pag.)

The debate between whether to play along – as Snapchat recommends – or to be offended recalls Shoneye's question: 'it's just a bit of fun, right?' (Krishna 2016).

Not necessarily. In *Complex*, a site focused on youth culture, Vrinda Jagota reminded readers that 'cultural biases mediate every step of the construction and interpretation of images taken on Snapchat [...]. [T]he app exists squarely and comfortably in a culture that asserts that even our most banal moments deserve to be casually white-washed' (2016: n.pag.). Her words validate users' experiences and recognize Snapchat's connection to broader sociocultural issues. Owens, too, urged users to question the media they consume:

the [false] narrative that many people have heard and seen via all forms of media is, the lighter you are the [...] prettier you are [...]. When people see this idea being reflected, (whether intended or not) in one of their favorite apps [...], they *should* react.

(2016, original emphasis)

Moreover,

as the lenses that [...] white-wash users are those that apply makeup, rhinestones, and flower crowns – characteristics generally associated with performances of beauty and femininity – Snapchat reifies beauty standards that disproportionately affect femme-presented persons of color. In other words, it's usually women of color who feel the negative effects of a racist lens/filter the most.

(Jagota 2016: n.pag.)

'I am proud to be a woman of color and love my melanin-filled skin', Owens stated. 'Yet, this "pretty filter" [...] makes me feel entangled in a web of disempowerment and perpetuation. If I use that filter I am making a statement that my natural complexion and facial features are not pretty enough' (2016: n.pag.). BuzzFeed shared posts from dissatisfied users who called upon Snapchat to keep the cute flower crowns but lose the skin lightening effects. One user tweeted that she was 'very disturbed'; another shared unapologetically unfiltered selfies on Tumblr paired with a resolute caption: 'lowkey boycotting the beauty filter on snapchat bc it just whitens ur skin and who needs that oppressive colorism in their life u feel' (Krishna 2016: n.pag.).

As 'playful' as Snapchat claims their filters are (Snapchat Inc. 2015), they are far from harmless fun. Users who apply amusing filters end up with

chiselled-away cheeks and whitened skin – sometimes without desiring or comprehending it. What does prolonged exposure to these ‘fixes’ do to users’ mental health?

PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES

Each filter effect – nose slimming, face sculpting, lip tinting, eye enlarging, skin whitening, makeup enhancing – warrants its own set of critiques. But the swirling combination submerges Snapchatters in a sea of psychological challenges. Women who seek to explore identity formation and self-presentation through digital adornment are attacked by messages about social desirability and perfection. Filters have caused some users to feel detached from their natural faces; the process has been likened to cosmetic surgery and virtual violence.

Users can examine their ‘beautified’ selves in real time – yet Snapchat’s brand of beauty is unattainable and exclusionary. After daily exposure, it can become internalized:

We live in a society which pivots around [...] whiteness and all that is associated with it as being more *desirable, pure, beautiful, worthy* and *feminine*. [Users may end up] detesting the very features they possess because they are convinced daily that [they are] *grotesque* and a filter can aid them in bridging this gap between who they are and who they feel they should seek to be.

(Culture Critic 2018: n.pag., emphasis added)

These are powerful adjectives describing powerful messages about social desirability. According to Simeon, ‘[a]t the press of a button, [...] every] imperfection vanishes – and I am no longer me. Instead, I’m transformed into [...] the more “socially desirable” me’ (2018: n.pag.). On Her Campus, a site for college-age women, Elisabeth Staal concluded that the widespread embrace of Snapchat’s filters indicates that ‘society is teaching us to edit ourselves to be desirable’, which she deemed ‘damaging to our mental health’ (2015: n.pag.). Her testimony also implies the violence of Snapchat filters. ‘I am honestly disgusted at the [“pretty”] filter option, and embarrassed for Snapchat for supplying it’, she asserted.

The edits Snapchat made were not edits I wanted. Going through the filters, I tried this effect not knowing what [its] outcome would be. I was forced, so to speak, to see the edited me. That’s the worst part. This was thrust upon me.

(Staal 2015: n.pag.)

Staal’s recollections suggest a lack of consent and a lasting feeling of having been violated.

Snapchat’s beautifying effects have also been likened to cosmetic surgery. Bido was ‘not a big fan of [...] the instant nose job’ she received (Burhop Fallon 2016). Liquido found the experience of receiving a virtual facelift to be triggering:

In one swipe, my face was transformed to standards that the fashion and beauty industry has been pushing for decades [...]. I felt, in a word,

ugly. Were my almond eyes, brown skin, and round face less attractive? Did they need to be changed to put on a fun crown? [...] As an Asian-American woman, I've experienced a unique struggle with positive self-image. My 'look' is the opposite of runway models and most celebrities. [...]. I've envied other girls' luminous eyes and radiant skin. I've wondered about how invasive plastic surgery would be [...]. I've thought, 'I'd be prettier if I could just change these things about myself.' With a simple swipe, Snapchat made it easy for me to do just that. It's digital plastic surgery.

(Liquido 2016: n.pag.)

The notion of 'digital plastic surgery' has affected some users to such an extent that they seek Snapchat-inspired plastic surgery in the real world. As tech site Engadget framed it, they wish to 'look like a software-enhanced version of themselves' (Alvarez 2018: n.pag.). But what sounds like a sci-fi plotline actually masks mental health concerns. This phenomenon – dubbed 'Snapchat dysmorphia' – is related to body dysmorphic disorder, an obsessive-compulsive fixation on perceived appearance defects (Rajanala et al. 2018: p. 443). According to cosmetic surgeon Dr Tijion Esho, his clients used to reference celebrity photos but increasingly cite 'filtered versions of themselves as the goal' (Hoise 2018). Rather than acquiescing, Esho referred some to psychotherapeutic treatment (Hoise 2018). Dr Patrick Byrne, director of the Johns Hopkins Division of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, has encountered a 'disconnect between reality, mirror images and photos [...] in his practice' (Willingham 2018: n.pag.). As he explained to CNN:

I've always handed patients a mirror, and they've picked it up and pointed, and we've discussed what they wanted [...]. Now, [...] they'll look at it for a moment, get frustrated and say, 'You can't really see it here' and show me a picture. And that's amazing, because we're looking at the same face through different media. They're bothered by their [unfiltered] pictures but not by their reflections.

(Willingham 2018: n.pag.)

Snapchatters have confessed to mild identity confusion when comparing the unfiltered mirror-self and the selfie-self. The negotiation between the two can result in jarring realizations, as Olutoye described: 'I had no makeup on and [...] in between two filters I scared myself. I saw my real face. I got so carried away with how different they made me look that for a split second I forgot what I look like' (2018: n.pag.). After this, she resolved to get reacquainted with her natural beauty through unfiltered, makeup-free selfies.

In addition to seeing their 'perfected' selves, Snapchat users see friends' faces marred by these ideals. 'Over the course of the day, I open dozens of Snaps from friends. If looking at badly Photoshopped Victoria's Secret ads is bad for our self-esteem, then what is a live-action beautifying app doing?' (Arata 2016: n.pag.). Arata admitted the difficulty in recognizing and comprehending the digital augmentation happening to familiar faces: 'seeing women who seem to be effortlessly perfect creates the impression that everyone but you just naturally looks that way. It's much more difficult to make your brain realize they've been edited' (2016: n.pag.). By likening Snapchat selfies to images portrayed in the fashion media, she suggests that the app's users are responsible for perpetuating negative messages:

‘What starts as an innocently “beautiful” photo becomes problematic to all those seeing it. [...] [T]he perfect one is you and not some [...] model in a print ad’ (Arata 2016: n.pag.). The consequences affect ‘all those receiving the edited Snap’ (Staal 2015: n.pag.).

So, are users alone to blame? Not entirely. Liquido suggested that the people behind the platform must be held accountable. ‘Snapchat is a master at appearing like the passive third party that gives its users free reign over their own self-expression, but someone had to design, engineer, and approve those filters’ (2016: n.pag.). It is all too easy to forget that there are real people behind augmented reality technologies. The creators’ biases inform all stages of the user experience. For instance, cultural studies scholar Aisha Durham noted that ‘[w]e [incorrectly] assume that technology is race-neutral’ (Jagota 2016: n.pag.). Snapchat has ‘its own agenda. It wants to flatter and persuade you to keep using it, but has no obligation to tell you the truth or take responsibility’ (Arata 2016: n.pag.). ‘Snapchat sees itself as fostering individuality and personal connection, creating space for the narratives of each of its users equally’ (Jagota 2016: n.pag.), but this is impossible due to inherent biases. Snapchat-enabled spaces and narratives are

not entirely on users’ terms, as the tools used to take these images are not themselves unbiased. If the image is the means of communication, and that image is manipulated to say, ‘You will be more beautiful if your face contains less melanin,’ or, ‘Practicing femininity means not only celebrating flower crowns and glitter, but also contouring away the natural size of your nose [...]’, how could [it ...] ever be the authentic, unadulterated experience of users of color?

(Jagota 2016: n.pag.)

CONCLUSION

Originally praised as a space for authentic self-presentation, Snapchat has become a force for aggressively perpetuating fashionable but exclusionary beauty ideals through its Lenses feature. From the ‘pretty’ filter to the puppy filter, women’s faces are virtually made-up, contoured away and whitened. Some Snapchatters appreciate the ease and immediacy of flaw-erasing filters as they strive to keep up with a culture of incessant photo-snapping and increasing digital connectivity. Others experience discomfort at certain effects and at seeing familiar faces, including their own, conform to a problematic image of perfection. These filters – and the stereotypes about femininity and whitewashed beauty ideals they portray – operate within a system of sociocultural issues. The app’s ability to implant the fashionable ideal upon millions of faces around the globe through augmented reality technology has influenced the way people see each other and themselves – as the strong response in the online news, fashion and tech media reveals.

The writers, bloggers and reporters cited here have called out specific filter effects and the issues they pose – and they have led by example in terms of how to engage with the app, for all its fraught filters. Some have become more conscientious about the content they create and distribute through social media. Others have managed to use Snapchat for fun while remaining vocal about the problematic effects it yields and the users it harms. A few have

abandoned the app altogether, demanding better from cultural and corporate leaders. Perhaps over time these efforts may contribute to a new standard of beauty and image of fashion – one that is inclusive, respectful and empowering to a wide range of participants and consumers.

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Call for Panels, Paper Presentations and Designs: *Fashion, Style & Queer Culture Conference*

Drexel University's Antoinette Westphal College of Media Arts & Design in conjunction with Intellect's Editors Convention and the journal *Fashion, Style & Popular Culture* is proud to present our third conference *Fashion, Style & Queer Culture*, 20–22 May 2021.

In this third *Fashion, Style &...* we will focus on how fashion and style is portrayed in queer culture. This conference moves beyond fashion as clothes and is broadly interdisciplinary, considering all areas of media, arts and design. Our hopes are not only to engage in issues surrounding queer as a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and nonbinary gender 'umbrella identifier' but to also examine all areas of the arts, media and areas of design that are in and of themselves considered queer. **We welcome all disciplines.**

Members of the LGBT community have recaptured the terminology 'queer' as it becomes a new area of study allowing LGBTQA to re-examine how we look at lifestyle. But as the queer theorist Thomas Piontek (2006) has discussed – through the prism of identity and its discontents the field (queer) studies modelled itself on other areas such as ethnic studies programmes, perhaps to be intelligible to the university community – this conference aims to see the other interdisciplinary connections and approaches to queer. With the advent of queer theory, there are now many perspectives available that frequently find themselves at odds with the traditional, and while fashion has been one of them, this conference hopes to examine all areas, representations and expressions of queer culture found in style, art, exhibition, religion, education, the humanities, health, medicine, business, social sciences, everyday lifestyles, practice-based disciplines and other various forms that are indicators of this phenomenon. This conference aims to push the envelope of scholarship to gain new understandings about the visual cultural expression of Fashion, Style & Queer Culture representing a wide variety of disciplines, with a particular emphasis on perspectives and approaches.

Publication Outcomes

For many academics, what counts towards publication varies by country, institutions of learning, and where a particular participant is in their academic career. This conference will have all abstracts published with various outlets for full paper publication in addition to a special issue of *Fashion, Style & Popular Culture* dedicated to Queer. All abstract submissions for this conference will be double blind peer reviewed prior to acceptance. Those who would like to pursue publication will have the option. Conference abstracts will be published by Intellect Books.

Submissions

Abstracts submission guidelines can be found here: drexel.edu/fashion-style/program/call-for-proposals/
Deadline for Early Bird is 15 March 2021 for the conference.

Registration

Faculty, Professional Staff, Professional: \$175
Students and Retired: \$110. After 15 March 2021 all rates increase \$30
Those with questions should email Dr. Joseph H. Hancock, II at jhh33@drexel.edu.

Intellect Editors Convention

On Saturday 22 May 2021, Drexel University will be hosting the Intellect Editors Convention. Editors and Board Members of Intellect journals are welcome to join this exclusive event which will include presentations and workshops on the different elements of the journal editing and publishing process led by the Intellect team. The Convention is a great opportunity to meet with other editors and the Intellect team to discuss issues relating to your journal and journal publishing in general. Editors of journals should contact Journals Manager, Bethan Ball at bethan@intellectbooks.com, if you are interested in attending.

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