TURUN YLIOPISTO

Filtered femininity

How TikTok beauty filters reproduce feminine beauty ideals

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This thesis examines how TikTok beauty filters reproduce and circulate feminine beauty ideals through their visual design, naming conventions, and platform logic. It brings together scholarship on selfies and body image, gendered and racialised beauty ideals, ageing and visibility, and theoretical perspectives on algorithmic oppression, postfeminism, self-presentation, and self-objectification to analyse beauty filters as socio-technical cultural artefacts rather than neutral tools of self-expression.

Methodologically, the research draws on a manually compiled dataset of 59 beauty filters identified through TikTok's Beauty tab and examined qualitatively using the in-app camera. The analysis identifies recurring patterns of facial modification that collectively homogenise women's faces: smoothing and brightening skin, slimming facial features, enlarging eyes, and plumping lips – reproducing implicitly white, Eurocentric, and youthful ideals of femininity. A disproportionately small number of Effect House creators and heavily recycled design templates further intensify this homogenisation. Meanwhile, filter names and visual iconography consistently frame heavily modified appearances as natural, effortless, or playful, obscuring the extent of their intervention.

The thesis argues that TikTok beauty filters function as socio-technical tools that both reflect and reinforce existing hierarchies of gender, race, and age. As beauty filters grow more sophisticated, their modifications become harder to detect, and therefore harder to challenge. This thesis contributes to ongoing debates about gender, technology, and visual culture by demonstrating how seemingly minor digital tools participate in the broader standardisation of femininity.

Keywords: beauty filters, social media, self-presentation, TikTok, femininity, algorithms

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1 Introduction

Social media has become one of the most influential cultural forces of the twenty-first century, shaping communication, social relationships, and people's self-perceptions. Social media platforms function as spaces that construct and shape identities, where individuals curate and present versions of themselves to their audiences. Central to social media is the creation and sharing of visual content, which is amplified by algorithms that prioritise visually appealing and engaging material. Sharing photos of oneself is standard practice online, and awareness of algorithmic biases encourages users to post in ways that align with what is perceived to be rewarded by the algorithm (i.e., visibility in the form of likes, comments, and engagement). As technologies favour visually appealing content, beauty filters emerged as a technological and cultural phenomenon. (Javornik et al. 2022, 1.) As a consequence, the widespread use of beauty filters contributes to user encounters with increasingly idealised and digitally modified appearances.

In a decade, beauty filters have transformed the social media landscape. Beauty filters are digitally applied effects that modify users' appearance and have become increasingly sophisticated in recent years (Ryan-Mosley 2023). Many are powered by augmented reality (AR) or artificial intelligence (AI), enabling them to "map" almost seamlessly onto users' faces by utilising machine learning, even when the face is partially obscured or in motion (Weatherbed & Sato 2023; Ryan-Mosley 2022). Unlike earlier (circa 2015–2018) playful filters that added cartoon-like effects or "cool" and silly accessories onto user's heads and faces, contemporary beauty filters primarily aim to align users' appearances with culturally dominant aesthetic ideals that for women appear as airbrushing the skin, enlarging the eyes, lengthening eyelashes, reducing the size of the nose and jaw, plumping the lips, and even whitening the teeth (see e.g., Mihăilă & Braniște 2021; Lavrence & Cambre 2020). This happens through digital face distortion (Ryan-Mosley 2021a; 2022). Much research has been published about the effects of virtually modifying one's appearance, resulting in terms like *Snapchat dysmorphia* where people's excessive usage of facial filters leads them to experience lower self-esteem; and *Instagram face* where consumers feel pressure to fit into a beauty standard shaped by filters and influencers (see e.g., Rajanala et al. 2018; Miller 2025; Haines 2021). Social media beauty filters are often user-generated and share similarities across social media platforms. In 2019, Meta (formerly Facebook) chose to remove pro-surgery filters after ethical concerns surrounding their use and the societal anxieties they

provoke: Dissatisfaction with one's appearance can worsen with the use of AR filters, as their immediacy and realism may cause unhappiness with one's "real" looks, and in some cases the prolonged use of filters can lead to one seeking cosmetic surgery to achieve the idealised version of the self that filters offer (Javornik et al. 2022, 2–3; Watson 2022, 123–124). This surgery seeking to resemble one's filtered self is noteworthy as evidence of how beauty filters reinforce and encode a particular version of the face as correct, desirable, and attainable – one that is framed worth pursuing digitally and in real life. It is this encoding of ideals that this thesis examines.

The presence and usage of beauty filters can be analysed and understood through the broader context of media and cultural theory. As Erving Goffman's (1979) ideas of self-presentation suggest, individuals constantly manage impressions in social interactions. Social media extends this performance into a visual online space, where appearance functions as a form of social capital. Platform design features such as follower counts, likes, and comments facilitate constant peer comparison and can incentivise harmful online behaviour. The use of beauty filters can be seen as a tool of self-fashioning[1] that is intimately tied to online identity, social validation, and audience feedback. This thesis ties the criticism surrounding digital body modifications – body editing through filters – to the role that objectification and self-objectification have which shapes women's experiences of their bodies by engaging with Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) objectification theory. Beauty filters that promote narrow beauty ideals risk perpetuating these objectifying dynamics by encouraging conformity to normative standards of attractiveness. Drawing on Noble's (2018) concept of algorithmic oppression, this thesis also examines how platform infrastructures embed and amplify these ideals structurally, while postfeminist media theory illuminates how filter use is culturally framed as individual choice and empowerment rather than conformity.

Studies indicate that exposure to idealised and manipulated images on social media is associated with increased body dissatisfaction, social comparison, and the internalisation of unrealistic beauty standards (e.g., Fardouly et al. 2017). Young people, particularly adolescent girls, appear especially vulnerable, as they navigate both developmental processes of identity formation and heightened social media engagement. Failing to manage one's negative emotions or foster a positive self-image can make people more vulnerable to body monitoring

[1] The process of constructing one's identity and public persona according to a set of cultural or social standards (Greenblatt 1980).

and other mental health issues such as depression, eating disorders, and low self-esteem. (Resurrección et al., 2014; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Generation Alpha is the first generation to grow up surrounded by technology their entire lives which constitutes the "foundation of Generation Alpha's identity" (Piccerillo et al. 2025, 2), making it relevant to examine how digital tools such as beauty filters operate. Moreover, research suggests a link between the frequent use of beauty filters and interest in cosmetic surgery (Mihăilă & Branişte 2021, 108).

From the perspective of postfeminist media culture[2], the normalisation of beauty filters aligns with neoliberal ideals of self-optimisation where individuals are encouraged to constantly improve themselves through consumer practices (Mihăilă & Branişte 2021). In this sense, beauty filters participate in a logic that frames self-enhancement as both a personal responsibility and a societal expectation. The cultural significance of beauty filters also lies in the counter discourses they generate. Trends such as #nofilter and #unfiltered explicitly challenge the dominance of digitally altered appearances, advocating for authenticity and unedited self-representation. These anti-filter discourses reveal to us that while beauty filters are widespread, they are not unchallenged. Rather, many social media users wish filter usage or photo editing was disclosed (Dove 2022). AR filters sit at the intersection of technological innovation, cultural norms, and individual agency (Clifton 2024). This growing aversion to filters and increasing cultural awareness of their negative mental impacts can also be seen in Meta's push in ending support for user-generated filters in early 2025.

This thesis situates beauty filters within existing literature and argues that their design features and presence on social media platforms actively reproduce and normalise narrow ideals of femininity – ideals that, as existing research suggests, have the potential to shape how women perceive themselves and others. I explore how current beauty filters on TikTok replicate and reinforce beauty norms, how they can shape online self-presentation and identity construction, and how they relate to broader issues of body image. I aim to provide a socio-cultural analysis of why and how the proliferation of beauty filters mediates discourses on beauty and self-representation. The research question is as follows: How do TikTok beauty filters construct and reproduce feminine beauty ideals through their design and circulation?

[2] Utilising texts such as Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility by Rosalind Gill (2007).

Through a qualitative analysis of beauty filters collected from TikTok's Beauty tab, I examine how their visual design, naming, and circulation construct and reinforce the ideals discussed above. Moreover, drawing on self-presentation frameworks such as objectification theory and utilising postfeminist analysis, I continue to explore how beauty filters can influence users' self-presentation and identity construction against filtered faces. By documenting the visual design features of trending AR beauty filters on TikTok, this thesis analyses how filters function as tools of objectification that reproduce white Eurocentric and youthful representations of femininity. The analysis focuses on existing beauty filters that distort facial features, add cosmetic features such as makeup, and signal particular ideals through their names. These features serve as the primary material for the analysis chapters. This thesis aims to critically examine the implications of technologically mediated beauty ideals that social media users encounter through beauty filters by analysing existing filters on TikTok through the lens of algorithmic oppression, postfeminist theories on beauty, Goffman's self-presentation framework, and objectification theory.

1.1 Scope and limitations

Research into body dissatisfaction has historically centred on thin-ideal internalisation, eating disorders, and body dysmorphic disorder in girls and women (for example Cohen & Blaszczynski 2015), with comparatively less attention paid to facial dissatisfaction and digitally mediated self-presentation (see Holland & Tiggemann 2016). By focusing specifically on facial beauty filters on TikTok, this thesis offers a contemporary lens through which to examine appearance-related pressures in an image-saturated environment online. While shifting body ideals – like the renewed idealisation of thinness in the 2020s – form an important backdrop to current beauty discourse, this thesis does not analyse weight-related trends, pharmaceutical interventions, or broader (digital) body modification cultures. The emphasis remains on facial beautification technologies and their visual, cultural, and psychological implications.

Although scholarship on selfies and networked self-representation (e.g., Walsh & Baker 2017) provides valuable context, this thesis is limited to analysing in-app facial beauty filters rather than selfie practices more broadly. It does not examine user captioning strategies, influencer branding, or audience reception in depth. Instead, it concentrates on the visual modifications produced by filters themselves and the aesthetic norms they embed. This thesis

also does not aim to provide a historical overview of the effects class, Eurocentrism or colonialism has had on beauty ideals, although these frameworks are utilised in the analytical chapters to illuminate contemporary filter aesthetics.

Methodologically, the analysis is based on manual examination of TikTok filters using the platform's in-app camera. Filters were identified, applied, and assessed qualitatively rather than through computational image analysis or large-scale data scraping. As such, the dataset is smaller and the findings are thus more interpretive and illustrative. This thesis does not claim to measure psychological impact directly, nor does it include interviews or surveys with users. Claims regarding affect, self-perception, or dysmorphia are drawn from existing literature rather than empirical participant data. The dataset is also platform-specific and temporally bound. TikTok's interface, filter catalogue, and recommendation algorithms are dynamic and subject to continuous change. Consequently, this thesis should be understood as a snapshot of TikTok's filter ecosystem at the time of research in 2025–2026. Furthermore, the analysis is limited to filters accessible within one user account and geographic location, meaning results may vary across regions or personalised algorithmic feeds. Finally, while this thesis engages with gendered implications of beauty filters, it does not aim to represent all user demographics. The focus on women and femininity reflects both the gendered nature of beauty culture and the patterns observed in the analysed filters. Experiences of men, nonbinary individuals, and other marginalised groups warrant further, dedicated research.

This thesis focuses on TikTok as its primary site of analysis. TikTok was launched globally in 2017 and has grown into one of the world's most-used social media platforms, with over a billion active users and a particularly strong presence among younger demographics (Miltsov 2022; Slotta 2026). Unlike social platforms such as Instagram, TikTok maintains a comparatively open filter creation ecosystem through its Effect House tool, which allows third-party creators to design and publish filters directly to the platform. This openness has produced a large and organic filter catalogue that is driven by independent creators rather than solely by the platform itself, although TikTok does incentivise filter creation by rewarding the creators[3]. TikTok's algorithms further shape which filters gain visibility and use. Additionally, Meta's 2025 removal of user-generated filters (Davis 2024) from Instagram and Facebook has shifted the beauty filter culture toward TikTok, making it the most active and relevant

[3] Creators can monetise their effects (Effect House 2026) https://effecthouse.tiktok.com/learn/guides/management-and-growth/monetize-your-effects.

platform for this kind of analysis at the time of writing. It therefore represents a timely and mostly underexplored site for examining how beauty ideals are circulated and normalised through platform design and algorithmic recommendation.

This thesis proceeds as follows: Chapter 2 reviews existing literature on selfie culture, beauty ideals, and digital self-presentation, and introduces the theoretical frameworks guiding the analysis. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology and dataset of TikTok beauty filters. Chapters 4 and 5 present the analysis, focusing on how filter design reproduces and standardises feminine beauty ideals. Finally, Chapter 6 summarises the findings and reflects on their implications.

2 Literature review and theoretical framework

This thesis draws on a range of academic literature and research on self-presentation, objectification, algorithms, and social media usage as analysed later in this chapter. The literature consistently shows that women and girls are rarely free from the expectations of idealised beauty standards in cultures where female bodies are routinely objectified. As a result, the potential always exists for their thoughts and actions to be disrupted by internalised beauty ideals and by persistent concerns about how their bodies appear to others (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997). The pervasiveness of social media has profoundly reshaped how people construct and display their identities. Selfies occupy a prominent role on social networking sites (SNS) and are recognised as social and cultural practices that are entangled with questions of identity, gender, and age. How one takes, edits and posts selfies matters. Earlier research[4] has demonstrated how selfies, particularly when edited or filtered, can be viewed as extensions in modes of self-presentation which are shaped by sociocultural expectations and advances in technology such as photo editing.

I draw on various research articles into beauty (filter) culture, selfie-taking and identity to contextualise beauty filters and understand their role on social media and how filters operate. A central concern in the literature is how social media amplifies appearance-based comparison with peers, celebrities, and influencers. However, emerging scholarship highlights a shift toward comparison with one's own filtered self (see Rajanala et al. 2018; Coy-Dibley 2016; Javornik et al. 2022). Studies of generation Alpha's social media usage, for instance, demonstrate that children born entirely into the digital environment (digital natives) are already subject to the pressures of mediated appearance ideals (Piccerillo et al., 2025). Piccerillo et al. found that preadolescents' (ages 10–15) social media use predicted higher social media addiction, reinforced sociocultural appearance ideals, and was negatively associated with emotional intelligence. These findings suggest that online identity[5] now begins forming at an earlier age than much of the existing body image literature has accounted for. As a result of these growing concerns, in December 2025, the Australian government announced bans on several major social networking platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat, for children under 16, citing mental health and safety

[4] For example, Lavrence & Cambre 2020; Fredrickson & Roberts 1997; Coy-Dibley 2016; Javornik et al. 2022 and Mihăilă & Braniște 2021.
[5] Online identities are shaped by digital platforms and users curate and perform these identities based on which platform they are on (Rowland & Estevens 2025).

concerns (Livingstone 2025). These legislative shifts suggest a growing state recognition of the risks posed by social media, where the algorithmic promotion of unattainable beauty standards is increasingly viewed as a public health crisis rather than merely a matter of individual user choice. Media coverage has reported similar debates and proposals in countries such as Denmark, Norway, and France, as well as discussions within the EU about stricter regulation of TikTok's recommendation algorithms for minors. (Ibid.). Furthermore, the EU has considered fining TikTok unless it revises its addictive algorithm (Hartikainen 2026). While these top-down regulations focus on usage age, they highlight the urgent need for the kind of qualitative analysis of filter design that this thesis provides, as the 'addictive algorithms' mentioned by the EU (ibid.) are the primary vehicles for the homogenisation of beauty standards.

Research suggests that filtered images tend to receive higher engagement online, and awareness of photo editing causes audiences to assume a photo has been edited or scrutinise it to assess its authenticity (Lavrence & Cambre 2020, 5). Studies such as those by Lavrence and Cambre (2020) indicate that filters provoke intensified "looking practices", where users scrutinise both their own and others' images for traces of authenticity or manipulation. This reflects wider anxieties around digital authenticity and suggests that filtering has become normalised on social media to the extent that unedited selfies are then regarded as anomalies. (Ibid.). However, similar research observing the behaviours and thought patterns of people with less knowledge into photo editing has not been conducted.

Filters have also been examined through different lenses, such as through the uses and gratifications theory: Ibáñez-Sánchez et al. (2022) interpret AR filters as entertainment products, focusing on the pleasures of play, curiosity, and interaction they facilitate through specific affordances. Indeed, filters are not only used for appearance management, but form part of a broader landscape which is digital play. Social media platforms operate both as spaces of identity experimentation as well as capitalistic infrastructures. At the same time, feminist scholars argue that filters cannot be reduced to entertainment (see e.g., Coy-Dibley 2016; Miller 2025; Lavrence & Cambre 2020). Critical conversations around filter usage claim that filters reinforce normative standards of beauty. For example, Castillo-Hermosilla et al. (2023) situate filters within the ethics of AI, demonstrating how AR technologies reproduce misogynistic ideals under the guise of choice and empowerment. Similarly, Marghitu and O'Meara (2024) highlight both risks and potentials: filters perpetuate hegemonic norms of femininity, but can also provide liminal spaces for queer and nonbinary

users to experiment with identity and fantasy. Such accounts caution against simplistic narratives of harm or empowerment, urging instead an intersectional approach that considers how gender, sexuality, race, and class shape filtering practices.

Beauty filters must be situated within the broader cultural dynamics of social media. Platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok emphasise visuals and with an additional focus on aesthetic presentation especially on Instagram and TikTok. On social media, visual content serves as communication while also functioning as social capital through attention, validation, and engagement (Putra & Afrilian 2025). The repeated use of filters normalises highly stylised faces and the positive reinforcement in the form of likes on filtered images encourage users to continue using them (Haines 2021). The rise of beauty filters can be understood as an extension of these dynamics – tools that enable users to meet the aesthetic demands and beauty ideals of social media while also shaping and firming those demands through their widespread use and circulation.

Empirical research consistently highlights the relationship between digitally altered imagery and body image dissatisfaction (Watson 2022, 123–124). Watson's (2022) literature review comprising 29 empirical studies establishes strong ties between appearance-focused social media usage and body dissatisfaction as well as subsequent negative effects on confidence, mental health, and self-esteem. The examined studies indicate that exposure to idealised, edited, or filtered images fosters social comparison, internalisation of beauty ideals, and higher body dissatisfaction. The loop between filters, self-presentation, and audience feedback reinforces particular forms of beauty as desirable and amplifies their cultural dominance. Importantly, these effects appear most pronounced among young people whose social media use coincides with developmental stages of identity formation. (Ibid.). These studies suggest that beauty filters reinforce hierarchies of appearance, intensify surveillance of the self, and normalise unrealistic ideals. (Ibid.). The literature has recently begun to address how filters themselves produce and normalise particular beauty ideals through their design features and circulation. This thesis draws on feminist media theory and critical algorithm studies to analyse TikTok beauty filters as socio-technical artefacts. Rather than focusing primarily on users' psychological responses, the analysis centres on how beauty filters themselves are designed, structured, and circulated, and how they encode and reproduce particular ideals of femininity. To do so, this thesis combines perspectives on algorithmic bias, digital self-presentation, and objectification theory to examine how visual norms are embedded within platform technologies.

2.1 Selfie editing and self-image

Digital photo manipulation and cosmetic retouching, such as those made using Photoshop, have long been commonplace in magazines consumed by the public (see Reaves et al. 2004). Digital retouching in magazines influences consumers to see digitally polished, slimmed, and smoothed bodies as normal, positioning unedited bodies as deficient by comparison (Coy-Dibley 2016, 5). However, while many were aware of these practices, the general population did not typically alter their own photos (Reaves 2004, 65; Cohen & Blaszczynski 2015, 2). Photo editing became more commonplace with the rise of smartphones and the surge of free photo-editing apps, such as Facetune, Perfect365, and BeautyPlus, offering automated beauty enhancements that require little to no skill to use. More recently in-app beauty filters have emerged as features built within social networking apps themselves such as TikTok's in-app filters. Coy-Dibley (2016, 6) suggests that when editing technology became widely available, it was mostly used to copy existing beauty ideals, such as airbrushing, rather than to challenge them or create truly different, non-traditional forms of self-expression.

As demonstrated earlier, a growing body of literature documents the connection between filter use, body dissatisfaction, and negative self-perception. One of the key findings across studies is that filter usage has measurable psychological effects such as body dysmorphia, and it amplifies negative self-evaluations. These psychological risks associated with beauty filter use are also visible in national surveys. A 2021 study[6] reported that 72% of Finnish girls aged 10–17 felt they needed to look perfect on social media, and 52% used filters or editing apps to appear better in pictures (Dove 2021). Furthermore, studies demonstrate that selfie editing can directly increase dissatisfaction in one's looks, and that technology which facilitates image manipulation affects credibility and results in misinformation (Watson 2022, 119). Tiggemann et al. (2020) found that taking and editing selfies led to increased negative mood and facial dissatisfaction, with the extent of dissatisfaction directly linked to how heavily the image was edited. The more extensively participants edited their images, the greater the reported increase in dissatisfaction, suggesting that the act of editing itself is harmful (ibid.) These studies suggest that appearance-related pressures on social media and filter use impact

[6] The survey referenced here was conducted by Syno in 2021 on behalf of Dove. Dove is a commercial company with a financial interest in promoting body image concerns as a social issue, and this research has not undergone independent peer review. It is cited here for its illustrative value in providing Finnish context.

everyday behaviour of both adolescents and adults online, rather than being limited to influencers or content creators with large followings whose livelihoods might depend on the visual content they produce.

The widespread circulation of filtered images has also altered how authenticity is perceived. In focus group research, participants described assuming by default that selfies are edited, regardless of whether editing had actually taken place (Lavrence & Cambre, 2020). This assumption of inauthenticity fuels a "digital-forensic gaze", wherein users scrutinise "perfect" images to detect signs of editing (ibid.). Such intensified looking practices create anxiety both for those posting images and those viewing them, further intensifying self-surveillance. (Ibid., 5; 11.). These observations suggest that photo manipulation has the potential to reshape social dynamics of perception and trust. For instance, using online dating as an example, Coy-Dibley (2016, 8) proposes that wariness of people's online photos shows that people are already aware that the way individuals present themselves digitally may not always fully reflect who they really are. However, this wariness or lack of trust, is at odds with the general – although outdated – idea of social media pictures being often perceived as "real" and authentic (Cohen & Blaszczynski 2015, 2) compared to commercial photos of models and celebrities that are often deliberately airbrushed to conceal imperfections. With the prevalence of photo editing tools available to the general public, this is hardly the case anymore. Social networking sites are aware of this: Instagram's CEO Adam Mosseri stated on his Instagram that "authenticity is becoming a scarce resource --. Savvy creators are leaning into unproduced, unflattering images. In a world where everything can be perfected, imperfection becomes a signal." (Mosseri 2025).

The psychological risks associated with filter use are evident in *Snapchat dysmorphia*, a form of body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) (see Rajanala et al. 2018; Wolfson, 2018; Chiu 2018). The term describes patients seeking surgery to resemble their filtered images rather than celebrities (Rajanala et al. 2018; Chiu 2018). Coy-Dibley's (2016) concept of "digitised dysmorphia" further develops this idea by framing such tendencies as socially conditioned, "shaped collectively by societal pressures, constructs of beauty and the technology presently available to attain these standards in image form" (ibid., 2). Coy-Dibley positions *digitised dysmorphia* on a spectrum alongside BDD, and describes how beauty norms and image-editing technologies collectively shape women's perceptions of their bodies. Unlike

traditional media, where comparisons[7] are directed outward toward celebrities or models[8], selfie editing technologies encourage comparisons with one's own filtered self. This can intensify the internalisation of unattainable standards as the digitally modified face or body becomes the benchmark against which the unfiltered self is judged. The edited image begins to materialise as an ideal version of the self, displacing the "corporeal self" as the standard of evaluation (Coy-Dibley 2016, 2). Medical practitioners have raised concerns that photo editing reflects rising rates of BDD and other mental health risks associated with unrealistic self-comparison (Castillo-Hermosilla et al. 2023), whereas some beauty clinics have begun offering "real life filter" treatments to look like their filters (Miller 2025, 4).

Despite the risks associated with them, filters are not exclusively experienced as harmful. Some research highlights their potential benefits, particularly for users exploring non-normative identities. For example, custom filters can provide alternative aesthetics that depart from mainstream beauty ideals. Nonbinary users have also described filters as offering temporary reprieve from the critical gaze, enabling playful experimentation with appearance without the cost or permanence of cosmetic interventions (Marghitu & O'Meara, 2024). These perspectives complicate dominant narratives of harm, showing that filters can function as both tools of either conformity or exploration, depending on the context of use. Nonetheless, Coy-Dibley (2016) argues that even if dissident use of filters is possible, dominant cultural ideals of beauty and thinness that are reinforced by both traditional and digital media, already overwhelmingly influence how women edit and share images on social media.

Overall, research on selfie editing and beauty filters indicates that digitally altered images can intensify self-surveillance, body dissatisfaction, and comparison with both others and one's own filtered self, particularly among girls and young women. At the same time, some uses of filters remain playful or experimental, revealing an ambivalent terrain between harm and agency. To understand why these pressures and possibilities are structured in this manner, the

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[7] A substantial body of research has examined the psychological effects of social media imagery through frameworks such as social comparison theory (Festinger 1954) and the tripartite influence model (Thompson et al. 1999). These approaches highlight how exposure to idealised images can lead to appearance-based comparison and the internalisation of beauty ideals. While these frameworks are useful for understanding users' responses to idealised imagery, they are less suited to analysing how beauty filters themselves are designed and how they encode aesthetic norms. This thesis therefore shifts focus from user effects to the visual and structural properties of filters.

[8] It is important to note that research also suggests that awareness that professional models' images are digitally altered reduces negative self-comparison and body image dissatisfaction (Cohen & Blaszczynski 2015, 2).

next chapter situates beauty filters within broader hierarchies of gender, race, and beauty ideals.

2.2 Gendered and racialised beauty ideals

> "The luminosities of femininity are unapologetically and invariably white."
>
> Angela McRobbie in The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change (2009, 79).

This thesis situates beauty filters as a part of broader cultural hierarchies of gender and race that shape beauty standards. Society places more emphasis and pressure on women's appearance and attractiveness (than on men's) to meet societal criteria and standards (Coy-Dibley 2016, 3). Scholars such as Gill (2007) and McRobbie (2009) have demonstrated that Western media consistently reproduces Eurocentric and heteronormative ideals of whiteness, slimness, and femininity as the default standards of beauty. In Virginia Blum's *Becoming the Other Woman* (2005, 108; 118) Blum suggests that advertisements in contemporary Western culture imply that any woman can become *her*[9] if they just, for example, use a certain product correctly. Beauty filters tend to borrow from this line of neoliberal thinking and combine Eurocentric aesthetic ideals to produce homogenised and standardised beauty. Blum's analysis of beauty advertising frames beauty as universally attainable through the correct use of products and tools; beauty filters can be understood as extensions of this logic. Filters appear to level the playing field by offering all users access to the same aesthetic ideals, giving "everyone an equal chance" to be beautiful, but simultaneously obscure the structural inequalities that shape whose faces are represented and whose faces most easily align with the beauty ideals (ibid., 109).

The concept of the *Instagram face* encapsulates the aesthetics of the contemporary digital landscape. The *Instagram face* is characterised by smooth, poreless, and tan skin, symmetrical features, slim noses, plump lips, and large eyes, constructing a universalised and ethnically ambiguous appearance (Padtberg 2025). Online, this look is presented as aspirational and attainable through filters, non-invasive cosmetic procedures, and beauty products used

[9] *Her*, as in this case, the woman in the advertisement. The Other Woman. The ideal woman that Blum refers to. "She is you when you have this, this, and that fixed". (Blum 2005, 110). Naomi Wolf (1991) articulates this idea through her concept of the "Iron Maiden", an unattainable standard of beauty that is used to punish women for failing to achieve or conform to it.

correctly. In reality, the *Instagram face* is largely dependent on technological intervention as it is a collage of idealised features from multiple ethnicities. The constructed ideal is structurally unattainable without physical or digital modification. Beauty filters such as TikTok's viral *Bold Glamour* overlay digital makeup and also reshape facial proportions to conform to Eurocentric beauty ideals, generating faces that appear "natural" yet are hyper-stylised and feminised (Marghitu & O'Meara 2024). Research into beauty filters further demonstrates that many filters default to "westernising" users through applying skin-brightening effects (Ryan-Mosley 2022). The *Instagram face* exemplifies how filters and other digital technologies standardise and reproduce exclusionary beauty norms by elevating a look that is virtually impossible to achieve without digital or surgical intervention. Moreover, the intersection of gender and race is further visible in the cultural reception of filters. While lightening effects align with long histories of colourism, the feminised features such as large eyes, smooth skin, delicate jawlines then reflect idealised femininity. Beauty filters thus link race and gender in ways that reduce women to narrow archetypes, ones that seek to be simultaneously white, young, and hyper-feminine.

Critical feminist analyses suggest that these filters do more than reproduce ideals; they also disguise this reproduction of homogenous features and their usage as choice and empowerment. For example, in their article *Breaking the Filtered Lens* (2023) Castillo-Hermosilla et al. situate beauty filters within the ethics of AI, arguing that the rhetoric of play and personalisation masks how seemingly mundane acts of self-presentation operate as smokescreens for the perpetuation and internalisation of unrealistic feminine (beauty) ideals. Users are encouraged to deem their filtering practices as exercises in autonomy, when in reality they are participating in a system that standardises bodies and intensifies objectification. The affordances of beauty filters also give users opportunities to entertain and visualise what they would look like with slightly tweaked features – what they might look like if they looked subjectively *better* (Miller 2025, 4).

The racial dimensions of beauty filters are central to understanding how they (and the data they are built upon) reproduce and naturalise particular beauty hierarchies. Indeed, the technological infrastructures that support AR filters are not neutral nor objective – they are shaped by algorithmic systems that mirror the social, cultural, and racial biases of their human designers. As Safiya Umoja Noble (2018, 11) argues, the codes operating automated decision-making are programmed by human beings whose values reflect existing hierarchies of racism, sexism, and meritocracy, whether conscious or not. When beauty filters lighten skin tones,

narrow noses, or "correct" facial features to align with Eurocentric norms, these outcomes are not accidental but symptomatic of what Noble describes as "racism and sexism [as] part of the architecture and language of technology" (ibid., 17). danah boyd (2023, 237) discusses how algorithms are not anti discriminatory by design but warns that algorithmic systems can be used to "produce a new form of discrimination" that can amplify social inequality and strengthen harmful racial stereotypes. Beauty filters, like search engines and other algorithmic systems, participate in what Noble calls *algorithmic oppression*: a process through which structural inequities are reproduced under the guise of technological "neutrality". For instance, the *Instagram face* exemplifies how algorithmic design translates racialised ideals into seemingly objective forms of beauty: it "borrows" features from different ethnicities and applies them onto white faces. The very code that the algorithm is built upon – which boosts visibility for faces that conform with the *Instagram face* phenotype – is man-made and thus susceptible to subjectivity (Noble 2018). For instance, these man-made algorithms in TikTok's and Instagram's filter libraries often favour lighter skin tones and facial symmetries that more easily fit the "standard" model built into their detection systems. When these tools are designed to "map" faces, the templates themselves already contain a particular racial reference point which is most often white and Western. "Data are made, not found" writes boyd (2023, 237), and is always subjective. Thus, the very infrastructure of facial recognition technology enforces whiteness as the default aesthetic and technical standard (Noble 2018).

As Noble (2018, 161) points out, users may assume that what appears online on their screens reflects objective or "normal" outcomes, when in reality these results are "a direct result of the way that human beings have consciously designed both software and hardware to function this way and no other". In the context of beauty filters, this "normality" manifests through a digitally homogenised beauty ideal that marginalises darker skin tones and visibly non-European features all the while presenting itself as universal or neutral, but white able-bodied and heteronormative women are the ones who stand to benefit from adopting ethnic features (Miller 2025, 5). Noble's critique illuminates how algorithmic power intersects with consumer culture. Social media platforms are built around models that reward visibility, popularity, and repeated engagement, rather than diversity or fairness in representation. As a result, filters that align with dominant beauty ideals are more likely to be promoted, reused, and circulated than those that challenge or deviate from these norms. This aligns with the beauty industry's commodification of diversity, where it is selectively incorporated as a marketing strategy or an aesthetic rather than as structural inclusion (Borgerson & Schroeder,

2021). Thus, filters can be seen as both products and producers of inequality, which reinforces what Noble describes as “the recklessness and lack of regard shown to women and people of colour in the output of these systems”. (Noble 2018, 11.)

At the same time, surreal or non-beauty-related AR filters are also prevalent online. Such creative beauty filters, however, remain exceptions within a broader ecosystem that is dominated by commercialised and overly feminised beauty (Marghitu & O’Meara 2024). The prevalence of beauty filters that align with Western beauty ideals suggests they indeed reinforce cultural hierarchies. Thus, beauty filters are deeply entangled with the politics of race and gender. The emphasis falls heavily on whiteness, Eurocentric yet ambiguous features, and youthfulness, which is discussed further below. While some uses of filters demonstrate possibilities for play and disruption, the dominant trend is one of homogenisation. Analysing beauty filters within the contexts in which they emerged and circulate reveals that they function less as individual tools of self-expression and perhaps more as technologies with growing influence that have the power to influence whose bodies are visible and desirable.

2.3 The cultural imperative of youthfulness and erasure of age

Scholarship on beauty and ageing has for decades emphasised the cultural invisibility of older women and the pervasive pressure to maintain a youthful appearance (Blum 2005; Wolf 1991; Friedan 1993). Blum (2005, 110; 120) observes that innovations in cosmetic surgery offer women the possibility of altering nearly any aspect of their appearance, provided they can afford it. Beauty filters have, to some extent, democratised this promise of transformation by making the pursuit of beauty more accessible, however only online. But the vice versa also stands: Filters make it possible to “try on” cosmetic procedures such as visualising what a wrinkle-free forehead could look like, which may influence decisions to pursue treatments like Botox. Feminist critiques from the late twentieth century documented how ageing was equated with unattractiveness, invisibility, and even unemployability for women (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997, 194). Friedan (1993) argued that representative images of older women were almost absent in the media, while the few that existed tended to depict women who appeared much younger than their age (Friedan 1993, 35–38). Similarly, Wolf (1991) shows how ageing women are repeatedly sold the promise that looking young is both possible and morally desirable, achievable through cosmetic surgery, dieting, and beauty products.

Contemporary beauty industries continue to profit from promises of "staying young". Friedan (1993, 43–44) attributes this to the hegemonised view of young adulthood as the "best years of life" as well as the "denial of age" or aging: *You're not getting older, you're getting better*. This emphasis on youthfulness views age-erasing effects as improvements. Age-erasing beauty filters simply deliver what society already tells women they should look like.

Many popular filters are anti-aging by design as they include automatic smoothing of wrinkles, removal of fine lines and other signs of aging, as well as skin brightening. These effects replicate the promises of cosmetic enhancements, but immediately in real time and without cost. For instance, users of TikTok's *Bold Glamour* filter reported that their faces appeared both more symmetrical and more youthful, with blemishes erased and skin tone brightened (Marghitu & O'Meara 2024; Weatherbed & Sato 2023). Consequently, beauty filters reinforce the cultural association of beauty with youth and render older appearances undesirable or invisible. Coy-Dibley (2016, 5) argues that contemporary standards of femininity are increasingly detached from anatomical, material bodies, and are shaped more by the technological possibilities of photo manipulation. Applying Coy-Dibley's perceptions to aging, beauty filters further distance femininity from lived, material bodies by setting youthfulness as the default visual standard. By "enhancing" appearance, they normalise a digitally mediated ideal in which signs of age are routinely edited out. In doing so, ageing becomes something to correct and as a result, older bodies are marginalised, while youthful features are standardised for all ages (see also Friedan 1993).

The implications of anti-aging discourses for self-image are significant. Editing one's own image can increase facial dissatisfaction regardless of the baseline mood or comparison images presented (Tiggemann et al. 2020, 181). When smoothing and anti-ageing features are integrated into filters, they not only shape how filter users present themselves but also at the same time recalibrate social expectations of what a "normal" face should look like. Wrinkles and fine lines have become increasingly absent in user-uploaded photos, particularly in images of celebrities whose online appearances are heavily edited or filtered. At the same time, the concept of aging on social media should not be understood only through the lens of erasing age. Some filters instead offer creative possibilities by exaggerating ageing: for example, AR effects that superimpose realistic-looking wrinkles onto a user's face. While often treated humorously, these filters also open conversations about the inevitability of aging and the cultural discomfort surrounding it. Nonetheless, the overwhelming dominance of filters that emphasise youthfulness suggests that aging continues to be constructed primarily

as a problem to be managed rather than an inevitable stage of life. Furthermore, many of these "aging" filters are treated as cautionary tales (Mosley 2023) if one does not take care of their skin with the right skincare (see Blum 2005). The next section introduces the theoretical perspectives that help analyse how these representational norms operate at the level of everyday self-presentation and affect.

2.4 Theoretical perspectives

This study draws on feminist media theory and critical approaches to digital culture to examine how beauty filters structure and reproduce appearance norms on social media. Rather than focusing primarily on users' psychological responses, the analysis centres on beauty filters as socio-technical artefacts that encode and circulate particular ideals of femininity through their design and platform visibility.

The theoretical framework combines perspectives on algorithmic bias, postfeminist media culture, digital self-presentation, and self-objectification. Noble's (2018) work on algorithmic oppression provides the structural foundation, highlighting how platform infrastructures prioritise and amplify specific aesthetic forms (beautiful and fair-skinned), embedding racial and gendered hierarchies into systems that present themselves as neutral. This is complemented by postfeminist media theory, which illuminates the cultural logic within which these systems operate: femininity is constructed as a continuous project of self-optimisation, framed as individual choice and empowerment while reinforcing normative standards of appearance (Gill 2007; McRobbie 2009; Mihăilă & Braniște 2021). Goffman's dramaturgical theory of self-presentation (1959; 1976) then examines how beauty filters pre-structure the performance of identity by offering ready-made visual templates of femininity – functioning as hyper-ritualised representations of gender at the level of individual self-presentation. Finally, feminist objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997; Paasonen et al. 2020) analyses how these filtered representations position the self as an object of visual evaluation, encouraging women to internalise an observer's perspective on their own appearance. These perspectives provide a foundation for analysing how technological, cultural, and interpersonal factors shape engagement with idealised beauty norms on social media. Together they provide a lens for analysing TikTok beauty filters as socio-technical tools that both reflect and reinforce idealised beauty norms, particularly in the context of femininity, youth, and race.

2.4.1 Encoded biases in algorithms

The cultural impact of beauty filters is shaped by the algorithmic systems that determine their visibility and circulation, as introduced earlier in chapter 2.2. Social media platforms such as TikTok rely on algorithmic infrastructures to organise, recommend, and amplify content, including filters. These systems are often perceived as neutral or objective, yet critical scholarship has demonstrated that they are deeply embedded in existing social and cultural hierarchies. According to Noble (2018, 1–3), algorithmic systems are not impartial tools, but are shaped by human values and assumptions that can reproduce forms of bias and inequality.

With beauty filters, algorithmic bias becomes visible through the types of faces, features, and aesthetics that are prioritised and circulated. Filters that align with dominant beauty ideals such as lighter skin tones, symmetrical facial structures, and youthful features are more likely to gain visibility, be reused, and reach large audiences (Noble, 2018; Castillo-Hermosilla et al., 2023; Ryan-Mosley, 2022). This is not a reflection of user preference, but a consequence of how these systems reward engagement and recognisability. As Noble (2018, 17) notes, algorithms often reflect and reinforce existing social hierarchies instead of operating with true neutrality.

Algorithmic systems also shape the conditions under which filters are created and distributed. TikTok's filter ecosystem, including its Effect House and creator reward structures, incentivises the production of filters that perform well in terms of engagement. This creates an environment in which creators are encouraged to reproduce familiar and widely accepted aesthetic templates rather than experiment with alternative or disruptive forms. Consequently, the circulation of beauty filters is not only a matter of cultural expression but is also tied to economic and platform-driven logics that favour standardisation. Noble's (2018) concept of algorithmic oppression is particularly relevant for understanding how these dynamics operate at a structural level. Algorithmic oppression refers to the ways in which digital systems systematically reproduce social inequalities while appearing neutral or objective (Noble 2018, 4). With beauty filters this can be observed in how Eurocentric and heteronormative features are favoured algorithmically, embedded in both the design of filters and the systems that promote them. When such features are repeatedly presented as default or "natural", they come to define what is perceived as normal or desirable within.

In this thesis, Noble's framework is used to analyse how the recurrence of similar aesthetic modifications within the dataset reflects broader patterns of algorithmic prioritisation and visual standardisation. Algorithmic visibility plays a key role in transforming individual design choices into broader cultural norms. On TikTok, filters are circulated through recommendation systems such as the "For You" feed, where visibility is determined through opaque engagement metrics. Filters that are widely promoted and reused do not only reflect existing beauty standards, but actively reinforce them through repeated exposure and algorithmic amplification. This also supports boyd's (2023, 237) argument that algorithmic systems do not neutralise existing social arrangements but rather reify and amplify them, reconfiguring the site of power rather than eliminating it. This dynamic is evident in how TikTok's recommendation algorithms prioritise beautiful people in users' feeds (Allyn et al. 2024).

2.4.2 Beauty filters as socio-technical media objects

Beauty filters on social media can be understood as socio-technical media objects that are embedded within postfeminist and neoliberal media cultures. Rather than functioning as neutral or purely aesthetic tools, they participate in cultural logics that position femininity as a continuous project of self-improvement and visual monitoring. Postfeminist media culture frames women as active, self-managing subjects who are expected to take responsibility for their own appearance, often under the guise of empowerment and individual choice (Gill 2007; McRobbie 2009). Within this neoliberal mindset, practices of beautification are no longer imposed externally but are internalised as forms of self-care, self-expression, and personal responsibility (see Wolf 1991).

This emphasis on self-regulation aligns closely with neoliberal ideals, in which individuals are expected to optimise themselves using available tools and technologies. As Gill (2007) argues, contemporary media culture increasingly constructs femininity through discourses of choice, autonomy, and self-surveillance, while also reinforcing narrow and normative standards of beauty. McRobbie (2009) similarly highlights how postfeminist culture rearticulates feminist gains into expectations of self-discipline and continuous self-improvement. Beauty filters can be seen as extensions of these dynamics: they offer immediate, technologically mediated ways to "improve" appearance, making aesthetic labour

faster, more accessible, and more normalised. This aligns with what Gill (2007, 149) terms a postfeminist media sensibility, in which femininity is constructed through continuous self-surveillance and aesthetic labour framed as individual choice and empowerment – contributing to what McRobbie (2009, 12) describes as the "undoing" of feminism through its incorporation into popular culture.

At the same time, these processes are not open-ended or infinitely flexible. As Coy-Dibley (2016, 5–6) argues, digital self-modification technologies tend to reproduce existing beauty norms rather than radically transform them. Instead of enabling entirely new forms of appearance, they intensify and standardise already dominant ideals by making them more easily attainable and widely circulated. Similarly, Mihăilă and Braniște (2021, 106–107) show that augmented reality beauty filters indeed operate within postfeminist logics that frame appearance modification as both desirable and necessary, while presenting these practices as playful or empowering. In practice, however, such filters repeatedly apply a limited set of modifications which collectively produce a narrow and recognisable version of femininity.

The framing of beauty filters as freely chosen forms of self-expression reflects what Gill (2007, 153) describes as a postfeminist emphasis on autonomy and empowerment, yet this discourse obscures how such technologies contribute to the standardisation of appearance, echoing McRobbie's argument that feminist ideas of choice are mobilised to conceal the continued regulation of women and normalisation of certain femininity. Conversely, beauty filters can also be understood through what Gill (2007, 156) terms the "makeover paradigm", in which individuals are encouraged to perceive themselves as in need of continuous improvement, positioning the face as an object of ongoing modification and optimisation. Using beauty filters can also be understood as a continuation of the broader social expectation that women should maintain attractiveness to achieve social and economic success. (Mihăilă & Braniște 2021, 107; Blum 2005, 123.).

Understanding beauty filters as socio-technical media objects therefore requires attention to both their cultural and technical dimensions. They are shaped by both gendered expectations and aesthetic conventions, but also by the design of interfaces, visual templates, and platform affordances that determine how faces can be modified. These elements translate abstract cultural ideals into concrete, repeatable visual forms. They are embedded into the tools users engage with. Beauty filters are thus technologies that standardise and encode dominant representations of femininity. Drawing postfeminist literature suggests that beauty filters

operate within a postfeminist media sensibility characterised by self-surveillance and individualised responsibility, but also the idea of freedom of choice, that ultimately produces standardised and highly stylised forms of feminine beauty (Gill 2007, 149–156; McRobbie 2009, 12–18). In this thesis, this perspective is applied to the dataset of TikTok beauty filters by analysing recurring design features – such as skin smoothing, facial reshaping, and naming conventions – as manifestations of these postfeminist and neoliberal visual logics.

2.4.3 Digital self-presentation and gendered identity

Erving Goffman's (1959) concept of self-presentation in his book *The presentation of self in everyday life* supports the analysis of the role of beauty filters in online identity construction. According to Goffman's dramaturgical role theory, individuals engage in "impression management" in face-to-face interactions, curating the "front stage" of identity for different audiences (1959, 11). Conversely, on social media curated feeds, selfies, and edited images become performances directed toward both real and imagined audiences. The design of social networking sites facilitates self-curation: users can carefully manage what appears on their "front stage" by controlling images, captions, and filter use. Beauty filters function as tools in this performance, helping to curate another version of self.

Goffman's work also helps to observe how beauty filters construct and reproduce ideals of gendered identity. In *Gender Advertisements* (1976), Goffman argues that advertisements depict men and women as idealised versions of their respective genders and as how society thinks men and women behave, not as they actually are. They utilise female stereotypes such as appearance and gestures to signal "female". Beauty filters that duplicate idealised femininity can be seen as extensions of the same representational practices as they produce stylised versions of femininity that reinforce "restrictive ideals of femininity under the guise of consumer choice and empowerment" (Dimulescu 2015, 510; Mihăilă & Braniște, 2021, 106). In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler offers similar perspectives: Gender is not a stable identity but a performance. Similarly, Mary Ann Doane (1982, 81) offers perspective on the *masquerade*, how "womanliness is a mask which can be worn or removed". Beauty filters can be understood as facades that make femininity visually repeatable and one's looks as something that can be altered. They offer users pre-coded tools to digitally attain facial features that align with culturally dominant ideals. Rather than enabling authentic self-expression, filter use becomes a practice through which gendered norms are rehearsed,

standardised, and reproduced through digital mediation. These filters also frequently reproduce the tropes identified by Goffman (1976), including the association of femininity with youthfulness, delicacy, submissiveness, and childlike qualities.

Where Goffman analysed the gendered codes present in print advertising, beauty filters represent a more immediate and interactive iteration of the same logic in which the user is simultaneously the medium, the image, and the audience, consuming and producing (even advertising) idealised femininity in real time. Postfeminist media culture constructs women as freely choosing, empowered subjects, yet these "choices" frequently align with normative, heteronormative femininity. Filtering one's image can be framed as play (e.g., Javornik et al., 2022), self-care, or empowerment rather than compliance with beauty norms.

While Goffman's work is helpful in understanding motivations for use such as impression management, and his theories remain influential, he has been criticised for lacking theoretical perspective until his later work and for paying limited attention to structural power relations, intersectionality, and digital technologies (e.g., West and Zimmerman 1987; Butler 1990; Psathas 1996; boyd 2014; van Dijck 2013). In this thesis, Goffman's theories are therefore used not as a complete explanation, but in conversation with relevant literature and as a starting point that is reinterpreted through feminist and critical perspectives on digital culture. Goffman's framework is utilised to examine how beauty filters themselves pre-structure what kinds of impressions are possible. By offering ready-made visual templates of femininity, filters define the parameters within which self-presentation can take place. This perspective is applied to the dataset by analysing how recurring filter designs standardise specific facial features and expressions, thereby shaping what forms of femininity are made available for performance on TikTok.

2.4.4 Objectification theory and self-objectification

Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) objectification theory provides another useful lens. The framework has been utilised in similar research into body dissatisfaction and explores how women, in cultures where women's bodies are (sexually) objectified, come to internalise an observer's perspective on their own bodies. Fredrickson and Roberts suggest that this can lead to "habitual body monitoring" which can increase shame and anxiety while reducing authentic expression and bodily awareness. (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997, 175–182.) Beauty filters can

be understood as both products and reinforcers of this dynamic. By allowing users to continuously “improve” or “correct” their appearance according to external standards, filters normalise self-objectification as a habitual mode of engaging with the self. The act of representing oneself through filters reinforces this dynamic. As Paasonen et al. (2020, 15) note that visual representation itself can be a form of objectification, turning the person into something to be viewed and evaluated. This is intensified in filters, where users are encouraged to see and modify their own faces as objects to be optimised for social approval. Self-objectification is then linked to increased body surveillance, body dissatisfaction, and vulnerability to mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and disordered eating (Watson 2022).

Fredrickson and Roberts (1997, 175) write: "The most subtle yet pervasive form of appearance-based evaluation is enacted -- through gaze, or visual inspection of the body". This objectification process is intensified by the pervasiveness of social media where images dominate people's screens. Publicly shared images on social media invite to gaze at the subject, and filters help shape what is made available for inspection, presenting digitally altered versions of bodies that often conform to cultural ideals while concealing potential imperfections. An objectifying gaze is not necessarily intentional, but Fredrickson and Roberts suggest that the practice of objectifying women’s bodies functions to reinforce and express patriarchy (ibid., 177) and online, this manifests through technologies shaped by patriarchal and male-dominated cultures (Coy-Dibley 2016, 6). Rather than explaining why objectification happens, objectification theory assumes that women already exist in a culture where their bodies are constantly looked at and potentially objectified. Its goal is to highlight the psychological effects of (sexual) objectification on women. The theory posits that self-objectification happens through socialisation where women and girls internalise to “treat themselves as objects to be looked at” (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997, 178).

Some feminist scholars argue that beauty can often be seen as a form of power for women, functioning as a currency that can be exchanged for social and economic advantages[10] (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997, 178). Thus, practices often dismissed as vanity can instead be understood as efforts to enhance social standing and influence how one is perceived and treated by others. The value of beauty depends on conformity to beauty standards set by the dominant culture, typically shaped by white, male ideals. (Ibid., 178–179.) Beauty filters can

[10] For example, Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) refer to Rhoda Kesler Unger, 1979.

be understood as contemporary instruments in this exchange: They reproduce narrow, Eurocentric ideals by digitally reshaping women's appearances to align with mainstream ideals. Coy-Dibley (2016, 6) paraphrases Kathy Davis (1995) and notes that women are aware of the pressures and expectations of beauty put on them, and make active choices within them. Digital tools may offer a sense of agency by allowing women to alter their appearance themselves and explore alternative selves. Thus, filters appear to offer women enhanced social capital online but, in reality, reinforce norms and deepen reliance on online validation and limiting rather than expanding individuals' agency "since the choices one makes are restricted by, or related to, cultural definitions of beauty" (ibid.)

Self-objectification and the pursuit of beauty is not necessarily conscious or deliberately chosen. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997, 179) posit: Theories of socialisation suggest that through repeated exposure to pressures to enhance physical appearance "girls and women come to experience their efforts to improve their appearance as freely chosen, or even natural". Social media algorithms and by extension, beauty filters, reward perfection (and thus digitally altered bodies) to the point where the use of filters feels more like an aspect of "normal" online behaviour and less like a response to external demands. Beauty filters and beauty app interfaces use rating and monitoring systems that encourage women to engage in constant self-monitoring of their appearance to achieve their ideal social media presence. Through these mechanisms, users are encouraged to present idealised, digitally enhanced versions of themselves that meet social expectations and standards. Further, comparing one's body to others often leads to more selfie editing. (Mihăilă & Braniște 2021, 107.)

Objectification theory can also be extended to discussions around aging by showing how aging affects women's mental health differently depending on how strongly they internalise cultural ideals. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) argue that in a culture where women's bodies are persistently objectified, ageing represents a loss of social value. Growing older becomes synonymous with stepping outside the objectifying gaze, which can produce feelings of shame, invisibility, or decline (ibid., 181–182; 194–195). These insights remain relevant today, particularly as digital technologies like beauty filters offer new tools for "reversing" or concealing signs of age. Objectification theory provides a lens to analyse beauty filters as technologies that systematically render the face as an object to be evaluated, modified, and optimised according to culturally dominant standards. Tensions between conformity and resistance are not new. Paasonen et al. (2020, 44–46) note that second-wave feminist activism already critiqued 'female looked-at-ness' – the cultural pressure on women to shape their

appearance in accordance with heteronormative ideals of desirability. Beauty filters are a contemporary manifestation of the same pressure that is now embedded directly into the tools women use to present themselves online. Objectification theory thus provides a lens through which to analyse beauty filters as technologies that systematically render the face as an object to be evaluated, modified, and optimised according to culturally dominant standards.

2.5 Summary and research gap

This thesis situates beauty filters within a broader landscape of media representations, body image research, and feminist critiques of beauty culture. Noble's (2018) concept of algorithmic oppression and postfeminist media theory serve as the primary analytical lenses, while Goffman's (1959; 1976) self-presentation framework and objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997) provide further tools for examining how these dynamics operate at the level of individual identity and self-perception. Social comparison theory (Festinger 1954) and the tripartite influence model (Thompson et al. 1999) offer supplementary context for understanding how users internalise the ideals that filters promote. Studies show that social media intensifies appearance pressures at increasingly younger ages, reinforcing sociocultural beauty ideals and reducing emotional well-being (Piccerillo et al. 2025). Research on selfie-editing further illustrates that seemingly playful practices of enhancing one's own image can generate dissatisfaction by widening the gap between "real" and idealised appearance (Tiggemann et al. 2020). Feminist critiques frame filters as extensions of the patriarchal gaze, consumer culture, and neoliberal ideals of self-optimisation: beauty filters are often marketed as convenient tools of empowerment and choice, yet they reproduce Eurocentric, feminised standards of beauty that narrow diversity rather than expand it. Phenomena such as *Instagram face* and concerns about *Snapchat dysmorphia* exemplify how digital technologies reshape beauty norms by erasing individuality and promoting standardised beauty (Castillo-Hermosilla et al. 2023; Lavrence & Cambre 2020). Existing scholarship has therefore focused predominantly on users' psychological responses to filtered images and on broader cultural critiques, while giving comparatively less attention to how beauty filters themselves encode and circulate particular ideals of femininity.

There has been important research into beauty filters on Instagram (e.g., Miller 2025; Miller & McIntyre 2022), but the discontinuation of third-party filters on Meta platforms has shifted

beauty-filter culture toward other sites such as TikTok. This evolution and migration has received comparatively less scholarly attention, particularly with regard to TikTok's in-app beauty filters and the platform-specific ways in which they are designed, named, and promoted. Moreover, there is limited academic research that explicitly examines the relationship between beauty filters and ageing or anti-ageing discourses. Drawing on feminist literature from the 1990s, I apply earlier theoretical frameworks (e.g., Wolf 1991, Friedan 1993) to contemporary beauty filters, arguing that the anti-ageing effects of these filters reproduce long-standing narratives that equate youth with beauty and social value. By smoothing wrinkles and erasing visible signs of ageing, beauty filters perpetuate the erasure of older women from social media and reinforce ageism, suggesting continuity rather than rupture between traditional beauty industries and digital platforms.

This thesis addresses these gaps by examining TikTok beauty filters as socio-technical cultural objects situated within discourses of gender, race, and platform power. It shifts from a primary focus on user outcomes to examine the visual design features, naming conventions, and platform logics through which beauty filters construct and normalise specific representations of femininity. Noble's concept of algorithmic oppression explains how platform infrastructures translate cultural ideals into structural defaults – amplifying filters that conform to Eurocentric and heteronormative beauty norms while presenting this circulation as neutral or organic. Postfeminist media theory in turn illuminates how filter use is culturally framed as individual choice and empowerment rather than conformity, obscuring the extent to which these tools reproduce and standardise dominant beauty ideals. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing conversations about digital self-presentation and the persistence of normative beauty ideals on social media (Watson 2022).

At the same time, I acknowledge counter-discourses and resistant practices exist, reminding that digital technologies are not passively consumed but actively negotiated within culture. Building on earlier mentioned theoretical frameworks, this thesis treats beauty filters as technological and cultural texts and investigates how they reproduce, reshape, or occasionally resist dominant beauty ideals. The next chapter outlines the methodological approach and presents the dataset through which these theoretical frameworks are applied.

3 Methodology, research material, and process

This thesis examines how AR beauty filters on TikTok reproduce and circulate gendered and racialised beauty ideals by documenting and analysing filters directly from TikTok in conversation with relevant literature. The approach focuses on filter design features, naming conventions, and platform visibility, situated within feminist media theory and objectification frameworks. By analysing filters already categorised as “beauty” filters, I can observe how femininity is pre-scripted through these tools and made available for repetition.

TikTok was selected as the primary site of analysis due to its central role as a social networking site with a strong beauty culture and its comparatively permissive stance on third-party filter creation. TikTok's Effect House and its in-app filter creator support a wide range of tools for filter creation, providing a dynamic and organic environment for observing which types of beauty filters are repeatedly used and promoted. While Snapchat continues to allow third-party filters through its Lens Studio tool, most communication on Snapchat is private rather than public, making TikTok a more suitable site for observing how beauty filters circulate at scale.

3.1 Documenting beauty filters on TikTok

I conducted the analysis on TikTok using a newly created account in order to observe how beauty filters are presented to users with minimal prior platform interaction. Due to TikTok's restrictions[11] on account creation, the account was created through my existing Facebook account, with the year of birth set as 1999. No content was posted, followed, or interacted with prior to the analysis. TikTok's interface and filter availability are algorithmically shaped by factors including age, location, and linked accounts. These processes are opaque and subject to change, and while it is not possible to determine precisely how they influenced the filters displayed, acknowledging them is essential. Additionally, the effects of the filters were tested directly on me through the front camera on my personal mobile phone which is an iPhone 15 Pro. The TikTok filter interface does not provide “before/after” comparison images beyond small preview icons, and purely technical analysis was not possible because the code and metadata of the filters were inaccessible. The analysis therefore relied on visual image

[11] I could not create an account with an email without TikTok banning my newly created account immediately.

analysis to examine how each filter altered my facial features (see Rose 2023; Bainotti & Rogers 2022). This introduces a limited degree of interpretive subjectivity, which is acknowledged as part of the analytical process. Lastly, the filters analysed should not be understood as a neutral or comprehensive catalogue of TikTok beauty filters, but as a small selection of filters made visible to a specific user profile at a specific moment in time.

After creating the account, I navigated to the filter tab. The default "Trending" section did not prominently feature beauty filters, so I switched to the dedicated "Beauty" category. The existence of this category itself reflects TikTok's recognition of beauty filters as a distinct and desirable mode of visual engagement. Within the "Beauty" tab, a total of 101 filters were available at the time of analysis. All filters presented in this category were documented and manually analysed one by one. Of these 101 filters, 42 were excluded from the primary analysis as they did not function as beauty filters in any conventional sense. These included filters designed primarily for humour, facial distortion, object overlays, animal transformations, or complete facial replacement.

The remaining 59 filters constitute the primary dataset. These were identified as beauty filters based on shared characteristics such as skin smoothing or lightening, facial slimming, feature reshaping, makeup simulation, or enhancement of youth-associated traits. Each filter was documented using a structured analytical framework that recorded:

- The filter name and number of uses
- Visual effects applied to the face
- The filter creator and their profile details (if available)
- Cultural and aesthetic references implied by the filter design

This systematic documentation allowed for comparative analysis across filters, highlighting recurring visual patterns and design conventions. The full dataset can be accessed through Appendix 1.

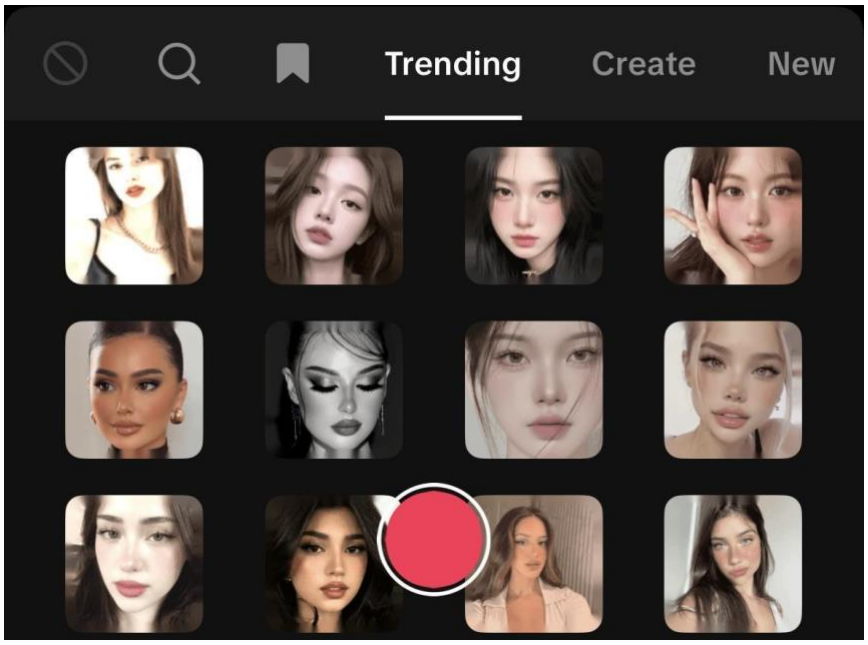

Figure 1. A screen capture of different beauty filters on TikTok's "Trending" page taken after the dataset was collected, showcasing Eurocentric filters, some of which incorporate East or Southeast Asian aesthetic elements.

The affordances by TikTok's dynamic algorithm presented an interesting feature. Once filters were tested, the platform began recommending beauty filters in the trending section when they were not present there in the beginning, suggesting that the algorithm had identified this as an emerging area of interest. This self-reinforcing mechanism echoes the broader argument of this thesis, that users are subtly directed toward beauty-enhancing content through algorithmic feedback loops that normalise aesthetic modification (Noble 2018).

3.2 Methodological justification, limitations, and ethical considerations

The primary aim of this thesis is to examine how AR beauty filters function as visual and technological extensions of long-standing ideals of femininity, and how they participate in shaping contemporary beauty norms. I examine how these filters reproduce and reinforce Eurocentric beauty standards, youth-oriented aesthetics, and the postfeminist logic of self-optimisation within TikTok's ecosystem. By analysing the visual features and prominence of selected trending beauty filters, this thesis explores how technologies of self-presentation influence the way appearance and gender are represented in digital popular culture. The focus is on the cultural, visual, and discursive mechanisms through which beauty filters shape digital selfhood and social perceptions of the body.

This thesis posits that beauty filters function not merely as tools of play or self-expression, but as cultural technologies that reflect and reproduce hegemonic beauty ideals. While quantitative methods such as surveys or psychological experiments are frequently utilised in studies of body image and social media use, this research takes a qualitative, interpretive approach instead. Quantitative surveys could reveal how many users feel dissatisfied after using filters, and how they are used, but they would offer limited insight into how and *why* such filters reproduce specific aesthetic hierarchies or technological biases. Beauty filters operate through affective and visual registers that cannot easily be reduced to survey responses. The interpretive approach draws from feminist media theory, objectification theory, Noble's concept of algorithmic oppression, and postfeminist critiques of neoliberal self-optimisation, emphasising both the symbolic and structural dimensions of beauty online.

Conducting research on commercial platforms raises ethical concerns. The analysis relies on algorithmically surfaced content that is opaque, constantly evolving, and shaped by inferred demographics. No personal data was collected, users were not interacted with, and only public filters were documented. Although creator anonymity was considered, I chose to keep creator usernames visible in the dataset. The filters analysed are publicly available and designed for mass use; many creators have significant followings and may receive financial compensation through TikTok's Effect House reward programme. As Noble (2018) argues, algorithmic systems embed structural inequalities that require critical interpretation of platform outputs. Limitations include the platform-specific and temporally-bound nature of the dataset: TikTok's filter ecosystem changes rapidly through updates, moderation, and algorithmic shifts. Some dataset creators were banned prior to analysis but their filters had remained visible. Moreover, a single account means findings reflect one algorithmic experience rather than a universal picture of TikTok. This thesis also does not analyse how users subjectively experience filters, nor how different faces may be affected differently by the same filter. Instead, it focuses on the structural level of representation: what kinds of faces filters assume, construct, and reward.

3.3 Beauty ideals, according to TikTok’s beauty filters

The analysis of beauty filters on TikTok reveals a recurring set of coherent visual modifications, including skin smoothing and lightening, facial slimming, nose narrowing, eye enlargement, and lip enhancement. Across the dataset, these filters display similarities in their

design logic, collectively producing similar, standardised ideals of beauty. This standardisation operates through repetition: the same enhancements are applied regardless of facial structure, age, or racialised features. As a result, the homogeneous designs replace cultural and ethnic plurality with consistent facial modifications, portraying specific facial proportions, textures, and contours as universally desirable and attainable. However, this being said, the effects of these filters are not always uniform across users. When applied to faces that might deviate from the *assumed* template[12], some filters produce exaggerated or distorted outcomes, revealing implicit assumptions about the "expected" or default user. As Noble (2018) emphasises, it is important to consider who technologies are designed for and whose bodies are centred in their construction. While beauty filters appear accessible to all, their design reflects normative facial ideals that do not accommodate all users equally.

This process of standardisation aligns with Goffman's concept of ritualised representation in which femininity is not depicted as diversity or intersectionality, but as an idealised and stylised form that is made culturally legible through repetition. According to Mihăilă & Braniște (2021, 106), AR beauty filters replicate "exemplary or normative femininity images". Butler's (1990) concept of performativity further illuminates that filters function as technological templates that make femininity repeatable and editable. This performativity turns femininity into something enacted through digital tools and scripts rather than an organic expression of self. Consistently using distorting beauty filters also encourages self-surveillance, bodily monitoring, and self-objectification (Mihăilă & Braniște 2021, 108).

Several of the most widely used beauty filters in the dataset were created by the same Effect House designers and display highly similar patterns of facial augmentation, including skin smoothing, facial slimming, nose pinching, and lip enhancement. Many creators appeared multiple times in the dataset, often with several filters reaching millions of uses, suggesting that popular designers repeatedly reproduce the same aesthetic templates with little variety despite the large volume of filters available (Miller & McIntyre 2022, 3621). For instance, the creator @annareee27 appears seventeen times across the dataset, with filters that consistently apply near-identical facial modifications, and the creator repeatedly references Bratz dolls, which are stylised, hyper-feminine visual archetypes. Although the mechanisms through which certain creators gain prominence remain obscured, the recurrence of near-identical

[12] That is, Caucasian.

filters with high usage indicates that platform structures and creator hierarchies influence which aesthetic forms circulate most widely.

The repetition of the highly stylised and near-identical design patterns may be further reinforced by TikTok's Effect Creator Rewards programme, which likely financially incentivises third-party creators to create filters that generate high engagement. Makeup and beauty effects, in particular, must reach substantially higher usage thresholds to become monetisable, encouraging designers to produce filters that conform to already dominant beauty norms and that perform reliably across large user populations (TikTok 2026a). These mechanisms suggest that it is more lucrative for creators to design beautifying filters than explicitly dissident ones. Indeed, appearing beautiful stimulates visual hedonism due to its positive affect which is one of the motivations for filter use (see Javornik et al. 2022; Lavrence and Cambre 2020). The limited variation across filters created by the same designers suggests that economic incentives may cause filter creators to turn to reproducibility and visual predictability over aesthetic experimentation. While TikTok does not explicitly promote specific beauty ideals, its reward structures prioritise effects that achieve mass adoption, contributing to the continued circulation of a narrow range of facial aesthetics.

The prominence and popularity of face-altering beauty filters on TikTok demonstrates how platforms have a role in shaping beauty ideals. Algorithmic visibility ensures that certain faces become more visible, more reproducible, and more desirable, while others become marginal in social media aesthetics. Femininity is thus produced and enforced through a combination of cultural representation and platform architecture. A more detailed analysis of these patterns will be developed in Chapter 5.

4 Filters in everyday social media

Beauty filters are designed to "inspect, rate, assess, monitor, or optimise physical appearance" (Mihăilă & Braniște 2021, 106). They structure how users see themselves and what aspects of the face are open to modification. Fixed templates – like beauty filters or the concept of the Instagram face – help shape what users perceive as ideal, acceptable, or achievable, and direct their attention to what features can or should be edited and how those features should look (Coy-Dibley 2016, 5). In some ways, filters offer users access to an identity that their material body cannot reach, allowing the digital image to exceed physical reality. Importantly, these aesthetic standards are not confined to the platforms from which they originate. Site specific filters do not only exist on the platforms they were created for: Online images and videos are "circulated across platforms and the web", and thus so do filter-enhanced images (Bainotti & Rogers 2022). Indeed, filtered images are shared across online platforms from social media sites to dating apps.

According to a 2022 survey13 which examined online behaviour among Finnish adolescent girls, forty-five percent reported wishing they looked more like the influencers they follow (Dove, 2022). This pattern of upward social comparison (Festinger 1954) illustrates the internalisation of appearance ideals and appearance-based comparison through media and peer influence, echoed by the tripartite influence model. Because influencers' images are frequently filtered, edited, and carefully curated, the standards against which adolescents compare themselves are largely unattainable. Conversely, Miller and McIntyre (2022, 3622) offer further insight that celebrities apply beauty filters on faces that have already been cosmetically and/or surgically altered, presenting hyper-idealised versions of themselves to their audiences. This helps to explain why over half of respondents (54%) in the 2022 survey reported considering changing their appearance after viewing content by influencers: These upward comparisons can lead to behavioural changes such as body editing, and negative thinking patterns such as body dysmorphia. The high prevalence of photo editing and filter use (73%) further suggests that adolescents are not only passive recipients of idealised

[13] The survey referenced here was conducted by Syno in July 2022 on behalf of Dove, with 508 girls aged 10–17 and 454 of their guardians participating. Dove is a commercial company with a financial interest in promoting body image concerns as a social issue, and this research has not undergone independent peer review. It is cited here for its illustrative value in providing Finnish context.

imagery but are compelled to participate in reproducing the same aesthetic ideals. (Dove 2022).

4.1 Selfies and selfie-editing in popular culture

First, to understand the discourse and research of beauty filters, we must understand where they came from. Selfies have become a central form of self-presentation in contemporary digital popular culture as social networking sites have gained popularity and amassed hundreds of millions of daily users. In selfies, the subject of the photograph is both the photographer and the object. Posting and taking selfies is also a way of producing and curating one's image for their online audiences. How you take selfies matters. Research shows that the frequency of selfie-taking is linked to patterns of social comparison, particularly with peers (Watson, 2022) and Paasonen et al. (2020, 15) suggest that visual representation itself is objectifying. Individuals who often take selfies, who use social media heavily, and who are highly aware of how they are perceived by others are more likely to edit their selfies before sharing them. This editing is not necessarily a response to dissatisfaction with one's real-life appearance. Rather, it reflects a desire to look better or to conform to peer expectations online14. Coy-Dibley (2016, 2) elaborates how women are not only pressured to compete against socially constructed beauty standards, but also against their own images. In many cases editing images appears to be the only accessible means of reaching otherwise unattainable beauty standards. Even individuals who are confident in their looks may still engage in editing practices to present a more polished or idealised version of themselves. (Chae 2016, 374–375.) Miller (2025, 4) suggests, utilising Meredith Jones' (2012) concept of the "fashionable face", that women's engagement with beauty filters can be understood as a response to societal pressures to maintain aesthetically ideal appearances. Furthermore, when given the opportunity to "control" images, the desire to do so intensifies (Coy-Dibley 2016, 6).

Selfies function in a feedback loop: the more selfies one takes and views, the more opportunities arise to scrutinise one's appearance and thus appearance comparisons. Social

[14] Extending this logic, Rose (2023, 41) argues that "the seeing of an image thus always takes place in a particular social context that mediates its impact." Then, the presence of edited images, or the assumption that images have been edited, may be considered normal or even expected on social media. However, if filtered or edited images were removed from this context and used for other purposes such as government identification, their impact and interpretation would be different.

media amplifies this process and exposes users to seemingly endless streams of selfies and provides instant feedback in the form of likes, comments, and shares. This feedback becomes central to the online presentation of self, highlighting the role of an audience in shaping how selfies are taken, edited, and circulated. The pursuit of online validation can lead users to a reliance on external approval, "linking one's sense of self-worth to online feedback" (Piccerillo et al. 2025, 3). Selfie-editing becomes a form of digital self-fashioning – a temporary makeover that creates an "ideal self" for online consumption, and for online consumption only. Indeed, for selfie-editors, the discrepancy between their offline appearance and their edited, idealised online self can cause facial and body dissatisfaction and detachment from their real-life looks (Tiggemann et al. 2020). Some may become increasingly immersed in their digital image, editing their pictures in a consistent way, while others seek to bridge the gap through cosmetic procedures. This trend is reflected in the rise of "selfie-driven" plastic surgery (Mihăilă & Braniște 2021, 109; Aldosari 2020). For example, a 2020 survey found a significant correlation between filter use and the desire for cosmetic surgery: Nearly 38% of participants reported wanting cosmetic procedures because of selfies, and among them, 60% regularly used filters (Aldosari 2020). This relationship was particularly notable among women to whom a majority of filters are targeted to. The survey found that frequent exposure to filtered and idealised images of oneself may heighten dissatisfaction with appearance and motivate surgical modification. Surgical makeovers have been marketed as equalising beauty "by implying "everyone" (including those not blessed genetically or financially) has the "right" to thin thighs and small noses" (Blum 2005, 112). For audiences, repeated exposure to edited selfies reinforces unrealistic beauty standards, fuelling appearance-based comparisons and pressures to alter one's own looks to conform.

4.1.1 Curating the online self

As established in Chapter 2, filters differ from traditional editing in their immediacy and automaticity – changes are applied in real time with little deliberate input from the user, which arguably normalises idealised beauty standards in more pervasive ways than manual editing. Selfie-editing offers a way for users to shape who they want to be online, potentially challenging social norms and expectations rather than submitting to them (Coy-Dibley 2016, 5).

Editing is usually a deliberate act carried out after the photo is taken, where individuals make conscious decisions about which features to alter and to what extent. In some way, this gives people more autonomy[15]. Selfie-editing technology allows users to construct and reconstruct the self on their own terms, enabling fluid, multiple, and even disguised identities in ways that are not possible offline and physically. In this way, selfie-editing tools can challenge and democratise beauty culture by offering the same beauty templates to women who do not fit into beauty standards without digital intervention. In practice, such tools often end up reinforcing and recreating the very standards imposed on women. (Coy-Dibley 2016, 5). Filters, on the other hand, are pre-determined, work in real time and apply changes automatically, often requiring little awareness or effort from the user. This immediacy could make filters feel less like an intentional alteration and more like an integrated part of image production. Thus, it could be argued that the immediacy of filters normalises idealised beauty standards in more perverse ways than traditional editing practices. Mihăilă and Braniște (2021, 108) continue: Both selfie-taking and usage of beauty filters are linked to higher social anxiety, cosmetic surgery intentions, and social media addiction. This is evident in especially adolescents: Viewing edited photos, compared to unedited ones, directly lowers adolescent girls' body image (Roberts et al. 2022).

4.1.2 Understanding AR-filters

Seeing is no longer believing. Augmented reality (AR) filters have become a defining feature of contemporary digital culture, particularly on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat – platforms which host filters and where selfie sharing is the most prevalent (Javornik et al. 2022). These filters range from "neutral" effects for entertainment purposes – like adding cartoon puppy ears popularised by Snapchat in 2015 – to filters with more transformative facial modifications, such as smoothing skin, enlarging eyes, or slimming the jawline to make the user appear "better". While AR filters were first popularised as playful add-ons, they began to facilitate something else entirely when their novelty wore off – that is, a digital climate where editing has become naturalised (Lavrence & Cambre 2020, 11). At their core, AR filters function through a combination of face detection and digital mapping.

[15] Some scholars argue that the sense of autonomy offered by editing tools is an illusion as these technologies reinforce and intensify prevailing beauty pressures, ultimately limiting women's freedom by compelling them to conform to entrenched beauty norms.

The process begins when an algorithm analyses the pixels captured by a camera to identify key facial landmarks such as the eyes, nose, lips, and jawline. Once detected, a dynamic digital mask is overlaid onto the user's image. This mask moves in real time with the user's expressions, adjusting to blinking, smiling, or changes in head position. Visual effects are then applied to this mapped surface, producing the familiar alterations such as skin smoothing, lip enhancement, or facial contouring. (Herrington 2019; Ryan-Mosley 2022; Clifton, 2024.).

While some contemporary filters integrate artificial intelligence to transform still images into AI-generated likenesses, most rely primarily on AR technology. These tools have become widely accessible through publicly available software such as Meta's Spark AR, which is no longer supported, and TikTok's Effect House, which allow users to create, modify, and publish their own filters. Following Meta's decision in August 2024, to stop supporting third-party filter content in January 2025, over two million filters were removed from Meta's apps (Davis 2024; The Laotian Times 2024; Clifton 2024). Before that, Meta had limited face distorting beauty filters from appearing in Facebook and Instagram's "Effect Gallery" which displays popular filters at that time, but non-surgery promoting beauty filters were not banned or reinforced[16] in any particular way (Boseley 2022; Miller & McIntyre 2022, 3618). One could argue that any filter which distorts users' facial features indirectly encourages cosmetic modification, at least at the level of imagination and desire. Snapchat with their "Lens Studio" and TikTok's "Effect House" remain the primary platforms where user-generated filters can be created and shared freely. The popularity of third-party designs on TikTok is notable, with individual filters often garnering thousands or even hundreds of thousands of uses. Famously, the *Bold Glamour* filter has been used in over 296.1 million TikToks as of May 2026, illustrating the cultural reach and algorithmic amplification of AR-driven beauty enhancement on TikTok. An investigation into TikTok's governance found that TikTok's employees and executives knew about the app's harmful effects on its users and specifically identified beauty filters as causing harm and singled out the *Bold Glamour* filter as an example (Allyn et al. 2024).

[16] A Facebook spokesperson said "Effects that directly promote cosmetic surgery are not allowed on Instagram", but this leaves room for other facial distorting filters (Boseley 2022).

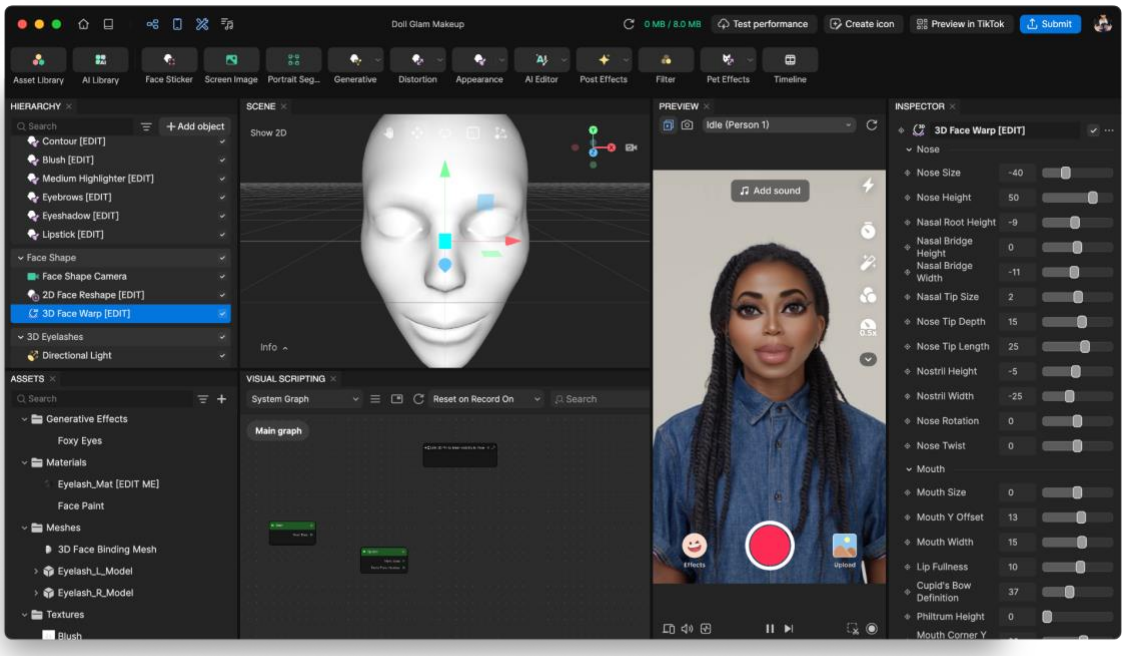

Figure 2. Screenshot of TikTok's Effect House interface using an in-application filter called "Doll Glam Makeup" demonstrating the various detailed modifications available.

Although AR filters and traditional photo-editing apps like Facetune or Photoshop share the purpose of modifying images, their ways of operating are distinct and different. "Traditional" photo editing typically requires manual adjustment of a still image: users might choose to smooth skin, whiten teeth, or adjust lighting after the photo has been taken. These changes are static, intentional, and often take time. AR filters, by contrast, work in real time and in motion. They do not require post-production effort but instead instantly overlay modifications as users take photos or record videos. Filters are a template applied analogously to each user despite their features (Miller 2025, 6). Furthermore, while photo-editing apps utilise after-the-fact editing, AR filters provide the end result in real time. This real-time enhancement can be appealing, offering users new ways to play with appearance, but it also raises concerns about self-perception, authenticity, and mental health, particularly among young people. Lastly, the filters on social media apps such as TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat do not support uploading pictures and applying filters onto them, but instead the affordances of the apps encourage users to take pictures or videos on the app itself. This might be a design flaw or a deliberate attempt to increase engagement on the apps.

4.2 Filters to try on

Goffman's analysis of women's clothing in *Gender Advertisements* (1976, 51) can be extended to the use of beauty filters on social media. Just as Goffman observed that female attire in advertisements often takes on "costume-like" characteristics that signify play, experimentation, and a lack of deep identification, AR filters similarly portray appearance as something provisional, adjustable, and interchangeable. Since contemporary social networking sites are saturated with pictures that have AR filters overlaid on them, the extent of which such filters can be viewed and accessed online enables users to cycle through filters much faster one might change outfits: echoing Goffman, treating self-presentation as a playful experiment in visual identity. The ease with which filters can be applied and discarded reinforces the impression that appearance is not a fixed or authentic reflection of self, but rather a flexible surface open to modification. Miller (2025, 2) continues this idea: Beauty technologies serve as "try on" tools for non-surgical "tweakments" such as Botox or filler and allow users to try on different features and identities.

Patriarchal Western society has constructed women's aesthetics in highly heteronormative and commodified ways, shaping them for the male gaze (Coy-Dibley 2016, 4). Expanding on this, Dimulescu (2015, 510) observes:

> Being beautiful, feeling beautiful and looking beautiful are social and cultural practices associated with women's identity and self-worth.

Indeed, the male gaze has long functioned as a regulatory force over women's appearance and behaviour, however finding new meaning in the age of beauty filters. At the same time, as Goffman points out, this apparent playfulness does not necessarily diminish the seriousness with which such appearances are received. Instead, filters situate women (and also men) within a cultural economy where time and emotional investment are directed toward achieving a "perfected" look that aligns with the prevailing beauty standards. Much like clothing in advertising, filters thus operate both as experimentation and mechanisms of social regulation: They invite users to try on idealised versions of themselves, while simultaneously reinforcing the very norms that dictate which appearances are valued. Thus, beauty filters have the potential to function as contemporary digital "costumes", tools through which gendered identities are staged, repeated, and evaluated in the performative space of social media. Miller (2025, 4) also suggests that the use of beauty filters could be related to the expectation put on women to maintain an up-to-date look, like a fashionable wardrobe except

it now extends to cosmetically or digitally altered faces. Moreover, Goffman's (1979) distinction between everyday rituals and their "hyper-ritualised" commercial depictions can be applied to beauty filters. Filters standardise and exaggerate existing beauty conventions in much the same way advertisements edit out the "dull footage" of ordinary life. What remains promoted to women is an idealised representation of femininity – smooth skin, symmetrical features, perfected proportions – presented as if it were real and natural. Just as advertising rituals sell a vision of gender relations, filters sell a vision of beauty: a curated, hyper-ritualised image that obscures the imperfections of people's "real" appearance making them conform. Lavrence and Cambre (2021, 11) note that modifying one's appearance toward heteronormative beauty ideals is often incentivised through platform feedback mechanisms such as likes and comments, particularly among cisgender women.

However, the perpetuation of beauty norms cannot be explained only through the dynamics of the male gaze or male coercion. As Blum (2005, 123) argues, such norms are structural and deeply internalised, reproduced through women's own participation in the systems that sustain them. This internalisation transforms external surveillance into self-regulation, a form of discipline that operates even in the absence of an external observer. Beauty filters illustrate this process of self-objectification by enabling users to modify, "correct", or enhance their facial features, transforming social ideals and expectations into visible, editable features. Conversely, when compiling the dataset, I noticed that many of the filter creators appeared to be women, illustrating how beauty ideals are sustained through women's participation in the very systems that circulate the normative ideals. The affordances of social media apps become a mirror that prescribes how one should or could look, if only they did *this* and *that*. This continuous act of self-surveillance – checking, adjusting, and perfecting one's image – also exists beyond the moment of capture, shaping offline self-perception, too.

4.3 Beauty filters reproducing Western beauty ideals

According to Bordo (1993, 21–22) the female body is not a "site of individual self-determination", but socially constructed and historically colonised – then notes that patriarchal practises are historically and socially more complex than depicting women as "passive, without agency, a depiction that overlooks both women's collusions with patriarchal culture and their frequent efforts at resistance." Fredrickson and Roberts (1997, 181)

paraphrase Wolf17 who noted over three decades ago in 1991 that Western media was saturated with depictions of idealised female bodies characterised by youth, slimness, and whiteness. In The Beauty Myth (1991), Wolf argues that the pervasiveness of such imagery caused alternative representations of beauty to be almost invisible, popularising and universalising the Western European beauty ideals. Despite claims of "neutral" technology and increasing diversity and inclusivity on global social media platforms (Miller 2025, 4), these platforms continue to reproduce similar norms of youth, slimness, and whiteness, now intensified through algorithmic amplification and the widespread use of photo-editing tools and beauty filters. The inclusion of "ethnic" traits – such as plump lips and "fox eyes" – in beauty filters work to emphasise and maintain Whiteness instead of aiming for inclusivity (Miller 2025, 3).

Beauty filters progressively reshape beauty ideals toward a more feminine image (Mihăilă & Braniște 2021, 108). Across literature and the dataset used in this thesis, they are characterised by smooth, brightened and lightened skin, smaller noses, bigger lips, narrower jaw, and bigger or elongated eyes, as well as makeup application18. Beauty filters are presented to consumers as tools for playful self-expression, but often strengthen and reproduce these long-standing aesthetic hierarchies. Many of the popular filters on TikTok, for example, augment and soften features in ways that align with Eurocentric ideals of beauty. Rather than expanding the range of possible appearances, filters tend to narrow them, producing homogenised digital faces that conform to whitened and feminised archetypes. White users can appropriate "ethnic" beauty while still preserving their whiteness. At the same time, it sends a contradictory message to people of colour: Ethnic features associated with their racialised identities may be adopted, but they are not as valued when attached to their non-white identities (Ryan-Mosley 2021b). According to Miller (2025, 3), this pressure put on women of colour to "whitewash" their appearance is a continuation of long-standing Eurocentric beauty standards that now extends to beauty filters. This phenomenon is present in the Instagram face of poreless and brightened, yet tan skin, full plump lips, small or pinched nose, high cheekbones, and wide eyes that seemingly appropriates features from different ethnicities but still appearing Western.

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[17]This thesis draws on Wolf's (1991) analysis of beauty culture as a system of social control, while recognising subsequent scholarly critiques of her empirical claims and broader work. For example, her anorexia statistics have been widely critiqued for inaccuracy (Schoemaker 2004).

[18] How and what type of makeup is applied, however, depends largely on the filter, but many overlay longer eyelashes on the user.

Sometimes the aesthetic (cute, sexy, or playful – doe eyes or fox eyes) changes, but the bottom line does not.

Snapchat dysmorphia and the pursuit of the Instagram face are interlinked. Both demonstrate how filters mediate new aesthetic aspirations by reinforcing Eurocentric standards and re-centering the digitally altered self as the benchmark of beauty. The filtered image becomes both the source of aspiration and the model against which one's embodied self is judged, deepening cycles of dissatisfaction and further entrenching cultural ideals that privilege youth, slimness, and whiteness. Castillo-Hermosilla et al. (2024, 99) point out that constant adherence to filters and the beauty ideals they reproduce has the potential to "-- homogenise women's bodies as they aim to shape it to conform to existing beauty ideals, thereby reinforcing a correct way female bodies should look like."

The gap between real and idealised appearance has been linked to disordered eating, rising anxiety and depression rates, and body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) (see Watson 2022; Di Gesto et al., 2022; Vendemia & DeAndrea, 2021). The phenomenon of Snapchat dysmorphia illustrates the escalating psychological risks tied to these technologies that facilitate body comparisons (Mihăilă & Braniște, 2021, 106). The persistence of the pervasive beauty ideals highlights how technologies that are marketed as creative, are in fact designed within cultural systems of power, which ties back to Noble's (2018) idea of algorithmic oppression – that algorithmic design often reflects the biases of its creators and the cultural contexts in which it is developed. Thus, filters function as racialised technologies. By pushing certain norms, they marginalise others. This is evident in controversies surrounding filters on apps such as FaceTune, Snapchat, and TikTok, where filters have been criticised for lightening darker skin tones or erasing features associated with non-white identities. This criticism echoes the critiques of feminist scholars such as Wolf (1991), but in the digital milieu their reach is amplified.

Moreover, the global circulation of Western-designed filters universalises these beauty norms far beyond their historical and geographical origins. In regions such as East Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, local users encounter and engage with filters that reproduce Eurocentric ideals, reinforcing the perception that beauty is synonymous with whiteness and Western features. At the same time, local variations emerge and blend into Western aesthetics. An example is the popular "V-line" filters in East Asia, which elongate the jawline, or Korean "aegyo sal", popular especially with Generation Z. Nonetheless, the overarching

trend remains one of convergence towards a narrow, Westernised aesthetic ideal. Beauty filters also contribute to digital colonialism: the imposition of cultural values and norms through technological infrastructures designed in the Global North (Ndemo 2024). While social media companies increasingly claim to embrace diversity, their platforms' most popular filters continue to encode whiteness as the aspirational default.

4.4 Colourism and skin lightening effects in filters

Observing popular and trending beauty filters, a phenomenon that manifests itself is the persistence of colourism, or the prevalence of lighter skin tones over darker ones. Racial discrimination and colourism are deeply rooted in Eurocentric ideals of beauty and colourism has deep historical roots in colonial and Western visual cultures, where whiteness has long been constructed as synonymous with purity and desirability, reinforced by colonialist ideologies (Dinkar et al. 2025, iii–iv)). Western beauty standards encourage women of colour to alter their appearance to better fit these norms around hair texture, skin tone, and facial features. Not conforming to these ideals can affect their access to employment, social mobility, public visibility, and desirability in dating and marriage (Miller 2025, 5). This bias can also be found in beauty filters and the algorithms that distribute them (see Noble 2018). A quick look at the filter catalogue on TikTok (Appendix 1) shows that many popular filters automatically apply skin-lightening effects, smoothing and brightening complexions (Ryan-Mosley 2022). Miller (2025, 9; 12) found that many Instagram third-party beauty filters that changed the user's eye colour overwhelmingly lightened eyes to blue, grey, light blue, or green while brown eyes were underrepresented. These enhancements are offered as beauty improvements, yet they reproduce racialised hierarchies by presenting whiteness as the default aesthetic ideal. In their article *Racial Bias in the Beautyverse: Evaluation of Augmented-Reality Beauty Filters,* Riccio and Oliver (2023) found that beautifying filters make people of different races appear whiter. They demonstrate that the application of beauty filters systematically alters facial features in ways that increase the likelihood of people from different racial backgrounds being classified as white by algorithmic race-classification systems.

The skin lightening effects of filters have been called racist (Mulaudzi 2017; BBC 2016) due to the implicit racial biases such as whitewashing people of colour. Not only do some beauty filters lighten faces, they also pinch noses and lighten users' eyes to conform to Eurocentric

beauty ideals, implying that “people should look whiter to be considered beautiful” (Riccio & Oliver 2023, 715). Similar to how lighter skin is often seen as more beautiful, blue eyes are commonly viewed as the most attractive eye colour. As eye colour is connected to pigmentation, the preference for blue, green, and other lighter eye colors can reflect broader beauty standards that favor whiteness and lighter skin tones. (Miller 2025, 12.) Furthermore, Riccio and Oliver (2023) posit that this Eurocentrism can be also seen in the “colonisation of ethnic features as an aesthetic”, meaning certain features such as big lips or “foxy” eyes are accepted as beautiful only when they appear on the faces of white people.

Filters that conform to Eurocentric features and lighter skin tones tend to achieve greater visibility and engagement, reinforcing what Noble (2018, 21) identifies as the “algorithmic power” that shapes social relations and normalises inequality. Even in 2019 when Meta first restricted extreme face-distortion filters that were said to promote plastic surgery such as rhinoplasties and lip filler, subtler filters continued to circulate widely after the ban, maintaining the same aesthetic norms under less explicit branding. This ban was lifted in 2020 except for filters that “directly promote” surgery such as “surgery lines” (Miller & McIntyre 2022, 3618). Meta then stopped supporting third-party filters altogether in 2025. These digital beauty practices echo beauty industries’ marketing of skin-lightening products and extend these same logics into the algorithms that standardise whitened and feminised appearance by increasing their visibility. Indeed, by positioning lighter skin as both a technological default and a desirable outcome, beauty filters reinforce racialised ideas of visibility and desirability. Riccio and Oliver (2023, 718) argue that they “perpetuate historic discrimination and privileges”. While digital self-representation is shaped by individual preference, that itself is shaped by socio-economic systems that are influenced by historical inequalities, such as the colonialist legacy. Through Eurocentric beauty filters, these ideas have been embedded into the visual language of everyday social media use, which is then offered to consumers as mostly globalised and democratic.

4.5 Counter-discourses and cultural contestation

Although beauty filters are widely adopted and normalised across social media platforms, their use is not uncontested. Counter-discourses that challenge editing and digital self-modification arise organically. Papacharissi’s concept of affective publics helps explain how resistance circulates not primarily as structured political argument, but as shared sentiment,

humour, discomfort, or irritation (Papacharissi 2014). TikTok's algorithm facilitates this circulation. Platform affordances such visibility, remixability, and algorithmic recommendation allow emotional reactions to filters to travel rapidly through imitation, parody, and memetic variation (Hautea et al., 2021). Furthermore, hashtags such as #NoFilter or #Unfiltered[19] have become rallying points for users and brands seeking to critique beauty filters and the psychological toll of idealised self-representation. TikTok's emphasis on short, multimodal videos encourages critique to appear in playful or ambiguous forms: exaggerated filter use, comedic distortion, or refusal to participate (Hautea et al., 2021).

One example of corporate resistance has been Dove's #TurnYourBack campaign (Nouril, 2023), launched in response to the viral *Bold Glamour* filter. The campaign invited users to "turn their backs" on the filter, to hijack the hashtag to flood the platform with content exposing the dangers of extreme digital manipulation. The campaign was positioned within Dove's wider #NoDigitalDistortion initiative that forms a part of the brand's long-standing commitment to promoting body positivity and unedited representation in its advertising (Dove 2026). Yet, while such interventions are framed as acts of empowerment, they also utilise social critique as a marketing tool. Dove's campaign demonstrates how even anti-filter activism operates within consumer culture by turning resistance into hashtags and forms of visibility in the attempt to oversaturate certain keywords with body positive content. Looking back almost three years after Dove's #TurnYourBack campaign launched, it seems that the campaign did not have the desired result as it did not "hijack" the *Bold Glamour* topic with counter discourses.

> "Unless you are under 25, you probably think of Instagram as a feed of square photos: polished makeup, skin smoothing, and beautiful landscapes. Flattering imagery is cheap to produce and boring to consume. People want content that feels real. -- In a world where everything can be perfected, imperfection becomes a signal."
>
> – Adam Mosseri, Head of Instagram, in his end-of-year statement for 2025

Meta's decision to remove extreme facial-distortion filters in 2020 and, later, to altogether remove third-party AR filters in early 2025 reflected growing concerns about the effects of filters on young women's mental health (Sisounonth 2025). Internal research reportedly

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[19] This campaign was highlighted in Finnish media company MTV in a video "Näin kauneussuodattimet toimivat Instagramissa – Katso video!" MTV 4.10.2020 https://www.mtv.fi/lyhyet/1a15160be57bf83f343e/video-nain-kauneussuodattimet-toimivat-instagramissa-katso-video. Accessed on 10 November 2025.

linked the use of Instagram filters to body dissatisfaction and anxiety, prompting Meta to moderate certain filters more. Yet, these policy shifts were partial and temporary: At first in 2020, many filters re-emerged on Instagram with the same names but with less drastic changes, and many official filters still somewhat distort faces but are now under neutral or "softer" names[20], suggesting a rebranding rather than a genuine structural change. Even a brief analysis of social media platforms reveals tension between corporate claims of responsibility and business models in which aesthetic conformity drives engagement and profit. For instance, Instagram CEO Adam Mosseri's 2025 end-of-year remarks acknowledge that social media self-presentation is increasingly becoming edited and it is perceived as inauthentic. There is a contradiction between what users say they want to see (authenticity) and what platforms algorithmically prioritise (stylisation) in order to maximise revenue.

Similar contradictions are evident in TikTok's internal governance. Leaked documents analysed by Kentucky Public Radio reveal that TikTok employees were aware of the psychological risks associated with beauty filters, particularly for young users (Goodman 2024; Allyn et al. 2024). TikTok's internal proposals by employees suggested that the company provide educational resources on image disorders, introduce awareness campaigns about low self-esteem caused by excessive filter use, and embed warning banners or videos on filters to raise awareness on body image and mental health. Despite these internal discussions, the company has continued to prioritise visual conformity within its recommendation algorithms. Furthermore, previously when TikTok had examined there to be "a high volume of *not* attractive subjects" in users' feeds, they prompted to adjust the algorithm to amplify content from users deemed more conventionally beautiful. Indeed, corporate awareness of harm coexists with design features such as algorithms that actively harm users, but which turn profits. (Ibid.). Corporate awareness of harm thus coexists with design features that reinforce and monetise aesthetic hierarchies. This tension is further reflected in TikTok's public-facing guidelines for effect creators. The platform explicitly encourages the development of inclusive and responsible filters, advising creators to test effects across different skin tones, avoid promoting harmful stereotypes, and refrain from altering users' natural features in ways that could reinforce unhealthy beauty standards. At the same time, these guidelines acknowledge that filters can "draw attention to certain body features" or "alter them to be

[20] Examples include "BW Beauty," a black-and-white filter that smooths the skin, adds freckles and makeup, and subtly pinches the nose; "Natural," which lightly blurs the skin while narrowing the nose and enlarging the lips; and "Moody," which can be used with or without eyelashes and applies skin-smoothing, moderate makeup, and lip definition.

thinner," implicitly recognising their potential to shape self-image. The coexistence of such ethical guidance with platform infrastructures that reward highly standardised and appearance-enhancing effects contradicts TikTok's stated commitment to inclusivity. (TikTok 2026b).

Beyond corporate or institutional interventions, grassroots digital activism also plays a crucial role in contesting the dominance of filtered beauty. Counter-discourses exist within the same memetic logic that produces the norm, demonstrating how platform politics shape both standardisation and its disruption. The same system that sustains the aesthetic template also circulates counter-discourses, revealing that cultural resistance on TikTok operates through affect, imitation, and visibility rather than outside the platform's structures. (Hautea et al. 2021.). For instance, users who post filter awareness videos or side-by-side comparisons of filtered versus unfiltered bodies[21] engage in anecdotal acts that expose how beauty online is constructed. These acts reclaim visibility for "real", unedited bodies and challenge the postfeminist and neoliberal aspirational logic that equates self-improvement with empowerment (see Blum 2005). Resistance therefore takes the form of affective performance (see Papacharissi 2014). However, as Gill (2007) and McRobbie (2009) note, the postfeminist landscape often reabsorbs critique into its own rhetoric: authenticity itself becomes commodified, aestheticised, and marketed as another form of aspirational identity[22]. Furthermore, posts intended to raise awareness about extreme filters inadvertently amplify their visibility. For instance, the *Bold Glamour* filter went viral as users drew attention to it and news organisations reported on the phenomenon. All of this resulted in its sensationalisation and further increased its reach. The backlash against filters such as *Bold Glamour* demonstrates not a rejection of digital aesthetics per se, but rather a demand for transparency, ethical design, and inclusivity in mediated representations of beauty.

Beauty filters generate aesthetic templates that begin to shape how faces are perceived in the first place, highlighting and "correcting" features users may not previously have considered flaws. With consistent use, the filtered face becomes the benchmark against which the unfiltered body is measured. TikTok's algorithm repeatedly promotes a limited set of visual traits which reinforces a specific version of femininity through repetition. The status quo of fair Asian women and (racially ambiguous) white women visually dominating the small

[21] An example of this could be anecdotal "real life vs. social media" posts.
[22] Being "real" and authentic, embodying the "clean girl" aesthetic, is a brand for some creators.

thumbnails of user-generated TikTok filters could easily be disrupted by having Black, Brown and Indigenous people in thumbnails. This "making space"[23] is essential in transforming beauty filters from internalising Western beauty aesthetics to inclusive technologies (Rose 2023, 33). Lastly, counter-discourses also emerge when users parody, exaggerate, or reject the aesthetics of beauty filters: The nuisance of encounters with comedic or absurd filters on the "Beauty" page, as demonstrated in the dataset, could also interrupt the pursuit of the "perfect" filter and remind users of their artificiality as well as create friction. Having established the theoretical and cultural context in which beauty filters operate, Chapter 5 turns to the dataset itself, examining how these dynamics manifest in TikTok's Beauty category.

[23] "For those of us who dare to desire differently, who seek to look away from the conventional ways of seeing blackness and ourselves, the issue of race and representation is not just a question of critiquing the status quo. It is also about transforming the image, creating alternatives, asking ourselves questions about what types of images subvert, pose critical alternatives, and transform our worldviews and move us away from dualistic thinking about good and bad. Making a space for the transgressive image, the outlaw rebel vision, is essential to any effort to create a context for transformation." (hooks 2015, 4)

5 Patterns in filter design

> "Visual imagery is never innocent; it is always constructed through various practices, technologies and knowledges."
>
> – Gillian Rose in Visual methodologies: an introduction to researching with visual materials (2023, 44)

The following table maps the recurring visual patterns identified across the dataset of 101 filters out of which 59 that were explicitly identified as beauty-oriented form the basis of the following analysis. They are organised by category and frequency. These patterns collectively reveal a narrow and consistent aesthetic template – one that, as the sections below demonstrate, is deeply gendered, racialised, and tied to ideals of youth.

Table 1 summarises the dataset's dominant visual patterns and their frequency:

Category	**Common visual effects and features**	**Frequency across sample**[24]	**Notes**
Skin modifications	Skin smoothing, blurring, brightening/lightening, blemish removal, texture flattening	Very high (56)	Operates as a baseline layer across almost all beauty filters, including those labelled "natural" or "no filter"; strongly linked to age erasure and perfection norms
Facial contouring and reshaping	Face slimming, jawline slimming, chin narrowing, face shortening	High (41)	Produces a standardised V-shaped facial structure; frequently combined with skin smoothing and lip/nose modifications
Nose modifications	Nose pinching, narrowing of bridge, lifted tip	High (40)	Subtle but persistent alteration reinforcing Eurocentric facial proportions, even in "minimal" filters

[24] The frequency is based on the proportion of filters in which features appear: "very high", "high", or "moderate".

Eye enhancements	Eye widening, raised eyebrows, fox-eye lift, added eyelashes, *aegyo-sal*, eye colour change	High (37)	Central to youthfulness and femininity. Combines Western influencer trends with East Asian 'idol' aesthetics
Lip enhancements	Lip plumping, lip augmentation (shape distortion), overlining	High (39)	Full lips as a feminised beauty marker; often incorporated into aesthetic ideals that combine Eurocentric and racially ambiguous features
Age erasure	Wrinkle removal, texture flattening, baby-face proportions	Very high (56)	Age erasure is implicit rather than explicit: youth is treated as the default aesthetic state
Makeup simulation	Eyelashes, contour, highlight, blush, lipstick, eyeshadow	High (43)	Often layered on top of facial distortion, reinforcing the illusion of effortlessness and youthfulness
Naming rhetoric	"Natural", "Flawless", "Bratz"	High (34)	Language obscures the extent of modification and frames artificiality as authenticity
Nostalgia and cultural references	"2014," "2016,", "Bratz," "Barbie," "Idol", "retro" effects	Moderate (22)	Nostalgia or references reframe the filters as playful
Visual atmosphere and effects	Pink/purple tones, glow, haze, grain, sparkles, overexposure	Moderate (24)	Softens the visibility of manipulation and adds emotional or affective framing
Cross-filter similarities	Minimal variation between filters	Moderate[25]	Homogenisation of beauty ideals

The table reveals two key patterns: (1) a high degree of consistency across filter categories, and (2) effects that cumulatively produce Eurocentric, youthful femininity despite surface-level variation.

The analysis revealed recurring features: makeup application, skin smoothing and lightening/brightening, lip enhancement, nose pinching as well as face and jaw slimming. While some filters incorporated East or Southeast Asian aesthetic elements, these were largely hybridised with Western or Eurocentric ideals of femininity: Lighter skin, symmetrical features, and softened contours. Indeed, TikTok's most visible and promoted filters sustain

[25] Cross-filter similarities are difficult to quantify, thus the "moderate" label reflects my observations.

homogenised standards of beauty that transcend cultural boundaries yet remain rooted in Eurocentric ideals. Filters that incorporated East or Southeast Asian aesthetic elements – such as aegyo-sal or fox-eye lifts – largely hybridised these with Eurocentric ideals, suggesting that it is a case of cultural borrowing, or even appropriation, rather than genuine representational diversity.

According to Mihăilă and Braniște (2021, 101), perceived facial attractiveness is dependent on how much beauty retouching has been applied on pictures. The documentation of TikTok's trending filters reveals recurring aesthetic tendencies that align closely with established feminist critiques of media representation and body image. Although the selection was small-scale and exploratory, the observations provide insight into how beauty filters operate as cultural artefacts, sustaining and amplifying existing hierarchies of gender, race, and age. The following sections examine these patterns in closer detail.

5.1 Filter creation and design patterns

The analysis of trending TikTok filters above demonstrates visual and cultural homogeneity. Across the sample (see Appendix 1), certain stylistic conventions appeared repeatedly: skin smoothing and brightening, blemish removal, lip enhancement, and facial slimming were almost universal. Many filters also incorporated nose contouring or pinching, jawline narrowing, and subtle eye enlargement. These effects collectively construct an aesthetic that combines the markers of Eurocentric femininity – light, untextured skin and small facial features – with East Asian beauty trends, partially popularised by the increasing economic relevance of Korean culture and the rise of K-pop as a cultural force (Tewari 2026).

Filters from the sample such as *glam Barbie expo, Flawless Skin,* and *Soft Perfect Girl*, illustrate the hybridisation of beauty ideals circulating through globalised digital culture. Despite apparent cross-cultural diversity, the filters converge toward a shared visual archetype: a youthful, fair-skinned, hyper-feminised face. This homogenisation supports prior arguments that beauty filters reinforce Western-centric beauty hierarchies under the guise of individual expression (Dimulescu 2015; Wolf 1991). The coexistence of Asian and Eurocentric aesthetics suggests that the global digital beauty economy operates through aesthetic fusion, yet remains governed by the same principles of whitening, feminisation, and standardisation.

The data also reflect how algorithmic infrastructures mediate which aesthetics become visible and aspirational. Filters with the most uses from the sample such as those produced by creators like hendyivanpra or aestheticfilter__, whose filter icons feature predominantly Asian women nonetheless reproduce a Eurocentric beauty template. The repeated use of lightening and smoothing functions in their filters reveals how algorithmic popularity rewards conformity to globalised beauty norms. The repeated promotion of such filters indicates that TikTok's algorithm does not merely reflect user preferences but actively circulates specific visual ideals of femininity. For instance, court documents for a 2024 lawsuit against TikTok states that the app "prioritises beautiful people" and that the executives are aware of it (Allyn et al. 2024). Furthermore, many of the analysed filters present beauty enhancement as something natural, even effortless. Filter names that include terms like *natural, pure,* and *'no filter'* evoke a sense of authenticity, even as the filters digitally alter the face. However, what counts as "natural" here is relative as these filters appear subtler when compared to more extreme ones that drastically reshape facial features or add heavy makeup like *Bold Glamour,* for example.

From a design perspective, the consistency of enhancement features across independent creators indicates that these effects are not random but a design feature of AR filters. The technological presets available on TikTok's Effect House allow detailed facial distortion and "masks" that apply makeup and brightens or smooths skin which. These features are largely available on the application and easy to apply. The dataset also shows that a disproportionate share of the most-used beauty filters come from a small number of creators. When examining these creators further, many of them have multiple filters. This isn't incidental and reflects how TikTok's Effect House reward system works. The platform's Top Creator badges and bonus structures incentivise engagement and high use counts, meaning creators who produce many filters quickly, drawing on shared templates afforded by Effect House, are likely rewarded more than those who experiment. The aesthetic predictability is partly a product of this incentive structure.

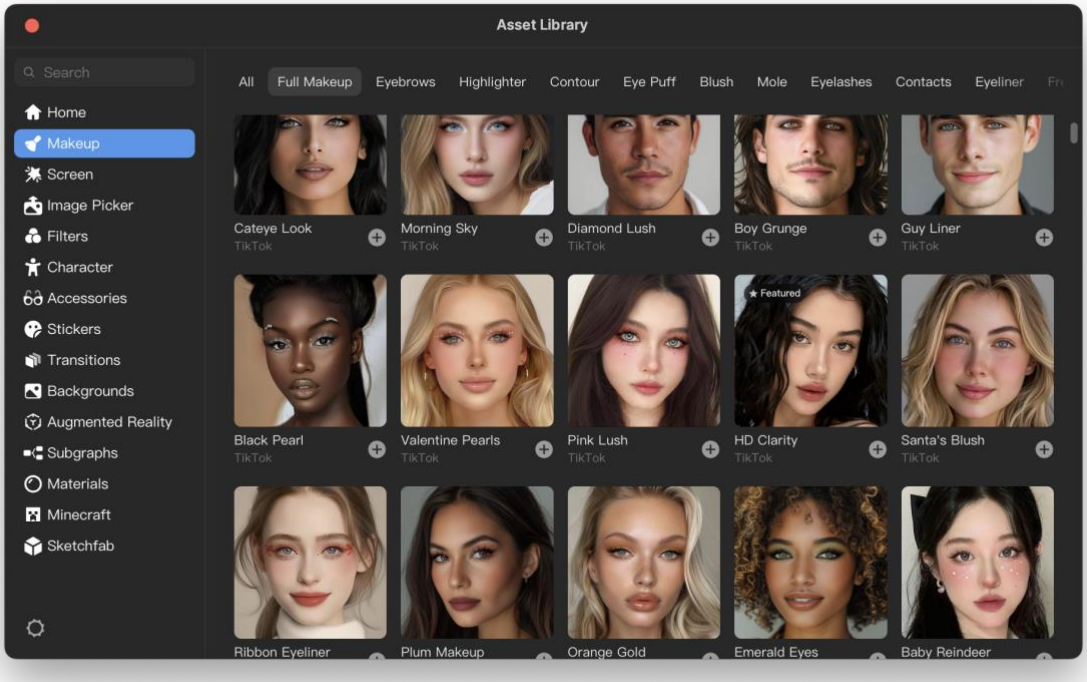

Figure 3. A screenshot of Effect House's makeup presents, including *HD Clarity,* which also features in the dataset. In TikTok's Effect House, effect creators are able to import and apply pre-set assets onto their filters.

When independent creators work from the same Effect House presets[26] – the same skin-smoothing tools, the same face-slimming sliders, the same eye-widening parameters that work by the same logic – the resulting filters will converge aesthetically regardless of the creator's own intentions or cultural background. This could be why filters by creators whose icons feature Asian women still reproduce Eurocentric templates. The tools themselves encode the bias before the creator makes any choices. This is connected to Noble's (2018) framework about algorithmic systems reflecting their designers' values, but here TikTok's design tools are doing the encoding before individual creators even begin. Lastly, even as the filter catalogue appears diverse, the aesthetic range in reality is narrow because it reflects the sensibilities and incentives of a handful of people rather than genuine variety. Users are presented with an illusion of choice as the variety of filter names and styles conceals the uniformity of the underlying design logic. This structural bias within design tools mirrors the historical patterns of representation identified by Goffman (1976) and Wolf (1991): the constant reiteration of youth, smoothness, and hyper-femininity to equate desirability.

[26] Currently, in the Effect House Asset Library, there are 228 "full makeup" filters for both women and men, the majority of which have AI-generated women in their thumbnails.

Goffman's (1979, 84) concept of hyper-ritualisation provides a useful lens through which to analyse the design of beauty filters by third-party creators. Just as advertisers, third-party filter creators do not invent new ritualised expressions but rather amplify existing cultural idioms. Like advertisers, filter creators draw upon familiar beauty conventions such as clear skin, large eyes, narrow noses, full lips and repackage them. The filters do not generate novel ideals but stylise and exaggerate what is already a representation of femininity and attractiveness circulating in culture. The *Instagram face* was a concept before beauty filters became as widespread as they are now. Similarly to advertisements, beauty filters represent a form of digital hyper-ritualisation: they codify cultural expectations of beauty into easily repeatable templates, stripping gestures of individuality and contextual nuance in favour of somewhat standardised, idealised features. What Goffman described as the advertiser's exaggeration is mirrored in the filter-maker's work: a further detachment of beauty practices from lived bodies, producing replicable and shareable images that perpetuate dominant beauty norms. Filters created by third parties participate in the same process Goffman identified in advertising – an intensification of cultural codes to the point where they become both exaggerated and naturalised.

5.2 The homogenisation of beauty

Among the 59 filters identified as explicitly beauty-oriented, nearly all shared visual traits associated with Eurocentric femininity. These included skin lightening, eye enlargement, nose slimming, jawline contouring, and lip enhancement. These visual effects reflect the persistence of what Naomi Wolf (1991) termed the beauty myth: the universalisation of Western ideals of youth, slimness, and symmetry as the normative standard of attractiveness.

The analysed filters reveal a hybridisation of global aesthetics. Many incorporate stylistic conventions drawn from East Asian beauty culture, particularly those popularised by South Korean entertainment and K-beauty industries. Hallyu, "Korean Wave," is the global rise in the popularity of South Korean culture (Jokinen 2026), including K-beauty (Tewari 2026). As Wang (2021) notes, South Korean beauty standards emphasise a youthful and "innocent" appearance, characterised by a small, V-shaped face, pale and blemish-free skin, plump lips, and large eyes – features similar to Eurocentric ideals, but packaged and presented differently.

These ideals, shaped by histories of class and colonialism, increasingly converge with Western notions of contouring, symmetry, and perfection. The result is a hybridised aesthetic of global femininity that merges Eurocentric whiteness with East Asian ideals of delicacy and youthfulness. In the sample, many of the most-used filters – such as Silk Radiance, and Soft Perfect Girl – combined K-beauty inspired features with skin lightening and facial slimming.

Figure 4. An example of a K-beauty inspired beauty filter featuring an Asian model with soft blurred lips, pale skin, *aegyo-sal,* and cool toned makeup.

The influence of East Asian beauty aesthetics is especially visible in filters that significantly lighten the skin and emphasise cuteness rather than sexiness. These filters show how globalised beauty economies are channelled into a series of narrow subgenres or aesthetics, rather than genuinely broadening the range of representation. They are also highly visible on TikTok, indicating their popularity on the platform. These findings resonate with research that situates beauty filters as "technological amplifications" of racialised and gendered beauty norms (Castillo-Hermosilla et al. 2023). The homogenised digital face, the *Instagram face*, is evident on most social media apps, including TikTok whose filters were analysed. While some filters incorporated features inspired by East Asian aesthetics, such as a "ulzzang"[27] style or artificially lightened faces with added *aegyo-sal*, these were hybridised with

[27] "Ulzzang" is Korean for "best face", which can also be translated as "good looking" or "best-looking face". The style is trendy in Asian countries such as China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Singapore. See: How to be an ulzzang, Ulzzang.net, archived 1 July 2017, https://web.archive.org/web/20170701072939/http://ulzzang.net/how-to-be-an-ulzzang (accessed 16 December 2025); Be Editorial Team, Gyaru vs ulzzang, Be Asia, 30 August 2015, archived 1 August 2018, https://web.archive.org/web/20180801010032/https://asia.be.com/beauty/korean-beauty/gyaru-vs-ulzzang-make-one-really-go-77983.html (accessed 16 December 2025).

Eurocentric traits. Social media has had an essential role in the expansion of K-beauty worldwide (Tewari 2026). Indeed, the result is a cross-cultural convergence toward whitened, feminised, and youthful facial archetypes, demonstrating how globalised beauty economies can merge into a single, algorithmically promoted aesthetic ideal. The strong presence of such filters within TikTok's "Beauty" section emphasises the platform's role in circulating and legitimising these ideals. By placing them in prominent discovery spaces, TikTok actively curates and reinforces these narrow ideals because its algorithms are designed to prioritise beautiful faces (Goodman 2024). This process also aligns with Dimulescu's (2015) observation that media representations of femininity reinforce restrictive ideals under the guise of consumer choice and empowerment.

Within TikTok and on social media in general, social comparisons extend to one's own digital reflection. Constant filter usage possibilities and exposure to filtered versions of the self and to other users' enhanced appearances, normalises self-surveillance and fuels self-objectification: the internalisation of an external observer's perspective (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997). TikTok's design thereby transforms beauty filters from entertainment tools into habitual components of digital self-presentation. Users are encouraged to both consume, try on, and create their own filters to earn rewards.

5.3 Elements of femininity and play in beauty filters

Many filters observed were presented under informal yet aspirational names such as *Flawless Skin*, *Pure girl face, Soft Perfect Girl*, and *Silk Radiance*. This naming strategy reflects a postfeminist rhetoric that merges pleasure, self-expression, and self-regulation. As Rosalind Gill (2007, 12–13) argues, the postfeminist subject is positioned as a freely choosing individual who nonetheless "chooses" to conform for "empowerment and taking control". Gill continues that conforming is represented as a personal choice and as an act of self-determination. Beauty filters as postfeminist practices invite users to participate in aesthetic enhancement framed as empowerment, while reinforcing normative ideals of femininity. Play and entertainment thus become sites of discipline where beauty ideals are reinforced in subtle ways.

Beauty filters' perceived variety and volume offer an illusion of choice that ultimately sustains beauty ideals (Miller & McIntyre 2022, 3621). The act of "trying on" a filter, framed as fun or experimental, conceals its regulatory function. Behind the illusion of agency is an infrastructure of design that codes femininity as beautiful skin, symmetrical features, and softness, among others. These filters operate as templates, teaching users how to digitally construct versions of themselves that fit the moulds of culturally desirable versions of womanhood (see Miller & McIntyre 2022). As Goffman (1959) observed, social life is organised around "front stage" performances where individuals curate an idealised self for an audience. This front stage self differs from "backstage" or "outside" versions of the self, how one represents themselves offline, for example (Goffman 1959, 112). On social media, this audience is both human and algorithmic, the latter programmed by human hands to reward conformity with visibility (Allyn et al. 2024). The more one aligns with ideals of attractiveness, the greater the likelihood of algorithmic amplification. Here the beauty filter functions simultaneously as a sociotechnical feature as well as a somewhat symbolic participant in gender performance by presenting beauty as a moral and aesthetic responsibility (see Fredrickson & Roberts 1997; Blum 2005). One could argue that representations of femininity are the product of interface design, algorithmic ranking, and social validation loops. This also aligns with Noble's (2018) concept of algorithmic oppression.

Ultimately, analysing beauty filters helps to illustrate how postfeminist culture merges consumption, visibility, and surveillance into modes of self-governance. As McRobbie (2009, 32) observes, "the sphere of leisure and consumer culture is dominated by the vocabulary of personal choice, and is the primary site for hedonism, fantasy, personal gratification, and entertainment". Beauty filters are a representation of this as they reframe self-surveillance, self-objectification, aesthetic labour as leisure and play because what appears as creative self-expression is in fact an act of voluntary conformity, where discipline is experienced as pleasure and regulation is disguised as autonomy.

5.4 Racial ambiguity and youthfulness in filters

Many filters in the dataset were observed to blur and smooth facial texture, such as acne or wrinkles. To further examine how beauty filters interact with visible markers of age and racialised facial features, a stock image depicting a light-skinned Black woman in her 50s–60s was analysed. The subject displayed natural signs of aging, including fine lines, mild

hyperpigmentation, and facial texture. Many of the beauty filters analysed in the dataset applied anti-ageing effects such as wrinkle smoothing, skin brightening, and removal of pigmentation. These transformations reflect ageist cultural narratives identified by Wolf (1991) and Friedan (1993), in which women's social value is tied to youth. The absence of age-inclusive filters is itself significant. Beauty is consistently equated with smoothness, symmetry, and luminosity – qualities culturally associated with youth and desirability. Filters can therefore be read as mechanisms of digital ageism that marginalise older women. This aligns with objectification theory's claim that aging women lose social value as they move outside the idealised, sexualised gaze.

Figure 5. A selection of TikTok filters on the trending page after data collection. Top row from left: (1) No filter. (2) *Bratz Toasty* by annaree27 with 1.6M uses. (3) *Bold Glamour* by TikTok with 292.9M uses. (4) *makeup* by brownxugar_12 with 723.7K uses. Bottom row from left: (5) *light makeup* by beautyfilter_ with 5.6M uses. (6) *Silk Radiance* by TikTok with 1.1M uses. (7) *Soft Perfect Girl* by suikimdi.jan_ with 1.1M uses. (8) *baddie makeup II* by aestheticfilter__ with 12.2M uses. Original photo: DBR Images via Getty Images. Image reproduced for academic analysis under fair use/fair dealing (Rose 2023, 85).

The results also affirm the observations made by scholars who have highlighted the gendered and racialised underpinnings of face modification technologies (Castillo-Hermosilla et al. 2023). By normalising a narrow visual standard as "enhanced" or "natural," these filters discourage the visibility of aging and racial diversity. The resulting digital aesthetic represents a technologically mediated continuation of what Goffman (1976) identified as hyper-ritualisation: a stylised exaggeration of social ideals presented as authentic representation.

5.5 Aging and the digital body

Because this thesis analysed filters rather than users, evidence of anti-aging functions is drawn from the visual design features documented in the dataset rather than from user testimony, for example. Of the 59 beauty filters examined, virtually all applied at least one age-erasing effect – skin smoothing and brightening, blemish removal, or texture flattening – affirming the observation that youth is treated as the aesthetic baseline rather than one option among many. Filters such as *Flawless Skin*, *Silk Radiance*, and *No filter - foxy eyes* are particularly instructive: Despite their varied names and visual styles, each removes visible skin texture, softens facial contours, and produces as baby-face proportions. The name *No filter - foxy eyes* is itself a pointed illustration of the paradox and irony at the heart of this section – it performs the absence of modification while delivering some of the most substantial facial restructuring in the dataset, including lip augmentation, nose pinching, face slimming, and jawline narrowing.

Objectification theory has been utilised in this thesis as a framework for analysing how cultural pressures around beauty manifest in women and it will be utilised to analyse the experience of aging. As Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) argue, the degree to which aging influences women's mental health depends on their internalisation of culturally prescribed feminine ideals and on the frequency with which they encounter acts of objectification. Already by the twentieth century, feminist scholars noted that representative media images of older women were scarce, and those few depictions that did exist tended to erase the physical markers of aging, often by portraying women who were styled or cosmetically altered to appear younger than their chronological age and for many women, aging was framed as a decline into unattractiveness and invisibility (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997; Friedan 1993). This is clearly evident in both the filters applied to the stock image in chapter 5.4 and those analysed within the dataset: across the sample, not a single filter was designed to render aging features visible or desirable. Where filters acknowledged skin texture at all – as in *FireFreckly*, which adds decorative freckles – they did so while smoothing and brightening the skin, leaving the anti-aging baseline intact even within a playful aesthetic.

Furthermore, despite seemingly increased media diversity, aging women are still largely absent from popular representation, particularly within social media ecosystems that are dominated by younger users, and thus youth-oriented aesthetics. Filters and editing apps

intensify the imperative to appear perpetually young. Unlike in 1997[28], when cosmetic surgery and topical anti-aging products were the primary tools offered to "combat" aging, today digital filters provide instant, free or significantly cheaper, and endlessly repeatable methods for erasing wrinkles, tightening skin, brightening eyes, and reshaping facial contours as seen in the 59 beauty filters analysed. Aging is thus framed as a condition to be digitally managed in online self-presentation, with beauty filters operating as tools that do just that.

The rise of anti-aging technologies reveals both continuity and change in cultural attitudes toward aging. On the one hand, the promise of halting or reversing aging has become more accessible: Where once only cosmetic surgery could offer a semblance of youth, filters help to standardise the illusion of agelessness, allowing anyone with a smartphone to manipulate their appearance. On the other hand, this accessibility can heighten the pressure to conform. If every user has the ability to erase the marks of age with a tap, the choice not to do so risks being read as negligence, failure, or "letting oneself go": Older women are often praised online if they appear youthful. Thus, aging women remain trapped in the *objectification limelight*[29], but under new digital conditions that render the ideal of youthful beauty both more visible and more unforgiving. This can have profound implications for identity and mental health. Objectification theory predicts that the continual comparison between one's physical self and the digitally altered, youthful self-image can cause body shame and anxiety. The paradox of digital self-presentation lies in its capacity to provide ephemeral empowerment – through the ability to control and perfect one's image – but at the same time it reinforces any cultural devaluation of bodies that do not conform. By creating illusions of perfection, filters can lead users to experience a sense of detachment from their bodies. (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, 195.

Beautifying filters extend the commercial logic of the cosmetic surgery and anti-aging industries discussed by feminist scholars. What is a lucrative market for skincare products, treatments, and surgeries[30] is now available to try on with facial filters. The amount of beauty filters that have anti-aging or youth-enhancing features embedded in them illustrates how deeply the association between femininity and youthfulness remains established in concepts of beauty. Women who do not naturally conform to beauty ideals continue to be encouraged

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[28] Referring to Barbara Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts' *Objectification theory: Toward understanding women's lived experiences and mental health risks*, published in 1997.
[29] A term used by Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997, 195.
[30] According to Bengale (2025), the anti-aging market size was valued at USD 71.75 billion in 2024.

by algorithmic infrastructures – as much as by advertisers – that in order to increase social standing they should fulfill beauty standards.

5.6 Motivations for use

Because this thesis focuses on filters rather than users, motivations for use are inferred from existing research and from the design features and naming conventions observed in the dataset, rather than from direct user testimony. The dataset nonetheless offers indirect evidence of the motivations that filter design anticipates and encourages.

Contemporary culture defines women largely through physical beauty, where appearance is also tied to how women act to legitimise that look. As a result, womanhood itself becomes equated with an obligation to be beautiful. (Dimulescu 2015, 508.) According to Fredrickson and Roberts (1997, 178) a woman's attractiveness and body appearance to others can significantly shape her life experiences. For example, obesity negatively affects women's social mobility compared to average-weight women and physical attractiveness has been shown to correlate with “popularity, dating experience, and marriage opportunities for women than for men”. (Ibid.). “Pretty privilege” is a psychological phenomenon wherein “good” traits are assigned to beautiful people simply by the basis that they look the part (Padtberg, 2025). At the same time, the ideal female body is almost impossible to attain. Wolf (1991) argues it is unrealistic – a myth. Photo editing and beauty filters can be seen as tools that reflect and reinforce the social value placed on women’s appearance by offering a way to align more closely with beauty standards. Coy-Dibley (2016, 4) writes: “What the body cannot achieve, the image can”. However, at the same time, filters might be intensifying pressures to conform by helping unattainable beauty standards go mainstream.

The dataset includes three separate filters named *natural*, one with a use count of 9.9 million, each applying skin smoothing, brightening, and subtle makeup while framing these modifications as the absence of editing. This naming pattern extends across the dataset: *No filter - foxy eyes*, *Flawless Skin*, and *Silk Radiance* that each evoke effortlessness while significantly modifying the face. The gap between what these filters are named and what they technically do reflects a design logic that anticipates and accommodates users' desire to appear “naturally” beautiful rather than visibly edited. Filters named for the ideal they promise rather than the modification they perform suggest that the dominant motivation they

cater to is not transformation for its own sake, but the achievement of an appearance that reads as authentic and unmediated. Like cosmetics, plastic surgery, or dieting that are marketed as ways to improve oneself, filters bring these same practices into the everyday routines of digital life. Editing one's photos provides individuals an outlet "to decide who and how they want to be" (Coy-Dibley 2016, 5). Beauty filters, in particular, promise enhanced versions of the self without physical effort and present this as freedom of choice even though the aesthetic standards these filters reproduce are themselves rooted in oppressive norms. Coy-Dibley (2016, 6) argues that this presence of oppressive pressures placed on women cancels out the prospect of true liberty and empowerment.

According to Cohen and Blaszczynski (2015, 2), users "strategically manipulate their profiles in accordance with societal ideals of attractiveness". The presence of beauty filters makes this photo manipulation easier – change is possible without physical effort or long-term commitment. At the same time, this ease of use impacts users' self-presentation and impression management (see Goffman, 1959), reinforcing what Fredrickson and Roberts (1997, 182) describe as appearance anxiety: A persistent monitoring and adjusting of appearance due to a "continuous stream of anxiety-provoking experiences". Mihăilă and Braniște (2021, 106) posit that selfie editing technologies exploit users' appearance anxiety. Beauty filters and selfie editing apps encourage users to modify their appearance in ways that feel rewarding. The appeal of these apps often depends on the pleasurable and user-friendly design of their interfaces. For instance, individuals considering plastic surgery can use these tools to create idealised versions of themselves and visualise potential changes to their faces and bodies. (Mihăilă & Braniște 2021, 107; Haines 2021.) Javornik et al. (2022, 5–6) suggest that some AR filters can have a positive influence on a user's affective state, that using visually stimulating filters is enjoyable. However, the pleasure from this private "visually simulating hedonism" is often only short-term when it comes to beautifying filters (Javornik 2021).

The tripartite influence model (Thompson et al. 1999) can be utilised to explain not only why beauty filter use is so widespread, but also why the ideals they represent prove almost resistant to counter-discourse. When media, peer, and aspirational influences[31] converge on multiple social media feeds, the pressure to internalise narrow beauty standards is structurally

[31] The "parents" of the tripartite influence model are replaced here by influencers as they hold social capital and authority online.

intensified. Several of the most-used filters in the dataset most likely achieve their high levels of engagement precisely because they circulate through all three channels (media, influencers, peers) simultaneously: promoted by the algorithm, used by influencers, and shared between peers. The volume and spread of beauty filters exacerbate this further. When photo editing becomes routine, it is increasingly perceived as normalised and thus more difficult to challenge. The dataset provides concrete illustration of this convergence. Filters such as *baddie makeup II* by @aestheticfilter__ (12.2 million uses), *makeup kim* by @beautyfilter_ (6.2 million uses), and *luv it* by @evvvvvvgen (7.4 million uses) represent the most-used filters in the sample and are each associated with Effect House Top Creators who produce large catalogues of thematically similar filters. Indeed, a user encountering *baddie makeup II* is not simply responding to a certain image of beauty, but navigating a filter that is already validated by millions of peers, promoted by the algorithm, and produced by a creator with 161 thousand followers.

Coy-Dibley (2016, 6) suggests that there is a certain liberation in selfie editing and thus filters use, because they "enable a person to finally embody these previously unattainable social standards and their own internal ideals of self-image". AR beauty filters and selfie editing affect users' well-being by (temporarily) increasing self-approval and positive affect but can increase social media addiction and cause lower life satisfaction (Mihăilă & Braniște 2021, 108). Users are incentivised to use filters as "their likes increase in proportion to their selfies' proximity to heteronormative beauty standards" (Lavrence & Cambre 2020, 11). According to Javornik et al. (2022, 10–11), the pursuit of an ideal self is the strongest predictor of filter use frequency. Users reported carefully curating filtered representations of the self that appeared improved yet natural and experiencing satisfaction when these images received social approval. At the same time, participants acknowledged that filtered self-presentation often occupied their thoughts "extensively", indicating to some extent the emotional tax involved in maintaining an idealised digital appearance.

Papacharissi (2014) argues that social media operates through shared emotional exchanges. Being seen and being emotionally validated are intertwined, so approval functions as a form of social connection rather than just individual feedback. Filtered selfies operate as affective statements that communicate attractiveness, belonging, and desirability within networked audiences. The pleasure associated with positive feedback therefore reflects both personal satisfaction and participation in an affective economy in which beauty functions as a social currency. Javornik et al. (2022) further distinguish between ideal, true, and transformed self-

presentational motives: While true and transformed self-presentation were associated with increased self-acceptance and positive affect, ideal self-presentation was linked to decreased self-acceptance and marginally lower mood. This distinction suggests that filters are not inherently harmful, rather, harm emerges when their use is driven primarily by the pursuit of an idealised appearance – one that does not match reality. Some, however, are able to separate platforms and real life and "do not feel their well-being or self-perception to be negatively affected by the filters" but still engage with filters. Enjoyment, convenience, social interaction, and creative content curation were also identified as significant motivators, but Javornik et al. (2022) do not distinguish between gamefied, 'silly', and beautifying filters in their dataset. The following chapter, the summary, brings together these findings and considers their broader implications for understanding beauty, technology, and femininity online.

6 Summary

> Many women are trading in their material bodies for photographic copies that represent what they want to be, should be, could be, need to be within Western society. The unfortunate reality of this phenomenon is that in years to come many of us will be unable to recognize ourselves within the images created through digital modification.
>
> – Isabelle Coy-Dibley in *"Digitized Dysmorphia" of the female body: the re/disfigurement of the image,* (2016, 2)

Users can now edit their online appearance and choose which parts of themselves to present and how they are presented. Although a wide range of beauty filters is available, most reinforce a narrow and standardised ideal of femininity. Their variety does not signal diverse representations of beauty and instead, it reflects a continuity of heteronormative and Eurocentric standards that regulate women's appearance. This thesis examines how TikTok beauty filters participate in the visual construction of femininity through standardised facial modifications and demonstrates that they do so by standardising and repeating culturally dominant beauty ideals. The filters gathered from the Beauty filter tab on TikTok, analysed in this thesis, represent the merging of algorithmic curation, aesthetic standardisation, and gendered self-presentation online. In the beauty tab, I identified recurring patterns of facial augmentation – skin smoothing and lightening, facial slimming, nose narrowing, eye enhancement, and lip plumping. These patterns were present with notable consistency across different filters and creators. The homogenous and artificial beauty template that filters offer, applies the same changes to the faces of users regardless of race and ethnicity (Miller 2025, 13). Rather than offering diverse or individualised forms of beautification, these filters reproduce a narrow beauty template that renders certain facial features natural, desirable, and normative. Users' natural facial features are digitally "enhanced" or modified to align with dominant beauty standards that frequently appropriate racialised traits by selectively "borrowing" ethnic features deemed desirable – such as fuller lips or elongated "fox eyes" – in ways that ultimately reinforce Eurocentric ideals. (Ibid.).

The analysis was based on a manually collected dataset of filters from TikTok's "Beauty" filter tab, examined through in-app visual analysis. This approach allowed for close inspection of how filters alter facial features in practice and how these alterations are visually standardised across different designs. While this method is somewhat limited in scope, it

provides insight into the aesthetic logics embedded in the beauty filters at a specific moment in time of research. Drawing on feminist media theory, objectification theory, concepts of digital self-presentation and algorithmic bias, I have demonstrated that beauty filters function as technological scripts for performing femininity, producing aesthetics that emphasise youthfulness and selectively incorporate non-white features within Eurocentric beauty standards. Selfie editing tools such as beauty filters intensify existing gender inequalities, commodifying femininity and reinforcing unrealistic expectations. Filters can inconspicuously cause users to internalise external beauty standards and to approach the face as an object to be optimised to fit beauty ideals. While filters can be framed as playful, creative, or empowering tools, beauty filters' design logics and circulation reveal a deeper disciplining function that aligns femininity with visual perfection, youthfulness, and whiteness. While this thesis examines beauty filters online, the digital and material worlds are not separate, but they constantly influence one another, affecting body image in both positive and negative ways as demonstrated through examples of BDD and *Snapchat dysmorphia*.

Although obvious filter use is often criticised as fake, what counts as "cheating" versus "enhancing" is contextual. Women[32] are invited to use filters to align with heteronormative beauty standards and while their use can be playful and enjoyable, it can also generate anxiety, when users worry about matching their filtered online images in real life. As a result, filters and their affordances become sites where pleasure and power overlap, which reshapes both online and offline self-presentation. (Lavrence and Cambre 2020, 11.). This thesis does not claim to establish direct causal links between beauty filter use and body dissatisfaction. Instead, it situates beauty filters within a broader media environment that intensifies appearance-based self-surveillance. Existing research suggests that selfie editing and beauty filter may contribute to increased body concerns, particularly among women and girls, and highlights the importance of addressing these issues when it comes to social media literacy. Reaves et al. (2004, 68) argue that learning to attribute impossible beauty standards to external manipulation rather than personal failure and recognising editing – that is, being media literate – can be a healthy development. Understanding the mechanics and aesthetics of beauty filters becomes essential for recognising how digital images are produced and normalised. Recent platform interventions suggest growing awareness of these risks. Meta's 2019 ban on surgery-promoting beauty filters and the removal of user-generated filters in

[32] It is important to note that this thesis focuses primarily on the beauty pressure put on heteronormative and cisgender women.

2025 indicate that major social media companies recognise the potential harms associated with exaggerated or unrealistic beauty ideals. Yet TikTok's continued promotion of filters raises questions about where responsibility is drawn between protection, profit, and user agency. Subtle enhancement may be less visible than extreme distortion, but it is arguably more powerful precisely because it appears natural and attainable. While extreme beauty filters are possible to detect now, as technologies become more sophisticated, this becomes increasingly more difficult (Lavrence & Cambre 2020, 11).

Recent developments in TikTok's governance structure suggest that AR beauty filters could face regulation in the future. Following the creation of a TikTok entity, owned and operated by a majority-American board, US lawmakers have gained greater influence over TikTok's product decisions, particularly those linked to youth safety and mental health (Tewari & Jamali 2025; McMahon 2025). Drawing on precedents set by Meta's removal of facial-distorting filters, regulators may push TikTok to restrict or clearly label filters that change facial features, especially for minors. Over time, this could lead to fewer extreme beauty filters, and a greater shift toward "authenticity", at least superficially.

Influencers and celebrities increasingly engage in selective disclosure of their beauty practices ostensibly for the sake of honesty, letting their audiences in on the know of their makeup and beauty routines while participating in undisclosed cosmetic procedures. It is not that filtering and digital editing will disappear to make space for authenticity, rather, the conspicuous display of such practices is increasingly criticised and thus not as aggressively visible (Miller 2025, 14). At the same time, cultural shifts point toward emerging counter-aesthetics. As Instagram's CEO Adam Mosseri observed, in a media landscape saturated with perfection, imperfection increasingly functions as a signal of authenticity. Research indicates that exposure to naturalistic and unedited images can have a positive effect on body image (see Fardouly et al. 2017; Cohen & Blaszczynski 2015), and body positivity movements argue that rejecting polished self-presentation can be both empowering and liberating, but on the other hand they are also "gentrified by white-centered politics" (Griffin et al. 2022). These tensions highlight that face filters are not fixed technologies but culturally negotiated and reshaped through platform dynamics. But as filter usage and photo editing become more difficult to perceive, how can users and scholars distinguish between authentic and artificial self-representation when the filters themselves aspire to appear natural even as they heavily modify users' appearance?

In this thesis I have demonstrated how beauty filters function as technologies that reproduce hierarchies of race, gender, and age. While filter use can feel liberating by transforming the user to fit into beauty standards, it can also cause social pressure to achieve and maintain a perfected self. Popular editing apps promote narrow, Westernised standards of beauty that often exclude differences in race, age, and gender identity. Ultimately, this thesis contributes to ongoing debates about gender, technology, and visual culture by demonstrating how seemingly minor digital tools participate in the broader standardisation of femininity. Beauty filters do not exist in a vacuum: They reflect existing ideals and they help normalise new standards of femininity by spreading them. The beauty ideals discussed in this thesis are not confined to only TikTok or social media more broadly. They circulate across online and offline contexts, highlighting the importance of critically examining how emerging beauty technologies shape social norms and expectations. Lastly, while this thesis made visible the standardised aesthetic patterns in TikTok's beauty filters, the analysis was limited by the platform's algorithmic opacity and the use of a relatively small, manually collected dataset. The findings should therefore be understood as a situated snapshot of filter design and visibility, rather than a comprehensive account of all filters. Future research could expand this work through cross-platform comparisons, larger data-scraping datasets, or interviews with both filter designers and users to further discern how beauty norms are produced, circulated, and challenged in online spaces. As augmented reality technologies continue to evolve, critical attention to their aesthetic and gendered implications remains essential.

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Appendices

Dataset of TikTok filters

Filter name, number of uses (if available)	Visual effects	User, username, followers	Cultural and beauty references
natural 9.9 million uses	Skin smoothing and brightening, slight makeup application: eyeshadow, contour, highlight, lipstick, eyebrows	Creator Effect Filter (@darkbrown____), Effect House Top Creator[33], 41.4k followers, 16+[34] filters, for both women and men, but mostly women. featuring Western or Asian women	Western beauty, youth, "being natural", Asian makeup application with lip blurring
light makeup 3.9 million uses	Skin smoothing and brightening, makeup application: long eyelashes, heavy contour and highlight, blush, lipstick, eyebrows. High contrast filter.	Effect Creator Tiktok (@beautyfilter_), Effect House Top Creator, 161.2k followers, 16+ filters for both women and men, but mostly women. featuring Western or Asian women	Western beauty, youthfulness, Asian references.
makeup kim 6.2 million uses	Skin smoothing and brightening, makeup application: long eyelashes, contour, highlight, blush, lipstick, eyebrows. Lower contrast filter.	Effect Creator Tiktok (@beautyfilter_), Effect House Top Creator, 161.2k followers, 16+ filters for both women and men, but mostly women. featuring Western or Asian women	Western beauty, youthfulness, Asian beauty references
natural (n.b. same name as above by the same creator, but different filter)	Skin smoothing and brightening, slight makeup application: eyeshadow, contour, highlight, lipstick, eyebrows. Higher contrast filter than above 'natural'.	Creator Effect Filter (@darkbrown____), Effect House Top Creator, 41.4k followers, 16+ filters, for both women and men, but mostly women. featuring Western or Asian women	Western beauty, youth, "being natural".

[33] To qualify as an Effect House Top Creator (Platinum tier), creators must publish at least 10 effects, with a minimum of three effects each used in 100,000 videos. See: TikTok Effect House: https://effecthouse.tiktok.com/learn/guides/support/faq-bonus-badges-and-ambassadors

[34] The number "16+" refers to the number of filters visible in the creator footer at the time of data collection, which displayed 16 filters. However, several creators have more than 16 filters, and TikTok does not disclose the total number available. When creators have extensive filter catalogues, individual filters may be difficult to locate within their profile interface. As the dataset was collected manually within the app, usage statistics were not always findable for every filter included.

Silk Radiance 921.8k uses	Skin smoothing, face slimming, jawline slimming, nose pinching, lip plumping, slight makeup application: eyeshadow, highlight, eyebrows, blush, aegyo-sal, lipstick.	No user details	Asian beauty, youthfulness
HNY 2.1 million uses	No facial distortion or added features. Heavy orange toned brightening filter.	Sara (@sarvsami), 11.7k followers, 16+ filters many of which feature Western women in their icons: some are beauty filters, some are simply similar filters as 'HNY'.	An allusion to 'old school' Instagram filters
luv it 7.4 million uses	Skin smoothing and brightening, jawline slimming, nose pinching, lip plumping, eye widening. Light pink filter.	evvvvvvgen (@evvvvvvgen), Effect House Top Creator, 391.3k followers, 16+ filters for both women and men, featuring Western looking women and men	Western beauty. Also an allusion to 'retro' Instagram filters
Scarlet 2.2 million uses	Skin smoothing and brightening, slight makeup application: eyeshadow, lipstick. Light pink 'retro' fiilter.	DN|Effect Beauty (dneffectbeauty), Effect House Top Creator, 34.1k followers, 16+ filters	Western beauty. Also an allusion to 'retro' Instagram filters
Bratz 2014 3 million uses	Skin smoothing and brightening, no makeup application, face slimming, lip augmentation[35] and plumping, nose pinching, jawline slimming, 'fox eyes', raised eyebrows. Light purple 'retro' filter.	Anna Ionova (@annareee27), Effect House Top Creator 509.2k followers, 16+ filters	Western beauty. Bratz dolls. Also an allusion to 'retro' Instagram filters
aka kiiro mixing trend !	Playful AR filter: no facial distortion or added facial features.	kairo🩶 (@kairolyz), 4.9k followers, 3 filters in total none of which are beauty filters	Not applicable: not a beauty filter
natural 1.4 million uses	Skin smoothing and brightening, slight makeup application: eyeshadow,	Ani (@brownxugar_12), Effect House Top Creator, 15.4k followers,	Western beauty. "Being natural".

[35] The difference between lip plumping and lip augmentation is distortion: Lip augmentation changes the shape of the lip instead of simply "plumping it".

	subtle lipstick. Adds extra contrast.	16+ filters	
Stacy 934.3k uses	Skin smoothing and brightening, face slimming, lip augmentation and plumping, nose pinching, jawline slimming, ‘fox eyes’, raised eyebrows, makeup application: eyelashes, blush, eyeshadow, highlight, heavy contour, lipstick.	Anna Ionova (@annareee27), Effect House Top Creator 509.2k followers, 16+ filters	Western beauty. “Instagram face”
HD Clarity 586.8k uses	Skin smoothing and brightening, makeup application: heavy contour and highlight, slight eyeshadow. Adds a grainy texture.	TikTok	Western beauty.
keyboard kitten 857.3k uses	Skin smoothing and brightening, lip augmentation, jawline slimming, makeup application: slight eyeshadow. Superimposes = ^ - ^ = object onto the face with “^” and “^” as ears. Adds a low saturation filter.	н1п4нятн4я Тян (@grustnaya_koshkodevochka), 270 followers, 8 filters	Western beauty. Youthfulness.
purplish vibes 1.8 million uses	Skin smoothing and brightening, face slimming, lip augmentation, nose pinching, jawline slimming, ‘fox eyes’, heavy makeup application: eyelashes, blush, eyeshadow, eyeliner, highlight, contour, lipstick.	jrm (@jrmorggam) Effect House Top Creator 373k.4k followers, 16+ filters for both women and men, featuring women and men	Western beauty.
Christmas Antlers 178.0k uses	Disney-like cartoon effect and added decorated antlers	Nancyguo18 (@nancyguo18), 855 followers, 16+ filters many of which utilise AI or add AR objects onto images	Not applicable: not a beauty filter
Конечно красота 😻[36] 1,5M uses	Skin smoothing and brightening, jawline slimming, face slimming, nose pinching, lip plumping,	Сашуля Хитрик (@user58384479629496), 247 followers	Western beauty. Youthfulness.

[36] Russian. Translates to “Of course, beauty” or “Beauty, of course”.

	eye widening, slight makeup application: eyeshadow, eyebrows	3 filters	
Flawless Skin 737.5k uses	Skin smoothing and brightening, jawline slimming, face slimming	suikimdi.jan (@suikimdi.jan), 1617 followers, 16+ filters	Western beauty. Youthfulness.
natural	Skin smoothing and brightening, slight makeup application: contour, highlight, lipstick. Added contrast.	Creator Effect Filter 🌷 (@darkbrown____), Effect House Top Creator, 41.4k followers, 16+ filters, for both women and men, but mostly women. featuring Western or Asian women	Western beauty. “Being natural”.
Bratz Vintage 672.4k uses	Skin smoothing and brightening, face slimming, lip augmentation and plumping, nose pinching, jawline slimming, eye widening. Application of grainy grunge filter.	Anna Ionova (@annareee27), Effect House Top Creator 509.2k followers, 16+ filters	Western beauty. Bratz dolls.
Laser Eyes Fun	Overly exaggerated distorted facial features, right eye glowing “laser eye”	Soft Filters (@soft.filters2), 7.1k followers 16+ filters that vary between extreme distortion and beauty filters	Not applicable: not a beauty filter
Rat Effect	Distorts face and gives rat accessories such as ears, snout, and eyes	Sera_y (@seraphina_8888), 2490 followers, 16+ filters that distort face, add objects, or do both	Not applicable: not a beauty filter
It’s 2014 2.3 million uses	Skin smoothing and brightening, nose pinching, lip augmentation, slight jawline slimming, widens eyes. Light pink filter.	evvvvvvgen (@evvvvvvgen), Effect House Top Creator, 391.3k followers, 16+ filters for both women and men, featuring Western women and men	Western beauty. Also an allusion to ‘retro’ Instagram filters
2016 Glamour ✧ 711.4k uses	Skin smoothing and brightening, slight makeup application: eyelashes, contour, highlight, lipstick, blush. Purple filter.	Hendyivanpra (@hendyivanpra), Effect House Top Creator, 691.4k followers,	Western beauty.

		16+ filters some of which are experimental but with skin lightening filters, filters with both women and men in their icons	
glam Barbie expo 2.3 million uses	Skin smoothing and brightening, nose pinching, lip augmentation, very slight jawline slimming, widens eyes, slight eyeshadow. Light coral filter.	evvvvvvgen (@evvvvvvgen), Effect House Top Creator, 391.3k followers, 16+ filters for both women and men, featuring Western women and men	Western beauty. Also an allusion to 'retro' Instagram filters
Beauty Red Shark 618.5k uses	Distorts user's eyes and mouth, transforms user's face into a red shark, applies eyelashes and lipstick	MAI (@beautymemestudio) Effect House Top Creator, 1758 followers, 16+ filters that mix human and animal features	Not applicable: not a beauty filter
Bratz clear skin 174.2k uses	Skin smoothing and brightening, removes blemishes, face slimming, lip augmentation and plumping, nose pinching, jawline slimming, widens eyes, raises eyebrows.	Anna Ionova (@annareee27), Effect House Top Creator 509.2k followers, 16+ filters	Western beauty. Bratz dolls. Youthfulness.
Brasil 217.8k uses	Adds sunglasses and a goatee.	Ian.zorr (@ian.zorri), 174 followers, 1 filter	Not applicable: not a beauty filter
huevo 151.7k uses	Replaces the user's face with an egg with the face of The Rock. Adds a heart shaped bokeh burst and smoke.	fan de meowl (@unrandom2618), 1 filter	Not applicable: not a beauty filter
hearts 743.4k uses	Adds Apple's Photobooth floating hearts onto user's head, slims face	filters (@lsfIters), Effect House Top Creator, 26.9k followers, 16+ filters that are mostly simply lens colour changing filters	Western beauty.
Phone - Eyes 1.6 million uses	Adds a horizontal phone with a moving image of a woman's eyes onto where the user's face is, adds lipstick.	Fiilter Creator - LeeLoong (@leeloong271), Effect House Top Creator, 26.9k followers, 16+ filters that are not beauty filters but some	Not applicable: not a beauty filter in the traditional sense.

		distort facial features in similar ways (for example filter named Heart Stickers)	
Bratz angelic shine 382.5k uses	Skin smoothing and brightening, removes blemishes, face slimming, lip augmentation and plumping, nose pinching, jawline slimming, raises eyebrows. Adds an overexposed, hazy filter.	Anna Ionova (@annareee27), Effect House Top Creator 509.2k followers, 16+ filters	Western beauty. Bratz dolls. Youthfulness.
makeup 499.3k uses	Skin smoothing and brightening, makeup application: long eyelashes, contour, prominent highlight, eyeshadow, blush, lipstick.	Ani (@brownxugar_12), Effect House Top Creator 15.6k followers, 16+ filters	Western beauty.
Goofy Lady	Distorts face: comically enlarges eyes, slims nose, and distorts lips. Applies eyelashes and makes the user bald.	xoxo Filters (@xoxo.filters), 8727 followers, 16+ filters that distort faces in a 'funny' way.	Not applicable: not a beauty filter
No filter - foxy eyes 1.8 million uses	Skin smoothing, no makeup application, face slimming, lip augmentation and plumping, nose pinching, widens eyes and raises eyebrows, jawline slimming	Anna Ionova (@annareee27), Effect House Top Creator 509.2k followers, 16+ filters	Western beauty. Youthfulness.
легкое сияние[37] 324.6K uses	Adds faint beauty marks, applies slight makeup (eyeliner, eyeshadow, eyelashes, eyebrows), brightens and smooths skin. Adds an overexposed filter.	ален ловли (@myalish5), 17 followers, 1 filter	Western beauty.
Random Sticker 42 894.7k uses	Adds red polka dots in the background. Applies various objects onto the user's face such as bunny ears, cat nose and whiskers, moustache, bow clip etc. that change within seconds.	DN| Effect Beauty (dneffectbeauty), Effect House Top Creator, 34.1k followers, 16+ filters	Youthfulness. Western beauty.

[37] Russian. Translates to "Light radiance".

Лариса Долина[38] 341.4K uses	Changes the user face to Larisa Dolina's.	Райли @ryleevigor Effect House Top Creator 115.3k followers, 16+ filters	Not applicable: not a beauty filter
Starry 2026 87.5k uses	Adds floating glitter in the foreground. Adds a glittering cowboy hat and tinted eyeglasses with '2026' on top of them onto the user's face. Face blurring and smoothing, lip augmentation, makeup application: prominent eyelashes, lipstick, blush.	👑La_Belle_Fleur ®🫵 (@labellefleurx1), 10.3k followers, 16+ filters	Western beauty.
Baby 1.2 million uses	Skin smoothing and brightening, face slimming, lip augmentation, nose pinching, jawline slimming, widens eyes, adds lipstick.	Anna Ionova (@annareeee27), Effect House Top Creator 509.2k followers, 16+ filters	Youthfulness. Western beauty.
beh 1.5 million uses	Skin smoothing, significant facial distortions: large 'anime' eyes with eye colour change and prominent aegyosal, pinches and lifts nose, lip augmentation and plumping, jawline slimming, face slimming.	No user details	Asian, idol beauty. Youthfulness.
Bratz natural☆ 477k uses	Skin smoothing, slight application: eyeshadow and lipstick. Face slimming, lip augmentation and plumping, nose pinching, raises eyes and eyebrows, jawline slimming	Anna Ionova (@annareeee27), Effect House Top Creator 509.2k followers, 16+ filters	Western beauty. Bratz dolls. Youthfulness.
Bratz 2014 exp 2 441k uses	Skin smoothing, slight makeup application: eyeshadow and lipstick. Face slimming, lip augmentation and plumping, nose pinching, raises eyes and eyebrows, jawline slimming. Adds an overexposed pink filter.	Anna Ionova (@annareeee27), Effect House Top Creator 509.2k followers, 16+ filters	Western beauty. Bratz dolls. Youthfulness. An allusion to 'retro' Instagram filters.

[38] Russian. Translates to "Larisa Dolina". Dolina is a Russian singer and actress.

3D LIPS&EYELASHES 197.6k uses	Overlays an entirely new face onto the user's head: A white woman with overfilled pink lips, exaggerated eyelashes, green eyes with green eyeshadow, new eyebrows, and freckles.	food (@effectik11), Effect House Top Creator 710.2k followers, 16+ filters that mostly utilise AI	Not applicable: not a beauty filter
TIGER COLORS Z/D 169.9k uses	Obscures the user's face entirely and overlays an illustrated picture of a woman with colourful tiger stripes on her face, blue eyes, full eyelashes, and lips pushed outwards. Adds colourful tiger ears and change's user's own hair colour to red.	Zonia/Divertida (@zoniagonzalezv), Effect House Top Creator 294.5k followers, 16+ filters that mostly utilise AI	Not applicable: not a beauty filter
Bratz Idol Glow 526.4k uses	Skin smoothing and blurring, face slimming, lip augmentation and plumping, nose pinching, raises eyes and eyebrows, jawline slimming, widens eyes and changes eye colour, adds slight aegyosal, slight makeup application: eyeshadow, lipstick, eyebrows.	Anna Ionova (@annareee27), Effect House Top Creator 509.2k followers, 16+ filters	Western and Asian idol beauty. Bratz dolls. Youthfulness.
Bratz real skin	Skin smoothing and brightening, face slimming, lip plumping, nose pinching, jawline slimming, widened eyes, raised eyebrows.	Anna Ionova (@annareee27), Effect House Top Creator 509.2k followers, 16+ filters	Western beauty. Bratz dolls. Youthfulness.
Marciano Egipcio 168.5k uses	Distorts the user's face and transforms them to a green alien with exaggerated alien features such as green skin, big eyes, large forehead, small nose and wide lips.	Damon (@damonfilters), 366 followers 16+ filters	Not applicable: not a beauty filter
cantik 654.5k uses	Skin smoothing, significant facial distortions: enlarges eyes and adds prominent aegyosal, pinches and lifts nose, raises and levels eyebrows, jawline slimming, face slimming, makeup application: blush, lipstick and eyeshadow. Adds bunny ears.	dio.saputra686 No other details available – deleted account?	Asian, idol beauty. Youthfulness.

CHRISTMAS HAT 82.7k uses	Adds a Christmas hat on the user's head.	・メイジー・カタレヤ・ (@maeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee137), 4 filters	Not applicable: not a beauty filter
хотела 307.4k uses	Adds a white rectangle with a red border inside of which is a low resolution image of snus. The red border of the rectangle extends into an arrow that points to the user's mouth indicating that there is snus inside.	**liuqcush**(@lindex0x) 893 followers, 15 filters	Not applicable: not a beauty filter
Bambi-Bunny glam 311.5k uses	Skin smoothing and brightening, face slimming, lip plumping, nose pinching, heavy makeup application: prominent eyelashes, blush, eyeshadow, eyeliner, highlight, contour, lipstick. Adds a warm purple filter.	Anna Ionova (@annareee27), Effect House Top Creator 509.2k followers, 16+ filters	Western beauty
типо 2018-2017 77.1k uses	Adds stickers of a real cat and a cartoon cat on the foreground. Adds black pixel meme glasses, a pink unicorn horn, and star-shaped clip onto the user's head. When the user raises their hand, a still image of a pug appears and follows the hand.	#Wulfardx (@love182816), 944 followers, 3 filters	Not applicable: not a beauty filter
rat cute 85.3k uses	Transforms the user's face to appear rodent-like. Adds rat ears and whiskers, and distorts facial features.	Max (@maxpxt), Effect House Top Creator 407.1k followers, 16+ filters	Not applicable: not a beauty filter
Late Night 16's ✧ 107.2k uses	Skin smoothing and brightening, slight makeup application: eyelashes, contour, highlight, lipstick, blush. Adds a purple filter. Seeminly same filter as "2016 Glamour ✧" above	Hendyivanpra (@hendyivanpra), Effect House Top Creator, 691.4k followers, 16+ filters some of which are experimental but with skin lightening filters, filters with both women and men in their icons	Western beauty.

Bratz clear skin[39] 174.2k views	Skin smoothing and brightening, removes blemishes, face slimming, lip augmentation and plumping, nose pinching, jawline slimming, widens eyes, raises eyebrows.	Anna Ionova (@annareee27), Effect House Top Creator 509.2k followers, 16+ filters	Western beauty. Bratz dolls. Youthfulness.
Dream 55.2k uses	Completely transforms the frame to a fantasy-esque background with bursting energy blasts. Overlays a woman in an elaborate headdress and clothes onto the user, obscuring any 'original' feature.	relaxnoname (@relaxnoname), Effect House Top Creator 108.1k followers, 16+ filters	West Asian (Indian?) beauty but not applicable as it is not a beauty filter
FireFreckly 334.8k uses	Skin smoothing and brightening, removes blemishes, adds prominent freckles and 15 fire emojis of different sizes onto the users face. Face slimming, lip augmentation and plumping, nose pinching, jawline slimming, adds long eyelashes and eyeliner.	laasiaa__ (@laasiaa__), Effect House Top Creator 12.3k followers, 16+ filters	Western beauty
bored keyboard kitten 857.3k uses	Skin smoothing and brightening, lip augmentation, jawline slimming, makeup application: slight eyeshadow. Superimposes < = - = > object onto the face with "<" and ">" as ears[40]. Adds a low saturation filter.	н1п4нятн4я Тян (@grustnaya_koshkodevochka) 270 followers, 8 filters	Western beauty. Youthfulness.
Bratz toasty 727.2k uses	Skin smoothing and brightening, removes blemishes, face slimming, lip augmentation and plumping, nose pinching, jawline slimming, widens eyes, raises eyebrows[41].	Anna Ionova (@annareee27), Effect House Top Creator 509.2k followers, 16+ filters	Western beauty. Bratz dolls. Youthfulness.
سيادة اللواء/ وليد السيسي[42]	Adds glasses and a moustache on the user's face.	One Minute Ad Reel (@1minareel), 10.5k followers,	Not applicable: not a beauty filter

[39] Similar to the same named "Bratz clear skin" above, but with less eye widening and more lip lifting.
[40] Seemingly similar to "keyboard kitten above" but with different symbols as ears.
[41] Similar to both "Bratz clear skin" filters above, but with more pronounced nose pinching
[42] Arabic. Translates to Major General/ Walid El-Sisi.

231.3k uses		4 filters	
Celestite Light	Overlays a black man’s face on the user's face.	Momo Thoc (@momothoc), Effect House Top Creator 25.8k followers, 16+ filters	Not applicable: not a beauty filter
ArCaReOn5 489.1k uses	Adds an overexposed filter.	Arcareon (@blue486juice), 6.6k followers, 7 filters	Not applicable: not a beauty filter
Natural 379.4k uses	Lowers hairline, skin smoothing and brightening, adds eyelashes, slims face, pinches nose, enlarges eyes, plumps lips.	Emiliaa (@emiliafersoo) 474 followers, 4 filters	Western beauty, youth, “being natural”.
No filter slim Clear 262.5k uses	Skin smoothing and brightening, removes blemishes, face slimming, lip augmentation and plumping, nose pinching, jawline slimming, widens eyes, slightly raises eyebrows.	Anna Ionova (@annareee27), Effect House Top Creator 509.2k followers, 16+ filters	Western beauty. Youthfulness.
Soft Perfect Girl 608.0k uses	Skin smoothing, blurring and brightening, removes blemishes, adds eyelashes and applies lipstick and blush.	🌸 Dariga 🌸 (@suikimdi.jan_), 11.7k followers, 16+ filters	Western beauty. Youthfulness.
clean girl 446.2k uses	Skin smoothing and brightening, removes blemishes, face slimming, lip augmentation and plumping, nose pinching, slims face, adds lipstick and blush.	evvvvvvgen (@evvvvvvgen), Effect House Top Creator, 391.3k followers, 16+ filters for both women and men, featuring Western women and men	Western beauty. Youthfulness.
Курочка на новый год 🍗 51,2K uses	Adds sunglasses and a roast chicken hat on the user’s head.	АРина 🎄(@sobolarin), 8 followers, 5 filters	Not applicable: not a beauty filter
Just a guy 52.1K uses	Transforms the user bald, distorts facial shape, adds bleached eyebrows and slight moustache. “Comedy” filter.	Olga (@oljgina), 12.5k followers, 11 filters	Not applicable: not a beauty filter

Veela 797.2K uses	Skin smoothing and lightening, removes blemishes, face slimming, lip augmentation and plumping, nose pinching, jawline slimming, widens eyes, slims and shortens face, adds makeup: eyelashes, eyeliner, eyeshadow, blush, highlighter	Anna Ionova (@annareee27), Effect House Top Creator 509.2k followers, 16+ filters	Western beauty. Youthfulness.
Bulgarian Paper 76.6K uses	Replaces the user's face with a low resolution 2D capsicum with blue eyes and human features. With raising one's hand, a cucumber appears.	benjamin (@ben43323), 5 followers, 1 filter	Not applicable: not a beauty filter
Dark Mood★ 71.4K uses	Skin smoothing and brightening, removes blemishes, face slimming, lip augmentation and plumping, nose pinching, slims face. Adds a dark, underexposed filter.	Anna Ionova (@annareee27), Effect House Top Creator 509.2k followers, 16+ filters	Western beauty. Youthfulness.
Khabib Nurmagomedov 92.8K uses	Overlays a 2D image of a man over the user's head, probably of Khabib Nurmagomedov.	Lidya NurmagomedovRU (@._365797), 36 followers, 2 filters	Not applicable: not a beauty filter
Viral Montagem Gritos	A video of "best 2025 collabs" on the video game Fortnite showcasing different 'skins' on the game: Stranger Things, iShowSpeed, Kim Kardashian, Daft Punk, Gorillaz, Kpop Demon Hunters, among others.	CHRIZZ MUSIC ⚡ (@chrizzz.muisc), 40.7k followers 16+ filters	Not applicable: not a beauty filter
expo Barbie 442.3K uses	Skin smoothing and lightening, removes blemishes, face slimming, lip augmentation and plumping, nose pinching, slims face, adds nose contour and highlight. By clicking on the screen, eyelashes are added.	evvvvvvgen (@evvvvvvgen), Effect House Top Creator, 391.3k followers, 16+ filters for both women and men, featuring Western women and men	Western beauty. Bratz dolls. Youthfulness.
2014 47.4K uses	Adds a purplish pink filter, similar to the default 'Rio de	Eren (@earenx), Effect House Top Creator 1.6 million followers,	Not applicable: not a beauty filter

	Janeiro' filter on Instagram, but overexposed.	16+ filters	
MEGA SUPER FAIRY🦋🌸💌🌿👄👄 32.3K uses	Equips TikTok's "Ugly filter" and upon it adds eyelashes, bleaches eyebrows, blush, and lipstick. Changes hair colour to red, applies butterfly stickers on top of head, and adds bursting sparkles.	дурочка :3 (@milaho636), 18 followers, 11 filters	Not applicable: not a beauty filter
Masetala amarillo y rojo 33.4K uses	Prompts the user to "make a finger heart" and a felt apple appears to the left.	Isidora Anais (@isidora.anas4), 1320 followers, 2 filters	Not applicable: not a beauty filter
Pure girl face✨ 91.4k uses	Skin smoothing and blurring, removes blemishes, pinches nose, raises upper lip	🌸 Dariga 🌸 (@suikimdi.jan_), 11.7k followers, 16+ filters	Western beauty. Youthfulness. Being "natural".
Baldcat 40.8K uses	Enlarges the user's eyes, makes them bald, overlays cartoon cat whiskers and nose on the user's face.	Jorge Callegos 🐌 (@mikxero), 37 followers, 16+ filters	Not applicable: not a beauty filter
L A pink hat 278.3K uses	Adds a pink 2D LA Dodgers cap on top of the user's head.	@neyla.ks, 3 followers, 1 filter	Not applicable: not a beauty filter
Crown marrón 55.5K uses	Blurs the skin, applies freckles and eyelashes on the users face as well as contours and highlights the nose.	frxn_59 (@frxn_59x), 21 followers, 1 filter	Western beauty.
Idol - Dark	Makeup application (blush, lipstick, eyeshadow), skin smoothing, skin brightening, eyelashes. Decreased exposure.	alfirohmawti_, 98.k1 followers, 16+ filters Effect House Top Creator	Western/Eurocentric femininity, East Asian influences
Flawless Skin 29.9K uses	Skin smoothing and brightening, removes blemishes,	Eren (@earenx), Effect House Top Creator 1.6 million followers, 16+ filters	Western beauty. Naturality.
Nuvira Soline	Reduces the size of the user's head, removing their nose and giving them bug	Monalissas (namminhnguyen250), Effect House Top Creator	Not applicable: not a beauty filter

	features: large eyes and enlarged lips and adds round glasses and well as bug antennas.	2309 followers, 16+ filters	
Cute guy 16.5K uses	Equips TikTok's "Ugly filter" and removes the user's eyebrows and adds a moustache and chin beard. Applies butterfly stickers on top of the user's head. Light pink filter.	@kristinushka25, 344 followers, 10 filters	Not applicable: not a beauty filter
Team gold or Team silver 31.9K uses	Splits the screen in two: Team gold on the left and team silver on the right. On the team gold side the user is given gold makeup and on the silver side, silver makeup. Both sides equip skin smoothing, eyelashes, eyeshadow, lipstick, and blush.	@magnifisenses.com, 172k followers, 14 filters	Western beauty but experimental filter.
Blue eyes 25.5K uses	Gives the user blue eyes.	Awesome Isla (@awsome.isla), 21 followers, 16+ filters	Western beauty.
Low lighting makeup 33.9K uses	Adds slight makeup: eyeshadow, highlighter. Adds a grainy texture.	Savannah (@savvvll), 2769 followers, 1 filter	Western beauty.
Pink hair 42.3K uses	Transforms the user's hair bright pink.	Inst: ssonryyy (@ssonryyy), 5913 followers, 16+ filters	Experimental, alternative beauty.
LOL	Distorts the user's face in exaggerated ways: raises and arches eyebrows, widens mouth, changes nose shape and makes the user bald.	user74272925058 @juliafilters7, 5,294 followers, 16+ filters Account banned.	Not applicable: not a beauty filter
make glamor 26.2K uses	Skin smoothing and tanning, makeup application: heavy contour and highlight, adds eyelashes, lipstick, blus. Brightens eyes. Adds a grainy texture.	@vanessa_manuela07, 92 followers, 1 filter	Western beauty.

DUPA🎀 19.5K uses	Adds a navy blue 2D New York Yankees cap with a bow emoji attached to the right on top of the user's head	𝓌 (@wikusaapv), 226 followers, 1 filter	Not applicable: not a beauty filter
Bald Funky	Distorts the user's face in exaggerated ways: raises and arches eyebrows, widens mouth, widens the distance between eyes, changes nose shape and makes the user bald.	Jenner Filters 👶 (@jenner.filters), 3362 followers, 16+ filters	Not applicable: not a beauty filter
LOL BALD	Distorts face by comically enlarging eyes, raises eyebrows, enlarges nose, and widens lips. Applies cartoon moustache and makes the user bald.	xoxo Filters (@xoxo.filters), 8727 followers, 16+ filters	Not applicable: not a beauty filter
💝💝💝 20.7K uses	Adds eyelashes on the user as well as an overexposed filter.	МОЯ СЕСТРА ТУТУТУ (@milanik91), 60 followers, 4 filters	Western beauty
Blibby 16.3K uses	Gives the user bug features and applies cartoon bug antennas. Enlarges eyes and slims the jaw.	elgnorthd (@elgnorthd), 18.8k followers, Effect House Top Creator, 16+ filters	Not applicable: not a beauty filter
Fun Smile Fun 22.5K uses	Distorts the user's face to a round shape: raises eyebrows, enlarges eyes, slims nose, adds a goatee, and makes the user bald.	@angelfilters6, 8450 followers, account now banned	Not applicable: not a beauty filter
mario 26.8K uses	Distorts the user's face to a round shape:, enlarges eyes and lips, adds a pink Mario hat and 'Mario' moustache.	Vioo (@vi0linne_4slii) 113 followers, 13 filters	Not applicable: not a beauty filter
Santa Cap Fun 3553 uses	Raises and arches eyebrows, enlarges nose, widens lips, and adds a Christmas/Santa hat on the user.	@bliss.filters, 7275 followers, account now banned	Not applicable: not a beauty filter

@f1oxyy3 Пепе ватафаааа..[43] 10.4k uses	Adds black facial tattoos on the user's face and dyes their hand deep blue.	РОЖИК (@rogen480), 77 followers, 15 filters	Not applicable: not a beauty filter

[43] Russian. Translates to "*@f1oxyy3 Pepe watafaaaaa..*".

Declaration of the use of artificial intelligence (AI)

I utilised generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools for support tasks in the creation of this thesis. The tools, their purpose, and my verification measures are detailed below. I confirm that I have used all AI tools with appropriate care and in accordance with the university's guidelines, and I take full responsibility for all content presented in this thesis.

Tools: Perplexity AI and ChatGPT (GPT-5.3)
Stage of use: Planning, revision, and language editing
Purpose of use:

- To help find possible angles for literature searches.
- To receive suggestions on structure and coherence (e.g. comments on whether paragraphs were overly long, repetitive, or unclear).
- To assist in identifying potential grammatical errors, errors in phrasing, or inconsistencies in terminology.
- To help build Table 1.
- To help draft this statement.

Verification:
All ideas, arguments, and interpretations in this thesis are my own and are based on published research and my own analysis based on the scholarship, articles, and dataset. AI tools were used to suggest wording, to point out possible errors, and to propose improvements when I asked. Any literature suggested by AI was checked by me before deciding whether to use it. Any reference lists or citation formats generated with AI were checked and corrected by me.