

Social Media and Its Role in Amplifying a Certain Idea of Beauty

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ABSTRACT: The use of social media is gaining momentum day by day. It has become extremely popular and has set its foot everywhere in society. Social media has influenced people in a lot of different ways but the most prominent one is the standards of beauty. The paper analyses the relationship between social media and its effect on people's views about their bodies in relation to what they see on social media. And also, how this influence of social media has amplified the use of unrealistic beautification applications and filters among people, especially teenagers and young adults. These applications and filters are photo-editing tools which allow the user to alter their images and make them prettier. These morphed images are unrealistic and can sometimes lead to low self-esteem in young women. A small survey was conducted in which twenty-six young women have participated and shared their views regarding social media experiences. The aim is to study how social media has altered their views about a female body and beauty standards.

KEYWORDS: social media, perception of beauty, beautification application.

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1 Introduction: Use of Beautifying Applications and Filters

Social media has its wings all spread in our day-to-day lives. Nowadays, whoever uses a smartphone is inclined to be on some social media platform.

According to a digital global report (Kemp 2021), social media growth has accelerated significantly since the outbreak of Covid-19. The number of users has risen by more than 13% over the last year, with approximately five hundred million fresh users taking the global user aggregate to nearly 4.2 billion by the beginning of the year 2021. The advancement in digital technologies is increasing rapidly. Social media has a huge influence on people nowadays and especially among the young adults. One of the principal features of Instagram and Snapchat is texting as well as image and video sharing. The popularity of these social media platforms is immensely huge and is increasing day by day. A study (Iqbal 2021b) shows that the greatest number of users are of age between 18–24 on Instagram and India is second highest on the list.

Fashion, Skincare/Cosmetics and Health & Fitness (Iqbal 2021a) are in the list of top ten interests of Instagram users. Kim Kardashian West, an American model, is the 7th most followed person on Instagram. Kendall Jenner, Khloe Kardashian and Kourtney Kardashian are among the top twenty most followed models on Instagram. All these women have a similar body type and facial features. Each one of them has a defined jawline and high cheekbones, contoured nose and poutier lips. Even their body shape is quite similar as they have slim arms, legs and waists with enhanced bottoms and breasts. These women have artificially acquired their beauty,¹ they have immensely changed their bodies through plastic surgeries like lip lift surgery, Botox, rhinoplasty, lasered hairline and what not. If one looks at Instagram profiles of fashion influencers in India like Komal Pandey, Diipa Buller Khosla, Kritika Khurana, Aashna Shroff, Pooja Mundhra, Santoshi Shetty, their images have a lot of similarity in terms of poses and make-over. Their lips are poutier, nose contoured, defined jawlines, high cheekbones, pear shaped body figure. These qualities have somehow become intrinsic for being beautiful. It has created a sense of uniformity on social media profiles.

Although beauty is a subjective concept its definition can differ from person to person. Social media can be seen playing an important role in framing a certain body type to qualify for being beautiful. The standard beauty type in our society is defined by the modalities of advertising, marketing, mass image reproduction which normalizes a certain idea of beauty. This idea is again plural but nonetheless in those pluralities there are certain intrinsic qualities. In today's time, poutier lips, enhanced eyes, defined jawline, contoured nose, high cheekbones, toned body have become intrinsic qualities,

1. See the article by Mehera Bonner “These Before-and-After Pics of the Kardashians Will Blow Your Mind” in *Cosmopolitan* (Dec 9, 2020) [Article](#)

especially on social media platforms. So, there are many applications that are picking up on these essentials of beauty which are also being manifested in Snapchat and Instagram filters. People who can't afford expensive make-up and plastic surgeries can alter/edit their images using these applications and filters in order to be a part of the normative of beauty. Many young women can be seen using them to enhance their lips, eyes, complexion and have a more toned face.

The fashion and beauty magazines like *Vogue*, *Elle*, *Allure*, *Femina*, *Cosmopolitan*, etc., have been playing a vital role in defining a certain idea about beauty for ages. Images of celebrities and models displayed in these magazines are admired by the masses and they frame this certain idea of beauty. The images displayed are often photoshopped or edited for the women to look picture perfect. This idea (Lindblad 2020) of photoshopping goes back to more than thirty years, when two brothers, Thomas and John Knoll, developed Photoshop in 1987 and sold the distribution license to Adobe Systems Incorporated in 1988. It was the first photo editing software introduced to the masses. Photoshop developed over the years with many new versions which took digital editing to a next level. Gradually, many simpler applications like Beauty Plus, PicsArt, B612, Snapchat, YouCam, Beauty Booth, Photo Wonder, etc. were released for smartphones.

Technological advancement has been radical over the years. These applications and beauty filters have created a huge difference among people regarding the idea of beauty. People are immensely using them to beautify themselves and to project a simulated self on virtual platforms. Jean Baudrillard, a French philosopher, in his work "Simulacra and Simulation" (Baudrillard 1994) has analyzed the connection among reality, symbols and society. He is of the opinion that the current society has "replaced all reality and meaning with symbols and signs, and that human experience is a simulation of reality." Simulation has been defined as an imitation which substitutes for the real world by Baudrillard. He talks about how contemporary media is responsible for obscuring the distinction between products actually required and products for which the requirement is created by the marketing industry. For the postmodern society, he says that "it is no longer a question of imitation but substituting the signs of the real for real".

This idea of a perceived reality works in the use of photo editing apps and filters which have made it easier to look prettier than your usual self. People use these filters and apps to create a hyperreal image of themselves on social media platforms. The concept of hyperreal is defined as something "more real than real". For instance, film stars in movies look glamorous

and are so believed to be. Their real image is different from their camera image. One example can be Rajnikanth, an Indian actor primarily working for South Indian films who looks older in reality than his film star image on screen. Thus, people have formed a hyperreal image of themselves to appeal to audiences.

These filters and apps can actually do magic to your images. One can apply make-up, lighter the skin tone, thinner the nose, apply fake bigger eye lashes, lipstick, enhance lips, bosoms, bottoms. It has become a popular trend to put up a crystal-clear picture of yourself on social media platforms. The use of these filters and applications has made it easier to shine in images even when you may have just woken up from bed. To illustrate further one of the participants of the survey has actually agreed to let her pictures be used for the study (Table 1). One can clearly make out the differences between the two pictures. The skin is smoother, nose thinner, lips poutier, breasts enhanced. The application used for these changes is Beauty Plus.



Table 1. Left: photo before modification; right: photo after modification.

One interesting thing about these filters and applications is that they are more emancipatory than surgeries. One can remain in their actual skin but alter their face and body using these apps and project a simulated self for virtual masses. This idea is attractive for people posting their pictures only for monetizing their accounts or just for more appreciation from the audience. Many influencers on Instagram use these filters and applications to create a prettier image on virtual platforms which sometimes help them

to gain immense popularity (for instance, a greater number of followers and likes) and eventually more money.

It is quite fascinating as there are many people who are using these filters and apps to fit into that certain idea of beauty to gain more popularity and hence more money. Influencer marketing is growing day by day and brands are compensating more money than ever before. Many Influencers are promoting products of different brands and making huge amounts of money. Brands usually affiliate links or promo code-based commissions for influencers promoting their products. There are different factors on which the earnings depend like quality of content produced, number of followers, profile's engagement, etc. Instagram Marketing Hub is one of the influencers calculators (Schaffer 2021) used to measure the profiles of the influencers considered. This particular calculator focuses on three factors: size of the followers, average "likes" per post and engagement rate. Hence, it can be concluded that filters and apps have gained huge popularity among Instagram users and influencers have helped in a way to amplify its use.

S No.	Followers	Average Likes	Engagement per Post	Estimated Earnings per Post in USD
1.	97,277	2,850	2.95%	\$390-\$650
2.	12,412	903	7.67%	\$84.75-\$141.25
3.	8,559	438	5.25%	\$79.5-\$132.5
4.	24,767	849	3.43%	\$153.75-\$256.25
5.	69,367	1,136	1.72%	\$277.5-\$462.5
6.	596,535	21,164	3.58%	\$1,782-\$2,970

Table 2. Details of the Instagram profiles of six influencers

Table 2 presents details of the Instagram profiles of several Indian influencers that are presented in more details in text that follows. These details have been taken from Instagram Marketing Hub, a website (Geyser 2020).

1. An Indian TV actress, blogger and an Instagram social influencer who creates humorous short reels in which some or the other filter is used to either enhance the background or beautify her face. She has the perfect poutier lips and thinner nose through surgeries. She has around ninety-seven thousand followers and publishes content mostly about fun and humor. According to her Instagram Marketing Hub report, she is earning money somewhere between 29,098.10 and 48,496.83 Indian rupees (INR) per post.

2. A physiotherapist and blogger who also calls herself an Instagram Influencer. She has used filters in almost every reel to brighten up her skin. She promotes different products like vitamins' supplements and skincare products from famous international companies. She has more than twelve thousand followers and is making money between 6,323.4–10,538.73 INR per post.
3. A Fashion Influencer who is making around seventy-nine to one hundred and thirty-two dollars (5,931.53–9,885.89 INR) per post with more than eight thousand followers. Most of her pictures and reels are filtered.
4. The fourth example is of a Instagram video creator and most of her content is about cosmetics especially make-up products. She has a good number of followers and is making between 11,471.36–19,118.94 INR per post.
5. An Instagram influencer has used a good amount of filters in her dance reels. She promotes different products of skin and hair care, jewelry, clothes, etc. She has a good number of followers and is making about 20,704.5–34,507.36 INR per post.
6. An Instagram influencer and model who is also a TikTok queen and calls herself a "Barbie Doll". She has a huge fan following with more than half a million followers on her profile. She is earning between 132,955.91–221,593.18 INR per post which is an enormous amount of money. She looks similar to a barbie in her reels and pictures with the help of make-up and filters. One can easily identify the immense use of filters in her posts. She acts and talks like a barbie with fixed facial features in a robotic manner as if she is the toy-barbie doll.

2 Data Collection and Methodology

The research work is based on the primary source of data collected through sending out questionnaires to young women using social media platforms. The main aim of the questionnaire was to know how many of these women were using beautifying apps and filters for their images. Also, it aimed to know whether the use of these filters and applications created any sense of low self-esteem in them about their real skin and bodies. The questionnaire was sent out randomly mostly via WhatsApp Messenger and Instagram to around thirty women but not everyone was comfortable responding to such questions. Twenty-six have responded and the analysis has been made accordingly.

Questionnaire:

1. What is your name?
2. What is your age?
3. What do you do?
4. What is your perception of beauty?
5. Which mobile phone do you use?
6. Do you follow any model on social media platforms? If yes, name them.
7. Do you use any sort of beautification apps or filters for your pictures?
8. Do you think your filtered pictures are better liked than unfiltered pictures?
9. How has the use of beautification apps and filters changed the perception of beauty?
10. Has their application affected your self-esteem?
11. What do you usually alter about your face or body using these filters or apps?
12. If you had enough money, would you opt for surgery as an option to change any part of your face or body?

The greatest number of responses (18) are from college students ranging between the age group 18–24 years which is, as stated in the beginning of the paper, the greatest number of users on Instagram (Iqbal 2021a). The age group 18–24 includes the transitional period from adolescence to adulthood in a person's life. It is easily visible that women turning into adults are more conscious about their looks than older women. The participants also include a few working women and one homemaker. The survey targeted only women consciously as the popularity of filters and beauty apps is more among women than men. Though lately one can notice younger men are also being attracted to the use of filters and apps.

Graphical representations of the data collected according to the mentioned categories is presented in Figure 1.

3 Analysis of the Data Collected

On the basis of the data collected, it can be said that because of the unrealistic beauty standards these women have felt insecure about their looks which has led them to use filters and beautification. Twenty-four out of twenty-six said that they are using filters or some sort of beautification app either to lighten their skin or give background noise. All these women agreed that their pictures are better liked when posted using filters. These beauty standards have created a certain idea of beauty where women feel that they need

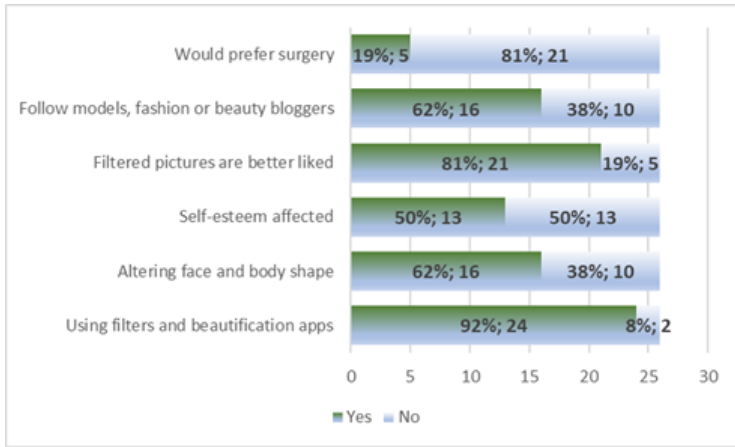


Figure 1. Analysis of answers to questions 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12

to alter their bodies according to their needs. Poutier lips are in trend these days and one of my participants is even ready to undergo surgery to enhance her upper lip. Perfect jawlines and high cheek bones are in demand too and most of the women accept that they usually alter their jawlines using these applications and filters.

Sixteen of the women participants follow models and other fashion or beauty bloggers who promote this certain image of being beautiful where they have perfect jawlines, poutier lips, enhanced lips and eyes, high cheek-bones with slim waist. These models are mostly plastic but they have created a beauty normative which has become an ideal for most women. Younger women are in awe of such celebrities and models and admire them for their perfect faces and bodies. So, most younger women feel an urge to look like them and take support of filters and applications to alter their image. The fashioned contoured nose is very much in demand. And the five participants who were ready to go for a surgery mostly preferred a rhinoplasty in which one's nose is altered and reconstructed which changes the appearance of the nose.

The questionnaire included a question where the participants' perception about beauty was asked. The majority of participants answered that beauty is something which resides inside of a person. Also, a confident person seems beautiful to many participants but at the same time these women are accepting that they use filters and apps to beautify their images which in itself is a contradictory notion. Also, the patriarchal notion of woman as a beautiful

object has triggered the use of filters and apps. In a patriarchal mindset, the existence of a woman is limited to a man's needs and the idea that a fair wife is a beautiful wife has also forced women to make themselves look appealing to a man. This is an unhealthy mindset which compels younger women who are easily convinced to take support of make-up, filters, beauty apps and the extreme option surgery in order to look pretty in accordance with the normative of beauty.

Many participants expressed that the constant use of social media has led them to compare themselves to the beauty images, and also agreed that use of these Snapchat and Instagram filters have altered their opinions about beauty. One of the participants said that these filters used by so many people belittle those who already lack self-confidence and are uncomfortable in showing their real skins. They give the viewers an illusion of extremely fair and clear skin, a thinner face, thinner nose and what not. These pictures might mess up with people's heads who start comparing these filtered pictures with their real skin. These filters and beautification apps have definitely changed the perception of beauty because when you use filters just make blemishes disappear. You can make anything disappear. You can make skin smoother which many times leads young women to believe that their skin should be flawless and they should not have pores in it. And that obviously creates a toxic environment and it also creates toxic things where women are forced to believe that the person you are looking at the filter is better than the person you are looking at the mirror.

Self-esteem is another important part of one's life. It is a subjective evaluation of one's own worth. The study also involved whether women when comparing themselves to their filtered hyperreal selves felt that it has hurt their self-esteem in any way. Thirteen participants answered that in a way their self-esteem was hurt, especially, when they started comparing their filtered self with their mirror image. The person in the filter is not real but when these women started aspiring to become like them, it did push their self-esteem. Many agreed that extensive use of these filters have now made it impossible for them to post a picture without filters. They do not feel confident in posting a picture without editing anymore. Some even said that they only use a filtered camera rather than a normal camera.

If we go deeper into psychoanalytic theory, this desire to look like your filtered self by opting for surgery reflects on the person's *id*, the impulsive and unconscious mind of a person. According to Freud's psychoanalysis theory (Freud 1990), psyche is framed into three parts: *id*, the primitive and instinctual component responding to basic desires and needs; *super-ego*, the

moral conscience and; *ego*, the realistic part mediating between *id* and *superego*. These apps and filters give an unrealistic image of oneself but the desire to look that way and to fit into the certain idea of beauty just to satisfy their *id* is reflecting upon the extensive effect of the use of these filters and apps.

Id works on the pleasure principle and wants every wishful impulse to be satisfied. Surgery is a radical option which is painful and can have serious consequences. Even after that if one still aspires to be like her filtered self via surgery, it is a problematic issue as one is putting up with something dangerous and uncertain. Many times, these surgeries fail and the outcomes are horrifying. Letting your unconscious mind rule over your rational self and opt surgery as an option is not at all a good idea.

4 Conclusion

With the westernization of India, the beauty standards have changed a lot in the recent years. The idea that “fair is beautiful” has been deeply rooted in Indian society. The matrimonial advertisements have always emphasized on the fairer skin tone of the girl. There is even particular demand for fair-skinned girls mentioned in the advertisements (Gelles 2020). Among all the qualities in a girl, fair skin tone is an intrinsic quality for being called beautiful in a stereo-typical Indian society and also, the most demanded. Colorism is deeply inscribed in Indian mindset and especially in the case of a girl which makes it a gendered bias. The Indian fairness cream market revenue was reportedly worth 30 billion dollars in 2019 and is anticipated to cross 50 billion dollars by the year 2023.² This idea is engraved in the minds of Indians that fair skin tone is the most essential quality for a woman to be beautiful. After this, a woman with bigger eyes, long black hair, full red lips and slim waist with wider hips is considered to be the ideal beauty in Modern India (Majidi 2020). These essentials are somewhat different than the new globalized beauty trends, for instance, fairness is no longer a significant quality due to racial equality in the global beauty trends. Also, the idea of thick-black long wavy hair is accustomed to Indian beauty ideals. The global beauty trend of poutier lips is also not a part of the traditional ideal of beauty in India. Discrimination and racism do not only happen between communities

2. See the article by Pia Krishnankutty “Before Fair & Lovely, there was Afghan Snow – all about the fairness creams market in India.” in Print (June 26, 2020) [Article](#)

but also within communities. Biasness for lighter skin tone exists among many countries across Asia, Africa and South America.³ According to a study (Sims and Hirudayaraj 2016), women that are dark-skinned in India and surrounding countries relatively have lesser opportunities to become a flight attendant, journalist, receptionist, model, sales associate, actress and other professions which needs interaction with masses because they will be judged as “unattractive”. Even among the participants of the survey, six to seven women directly or indirectly admitted that they lighten their complexion or skin tone using filters or beautifying apps. Most of the participants in the survey are either college students or working, hence, it can be stated that level or type of education does not matter when it comes to the use of filters and beautification apps on social media. Also, highly qualified people like doctors can be seen posting dance or music reels during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic on social media platforms in which they usually have applied filters.

Therefore, it can be concluded that social media plays an important role in defining a certain normative of beauty as all the top models and fashion bloggers look in a similar fashion, dress up in a similar fashion and even post pictures of a similar fashion. These trends have led other women to follow in their footsteps where these women take help of digital apps and filters to imitate them. Nowadays an image of a beautiful face and body is created which has defined certain essentials of being beautiful. It is mainly the enhanced lips and eyes, smoother skin, high cheekbones, defined jawline, slim waist, enhanced bottoms, thinner nose, etc. Many women have been influenced due to the extensive involvement of social media in today's time. Models and fashion bloggers have defined these standards of beauty which create an urge among other younger women to imitate. And many influencers are using these filters and apps for monetary reasons to gain more attraction and hence money. So, many women are using filters and applications which help them define their jawlines, poutier their lips, smoother their skins, slim their waists, etc. It has certainly in some cases lowered the self-esteem of women where they are unable to feel satisfied with their real skins and bodies. Also, it has created an illusion in them as they aspire to be like their filtered images. This leads to a sense of body dissatisfaction and overall lower self-confidence in many cases. It has become almost impossible for these women to post pictures without filters which is a negative effect. And those who

3. See the article by Meera Estrada “Commentary: Shadeism is the Dark Side of Discrimination We Ignore.” in Global News (Posted May 24, 2019), [Article](#)

aspire to their filtered self to an extent that they may opt surgery as an option reflects on the mental impact of these filters and apps.

This study has mainly focused on women of young age. Further advancement in the study can be brought about by including young men to see whether they are under the similar urge to enhance their virtual image on social media platforms and also, to women of older generations. The constant pressure from social media to fit into the normative of beauty has affected people's perception of beauty. Also, this extreme urge may lead people to opt for surgery which reflects upon a person's id i.e., the impulsive and unconscious mind. Widening the psychological scope of the study, this aspect of a person's id overruling the rational self can be further explored.

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