

Beauty Filters: The Ugly Truth

By Kelyn Tng | July 29, 6.00pm

Technology has done amazing things for modern society. But what would you do if technology was so advanced that you couldn't even tell if it was being used and it was affecting the way people viewed themselves in real life? Such is the reality of Augmented Reality or AR when used in the context of beauty filters.

AR is the base technology that is used for face filters. It uses face detection software and a set of pre-determined components set by the filter's creator to overlay a person's face¹. Its popularity might have started with Snapchat but really caught on when Facebook and Instagram also introduced face filters to their platform². Some filters bring a sense of whimsical fun, like adding a ring of butterflies around your head or giving you dog ears and tongue when you stick your tongue out. This technology eventually evolved to beauty filters – when it is used to subtly alter the physical appearance of someone's face or body³.

In its infancy, it was used as a quick fix to spruce someone's appearance online and was only available if you downloaded an app. Now, it can be found hard coded into software that we may use daily. Most phones have a beauty filter that can be pre-selected so that every picture that you take is immediately edited. Even Zoom has a "touch up my appearance" button which was a great benefit when COVID-19 hit, and people found themselves in front of a camera at home but didn't feel like making themselves up. But what happens when this changes the way people see themselves?

Negative side effects

Beauty filters augment the reality of someone's appearance and the technology is so advanced and far-reaching that anyone with a mobile phone has access to this, including children and teenagers who are still forming their identity. Cases of body dysmorphia and people walking into plastic surgery offices to look like their filtered self are cropping up all over the world and this might take a toll on medical and mental health systems⁴.

It is a problem that is big enough to warrant governments to act against the misuse of this technology. Norway has passed an amendment to their Marketing Act, etc. (tagging of retouched advertising) which in brief aims "to help reduce body pressure in society due to idealized people in advertising. Among other things, a duty is introduced to mark retouched or otherwise manipulated advertising when this means that the person's body in the advertisements deviates from reality in terms of body shape, size and skin⁴." France requires advertisers to declare if any commercial image has been retouched⁵. The United Kingdom requires influencers to declare when they are using filters especially when it pertains to exaggerating the effects that the product they are promoting can achieve⁶.

Advertising, and why this is a problem

Social media can be a wonderful tool for discovery and exploration of new topics and to enact social change for good. Yes, it is also fun when we see funny filters that are shared amongst friends for a good laugh. But when people are profiting from selling an ideal image or figure that is impossible to achieve naturally and negatively influencing people's perception of themselves in the process, that's where a line needs to be drawn. If governments have such strict laws about alcohol and tobacco advertising because of its well-known detriment to health, then they should also look at factors that will influence the mental health of its people.

With a vast number of people using the technology, there is always a chance for some people to misuse it. The laws that try to govern this new technology are not trying to stop people from having fun with it, but rather calling on influencers and advertisers, the people that might profit from selling this illusion, to be more transparent about their practices to avoid false advertising.

The simple case of popular makeup brand Tarte is an excellent example of why this issue needs to be addressed. On 7 July 2021, Tarte posted a video on their Instagram page with a woman promoting a smoothing primer with a voiceover that claims she is not using a filter and that her pores are shrinking because of the product. Shrewd users called the brand out for clearly using a filter and thus making false claims about the efficacy of their product. Tarte denied this and posted another video the next day still claiming “no filter”, this time with a revised caption stating that the primer cannot actually shrink pores but can help blur their appearance⁷, along with a video of the same woman using the product. Users noticed that the new video looked nothing like the first video and called out Tarte’s integrity⁸. Tarte has yet to respond further on this matter and it is unclear if they will suffer any consequences.

With technology becoming more sophisticated, it is increasingly hard to tell the difference between good lighting and the efficacy of a product or if an advertisement is putting a veil over our eyes just to sell a product. If most users are not able to tell the difference due to the advanced technology, then the onus of sincere and transparent advertising should fall on the people who are profiteering from using such technology. Advertising is powerful but power can be dangerous especially if the wrong message is spread. Brands need to be ethical and transparent; they need to come to a point where consumers can trust them when #nofilter truly means no filter.

References

- *What's Behind Augmented Reality Face Filters?* Quantilus. (2021, April 21). <https://quantilus.com/whats-behind-augmented-reality-face-filters/>.
- Ryan-Mosley, T. (2021, April 2). *Beauty filters are changing the way young girls see themselves.* MIT Technology Review. <https://www.technologyreview.com/2021/04/02/1021635/beauty-filters-young-girls-augmented-reality-social-media/>.
- Opitz, S.-C. (2020, June 5). *Beauty filters when beauty is standardised.* From Print to Pixel. <https://www.fromprinttopixel.ch/en/my-networked-images/beauty-filter>.
- Ministry of Children and Family Affairs. (n.d.). *Prop. 134 L (2020–2021) Amendments to the Marketing Act, etc. (tagging of retouched advertising).* Regjeringen.no. <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/prop.-134-l-20202021/id2842301/?ch=3>.
- Eggert, N. (2017, September 30). *Is she PHOTOSHOPPED? In France, they now have to tell you.* BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-41443027>.
- Daniel, C. (2021). The Danger of the Social Media Filter – ASA Rules Adverts are Misleading. *The National Law Review*, XI(42). <https://www.natlawreview.com/article/danger-social-media-filter-asa-rules-adverts-are-misleading>.
- tartecosmetics [@tartecosmetics]. (2021, July 8). Not a filter! While nothing out there can ACTUALLY shrink pores, our timeless smoothing primer does a lot to help blur their appearance & can be used under or over (like Shanna did here!) your makeup [Instagram video]. Retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/CRCMGdQBROK/?utm_medium=copy_link.
- Dahir, I. (2021, July 9). *Tarte cosmetics is DENYING accusations that they used a filter in a video meant to show how their product requires no filter.* BuzzFeed News. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ikrd/tarte-cosmetics-filter-video>.

Note: The opinions expressed in this blog post are those of the author. They do not purport to reflect the opinions or views of the Asia Internet Coalition (AIC) or its members.