

*The Impact of Snapchat Beautifying Filters on Beauty Standards and Self-image:  
A Self-Discrepancy Approach*

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The European Conference on Arts & Humanities 2021  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

This study explores the problematic nature of Snapchat's beautifying filters by presenting Saudi women's perceptions of self-beauty and reactions to these face-perfecting filters, from satisfaction to self-discrepancy. It expands the existing literature on Snapchat filters to users from Eastern regions. It uses the self-discrepancy theory to show the impact of perceived discrepancies between the actual and ideal self in facial images that use Snapchat filters, showing its impact on beauty standards and emotions. This study demonstrates the tension between the temporary satisfaction and confidence boost provided by filters and the simultaneous self-discrepancy that affects some women negatively. The study utilises qualitative method of research. It is based on online interviews conducts on ten Saudi women. The study emphasized the role of personality, self-beauty confidence, and faith in shaping the intensity of the impact. The results show a fluctuation in women's perceptions of the effect of filters on beauty standards, from filters merely emphasizing well-known standards to promoting new ones, causing women to enhance their actual self to reach an idealized look. This study argues that, to some extent, Snapchat filters are fake, unpleasant, and distorting.

Keywords: Self-discrepancy, Filters, Snapchat, Social Media, Saudi Women

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## **Introduction**

In the last few years, the Snapchat platform has witnessed an increase in use all over the world. Snapchat supports ephemeral communications and has become one of the most popular social and photo sharing applications worldwide (Tankoveska, May 21, 2021). This digital interaction on everyday photos and videos using augmented reality has drawn attention to the application (Rios, Ketterer & Wohn, 2018). Statistics indicate that there are 280 million daily active Snapchat users worldwide. It is one of the most popular social networking sites used in Saudi Arabia (Al-Qahtani, Basardah & Al-Shaer, 2019); Saudi Arabia ranked fifth place worldwide with a Snapchat audience of 19.6 million users in January 2021 (Tankoveska, Feb 10, 2021). One of the essential features of Snapchat that distinguishes it from other social media platforms is the Face Lenses feature, which is applied to users' faces using augmented reality.

## **Snapchat**

Snapchat was launched in 2011. It is a mobile application that displays shared content for a limited period. It depends on mobile portability; photos and images are taken anywhere and at any time (Bayer, Ellison, Schoenebeck, & Falk, 2016). People use Snapchat to share photos, communicate, and interact socially (Kerr and Faulkner, 2020). In 2015, Snapchat introduced Lenses, commonly known as face filters (Barker, 2020). Filters have been widely used to enhance users' appearance and present their ideal selves. These filters edit facial features, e.g. contouring the nose and jawline, widening the eyes, smoothing and lightening the skin, getting rid of blemishes and imperfections, applying virtual accessories and makeup, changing photo colouring, or adding cartoon elements. A "biometric grid" activated on the users' faces allow them to apply different Lenses on their faces (Zhao & Zappavigna, 2018:675). In their daily lives, users combine these technological effects with self-expression (Barker, 2020) and visual and written content (Brubaker and Wilson, 2018) while forming social connections.

Technically, the most unique Snapchat feature is the 24-hour story. The process shows a series of photos or videos; each remains between 1 and 10 seconds. It is presented, monitored, and edited by the user, and then viewed by the chosen audience. Different facial expressions are displayed and frequently changed and updated by the company.

## **Women on Social Media**

Physical appearance and self-presentation are essential components in women's self-evaluation (Wang, Wang, Liu, Xie, Wang, & Lei, 2020:164). Therefore, women are selective when posting picture of the self and tend to choose an image that gives a positive impression. Activities such as posting selfies, which usually involves applying filters, enhance women's self-image satisfaction (Wang, et al., 2020). Alsaggaf (2019) argues that Saudi women use strategies to present their idealized selves on social networking sites, while Rios et al. (2018:321) reveals that idealized filters are chosen depending on personalities, goals, and "scroll-first mindset."

## **Snapchat, from Satisfaction to Harm to Self-image**

A growing literature has developed on Snapchat with its increased use. Previous literature has shown that Snapchat has been used as a platform to enhance learning (see Kerr et al., 2020

and Al-Oudan, 2019), produce social capital (see Phua, Jin & Kim, 2017), share spontaneous experiences (see Bayer et al., 2016), and market products (see Tropp & Baetzgen, 2019). Most of the focus in the Arab literature on Snapchat has centered on its use in education (see Al-Sharaf, 2017 and Al-Oudan, 2019), social aspects (see Al-Azmi, 2017), the gratification of use (see Al-Qahtani et al., 2019), and marketing (see Alghamdi & Bogari, 2020).

In the western literature, many studies have identified negative psychological consequences associated with Snapchat use (Kahn & Martinez, 2020; Shin, Kim & Chong 2017; Steinsbekk, Wichstrøm, Stenseng, Nesi, Hygen & Skalická, 2021; and Utz, Muscanell & Khalid, 2015). One showed the negative impact of Snapchat selfies on users' mood (Fox, Vendemia, Smith & Brehm, 2020), and another showed that comparing the self-image with others' ideal images led to harmful outcomes (Vogel and Rose, 2016). But what about users focusing on their self-image compared to their ideal image? Vogel and Rose (2016) also demonstrate beneficial outcomes specifically when SNSs' users focused on their self-images rather than focusing on others' ideal images. Snapchat filters encourage such comparisons by allowing users to manipulate their self-image to reach the ideal version. Zhao et al. (2018) argue that editing apps such as Snapchat challenge the "authentic" self that is associated with self-images. Thus, Snapchat features have shifted the self-image from authentic to augmented and a modified form of the self (p:675). Kandathil, Patel, Saltychev and Most (2020) examine different perceptions of images taken by digital single-lens reflex (DSLR) cameras and by mobile phones, both filtered and non-filtered pictures of the self. The study found that images taken by Snapchat filters are linked with appealing attributes, whereas DSLR camera images are associated with ordinary traits.

Moreover, Eshiet (2020) argues that Snapchat filters influence the beauty standards of young women, thus playing a role in encouraging them to use fillers and seek plastic surgery. According to Ramphul and Mejias (2018), a plastic surgeon revealed that many clients request an appearance that corresponds to their filtered images on Snapchat and Instagram.

While there may be negative consequences, self-image satisfaction might occur to Snapchat filter users. Users upload their pictures/videos of the self to be seen by an audience, which might be enjoyable (Oliveira & Tam, 2020), boost confidence and raise self-esteem (Krause, Baum, Baumann & Krasnova, 2019), help pass the time (Phua et al., 2017), or help to express emotions through visual and written content on Snaps (which increases audience engagement, as argued by Brubaker et al., (2018).

The previous Western literature demonstrates the impact of filters' use, from satisfaction and joy to harm to self-image. With the increased use of Snapchat filters among women sharing photos and videos in Saudi society and the lack of studies on Saudi women's perceptions of self-beauty on social media, it is essential to understand the impact of social media features on women's perceptions of beauty and whether the use of these features influence the way they feel about themselves.

The study has three main questions:

Q1: Do Snapchat filters have an impact on Saudi women's self-image?

Q2: Do Snapchat filters have an impact on Saudi women's beauty standards?

Q3: Do filters lead to self-discrepancies that negatively impacted women's emotions?

## The Self-Discrepancy Theory

The use of Snapchat filters is an attempt to idealize the actual self-image. It is important to note here that the actual self-image is the image of the users without filters. The contradiction that users might feel when viewing the actual image compared to the ideal image using Snapchat Lenses (filters) could lead to negative emotions and dissatisfaction with the self-image. The self-discrepancy theory (SDT) described by E. Toy Higgins (1987) argues that there are specific emotional consequences that occur when individuals compare one self-state to another self-state and realize that a discrepancy arises between the two. Most are dissatisfied and disappointed when perceiving a discrepancy between actual and ideal selves. To researcher knowledge, the literature on self-discrepancy focuses mostly on body image (see Kim, 2020) except for one study on self-photos (see Mankotia & Wesley, 2020). As facial features, facial shape/form, and hair are considered integral parts of body image according to Jalali-Farahani, Amiri, Zarani & Azizi (2021), this study extends previous research and chose two self-states of interest out of six proposed by SDL: the actual/own (non-filtered image which I refer to as actual self throughout the paper) and the ideal/own (filtered images which I refer to as ideal self) focusing on facial features and appearance. These selves can be identified from one's perception, as proposed by SDL. Users likely compare Lenses before choosing which to post, resulting in a self-discrepancy that consequently may raise emotions such as dissatisfaction or disappointment.

## Methodology

### Sample

Participants were 10 Saudi women from the faculty of King Abdul Aziz University, in the age range of 35-65 years (see Table-1). Participants were selected depending on Snapchat filter use. The goal was to understand filter use and effects, with no intention to generalize to larger populations.

Initial	Years	Educational level	initial	years	Educational level
BF	35	PhD	AS	38	PhD
MH	36	PhD	AL	44	PhD
NS	39	PhD	SL	40	MA
NY	37	PhD	FM	38	PhD
AA	65	PhD	NA	44	PhD

Table 1: Participants' age and educational level

### Data Collection

This study utilized a qualitative method of research. Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted. To face the unique challenges of coronavirus pandemic precautions, data collection was mainly conducted online applying "social distant" technique. A technique that is advocated by Lobe, Morgan, Hoffman (2020:1) encouraging qualitative researchers to use technologies (video platforms) and alter their face-to-face study design to online one if needed. Due to cultural aspect and for women's privacy, it was difficult to use video platforms among participants. Thus, this study has used WhatsApp to collect data. Messages written or voiced on WhatsApp could remain recorded for the researcher's future use, at

convenience, while allowing for future explanations if needed. I was able to conduct two face-to-face interviews while the remaining eight were voice interviews through WhatsApp.

## **Interview Questions**

General questions were asked to participants about their interest in Snapchat filters and their use, followed by main questions asked about the impact of these filters on self-image, self-beauty confidence, self-discrepancy, and beauty standards. Data were collected, translated from Arabic to English, and categorized into main categories and themes.

## **Results**

### **Beautifying Vs. Distorting the Actual-image**

Snapchat beauty face filters have shown their effectiveness in beautifying users, as most participants use filters on the majority of their photos for an ideal appearance. They also agreed that filters make them prettier. NS, SL, AS, have never posted a photo without a filter. "Filters are Snapchat's salient feature; that's why I like to take advantage of them... why not use filters if I have the opportunity to look prettier," NS stated. AS also said: "Filters give the perfect image that I like my face and features to appear with." AQ uses filters on about 90% of her posted Snaps and stated that filters make her "glow" and look prettier. Likewise, AL and NS declared that filters make them prettier and they use them specifically when taking personal selfies. AS stated that these filters give clarity and lustre to her skin even when she is exhausted. She also said:

"Filters always give me the nice image that I seek, in the nice moments, when I am not prepared to take a memorable photo with family or friends, especially when I have not carried my makeup back, do not want to put on makeup, have no time, or am in a hurry".

Although filters beautify women and enhance their looks, for some participants, certain conditions allow them to dispense with using filters. AS and AL said that they may post an actual image if the sunshine gives them perfect lightning, or if they are in a group photo. Also, the clarity of the Snapchat camera was blamed for this attitude. NS said:

"I would take a photo without filters if the lighting were good or my face was not exhausted and the photoshoot was good. Sometimes I have photos saved from my regular camera... as photos by the regular camera are different from those taken by Snap, even without a filter, they are different, the settings are different... or when taking a group photo and the focus is not on me, my image will appear good and I don't need a filter here... also, I definitely don't need to use filters when I have a full face of makeup...but to be honest, I always use filters, about 98% of the time."

Furthermore, some participants vary in their level of dependency on filters. NA, FM, and AA, for example, fluctuate in their use, as they post photos with and without filters. NA said: "I like my natural look; I post many, many photos without filters. I also like to save photos with my actual look."

Although most of the participants were interested in Snapchat filters and affirmed their role in making them prettier, one participant showed no interest at all in filters; she criticized the distorted role of filters on self-image. MH is the only participants that refused to use filters, explaining that they distort the actual self-image. She said:

“I don’t use filters; I feel they change the facial features... not real... I don’t send photos with filters, I don’t like to, I feel I am prettier without them ... I feel filters are fake, not me.” She then proceeded: “The filters don’t reflect the actual look of a person, they are not cosmetic, on the contrary, they are distortionary.”

Nine out of ten participants agreed that filters make them prettier, but most did not like filters that applied significant changes to facial features, making the user look like they are a different person.

### **Self-discrepancy**

When comparing actual self to ideal self, we see conflicting data. When scrolling between filters, some participants felt emotional dissatisfaction and disappointment in their self image, while other participants expressed no effect.

### **Feeling Negative**

Some participants were emotionally dissatisfied with their picture of the self and complained about their skin’s appearance and tone, such as dark circles around the eyes. Some were unsatisfied with their entire actual self. This inconsistency, which MH did not allow to control her completely, was worrying to some participants. AL, for example, stated:

“I always do that: I look at my filtered image, then I press the X [button] and see myself, I look again at myself with the filter, then press the X [button], and in this way the comparison happens, and each time I choose, very fast, filter then X, filter then X, I realize the difference... My skin is ruined; why is there black under my eyes? The wrinkles are about to appear, what exactly is that?! Well, I do not see in the mirror what I see on Snap; why do I see them then on Snapchat? Because moving between the filters and the actual-image makes it clear...”

AA, a 65 years old participant, acknowledge her elderly appearance, saying sadly: “I look at my image, I can clearly see the wrinkles and the signs of being older when I compare my image with and without the filter.”

SL gave a shocking answer. She feels a high discrepancy between her actual and ideal filtered image that leads her to feel she is “ugly.” She said:

“I feel I am ugly, really ugly. I go back to look at myself and say why why do I look like that? [emphasis tone]. I feel sometimes that I am not satisfied with how I look. Not satisfied at all [emphasis tone]. I feel also that Snapchat is exploiting and promoting people to use their app more; filters make you beautiful and I am sure that they intentionally make our actual look ugly; they clearly show all the facial imperfections such as pores and I really feel unsatisfied about myself, so I use the filters.”

### **Is It All About Confidence and Maturity?**

The impact of self-discrepancy on self-image could relate to self-beauty confidence and maturity. Participants such as NA, BF, NY, NS, AA and AS acknowledged such discrepancies without diminished self- beauty confidence. BF stated that self-confidence plays a role, stating:

“I found myself prettier with filters, but in contrast, I don’t feel that I am not beautiful without it... it depends on the person, I am pretty, some people look normal or not

pretty, so it could be massively disturbing to them... I have self-beauty confidence, but I feel I am prettier with filters.”

Likewise, NS feels more satisfied with herself, stating that filters have reinforced her self-beauty confidence, though she stated that it depends on how a person reconciles with themselves. Similarly, NY said: “These filters show our real beauty; they bring out the beauty we have.”

However, filters also diminished some participants’ self-beauty confidence. SL said: “Of course filters decreased my confidence in my beauty; they make me feel ugly... shake me... I start looking a lot at myself... they annoy me.” Likewise, AL said: “Some filters are very nice, but they lead me to not accept my face.”

Moreover, one participant said that acceptance of unfiltered posts depends on a person’s maturity, as sensitivity and selectivity about self-image diminish as you age. AS said:

“Definitely filters don’t make me more confident about my beauty, because I am mature enough in this age... lately, I have been thinking more deeply; I don’t care like before. People start realizing and knowing that the beauty-look on Snap is not real, and the reality might be the opposite. People know the reality and they can distinguish it. For example, I would never judge how beautiful someone is from Snap and I think many people think the same.”

### **Snapchat self-care Monitoring**

The effects of Snapchat filters on self-discrepancy were not extreme enough to lead participants to seek plastic surgery. Most of them insisted that filters only help them to think more about their skin/look and encourage them to take care and time to reach the beauty level that Snapchat filters show them. BF stated:

“Yes, when I see myself with filters and go back to my actual image, I say to myself: I haven’t done any skincare for a long time? My skin is pale. When am I going to take off these sebaceous cysts around my eyes? I can see pale and poor skin without filters... but I don’t go to the extent of seeking plastic surgery. Many people ask for bigger lips, facelifts, etc. For me, I feel like my face is good but I need to take more care of it to look like the filters... so my cheeks will glow and the lips and eyes will look pretty...”

Treatments such as fillers, Botox, false lashes, or tanning are used to temporarily enhance looks due to the desire of idealizing the self on social media (Alsaggaf, 2019) that filters allow participants to experience. For instance, a filter that makes SL look tan encourages her to tan. AL stated that face beauty filters made her consider buying new green contacts to emulate the Snapchat green eyes filter. Likewise, NY felt that she needs to fill her lips to look like she does in filters. She said:

“With filled lips, I look prettier... and that does not mean I am not satisfied with God’s creation... no... thank God, I am so satisfied, but humans always seek the ideal look... and this is normal... that’s why we use makeup and foundation to clarify skin... it is the same idea with filters.”

As NS mentioned, the role of faith in accepting God’s creation was endorsed by most participants, which may explain why participants did not seek plastic surgery. AL, however,

mentioned other factors that might prevent women from seeking cosmetic surgery, such as fear of the procedure, economic factors, or side effects.

## **Beauty Standards**

Interestingly, most participants agreed that Snapchat filters promote well-known beauty standards such as wide eyes, long lashes, small sharp noses, and smooth skin. SA said:

“Look, for example, my sister and I have used the blue lens filter and it was nice on us but when our friend used it, it wasn’t nice on her at all, despite the filter being amazing... so the filter here is not a measure of beauty or a way to adjust standards... no... for me, beauty standard are still those wide eyes, shaped nose... what filters do is just take these standards and use them.”

On the other hand, some participants stated that beauty standards are shaped by social media. NS said: “Yes, definitely with filters, indeed, look at these freckle face filters, when it appears, people start liking it on their faces, when they put on their makeup... filters change lips to more filled ones, so you feel you have to fill your lips to look beautiful.” NS affirmed that filters promoted new standards, saying:

“I have never thought that the shape of the face could give beauty to the face, I always believe that a beautiful person is beautiful, that’s it. I have never thought that if the face was longer, if the cheeks were higher... the person might look prettier. Yes, standards change, and probably to a great deal because of filters.”

## **Discussion**

This study demonstrates a tension between how filters provide users with temporary satisfaction (Oliveira et al., 2020) and a boost of confidence (Krause et al., 2019) while simultaneously inducing discrepancies that affect them negatively, supporting the self-discrepancy theory. Vogel and Rose’s study (2016) demonstrated the harm caused when comparing the actual self-image to another’s ideal image. This study extended the harm to the self to comparisons between actual self and ideal self images. Therefore, women may evaluate themselves more harshly, exhibiting negative feelings and diminished self-beauty confidence. This result is consistent with Kahn et al. (2020), Shin, et al. (2017), Steinsbekk et al. (2021), and Utz et al. (2015), who emphasize psychological consequences for Snapchat use. On the other hand, the study highlighted the role of personality and self-beauty confidence, which shaped the intensity of the impact. Moreover, to most participants, beauty standards are constant and merely used by Snapchat, while to others, filters are promoting standards that affect people’s perceptions and reactions in line with Eshiet (2020). In this study, the impact of Snapchat filters has not gone beyond normal idealizing of the self; women may increase self-care or utilize superficial tools such as fillers or Botox, but will not seek significant changes such as through plastic surgery. This is in opposition to Ramphul and Mejias’s (2018) study which showed that filters caused users to seek plastic surgery. This might be due to the role of faith, as acceptance and satisfaction of God’s creation were frequently mentioned by participants.

This study also supported Zhao et al.’s (2018) study that emphasizes the role of Snapchat filters in challenging the “authentic” self, manipulating the self through enhancement or augmentation, but also argues to some extent that Snapchat filters are fake, unpleasant, and distorting to some users. In contrast to Eshiet’s (2020) study, which argued that filtered images are more appealing than those taken by regular cameras, this study indicated that

actual “authentic” images of the self with regular cameras or through a mirror are acceptable. This raises questions about why Snapchat’s camera settings have had such a significant negative impact on some users.

## **Conclusion**

This research adds to the existing literature and explores the impact of Snapchat filters on users’ self-image and beauty standards. It specifically brings to light the emotional consequences of discrepancies between actual self and ideal self brought about by filter use. The study emphasized the satisfaction involved in Snapchat filter use. It also showed the different emotions women have towards filter use, in which personality, self-confidence, and faith play a significant role. The study shows that Snapchat filters are promoting well-known beauty standards, and to some extent argues that Snapchat filters are fake, unpleasant, and distorting. For future research, studies could explore the impact of filters on users’ self-esteem and social relationships.

## **Acknowledgement**

I thank all those who have helped me in carrying out this research.

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