
Simulacrum of Perfection: Idealized Beauty in Images Modified By Filters

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the simulacrum of ideal beauty in images altered by photo filters on social media, using Jean Baudrillard's theory of Simulacra and Simulation. It seeks to identify the types and themes of filters used, explain how hyperreal standards of beauty are portrayed, and analyze the discourses and ideologies associated with their use in shaping the identity of netizens. The research employed a descriptive-analytical design, conducted interviews with 10 participants, and applied semiotic analysis to 20 selected images from social media. Results revealed that filters create a hyperreal appearance that is more desirable than natural looks, and that netizens actively engage in constructing a digital identity aligned with beauty standards reinforced by technology, culture, and social validation. Overall, photo filters serve not merely as aesthetic tools but as mediums for the ideological construction of the self within the visual culture of social media.

KEYWORDS: *simulacrum, photo filters, hyperreality, identity, social media*

INTRODUCTION

With the continuous expansion of digital technology, social media has become central to communication, connection, and self-expression, particularly among Filipino youth. Within this culture of curated images and visual perfection, photo filters have emerged as key tools in constructing the ideal appearance. These filters are no longer merely used to enhance images but now participate in shaping beauty standards, standards that are often foreign, commercialized, and detached from reality (Tiidenberg & Baym 2017; Chae 2017).

While numerous studies have addressed the effects of social media on mental health, body image, and self-esteem among the youth (Perloff 2014; Fardouly et al. 2015), few have focused on a deeper semiotic analysis of the images themselves as mediums of hyperreality, a reality created and repeated by technology until it becomes more desirable than the real (Baudrillard 1994). Within this context, photo filters emerge not merely as beautifying technological tools but as simulacra, representations that are detached from the original yet accepted as truth (Mirzoeff 2011).

Studies by Runkle and colleagues (2021) demonstrate that the use of beauty filters is not just about image editing but involves actual ideological transformation, conditioning young people to embrace a particular notion of beauty. In the Philippine context, such an analysis is both timely and relevant considering how rapidly the youth adopt and adapt to foreign

aesthetics promoted on platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook (Magtoto & David 2020).

Moreover, despite research addressing the media's influence on body image, attention remains limited when it comes to the actual filtered images as forms of discourse and identity construction (Gonzales & Hancock 2011). That is, there is a lack of local and contemporary studies that examine visual content on social media through the lens of Baudrillard's simulacrum, especially in terms of how it shapes Filipino youths' concept of beauty.

This is the gap that this study seeks to address: the absence of visual cultural analysis of social media images, particularly regarding the effect of photo filters in constructing the idealized form of beauty. Through a semiotic analysis of selected images from social media, this study aims to explain how photo filters function as mechanisms of simulacrum that define the ideal image of the self, a "visual body" that is expected, imitated, and desired within digital culture.

From this perspective, the study offers a new way of understanding not only the aesthetic value of photo filters but also their deeper implications in shaping the social realities and identities of youth in the age of hyperreality.

Theoretical Framework

To better understand the visual construction of ideal beauty through photo filters on social media, this study is anchored in Jean Baudrillard's theory of Simulacra and Simulation (1994). This theory focuses on the emergence of hyperreality in postmodern society, a type of reality in which the boundary between the real and the false becomes indistinguishable, as images become more believable than reality itself.

According to Baudrillard, a simulacrum is a representation that no longer refers to a specific original; instead, it becomes autonomous and generates its own meaning. In the context of this study, photo filters widely used on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok can be considered forms of simulacra—technologically manipulated visuals that do not merely enhance images but actually construct a new "identity" or hyperreal image of the self.

This theory describes the process by which Filipino youth are shaped through repeated exposure and participation in aesthetics generated by filters faces that are whiter, smoother, more "perfect" which eventually become the new standard of beauty. The original image of the self is pushed aside and replaced by visuals rooted in foreign ideals and algorithmic design.

Key concepts from Baudrillard's theory that serve as analytical lenses in this study include: Simulacrum, where the image or appearance seems real but no longer has an original source; Hyperreality, a new form of reality produced through the repeated representation of false images; and Loss of the Original, in which the physical form is gradually replaced and erased amid filters designed to produce a more "desirable" representation.

Through this theoretical lens, the study analyzes how the simulacrum of ideal beauty is embodied on social media, and how the youth are not merely observers but active creators of hyperreal versions of themselves. This becomes a critical lens for examining not only the

effects of filters but also the deeper social discourses, aesthetic ideologies, and cultural constructions of beauty within the Filipino context.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This study aims to examine the role of photo filters on social media as mechanisms of *simulacrum* in the construction of ideal beauty within the visual culture of Filipino youth. Specifically, it seeks to address the following questions:

1. What are the common types and themes of photo filters used by the youth?
2. How are hyperreal standards of beauty depicted in these filtered images?
3. What discourses and ideologies are associated with the use of filters in shaping identity?

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive-analytical research design, incorporating semiotic analysis as the primary approach. It aimed to describe specific forms of photo filters used on social media and identify the complex construction of ideal beauty produced through these tools. This design involved a deep reading of visual details in filtered images, examining aspects such as color, texture, positioning, composition, expression, and captions to interpret their implied meanings.

This analysis is firmly grounded in Jean Baudrillard's theory of Simulacra and Simulation (1994), which posits that in the postmodern era, images no longer reflect reality but instead replace it. In this study, photo filters are considered as forms of simulacra technologically manipulated visuals that not only beautify images but also construct a new "self" or hyperreal image. Through this theory, the study applies a critical lens to the relationship among technology, identity, and visual culture in today's digital society.

PARTICIPANTS

The study's participants were netizens or ordinary Filipinos who actively use social media platforms, particularly Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. Using purposive sampling, the researcher selected 20 netizens known for frequently using photo filters in their posts. Selection criteria included frequency of filter use, post visibility, and diversity of visual styles among participants. Participation was voluntary and secured through informed consent. The inclusion of netizens as participants aimed to represent common experiences in the digital space, not limited to youth but to anyone actively shaping their visual identity through technology.

DATA COLLECTION

Two primary methods of data collection were employed. First was the gathering of visual data, where the researcher selected specific images from participants' social media accounts. Although filtered images were collected, they were used solely for analytical purposes and not included as visual attachments in this report. The chosen images featured clear aesthetic

manipulation, such as alterations in skin tone, facial structure, lighting, or visual embellishments.

The second method involved brief semi-structured interviews to gain insights into the participants' perspectives on using photo filters. They were asked about their motivations, the filters' effects on their self-perception, and the beauty standards they aim to project to their audience.

DATA ANALYSIS

The collected images were subjected to semiotic analysis based on Roland Barthes' framework, particularly focusing on the three levels of meaning: denotation, or the literal form; connotation, or the symbolic and cultural implication; and myth, which refers to the ideological meanings embedded within the image. The visual elements that signify beauty and their corresponding symbolic meanings were identified and interpreted.

This was accompanied by the application of key concepts from Baudrillard's theory, such as simulacrum, where the image is no longer a reflection but a replacement of the original; hyperreality, in which the filtered image is perceived as more real than the real; and loss of the real, where physical reality is gradually replaced by constructed representations. Pattern coding was also utilized to identify recurring themes from the interviews.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The researcher ensured compliance with ethical standards in conducting the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before using their images and interview data.

To protect the participants' confidentiality and dignity, actual images were not included in the final report. Visual data were analyzed and presented textually rather than visually, in accordance with research ethics. Personal information was kept strictly confidential, and the use of images was limited to academic purposes only, with no distribution outside the scope of the research. Participants were also given the right to withdraw from the study at any point, should they wish to do so.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the analysis of data gathered from selected netizens who use photo filters on social media. The presentation of results is organized according to the three main objectives of the study: (1) identifying the types and themes of filters used, (2) understanding the construction of hyperreal beauty, and (3) examining the discourses and ideologies associated with the use of filters in the formation of identity.

In adherence to the ethical agreement with the participants, the actual images are not included in this section. Instead, the images are described based on their visual themes, symbolic forms, and the filters applied in order to fulfill the objectives of the semiotic analysis. The interpretation of these images draws upon Jean Baudrillard's theory of Simulacra and Simulation and Roland Barthes' semiotic framework to uncover the layers of meaning that emerge within the digital aesthetics of beauty.

Table 1: Types and Themes of Photo Filters Commonly Used by Netizens on Social Media

Type of Filter	Number of Images	Main Theme	Depicted Image
Beauty/Enhancement Filters	10	Fair skin, smooth texture, slim face, V-shaped jaw	Perfect, clean, healthy, model-like
Aesthetic Color Filters	6	Soft tones, warm glow, vintage hues	Artistic, dreamy, curated
Makeup Overlay Filters	2	Lip tint, eyeliner, blush effect	Ready-to-post look, selfie-prepared
Novelty/Cute Filters	2	Sparkles, animal ears, cartoon elements	Playful, charming, appealing to youth

Based on the analysis of 20 filtered photos from various netizens, four main types of filters emerged: (1) beauty-enhancing filters, (2) aesthetic color filters, (3) makeup overlay filters, and (4) novelty or cute filters. The most commonly used were beauty filters, which appeared in half of the analyzed images. These typically lighten the skin, smoothen the texture, and alter facial features (e.g., V-shaped jaw, slimmer cheeks). Next in frequency were filters that adjust the color or overall atmosphere of the photo to make it appear more “artistic” or “curated.”

The widespread use of beauty filters suggests that netizens conform to aesthetic standards often detached from their natural appearance. This reflects a preference for Eurocentric or foreign ideals of beauty—fair skin, smooth texture, a pointed nose, and a slim face. According to Chae (2017) and Perloff (2014), social media does not only disseminate idealized images but also shapes personal aspirations based on these visual representations. These filters, therefore, are not innocent or merely technical effects; rather, they function as mechanisms of aesthetic ideology.

Filters create a simulacrum of beauty, a look that appears real but is artificial, and is more accepted by netizens than their actual appearance. Through the lens of Baudrillard’s (1994) theory, this kind of image can be considered hyperreal, wherein the photo no longer reflects reality but is instead perceived as the “real” itself. Rather than presenting their physical body or authentic self, users often choose to display and trust their filtered self-image. In interviews, many netizens said things like, “I look better with a filter” and “I need it to look presentable”, clear indications that filters have become part of self-performance, no longer optional but essential.

In sum, the use of photo filters among netizens is not merely an aesthetic act, but one deeply embedded in cultural and ideological discourse. It is a form of visual self-construction rooted in media standards, technology, and a colonial imagination of beauty (Magtoto & David, 2020; Runkle et al., 2021). What is unreal becomes real—a self-image sculpted by filters and validated by likes, comments, and online approval. This practice is not solely a matter of personal choice, but a product of visual culture where images are crafted to conform to expected “perfection.” As Mirzoeff (2011) argues, in the digital age, visual culture is no longer just about representation, it actively constructs new realities.

Table 2: Summary of Image, Type of Filter, Effect, Netizen Perspective, and Hyperreality

Image	Filter	Main Effect	Netizen Perspective	Hyperreal Aspect
1	Glow Up	Smooth, fair skin, glow	“I look like a celebrity even when tired.”	Creation of the perfect self
2	Peach Blush	Makeup illusion	“You can’t tell I’m sleep-deprived.”	Mask of freshness despite fatigue
3	Sunkissed Glow	Healthy tan effect	“No sun, but I look like I came from the beach.”	Fabricated experience
4	Big Eyes Cute	Cute/infantile look	“I’m not cute in real life.”	Digital femininity
5	Glass Skin	Glossy, flawless skin	“I look dirty without a filter.”	Simulacrum of clean skin
6	Instant Slim	Slimmer body	“I’m ashamed of my belly.”	Screen-retouched body
7	Studio Light	HD lighting illusion	“I look like I’m in a photoshoot.”	Visually faked identity through lighting
8	Sunset Face	Warm glow + sharp jawline	“More flattering at night.”	Fabricated aesthetic
9	Anime Eyes	Large eyes, small face	“I look like a Korean idol.”	K-pop visual mimicry
10	Flawless Me	No pores, even tone	“I look like I’m wearing makeup even when not.”	Perfected version of the skin
11	BeautyCam Natural	Whitened skin tone	“I look mixed-race.”	Eurocentric beauty ideal
12	Sweet Filter	Soft focus, blurred background	“Like a love team photo.”	Romanticized image
13	Real Smooth	Skin smoothing + blur	“No eyebags, no pores, sana all.”	Dreamlike visual state
14	Soft Contour	Nose lift, emphasized cheekbones	“My face looks more defined.”	Sculpted face in virtual space
15	Clean Face AI	AI-enhanced symmetry	“Symmetrical even though I’m not.”	Algorithmic perfection
16	Model Effect	Elongated neck, lip tint	“I look like a magazine cover.”	Digital fashion aesthetic
17	Summer Selfie	Brighter, cooler tones	“I look fresh even in the heat.”	Environmental illusion
18	Halo Light	Illuminated eyes and cheeks	“My whole face lit up.”	Ethereal appearance
19	Baby Skin Filter	Pale pink glow, blurred nose lines	“I look like a teenager again.”	Rejuvenated digital self
20	Celebrity Look	Sharpened jawline + bright smile	“I really look like a celebrity.”	Simulacrum of celebrity persona

Based on the analysis of 20 filtered photos from netizens' social media posts, the presence of hyperreal beauty was clearly evident. These photos utilized various types of filters—from beauty-enhancement filters such as Glow Up, Glass Skin, Flawless Me, AI symmetry, and contouring, to novelty filters like Big Eyes and Baby Skin. All of these showcased physical appearances that were cleaner, smoother, slimmer, more proportioned, and more “pleasing” than the actual faces or bodies of the users.

According to the data, filters are often used to “look fresh,” “look like a celebrity,” “hide eyebags or belly fat,” and to “appear presentable even if not really so.” These statements reflect an intent to alter or replace physical reality within the digital space. The filters used by the participants are not merely tools for enhancing photos—they actively construct a new image of the self. Filters like Glow Up, Glass Skin, and Studio Light depict an idealized beauty standard with poreless skin, sharp noses, symmetrical faces, and clean backgrounds. Cute filters such as Big Eyes and Peach Blush contribute to a youthful appearance by shrinking the face and enlarging the eyes, forming an infantilized aesthetic popularized by K-pop and East Asian beauty standards (Chae, 2017).

Filters like Instant Slim, Contour, and Celebrity Look reflect a conformity to the body shapes and appearances of models and celebrities. As Perloff (2014) notes, the internalization of beauty ideals on social media occurs through repeated exposure to edited or curated images deemed desirable. Under these conditions, filters are no longer just technological enhancements but mechanisms of conditioning one's self-perception and concept of beauty. According to Baudrillard (1994), hyperreality emerges when representations such as filtered images replace the original, and the “fake” becomes more believable than the real. This is observed in nearly all of the analyzed images. For instance, by using the Studio Light filter, a netizen was able to post a selfie that looked professionally taken in a studio, despite being shot in an ordinary room. In this case, technology is no longer a reflective lens but a creator of a new version of the self.

Many participants expressed that they feel more “confident” when using filters and appear more “presentable” to others. Here, the creation of a simulacrum takes place an image of the self that is not real but is accepted as real. Instead of presenting reality, it is replaced with a more desirable, more “Instagrammable,” and more visually pleasing version for the digital public.

In conclusion, the analyzed images reveal that beauty standards on social media are no longer rooted in natural appearances but in the visual effects made possible by technology. Photo filters now serve as modern metrics of “beauty,” where the natural is deemed “insufficient” and the digitally constructed image is regarded as “more real.” As Mirzoeff (2011) asserts, in the age of visual culture, the image is no longer a representation of reality but a tool for producing truth. These hyperreal images are proof of the operation of simulacrum within digital netizen culture. Beauty on social media is a visual construction a fabricated ideal that surpasses the actual self. Thus, the filter is not merely a beautifying tool it is an ideological apparatus that creates new personas, new standards, and a new idea of what it means to be “acceptable.”

Table 3: Discourses and Ideologies Emerging from Netizens' Interviews
Regarding the Use of Photo Filters

Theme	Example Statement from Netizen	Emerging Ideology
Insecurity	"I can't post without a filter."	The natural body is inadequate; technology as a cover-up.
Perfectionism	"I always want to look flawless on my feed."	Aesthetic perfection as a public standard.
Social Approval	"I get more likes when my look is filtered."	Beauty is dependent on others' validation.
Visual Branding	"My style needs to be consistent. It has to be curated."	Identity as a visual product; image-conscious self.
Hyperfemininity	"I look more feminine with filters. In person, not so much."	The ideal woman is based on visual stereotypes.
Koreanization	"I look like a K-pop star with a filter. That's why I like it."	Embracing foreign (East Asian) aesthetic standards (skin tone, eyes).
Self-Escapism	"My real face looks tired. I want to look different online."	Escaping reality through a digital version of the self.
Digital Confidence	"I feel more confident taking selfies with a filter."	Newfound self-esteem derived from a technologically altered appearance.
Normalization of Editing	"It's normal now. Everyone's doing it."	The widespread notion that digital beauty is the norm.
Controlled Image	"Only what I choose to show should be seen."	Identity as a constructed persona on social media.

In the conducted interviews, various perspectives emerged from netizens regarding the use of photo filters as part of their self-expression on social media. Overall, ten discursive themes were identified, linked to the participants' aesthetic perceptions, emotional states, and social interactions. Among the most prominent views were: "I'm not confident with my real face," "I always need to look presentable on my feed," and "If there's no filter, I don't post." These statements reveal the deep impact of technology on the construction of visual identity. The filter has evolved from being a mere decorative or beautifying tool into a social instrument used to avoid embarrassment, gain praise, and maintain a perfected image. According to the study of Gonzales & Hancock (2011), curated images on social media constitute a form of "strategic self-presentation," where deliberately crafted appearances are used to control others' impressions.

Themes such as insecurity, perfectionism, and social approval suggest that participants' real selves are gradually being replaced by a preferred or socially acceptable version of themselves mediated by filters. Through the lens of Jean Baudrillard's theory of Simulacra (1994), the netizens' statements confirm the operation of the simulacrum in the shaping of personal identity. Their online personas have become "pseudo-real selves" images no longer reflecting truth but products of visual construction. Through the use of filters, a version of the

self is created that is more accepted, more praised, and more believed in by others and even by the self.

The underlying ideology here centers on the rejection of the natural, the pursuit of digital perfection, and the reliance on social media validation as the basis of self-worth. As observed by Runkle et al. (2021), digital youth engage in what they call “aesthetic labor,” where facial curation becomes part of their online routine and mental well-being. The discourses around photo filter use suggest that the identity of netizens on social media is no longer a natural reflection of the self but a technologically and culturally constructed one. Data shows that beauty and personhood in digital spaces are shaped through visual curation, strategic filtering, and audience-based validation. In this context, the filter is not merely decorative it is an ideological tool that promotes visual standards where the authentic is deemed insufficient, and the artificial becomes more desirable. The netizen is no longer just a user of the filter—they themselves are now being produced by the filter.

FINDINGS

Through a semiotic analysis of 20 filtered photos and interviews with selected participants, the study found that the most commonly used photo filters on social media are those designed to alter the natural appearance of the face and body to conform to beauty standards accepted by the digital public. Among the most popular filters are beauty-enhancement types such as Glow Up, Glass Skin, and Instant Slim, which whiten, smoothen, slim down the face, and add a radiant effect to the skin. The use of these filters results in the construction of an “ideal self-image” that appears more desirable than the users’ actual appearance. According to the participants, using filters boosts their confidence, gives them control over their image, and provides what they describe as a “presentable look” for public consumption.

The analysis also revealed that filtered images often depict hyperreal beauty—versions of the self that are more believed, accepted, and admired than the original. Through technology, netizens are given the capacity to create their own version of “perfection” via curated images. These representations are no longer reflections of truth but rather simulacra, false images more powerful than reality itself, as theorized by Jean Baudrillard.

Furthermore, the interviews surfaced ten (10) discursive themes related to filter use: insecurity, perfectionism, social approval, visual branding, hyper femininity, Koreanization, self-escapism, digital confidence, normalization of editing, and controlled image. These themes reveal various ideological beliefs surrounding beauty, the self, and how it should be presented in digital spaces.

In sum, the study found that the use of photo filters is not merely a technical or aesthetic matter, but one with profound implications on how netizens construct their identity.

CONCLUSION

Based on the data and analysis, it may be inferred that photo filters on social media serve as powerful tools in constructing digital selfhood and beauty. Through the use of these filters, netizens create an image of themselves that is more appealing, more believable, and more socially acceptable, an image perceived as “real” even though it is a product of technological manipulation. This clearly reflects Jean Baudrillard’s concept of simulacrum and

hyperreality, where the real is replaced by an imitation that is regarded as even more “real” than reality itself. In the age of social media, beauty is no longer a personal attribute but a product of technology, discourse, and societal expectations.

Thus, social media images are no longer mere representations of the self, but constructions of an idealized self, shaped by visual standards, colonial aesthetics, and the need for belonging and approval in the digital world. In this context, the use of photo filters may be seen as a symbol of aspiration for “perfection,” yet it may also blur authentic identity, lower self-esteem, and foster dependence on external validation as the basis for self-worth. The netizen is no longer merely the creator of their image, they are also a product of the images they have created.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In response to the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

First, for teachers, educators, and media literacy trainers, it is highly encouraged to organize seminars, forums, and workshops that teach critical visual analysis and semiotic literacy. These initiatives will help young people and netizens understand social media images not merely as visual content, but as ideological messages that influence their self-perception. Language, literature, and media studies educators should also integrate the analysis of visual materials into the curriculum to help students grasp the role of technology in shaping their personal development.

Second, for researchers, it is recommended to expand the scope of inquiry to include diverse regions, genders, and age groups in order to explore other aspects of filtered identity—such as its connection to mental health, self-esteem, gender representation, or its impact on marginalized sectors. A combination of semiotic and discursive analysis may be used to further examine the broader implications of this digitalized and aestheticized beauty.

Third, for social media platforms, it is important to consider implementing transparency features such as “Filter Used” or “Edited with Effects” to provide clarity on the authenticity of posted content. Simple disclosures can help prevent users from making unrealistic self-comparisons or misjudgments toward others.

Finally, for the general public, there is a pressing need to promote authenticity in self-expression. Netizens are encouraged to embrace and appreciate their real selves, and to foster a culture of digital honesty, one that values not only what is “beautiful,” but what is true.

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