
Filtering Out: How *Instagram* and *Snapchat* Filters Enhance Whiteness**Angela Taglione****Publication Date**

09-12-2023

License

This work is made available under a Exclusive rights in copyrighted work license and should only be used in accordance with that license.

Citation for this work (American Psychological Association 7th edition)

Taglione, A. (2022). *Filtering Out: How *Instagram* and *Snapchat* Filters Enhance Whiteness* (Version 1). University of Notre Dame. <https://doi.org/10.7274/24740151.v1>

This work was downloaded from CurateND, the University of Notre Dame's institutional repository.

For more information about this work, to report or an issue, or to preserve and share your original work, please contact the CurateND team for assistance at curate@nd.edu.

Angela Taglione

Isiah Dale

Multimedia Writing and Rhetoric

18 April 2022

Filtering Out: How *Instagram* and *Snapchat* Filters Enhance Whiteness

Filters on *Instagram* and *Snapchat* appear exciting and fun for users to alter their face in entertaining ways, but, for black users, especially women, it is very clear that many of the *beauty* filters try to mold their features to fit the white beauty standard. The filters slim facial features, whiten faces, and change a black face into one that closely resembles a white one. The white beauty standard and whiteness they enhance is problematic for the young users that are a large part of *Instagram* and *Snapchat*'s main audience. Young black kids and teens of different races that have these beauty standards engraved in their minds often experience anxiety, depression, and other mental illnesses due to inability to embody the unrealistic standards. *Instagram* and *Snapchat* need to make changes to make their beauty filters more inclusive or completely eliminate this aspect of their filters. While proponents of *Instagram* and *Snapchat* filters think they are entertaining and make them look better, I argue these filters enhance racism by beautifying whiteness and that they should be better adapted for other races to use.

Snapchat enhances whiteness in filters by lightening faces and slimming facial features, because they are continuing to uphold the beauty standards of makeup companies. The *Snapchat* filters that create flower crowns or dog faces for its users to use do not just add entertainment to their face. These filters "lighten skin, make eyes larger, and noses narrower" and completely change a black user's face into one resembling that of white beauty (Carlsbad 1). *Snapchat* filters create a self-discrepancy in which individuals not only try to obtain beauty features they see

represented on celebrities and models, but they also try to obtain a beautified and unobtainable image of themselves that is created by filters and editing (Alsaggaf 6). When *Snapchat* makes young teens, especially women, desire a fake and impossible version of themselves, they are fueling the makeup industry who profits off these insecurities. If black women are constantly falling victim to the filtered version of themselves and want to embody white beauty standards, they will be chasing after something that does not exist and will be constantly attempting to *fix* themselves. These filters emphasize the beauty standards in society and give *Snapchat* even more of a hold over their users. They need *Snapchat* to obtain this image of themselves and share this “perfect” picture of themselves to the world. Therefore, app designers are crafting filters with these ideas in mind and are aware of their negative impacts on self image.

Snapchat and *Instagram* app designers understand the negative effects of their filters yet continue to push out new harmful depictions of beauty or racist images because it makes them popular. In 2020, *Snapchat* released a filter to recognize Juneteenth and celebrate their Black users which prompted users to smile to break the chains to freedom (Hussain). The discussion of a simple filter is in fact addressing the larger matter of the depictions of black people through filters. This most recent mishap with filters by *Snapchat* proves their inability to correct their mistakes. In 2016 they released a Bob Marley filter that received backlash for digital blackface and for an anime filter that made the user’s face into Asian caricatures and 2017 released a Marie Curie filter with a smoky eye and face-thinning effect further promoting white beauty standards (Hussain). These conclusions have significant implications for black users and non-white users because *Snapchat* continues to release harmful content that depicts them and their culture in negative and narrow-minded ways that are not representative. *Snapchat* is continuing to profit off the popularity and money made from these filters without properly considering their audience.

Snapchat surely tries to be inclusive by introducing filters that highlight and celebrate different races and cultures, but it does not necessarily follow that they would neglect their research and not properly discuss their filters with those whom they are trying to represent.

Some users argue that *Snapchat* filters are entertaining and meant to be a lighthearted way to express yourselves and people are overanalyzing them or that *Snapchat* is used by a white majority so it is only fair that they cater towards the white features. Although I grant that some *Snapchat* filters can be a fun way of celebrating an event or laughing with friends, I cannot accept the overall conclusion that they are being overanalyzed because they do have detrimental effects on many users and alter faces beyond a playful and entertaining way. The Pew Research Center conducted research on the demographics of social media apps including *Snapchat* which revealed that 34% of its users were White, 35% of its users were Black, and 18% of its users were Hispanic (Auxier et. al). This research demonstrates that white users are not the overwhelmingly majority of users for *Snapchat*. In other words, if *Snapchat* were to cater their filters to any race, it would make the most sense for them to highlight black beauty features and not white. If these filters were meant to be just lighthearted and fun, they would not lighten faces, change eye colors, or drastically whitewash an individual's face. Filters can add funny animals or glasses or other accessories without pushing the boundaries into race.

The advertisements on *Snapchat* and *Instagram* highlight whiteness through heavily edited photos that display a thin white woman's ideal and focus on white content while shadow banning and censoring black women's content. Black culture places more value on the curvy body shape and less focus on how they display their bodies (Parris 59). However, the often oversexualized image of the black female body can often cause them to become shadow banned and censored more heavily than other content creators. *Instagram* is extremely vague in their

shadow banning policy, which “leaves users confused as to what is and is not appropriate” and causes a gray area as to what exactly is “sexually suggestive” (Joseph). While an image of a fully clothed plus sized or black woman is taken down for inappropriate content, other images of thin white women in more revealing clothing are often unflagged and left online. The shadow banning that occurs for black creators is troublesome because it prevents them from creating a safe space for black women and men to embrace their natural beauty and features. While some may argue that there have been strides in increasing representation in social media like *Instagram* and that there are many safe spaces for black women to embrace their natural beauty, I argue that society still enforces an unattainable beauty standard that is white. The algorithm issues within *Instagram* make it more difficult to promote their content because their feeds are not being protected. This can cause black women to have a hard time finding content they relate to or posts where they see themselves reassembled which can lead to poor body image and confidence and eventually mental illness.

The functionality of the explore page on *Instagram* highlights whiteness through algorithms that favor white beauty standards and have a detrimental effect on black mental health. *Instagram* is based around numbers through comments, likes, followers, views, etc. These numbers make it easy for “social comparison” to take place between users on the app (Jablonska and Zajdel 1). The likes and numbers correlate to one’s mental health. In a study led by researchers at the University of Texas at Austin, teenagers were assigned to receive few likes or many likes as part of the study and then asked to report their feelings. As expected, “students in the fewer-‘likes’ group reported more feelings of rejections and other negative emotions” (Reshanov). Users see numbers through likes, comments, and followers and when their numbers do not fit the rest of their friends or peers they feel like something is wrong with them. They feel

like they are not enough and these feelings usually manifest themselves in the form of mental illness. Modern day aesthetics are upheld through the algorithms on *Instagram* that prey on women and especially younger females. These algorithms can flood their explore pages with women who are thin, white, and adhere to modern day beauty. *Instagram* is unique in the way it centers around numbers, but even without numbers *Snapchat* also is victimizing young females through beauty standards.

Instagram and *Snapchat* have a negative impact on black mental health and affect their self image and take away their confidence and pride by teaching them that they can never live up to the societal accepted standards of beauty. Survey and web search data were collected to determine the differences in well-being effects of *Twitter*, *Instagram*, and *Facebook*. The study determined that “counties with a sizable black population” accounted for the majority of the negative effects of *Instagram* whereas an “opposite trend” was reported for counties that were mainly white (Jaida 7). Another study with female college students revealed that *Instagram* promotes an “increased focus on appearance” and those who actively use the app were more likely to experience dissatisfaction with their body size and shape (Baker et. al 280). Black women are “frequently the targets of harassment, sexual assault, and general sexual objectification” and experience long term mental health issues like depression and eating disorders (Parris 54). Black women’s mental health are especially severely affected by *Instagram* photos and *Snapchat* filters. *Instagram* is designed to make users seek out external validation through likes, comments, followers, and other forms of engagement. On the other hand, *Snapchat* and *Instagram* filters provide a lens into the *best* version of yourself that fulfills all the standards of beauty so that you can win the validation you seek. Therefore, black women are constantly falling short of their ideal beautified image that filters show them and can feel anxious

and depressed as a result of never achieving their goals and feeling like they are enough. The black community faces mental illness as a result of never living up to the white standards promoted in *Instagram* and *Snapchat*, which is why it is important that they have their own outlet online to feel heard.

Snapchat and *Instagram* should create diverse committees to review their filters before allowing them to be available on the app and should consider changing or eliminating beauty filters. These companies need to be held accountable for their continued creation of filters that beautify whiteness and enhance racism. Despite the issues in their filters being publicized, there have been no new changes in their filters and their creation process besides just taking some down. Hospitals, business companies, and researchers all use committees before making statements, releasing products, or publishing their work. Committees are “tools for mixing distributed knowledge and abilities of various parts of organization in the format of one active and integrated unit” (Amirabadi et. al 200). While *Snapchat* may have tried to honor different groups through their creation of filters for events like Juneteeth, it does not necessarily follow that they would not do more research and involve more opinions of people from the groups they are trying to represent in their filters. The model for proper aesthetics is still based on media and the mainly white influencers. By changing these filters and making them more inclusive for all races to use or eliminating beauty filters, these companies could help change the ideal aesthetics and beauty standards. These companies are the leaders in the social media industry and therefore if they make the change, it is likely that the rest of the industry will follow and start beautifying diversity and all races.

I have always used *Instagram* and *Snapchat* since around the 5th grade and upon self assessment of my use of both apps and their filters, I realized that I never thought much of the

filters except that they were entertaining and amusing to send to friends. Yet upon careful analysis of my usage after researching the ways filters enhance whiteness and cause self-discrepancy, I recognized the ways these filters influenced me growing up and my own image of myself. I remember from a young age never being able to post a picture that was not heavily edited, *healed*, or *smoothed* just right. The issue was that I never was told this was abnormal, if anything I was encouraged by my peers, and often felt I was not doing enough to enhance my image. Young girls just like myself would obsess over editing their pictures just right, the amount of likes and comments on each post, and the exact minute of the day they received the most engagement from their followers. The validation my peers and I sought through *Instagram* was extreme with managing taking down posts that did not do well and obsessing over every aspect of our posts and captions. My whole life I have heard mainly older adults say that we should not use social media and they need to get rid of these apps and devices. These older adults were surely right about the negative impacts of social media, but they never considered that the problem was not with the users but instead with the creators. The way social media companies like *Snapchat* and *Instagram* force a beauty standard on children from a young age and then monopolizes the tools to allow them to achieve this image is troubling. I think that if I had been exposed to less comparisons and competition on social media that maybe I would be less anxious and stressed about missing out and not living up to a thin white ideal.

Instagram and *Snapchat* dominate over the social media domain and need to be more active in their efforts to change the modern day aesthetics and beauty standard to one that resembles more races and bodies. Filters can be fun and add some accessories to the user without going to the extreme of altering their facial structure or lightening their skin. Currently even after the immense outlash and complaints over racist filters and shadow banning, *Snapchat* and

Instagram have yet to actually make a change in their algorithms and portrayal of beauty. A *Snapchat* filter can be created in “just 5 minutes” starting at “only \$4.99” and reach a wide audience often consisting of a vulnerable and impressionable group of young people (SwipeStudio). *Snapchat* and *Instagram* have the power and authority to make a change in the way beauty is portrayed in the media, but in order to do so they must stop filtering out race and instead embracing and celebrating every form of beauty.

Works Cited

- Alsaggaf, Rania M. "The Impact of Snapchat Beautifying Filters on Beauty Standards and Self-image: A Self-Discrepancy Approach."
- Amirabadi Zadeh, Hassan et al. "An Exploration of the Role of Hospital Committees to Enhance Productivity." *Global journal of health science* vol. 8,3 199-209. 6 Aug. 2015, doi:10.5539/gjhs.v8n3p199
- Auxier, Brooke, and Monica Anderson. "Social Media Use in 2021." *Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech*, Pew Research Center, 31 Jan. 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/04/07/social-media-use-in-2021/>.
- Hussain, Suhauna. "Snapchat Pulls Insensitive Juneteenth Filter after Backlash. Why Does This Keep Happening?" *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 19 June 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/business/technology/story/2020-06-19/snapchat-pulls-insensitive-juneteenth-filter-after-backlash>.
- Joseph, Chanté. "Instagram's Murky 'Shadow Bans' Just Serve to Censor Marginalized Communities | Chanté Joseph." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 8 Nov. 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/nov/08/instagram-shadow-bans-marginalised-communities-queer-plus-sized-bodies-sexually-suggestive>.
- Jabłońska, & Zajdel, R. (2020). Artificial neural networks for predicting social comparison effects among female Instagram users. *PloS One*, 15(2), e0229354–e0229354. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0229354>
- Kim, Jiin, et al. "A Systematic Review of the Validity of Screening Depression through Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat." *Journal of Affective Disorders*, vol. 286, 2021, pp. 360-369,

<https://www-sciencedirect-com.proxy.library.nd.edu/science/article/pii/S016503272100135> X,
doi:<https://doi-org.proxy.library.nd.edu/10.1016/j.jad.2020.08.091>.

Parris, Paulette. “‘Glowing up ain’t easy’ How #BlackGirlMagic Created an Innovative Narrative for Black Beauty Through Instagram.” (2020).

Reshanov, Alex. “Getting Fewer 'Likes' on Social Media Can Make Teens Anxious and Depressed.” *NewsCenter*, 24 Sept. 2020,
<https://www.rochester.edu/newscenter/getting-fewer-likes-on-social-media-can-make-teens-anxious-and-depressed-453482/>.

“Snapchat Promotes Euro-Centric Beauty Standards Through Whitening Filters.” *University Wire*, 24 May 2016. *Social Science Premium Collection*,
<http://proxy.library.nd.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/wire-feeds/snapchat-promotes-euro-centric-beauty-standards/docview/1791189358/se-2?accountid=12874>.
Accessed 30 Apr. 2022.

Swipestudio. “Create Your Own Snapchat Filter for Birthdays, Weddings, Businesses, Graduations, Baby Showers, Bachelorettes, Date Nights.” *Create a Custom Snapchat Filter with SwipeStudio*,
https://swipestudio.co/?gclid=Cj0KCQjwvLOTBhCJARIsACVldV2Hd9FU_0B-LTI-KPTviPHZl0VljRDe3MYakvxdPOzO1llwqO935HQaAsOZEALw_wcB.