Snap Out of It: The Implicit Bias Behind Snapchat Filters

Open the app. Tap the white circle. Select your intended audience, and send. Snapchat, a multimedia social networking app originally released to consumers in 2011, makes communicating with friends across the globe that simple. Snapchat quickly rose to the top of the App Store charts because of this ease, its user-friendly interface, and its unique employment of the disappearing post. One of the primary features of Snapchat is that the “snaps,” or posts, disappear immediately after the recipients views them. Snapchat is also most famed for its September 2015 update that introduced a wide array of “lenses,” or filters with which users can choose to alter or accessorize their photos. Lenses can be fun—especially when they are silly or quirky, like animal ears or cartoon food items surrounding the face. Filters like these are very obviously meant to distort the images taken on Snapchat, which are most often selfies. But what about when the filters are not as silly? Not as quirky? Not as obvious?

Reaching almost 200 million daily users in only five years, Snapchat creators realized that they struck a marketing goldmine with the introduction of their original lenses. One month after this update, Snapchat announced that content views on the app had skyrocketed from 2 billion to 6 billion daily. Over three billion disappearing pictures and videos were being taken and sent every single day using the popular new filters. The earliest lenses included what is
commonly called the “dog filter,” which simply adds a dog nose, ears, and tongue to the user’s face. The “puking rainbow filter,” is similarly additive, and remains an iconic filter that was initially uploaded by developers onto the interface. When applied, the user’s eyes become intensely magnified and the mouth opens to a glittering rainbow trail that flows off the screen in real time. A third original lens was one that similarly moved in real time, but instead of flowing rainbows, the lens curved the user’s mouth downwards into a digital frown, while displaying large cartoon-like tears that poured from the user’s eyes. All of these filters were (and some, like the dog filter, still are) very clear in their intent to overlay effects onto the face of Snapchat’s millions of users. However, as the months after the update passed by and consumers were growing used to the classic lenses, the newer ones became far more subtle in nature.

By early 2016, Snapchat began updating their app on a daily basis in order to consistently provide a range of new filters for its users to never get bored of trying. Developers added more fun effects, like an overlay of a piece of sliced bread that encompassed the user’s face, or the extreme distorting of one’s face to form the shape of a squash vegetable. Along with these additions came even more filters, but these weren’t so explicit in their distortions. One filter doesn’t have a nickname among users because of its lack of any easily identifiable features—further proving my claim of subtlety. The filter initially appears to only cast a cool temperature over the entire image, which alone would not be characteristic of Snapchat’s assortment of quirky lenses. When comparing photos with and without this seemingly uncomplicated filter, however, one can see the true effects that it has on users’ faces.

This cool-toned lens was among the first of many that Snapchat users began referring to as the “beauty filters.” They do not feature any animal ears or food items surrounding the face,
nor do they feature any trailing rainbows or animated tears. These lenses subtly do what society has caused the most recent generations of Internet users to crave: They make you “more beautiful.” Your eyes become bigger, your skin becomes smoother, your teeth become whiter and your lips become redder. Your eyelashes become longer and thicker, and your eyebrows become more groomed and more defined. With these filters, Snapchat developers have yielded to traditional beauty standards. In an attempt to universally define these beauty standards, Stanford University Professor Deborah L. Rhode writes in her book, *The Beauty Bias: The Injustice of Appearance in Life and Law*, that attributes like “facial symmetry [and] unblemished skin… have been widely viewed as… preferred features across time and culture.” She goes on to explain that the globalization of the Internet and social media has “brought an increasing convergence in standards of attractiveness” (Rhode 24). Social media platforms—especially Snapchat—profit from this aspect of selfie culture that contemporary society has influenced. Conventional beauty standards such as long eyelashes, big eyes, and colored lips have been present both across the world and across generations, but these standards are not present across the gender spectrum.

As a Humanities Professor at Hofstra University, Donna Freitas examines the impact that social media culture has had on young adults, as well as relaying the personal experiences with social media that young adults across thirteen college campuses have shared with her. In her book, *The Happiness Effect: How Social Media is Driving a Generation to Appear Perfect at Any Cost*, Frietas explores the advancement of gender stereotypes on various social media platforms, concluding that although “girls and women have always been judged by their appearances,” as Deborah Rhode suggests, “social media [actually] takes this tendency to a new
level of intensity and constancy” (Frietas 102). Snapchat’s creation of the “beauty filters” has contributed to this tendency to judge women for what their bodies and faces look like, even for physical attributes that are completely out of their control. “This is yet another sphere where women experience sexism in our culture,” Frietas writes, “and where men, ultimately, have it easier than women do.” Snapchat’s skin-smoothening and lip-coloring filters are targeted towards those who identify on the feminine side of the gender spectrum because for centuries, this has only been whom the beauty norms applied to. Men are not typically seen as requiring any alterations to their appearances in order to be deemed attractive, but women need changes. Women need editing and retouching. Women need filters.

In addition to the appeal to inherently sexist beauty norms, Snapchat has also promoted racially biased ones in the same subtle way. The commonly referred to “beauty filters” conform to traditional concepts of femininity with dancing pink hearts around users’ eyes and brightly colored flower crowns around users’ foreheads— but why are the filters that are considered the most beautiful also so… white?

Through the use of many of Snapchat’s most widely-used lenses, your skin tone becomes paler, your eyes become lighter, your nose and forehead become smaller, and your lips become thinner. Shandukani Mulaudzi, a columnist for The Huffington Post South Africa, writes about the racial and cultural implications that these changes Snapchat makes has on women of color whose faces they distort the most drastically. Mulaudzi calls Snapchat outright racist. As a black woman, she writes that the filters are “whitewashed and problematic” because women of color, including herself, “do not have almost-blue looking eyes… and don't have narrow noses [or] naturally rosy cheeks and small lips” (Mulaudzi). The “beauty filters” don’t only appeal to
misogynistic beauty norms, but more specifically to Eurocentric standards as well. Snapchat’s implicit push towards these racist biases minimizes the beauty and importance of non-white features, and perpetuates similar racial biases that their users may have and practice every day.

The dangerous notion that these inherently sexist and racist filters are what make the user beautiful, and not the user’s own facial features, leads to unintended consequences for the user’s self-image and self-esteem. While navigating this quick and easy app, one generally doesn’t consider any of this complex psychology that went into its creation, development, and consistent updates, but this implicit psychology allows the billion-dollar business to thrive. According to Vox writers Joss Fong and Dion Lee, Snapchat’s introduction of the lenses occurred after their acquisition of a Ukrainian video-editing application called Looksery, whose goal was to be a solution for “people who feel insecure during video communication and want to modify [their] eye color, nose size, facial shape, and skin” (Fong and Lee). Snapchat’s employment of these filters may have originally been a result of the same hopeful intentions, but as Julia Arciga of George Washington University writes in her 2016 USA Today article “Fight the Filter: Snapchat Selfies Distort Users’ Self-Image,” these “beauty filters” maintain a toxic selfie culture where “the only images that [Snapchat] users deem worthy of posting are the ones put through a distorting lens” (Arciga). Even if it is subconsciously at first, users begin to compare their faces in reality to their faces in the filters. For the millions upon millions of us without access to augmenting resources or even just the desire to augment our physical selves, the faces we see in the mirror will never align with the faces we see through Snapchat lenses. The filters create a sort of “double consciousness,” and for the minorities whom the odds are even more stacked against, the number of realities we have to simultaneously live in only increases. The social media
environment is one meant for sharing and communicating with the outside world, but issues like the ones I’ve identified with Snapchat bring to light how much selfie culture truly affects us on the inside.

Is the solution to Snapchat’s implicit bias behind their “beauty filters” for developers to stop making filters altogether? I firmly argue against that. The addition of Snapchat lenses revolutionized selfie culture, offering opportunities for more and more users to get involved in social media communities and have fun while doing so. Filters made hundreds of millions of people more active across a laundry list of social media platforms, as the images taken on Snapchat were saved onto camera rolls and posted onto users’ respective accounts on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Tinder, and many more popular networking apps. However, along with the global spread of these filtered selfies circulate the biases they promote. The continued development of Snapchat’s lenses tells individuals who don’t fit into society’s ideas of being beautiful that if you don’t look like the filters, you need to use the filters in order to fit in. There is a carefully handcrafted array for you to select from, but in order to be beautiful, you must choose and use one. Perhaps the solution is for Snapchat to revert back to the styles and designs of their earliest lenses—additive rather than transformative. It is hypocritical of Snapchat developers to continue advertising their platform as one of both communication and self-expression while creating filters that alter the very structure of their users’ faces, promoting conformity to antiquated standards of beauty. Regardless of how they decide to do it, I contend that it is the responsibility of the creators of Snapchat, who have such an influential voice in the modern technological world, to stop designing lenses that are complicit with these sexist and
racist views of society. This is an issue that affects all Internet users, and with that number rapidly approaching 4 billion people worldwide, it is one that absolutely cannot be ignored.
Works Cited


