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Visual Filters and Digital Subjectivity on Chinese Social Media: Platform Power, Beauty Labour, and Identity Negotiation

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Abstract. In the digital presentation of the self, visual filters can have a huge impact in Chinese social media on identity construction and expression, emotional expression, and social expectation negotiation. In this research, we will look at the double effect of the visual filters on Douyin and Xiaohongshu (Rednote) and how they (re)produce aesthetic standards and offer possibilities for individual agency. Taking on the qualitative case study approach, the three types of filtering - beautification filters connected to the "bai-you-shou" aesthetic, crying filters for an expression of emotions, and cartoon distortion filters for concealment of identity - are examined based on the theory of disciplinary power and technologies of the self and the theory of emotional capitalism and the theory of everyday tactics. The analysis shows that beautification filters are suitable for the function of self-surveillance and beautification work in the online space, and the emotional filters have an influence on the presentation and perception of emotion in an online space. Filters for concealment, on the other hand, offer other ways to work on issues of visibility and negotiate privacy. These practices show visual filters to not only be about platform control, but also not solely about personal empowerment. Rather, they must be comprehended within the dynamic between platform architecture and cultural norms and uses of the platform. This study integrates the aspects of aesthetic control, emotional expression and identity management of digital subjectivity to social media in the modern China, which enriches the research on digital subjectivity in China with a more sophisticated dimension.

Keywords: visual filters, digital subjectivity, platform power, beauty labour, identity negotiation

1. Introduction

Visual filters have become a popular social and technological phenomenon on Chinese social media, such as Douyin and Xiaohongshu, and are now widely used. Filters can enhance one's appearance and help people create an ideal image of themselves online; they can also express emotions and fit in with social norms [1]. Saturation in the digital age has caused content creation and consumption to be driven by platform popularity, commercial interests and changing beauty standards. Internet visual culture has spread the ideal of bai-you-shou (pale, youthful and slim), and this may be

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increasing pressure on people's appearances, especially for young women. This pressure is closely related to beauty labour; that is, the time, effort and other resources people invest in achieving socially desirable looks [2, 3]. Filters can also be used for more than beautification; they are also employed to express emotions, conceal identities and protect oneself from the scrutiny of the online world.

Research has shown that beauty ideals and algorithmic platforms have affected people's sense of self in recent years. However, these factors are often taken in isolation and their joint effect in China has not been fully examined. According to the concepts of knowledge-power and technologies of the self developed by Michel Foucault, this paper will examine visual filters as a type of social discipline and a way to construct digital identities [3].

It is a qualitative case study analysis, through the study of three typical filtering practices: beautification filters (bai-you-shou) on Douyin, vulnerable or crying aesthetic filters, and cartoon/anonymous filters. The research examines the visual aspects of the filters, the beauty ideals they represent, and how users engage with them, by conducting a qualitative content analysis of selected filters and the publicly available content on social media. The analysis is guided by foucauldian theory and supplemented with sociological theory where applicable for the purpose of interpreting the expression of emotions and concealment of identities.

The research seeks to gain an integrated knowledge of the formation of beauty labour, emotional expression and construction of the image of identity in Chinese digital culture by visual filters. It explores how beautifying filters produce the norms of appearance, how emotive filters create feelings which are translated into a stylised performance online, and how anonymising filters provide self-protection and alternative ways of expression. The study compares these practices with those occurring in the other platform, looking at the complex relationship between platform power and user agency, and how visual filters can at the same time be used as reinforcement of social expectations and as channels of negotiation and resistance.

2. Literature review

2.1. Digital self-fashioning and aesthetic ideologies

Social media have been crucial platforms in which people build and showcase their identities by means of visual material. Beauty filters, face-editing tools, and image-enhancement features enable users to manipulate their appearance and match their appearance to the dominant beauty ideals. However, these technologies are not just for enhancing photos. They can also uphold specific images of beauty and trigger individuals to assess their looks on the basis of others' opinions. The idealised images presented on SNSs may have a negative impact on body satisfaction as found by Fioravanti et al. in a systematic review which highlighted that users may engage in appearance comparisons [4]. Likewise, the study on photo-editing habits has shown a correlation between manipulated images and issues related to the body [5].

This is especially true for Chinese social media platforms like Douyin and Xiaohongshu, where visual presentation relates to beauty and lifestyle content and online social interaction. Sun and Wu explore the experience of Chinese women with the beauty filters and platform recommendation mechanisms and the link with aesthetic self-objectification and pressure to present themselves as idealised images [1]. Luo and Zhang also showed that technologies for face editing can convey and reproduce assumptions concerning gendered beauties [6].

However, do not think of the users as simply the recipients of these standards of beauty. They can conform to and negotiate with filters. For example, a person can try out a popular beauty look they

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have seen on social media and also attempt some other different styles. The above shows that platform design, social demands and people's own will have been shaping how people present themselves online. According to Foucault's theory of technologies of the self, users are people who use visual technology to construct, organise and change their own identities in online spaces.

Algorithmic systems for content recommendation, circulation and evaluation are becoming a more significant factor in digital self-presentation. Popular filters, trending templates, and recommendation systems drive which visual styles are seen and desirable on platforms like Douyin and Xiaohongshu. Such platform features can promote the copying of familiar aesthetic forms, further solidifying specific notions of beauty. Sun and Wu hypothesize that this combination of beauty filters and recommendation systems can further increase aesthetic self-objectification and prompt users to pay attention to their appearance [1].

But, filters can have other uses aside from beautification. Facial features can be changed, identifying characteristics can be blurred, and visual appearance can be modified to allow users to manage their own privacy and control their own visual reputation online. As such, filters serve as a means of negotiation of visibility, enabling users to engage and be active in online communities in a way that provides them with a certain measure of distance from their online presence and offline identity. Such habits also give rise to questions regarding whether visual changes can aid users in meeting social demands, avoiding unwanted attention, and, perhaps, risks involved with sharing of personal photographs.

Foucault's notion of disciplinary power is a helpful one to understand how people internalize social norms and discipline their own conduct. For algorithmically mediated environments, users can dress up to provoke reactions from the audience and visibility from the platform [7]. However, users do not have to be passive victims of such systems. In terms of technologies of the self, filter use can also be viewed as a form of identity management, in which people try to negotiate with the social expectations and have limited control over self presentation.

Though there has been a burgeoning research on beauty filters and aesthetic self-objectification, the connections between algorithmic governance, anonymity and user agency are underappreciated. Specifically, more research is required to better understand when filters have the potential to reinforce dominant beauty norms and when they offer users privacy, identity play, and or resistance to social norms. The focus of this study thus lies in how the filter works as a platform in aesthetic regulation, but also as a tool with which users can negotiate their digital identity.

To date, studies have investigated aesthetic norms on social media, gendered designs in facial editing technologies, and how mechanisms of social media platforms affect self-presentation in users, but not in relation to each other. But the studies have yet to fully account for the work of various filter types in the same platform environment, especially when it comes to the interplay of aesthetic and emotional expression, and the protection of identity.

3. Theoretical framework

To the extent that the above are deficient, Foucault's ideas on power and technologies of the self will be used to investigate self-presentation and identity construction in the world of digital filters. Power is not only directly coercive but also operates through social norms and discursive practices to shape how people see themselves and form judgments about their appearance (Figure 1). The three levels of the framework are platform governance (Platform Level), filter-mediated aesthetic standardisation (Filter Level) and the agency of users and beauty labour (User Level), and all of them work together. Recommendation algorithms, content moderation and traffic distribution mechanisms control the spread of the platform (01) and decide which entities and expressions are

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promoted. Visual effects at the filter level (02) offer a basic template for users to create their own visual works in line with aesthetic ideas and platform demands. At the user level (03), many people use these functions to learn about the idea of beauty and take part in digital beauty activities for social recognition; others wear masks strategically, use distortions and cartoon filters, etc., to protect their privacy, hide their identities, and reduce online risks. Filters can be used to change the beauty of art, and they are also general-purpose and strategic instruments for expression. Based on the analysis of the three cases of Douyin and Xiaohongshu (Rednote), this paper will explore the differences and similarities in visual culture on the two platforms mentioned above. Xiaohongshu is a lifestyle-sharing website that posts about products and builds communities, and Douyin is a short-video platform for the rapid spread of all sorts of content via algorithms. Although the two platforms have different structures, both provide a platform for people to share their thoughts on beauty and various ways to gain exposure. Based on the behaviour of users in the platform areas above, it can be seen that digital filters have helped to reduce the conflict between platform authority and demands for image uniformity in contemporary Chinese society. This theoretical framework of filter mediated identity construction is illustrated in Figure 1.

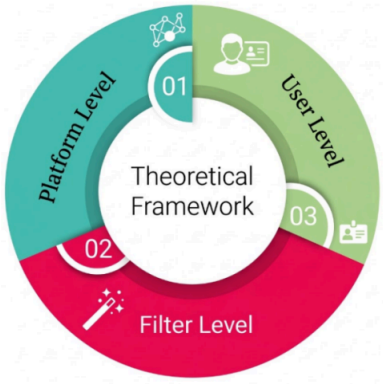


Figure 1. Theoretical framework of filter-mediated identity construction

4. Empirical analysis: filters, platform ecosystems, and user subjectivity

Visual filters have an impact on how users present themselves, convey emotion, and manage their identities on Douyin and Xiaohongshu (Rednote). To explain their popularity, it can be said that there are three factors that are interconnected: algorithmic visibility, commercialisation of beauty culture and the social and psychological needs of users. Some popular visual styles can invite users to follow more familiar visual conventions, and beautification elements can facilitate the reproduction of certain beauty constructs. Meanwhile, filters can assist users to convey emotions, try out alternate identities, and control their online presence. The competing functions give the context to the analysis of filters as instruments of social regulation and resources for individual agency.

4.1. Disciplinary power and beautification filters

The "bai-you-shou" style, which is often linked to a slim silhouette, young looks and fair skin, is one example of how beautification filters can help to enable the enforcement of dominant beauty ideals. Looks that can be replicated include skin smoothing, complexion adjustment and reshaping the face. From a Foucault perspective, these filters can help to reinforce discipline in that they may promote their internalisation of aesthetic norms and self-surveillance [5]. When this comparison is repeated over and over again with filtered and unfiltered images, it can become an ongoing process of self-

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evaluation resulting in beauty. This process can also be considered as digital beauty labour as users put in time and effort in creating images that are deemed to conform to audience expectation.

But passive conformation is not necessarily the same as filter use. These effects can be used for fun, self-expression, or taking part in internet fashions. The question is the relation between personal taste and aesthetic norms. Beautification filters thus show a clash between the idea of personal agency and self-regulation, as people have control over, and are able to manipulate, what they look like, but may also be reproducing the beauty norms found in digital visual culture.

4.2. The commercialisation of emotion: crying filters

Vulnerability-oriented visual effects and crying filters help to express emotions like sadness and loneliness in recognisable ways. Simulated tears, "reddened" eyes and "softened" facial characteristics allow the users to convey emotional states in a manner that is easily appreciated by an audience. Illouz's notion on emotional capitalism can be used to understand the link between emotional expression and social recognition and commercial culture [8]. Emotions on social media can garner positive comments and audience interaction, and help build an online presence.

However, digitally mediated emotion should not necessarily be seen as artificial or insincere. Filters can be used to convey authentic emotions, pose exaggerated emotions in a fun way, or to try out various types of expression. What is crucial, is how platform conventions affect which emotional displays are visible and socially sanctioned. This case shows how filters can be used as a means for emotional communication, and might be an incentive for the users to communicate emotions in a way that catches the viewers' attention.

4.3. Identity concealment through face filters

Users can use cartoon masks, animal-face effects and distortion filters to change or hide their face online. De Certeau's term 'tactics' gives an approach to comprehend how people find ways to work with the available components of platforms so as to maintain visibility in systems that they do not control [9]. The filters can be used for privacy reasons, to avoid being looked upon because of appearance or to engage in conversations without revealing the real identity. The Foucaultian notion of technologies of the self also implies that these decisions might be utilized as part of a process of active construction and self-governance of digital identity [7].

But hiding is not necessarily resisting, or anonymous. Some people use such effects for fun, others might use it to create a higher level of control over the process of self-disclosure. They are important depending on the context and purpose of their use. While beautification filters can serve to perpetuate dominant notions of appearance, concealment-oriented filters can offer alternative methods of engaging with visual culture. This juxtaposition reveals that filters can help to reinforce norms as well as give users the opportunity to contest the conditions of their online visibility.

All these cases illustrate the fact that digital filters are not oppressive per se, nor liberating per se. Their impact is manifested in the interplay between platform architectures, cultural norms and practices of users. This paper investigates the role filters play in the interplay of power, self-presentation and user agency by analyzing the processes of beautification, emotional expression and identity concealment.

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5. Discussion

This study argues that visual filtering on Chinese social media involves tension between platform governance and user agency. Although algorithmic visibility and dominant beauty standards might incentivize users to undertake digital beauty labour, filters can also be used to control self-presentation, privacy, and potentially social interaction. Users' digital identities thus are neither fully independent nor fully defined by the platform power, but are negotiated on an ongoing basis through daily practices. The sharing of idealised digital images can also, from Baudrillard's point of view, create an indistinct line between representation and reality, causing some users to make a negative comparison between their real image and the one they project. This difference can lead to concerns and feelings about appearance and pressure to change, but the impact of this should not be assumed to be widespread. Filters can therefore serve as temporary solutions to appearance issues and as a possible source of appearance expectations that help maintain them.

6. Conclusion

This study explores the influence of visual filters on Douyin and Xiaohongshu on digital self-presentation, emotional expression and identity construction. The analysis breaks down the filters into three interrelated roles. Firstly, beautification filters can perpetuate prevailing aesthetic ideals and foster a self-monitoring process and digital beauty work. Second, crying and vulnerability-oriented filters show how emotions can, again, be conveyed through stylised visual conventions and linked to audience engagement. Third, alternative visibility, privacy and online identity management strategies are available in the form of cartoon masks and distortion filters. The results indicated that overall, visual filters are not merely a tool of platform control, nor do they merely empower individuals. Rather, they are mediated by a process of negotiation between platform platforms, cultural expectations and user agency. However, this study has a number of caveats. This is a qualitative case study study where the findings were limited to three kinds of filters and two Chinese social media platforms. Moreover, the analysis used a limited set of filters and content that was openly available on the platform and did not involve systematic user interviews or a large volume of data from the platform. Thus, it is not possible to fully determine users' intentions, emotions and real reactions to algorithmic mechanisms. Future studies may include interviews, comparative platform analysis, and longitudinal and quantitative data to explore the impact of the filter use with various groups of users over time. This kind of study would better help us understand how digital technologies, aesthetic norms and identity construction are related in today's social media.

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