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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Social Media Filtered Images as Carnavalesque Resistance

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| ABSTRACT

A great many may perceive social media filters or lenses as ridiculous and filtering selfies as an act of sheer vanity or blind imitation of glamorous social media influencers. However, from within this pervasive contemporary digital phenomenon, resistance to dominant representations or subversion of societal expectations can be discerned. In other words, filters and filtered self-images are by no means simply and exclusively reproductions of socially idealized beauty standards and pre-existing cultural norms. Some filtered representations often disrupt the effect of the bandwagon from within, using the very digital resources provided by social media and filter applications. In this article, we approach this rather unexplored kind of filtered images from Mikhail Bakhtin's perspective, precisely employing his conception of the carnivalesque. Using this framework, the aim is to explore the potential subversiveness of certain playful social media filtered representations. Some social media filtered images while satiric and playful also constitute powerful statements with regards to identity politics and the current status quo.

| KEYWORDS

Digital culture, filters, filtered representations, Mikhail Bakhtin, carnivalesque, resistance.

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### 1. Introduction

Over the last decade, social media has acquired a dominant role in public communication, and filtered selfies have become a pervasive cultural phenomenon. On popular social media networks such as Snapchat, TikTok, and Instagram, a considerable number of users filter their selfies before sharing them with other users. Despite the ubiquity of social media filtered selfies, they largely remain scholarly underexplored. There are very few studies which investigate this digital cultural phenomenon. Given that many filter users reshape their images to produce self-representations that conform to societal ideals, for example, through the use of make-up filters and other aesthetic enhancement tools, the current literature on filters largely revolves around beauty filters. Within previous studies, the broad argument is that social media filtered self-images are reproductions of social ideals. The attention here is mostly directed towards beauty filters. This paper, however, does not particularly focus on beauty filters but sheds light on unexplored kinds of filtered representations. It examines instances of filter use which offer a playful critique of deeply entrenched conventional identity conceptions, power relations as well as societal expectations. Using Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of the carnivalesque, this article aims to examine the critical potential of digital "filter culture." The central argument, here, is that within "filter culture" there are humorous and subversive practices which allow new or unconventional ideas and ways of being to permeate into public discourse.

### 2. Literature Review

Despite the ubiquity of filtered images on social media, very few studies have investigated this contemporary cultural phenomenon. According to a research study conducted by Rosalind Gill (2021), 90% of her research population reports using filters or other types of photo editing to esthetically enhance their images before posting them on social media platforms. For Rosalind Gill, the

increasing popularity of beauty filters and photo editing practices contributes to a society where young people constantly feel scrutinized and pressured to look perfect and to present a perfect life.

Sofia P. Caldeira, Sander De Ridder, and Sofie Van Bauwel (2018) discuss the complex issue of controversial self-representation and censorship on social media platforms. Particularly, they discuss the case of banning a popular Instagram model from Instagram due to sharing “inappropriate” self-images. Caldeira et al. build on this case to explore the politics of gender representation on social media. They perceptively contrast “the technological affordances” of Instagram with its imposed constraints that shape the shared representations on the platform. These constraints include Instagram’s Terms of Use and the “diffuse power” exerted by Instagram users’ feedback. However, in their article, the focus is not on social media filters which add or remove some aspects of images. Rather, their concern is primarily with “the filtration” of posted images, precisely “provocative” gender representations, through Instagram’s Terms of Use. Put differently, their focus is on images that get flagged by other users or taken down by Instagram due to a certain bridge of Instagram’s policy. Their work directs attention toward the implications of such limitations on gender politics and self-representation in the digital age.

Clara Isakowitsch (2023) provides some of the most recent contributions on the issue of beauty filters. Precisely, Isakowitsch explores the effect of social media augmented reality beauty filters (ARB filters) on people’s perceptions of themselves. The study contrasts the effect of ARB filters which adapt to movements in real-time with the effect of static selfie editing. To reach this end, Isakowitsch uses Extended Mind Theory and Enactivism as frameworks. It is important to note that here the focus is on the fact that ARB filters involve motion and more radical changes to the user’s face. As far as the impact on self-perception and body image, the responses varied considerably among participants in Isakowitsch’s study. However, Isakowitsch’s analysis suggests that in comparison to static selfie editing, Instagram and Snapchat ARB filters may have a greater impact on people’s self-perception and body image.

It is important to note that Isakowitsch focuses exclusively on beauty filters and photo enhancement technologies. The author does not consider other uses of filters which serve other functions. Alongside beauty filters, there are filters or filter uses which do not necessarily align with the current beauty standards and societal expectations.

Christine Lavrence and Carolina Cambre (2020) also explore the issue of social media filtered images. In their article, Lavrence and Cambre do not limit their discussion to the “self” in the filtered selfie. They also explore the gaze or kind of looking that filtered selfies evoke. What Lavrence and Cambre call “the digital-forensic gaze” refers to both the gaze of the filter users at themselves and the gaze of others at them in a process of objectification. The magnification functions of smartphones, according to Rosalind Gill (2021), exacerbate this tendency to forensically scrutinize oneself and others.

Lavrence and Cambre also examine how the proliferation of filtered selfies has led to a general assumption on social media platforms that everyone is using a filter on their image, regardless of whether there is indeed a filter or not. For them, to a large extent, this stems from a recent shift in social media from heavy use of conspicuous, animated filters to more subtle “naturalistic” filters. Moreover, Lavrence and Cambre touch upon the ambivalent attitudes toward whether or not cisgender social media users should use filters. Based on participants’ responses, Lavrence and Cambre conclude that cisgender social media users are incentivized to use conspicuous filters on their selfies to meet heteronormative beauty standards. This is discussed as a strategy to increase “likes” and to boost engagement with these selfies on social media. A strategy which has negative psychological implications. In this regard, Lavrence and Cambre’s research suggests that using filters is “fun” but is also anxiety-provoking.

Recently, there has been an emerging – albeit scarce – scholarly attention toward social media filters and self-representation on social media. However, by and large, the existing literature focuses on beauty filters and “beautified” selfies. Conversely, this study focuses on an unexplored aspect of filtered images. To be more precise, this article explores unconventional filtered representations which subvert dominant narratives and challenge viewers’ perceptions.

### 3. Methodology

This paper employs the Bakhtinian conception of the carnivalesque as a framework for understanding the playful and subversive aspects of social media filtered images – mostly selfies but also other filtered images. Such a framework provides critical insights into various aspects of “filter culture” beyond the aspiration to meet societal beauty standards.

The carnivalesque is a concept associated with the Russian linguist and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin. He discusses this notion mainly in *Rabelais and His World*. In his study, Bakhtin focuses on the phenomenon of the carnival, particularly carnivals dating back to the European Middle Ages. The Medieval carnival is an annual spectacle that lasts several days. Carnival time is generally characterized by excess and the symbolic inversion of social hierarchies.

Some carnival distinctive properties include social satire, mockery of the church and state authority figures, and the display of grotesque costumes. During carnival, people wear body costumes with exaggerated features such as large noses, bellies, mouths, and phalli. Sometimes, they incorporate animal body parts into their costumes, or they cross-dress. Vulgar language, obscene behavior, and a general reversal of everyday rules and norms are all main characteristics of carnival time. Karen Backstein elucidates that:

Through masquerade, satire and mimicry, the poor 'become' the rich, the powerless can safely ridicule religious and other ruling institutions, and even gender categories become blurred as men don women's clothes and vice versa. Frequently, gay culture moves into the foreground during carnival, as transvestism becomes a cause for cheering rather than punishment. Carnavalesque imagery glorifies the grotesque, the oversized, and everything associated with the lower body. (94)

Also, it is important to emphasize that carnival is not a spectacle produced on a stage or orchestrated by officials. Rather, it is a performance by everyone. In other terms, carnival is a temporary space away from official culture.

Extremely relevant to this paper is Mikhail Bakhtin's interesting analysis of the liberating potential of carnival. For him, it is liberating not only because the church and state temporarily have almost no control over citizens' lives, but also because carnival shows that established rules and beliefs are not immune to ridicule or re-conception.

Bakhtin points out that carnival tradition diminished in Europe following the Renaissance. However, he posits that the public spirit of carnival metamorphosed into the "carnavalesque," rendering the spirit of carnival into a literary form. Bakhtin argues that carnivalesque literature, like carnival itself, challenges oppressive and restrictive forms of thought, fuels the imagination, and paves the path for the pursuit of emancipation.

With time, this Bakhtinian concept of the carnivalesque continues to encompass more than just literary forms. As Chris Barker indicates, "the contemporary use of the term carnivalesque is a metaphorical one that connotes a form of resistance to power and authority from within popular culture" (21). In the same vein, in this research study, some instances of social media filtered images are seen as carnivalesque subversions of pre-imposed, restrictive social and cultural norms related to issues such as the representation of gender, status, beauty, and other aspects of identity.

#### **4. Results and Discussion**

Both carnival rituals and the use of filters grant a degree of otherwise unpermitted freedom to ordinary people. They both allow people to lose their everyday identity and to assume a range of alternative identities, at least temporarily. Like carnival masquerade, using filters, people can disguise themselves as someone of a higher social status. As a case in point, using filters or photo editing applications, social media users reshape their self-images to look like a supermodel, an Oscar-winning Hollywood star, a particular politician, a famous sportsperson, and the list goes on. The interface of applications such as FaceJoy and FacePlay provides numerous illustrations of these filters and their uses.

Again, analogous to carnival satiric practices, when using filters, some users do not typically represent themselves in conventional ways that strive to meet societal expectations. For instance, some filtered self-images offer a parody of conventional beauty standards. Instead of using a filter or editing their photos to make their images aesthetically pleasing, some users opt for quite the opposite. For example, they filter their images to give themselves a double chin, a wide nose, or droopy jowls. Ensuing the popularity of such humorous and unconventional self-representations, filters that serve this end have become increasingly commonplace. Now they are some of the first to pop up as soon as one opens their front camera on an application like Snapchat. Popular filters of this kind include "Ugly Face Lens" by Sushant16777, TikTok's "Ugly Face" filter, "Uglyface Lens" by Mohammed Yousif, and "Brows and Nose Lens" by Snapchat. To a large extent, these filtered selfies ridicule social media "glam" and "glow up" culture, in particular, and mainstream flawless beauty aspirations, in general.

Similarly, some users deploy filters that distort their faces or exaggerate their facial expressions in a playful manner. For example, some use Instagram's "Funny Mirror" filter to reach this purpose. This filter is inspired by the distorting mirrors found in amusement parks. Using the "Funny Mirror" filter, one's face (selfie) becomes bent, disfigured, and deformed. TikTok's "Shook Filter" is another popular example in this category. Using it, the user's face acquires a slightly shocked smile and a double chin, making them look "shook" – or shocked. Such filtered self-representations, which blow one's face out of proportion, do the opposite of all of those glamorous beauty filters out there. In fact, they subvert the viewer's expectations.

Other filtered self-representations take a jab at stereotypical representations of masculinity and/or femininity. This is often achieved through the reversal of conventional visual gender cues or by visually blurring the traditional gender dichotomy. As a case in point,

a person with the physical attributes associated with a woman may use a filter to acquire the visual markers of identity associated with power and muscularity. For instance, using Snapchat's "Police Officer" lens, some women overlay on their selfie a police hat, a thick horseshoe mustache, and aviator glasses. The addition of these visual cues reshapes the woman's selfie to look like a police officer. A job traditionally male-dominated and associated with power. On the other hand, someone with the physical attributes associated with men may use a filter to acquire visual identity markers conventionally associated with women or femininity. A popular example in this case is the use of make-up filters by people with the physical attributes generally associated with men.

Recently, there has been another trend of using drag queen makeup filters. Filters creators may have built on people's unconventional experimentation with their filtered self-representations. YouCam's interface shows many illustrations of drag queen filters. These filters are used to instantaneously give the user a dramatic makeover. The website Perfect states that YouCam makeup filters can generate up to 150 different hair colors, extravagant makeup looks, and 3D accessories. Using such filters, the user visually acquires distinctive elements of drag queen makeup, including high-arched eyebrows, long lashes, extra eyeshadow, and an overall flashy palette. The website Perfect demonstrates how YouCam drag queen filters can makeover one's image to look like famous drag queens such as Gigi Goode, Ginger Minj, and Plastique Tiara.

Another filter that has gone viral is the "Face-swap Filter." Now, it can be found in almost any photo editing application. Using this filter, users often alter their facial features to represent themselves as their opposite gender. Using "face-swap filters," users also can swap their faces or parts of their faces with a baby, a pet, a friend, a grandmother, or any subject of their choice. The result is a wide range of silly, playful, and even grotesque filtered face swaps.

These "unconventionally" filtered self-images – the conventional here being filters that focus on the aesthetic enhancement of the image – serve a social function, as they construct an alternative vision of identity and, by extension, community. Filtered selfies are usually shared with an audience on social media networks. Thus, they have the potential to pave the way for new or unconventional ideas to permeate public discourse. This includes re-conceptions of gender norms and a challenge to the need to look mainstream "perfect." Such filtered selfies ridicule social media "glamour culture" while making popular the acceptance of one's older or even "uglier" version of themselves. By and large, the above-discussed filtered self-images represent an aesthetic that celebrates the unpopular.

This function is more evident when taking into account the fact that filter designers act upon users' ideas to produce new filters. For instance, in the early days of filters, they were generally created to edit out "imperfections" and to make one's image aesthetically more appealing in real time. However, as some users started to manipulate the available editing options to make their image look like, for example, their opposite gender or to visually blur the conventional gender dichotomy, photo editing applications and social media networks started to create filters specifically for those purposes. The "Gender-swap Filter" is a case in point. It has now become customary for users to create filters and submit them to social media platforms or photo editing applications for public use.

Furthermore, there are instances in which what looks like mere fun and silly filters instigate serious debates. In 2019, NowThis News, an American social media-focused news organization, tweeted a video that uses the "Gender-swap Filter"—sometimes called the "woman Snapchat filter"—on the faces of former U.S. presidents to make all of them look like a female version of themselves. The video is captioned, "These Snapchat filters are giving Americans the women presidents they've never had." The video ignited serious criticism on X (formerly known as Twitter). A considerable number of comments point to the insulting implication that a Snapchat filter can make amends for centuries of gender inequality. As some tweets read, "the bottom line is that we need real representation, not just a fun gender-swap filter," "how about we just vote one into office?! just a thought!", and "Or – and hear me out – we could elect a woman as president." Applying the gender-swap filter on images of presidents did receive a great deal of criticism. However, what should be stressed is the fact that this stirred a debate and shed light on the fact that there have not been women presidents in the U.S. The debate instigated by the use of the "Gender-swap Filter" exemplifies Bakhtin's notion of carnivalesque potential for subverting established worldviews and the status quo.

By and large, certain compositions of filtered representations constitute a creative means of initiating a counter-discourse. They sometimes offer politically charged statements. Nonetheless, there are "objective" restraints on the liberating effects of filters and their use. To be more specific, users are not the owners of social media platforms. Although now practically anyone can create a filter, not all submitted filters are approved. Oftentimes, certain filters get banned like the "Jewish Snapchat Filter," Instagram's "Cosmetic Surgery Filter," and "Race" or "Black Filter" on FaceApp. Here, the argument is not about whether or not certain filters should be banned. Rather, the point is these filters or filtered images still function within a set of super-imposed constraints and are subject to censorship.

## 5. Conclusion

In this article, building on Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of the carnivalesque, we have examined the subversive and critical potential of certain social media filtered self-representations. The main argument has been that satirical and playful filtered representations have the potential to subvert dominant narratives and challenge viewers' perceptions. Manipulating identity visual cues in an unconventional manner or using "de-beautifying" effects, some users construct filtered images that subvert, at least temporarily, deeply entrenched conceptualizations of beauty standards, gender differentiation, power relations, and social hierarchies.

Understanding the critical potential of certain filtered images necessitates acknowledging the role of social media and visual technology in the contemporary increasingly digitalized world. Given the central role social media outlets have acquired in public communication over the last two decades, what seems as a personal showcasing of an individual's choices and perhaps mere silliness has the potential to allow re-conceptions of identity and established norms to seep into public discourse.

Like carnival, filtered selfies are performative, inviting audience engagement, interaction, and interpretation. Gender and body politics are often at the forefront of such performances. Spectacular filtered images also draw attention to other often intertwined issues such as social status, power relations, and naturalized social hierarchies.

In this article, we argue that resistance against dominant narratives and stereotypical representations occurs from within "filter culture." While the word filter has become almost interchangeable with aesthetic enhancement and the perpetuation of idealized beauty standards, some filtered representations, as previously illustrated, challenge normative representations and mediated stereotypes and hierarchies – albeit with varying degrees. Although all filter users have access to the same "standardized" filters or lenses, resistance is manifested through the creative manipulation of these tools. As such, resistance happens "inside" social media using the very resources provided by the filter applications. However, it is important to stress that within this account, resistance is not to be thought of in revolutionary terms or as a straightforward reversal of the order of high and low. Instead, resistance here is enacted in terms of ambivalence, satire, and negotiation as exemplified by the transgressive character of the carnivalesque.

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