

*“Is it all just lip service?”:*

*On Instagram and the normalisation of the cosmetic servicescape*

*‘The danger of cosmetic surgery becoming too closely linked to reality  
TV or celebrity endorsement is that it can make surgery seem like a  
commodity, which should never be the case. An operation is not something  
that can simply be returned to the shop if you have second thoughts.’*

Rajiv Grover, *The British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons* (2019)

### **From bodywork to self-work – post-feminist subjectivities and the cosmetic boom**

Working on the body is hard work. The aesthetic labour we perform on our bodies, that is, the beautification of our corporealities to meet ever-changing beauty standards, involves ‘time, money, skill, effort, physical discomfort and even health risks’ (Lazar, 2017: 51). Nevertheless, we endure this labour of beauty in our pursuit of perfecting our physical form. The cosmetics industry, including cosmetic surgery, has been instrumental in enabling an aesthetic labour, so that through our consumption of cosmetic services we crawl our way toward more idealised versions of ourselves. In fact, body modification through cosmetic surgery has been steadily on the rise, even during the pandemic (Williams, 2020), as people across the globe become more critical of how they ‘look’ on working-from-home video calls and turn to the market for solutions (Meeson, 2020). From rhinoplasty and butt-lifts, breast augmentations and pec implants, vaginal rejuvenation and penile enlargements, to less invasive but highly visible procedures including dermal-fillers, fat freezing, and Botox, we have seen a significant uptake on cosmetic procedures across the gender spectrum that

conspicuously alter the body in a permanent or semi-permanent way (Heath, 2019). Reality-TV and glamour magazines targeting predominantly female audiences (Gill, 2009) have in recent years been replaced by social media and online influencers that now act as beacons of beauty ideals for both women (Dobson, 2015) and men (Chatzopoulou et al., 2020). Through visual and textual narratives (Gurrieri and Drenten, 2019), we see digital platforms vividly projecting a new normativity that is unapologetically altered.

The labour involved in the making, performance and presentation of the body has been at the heart of feminist scholarship (Gill and Schraff, 2001, Gill, 2009). Moreover, despite a growing popularisation of male cosmetic surgery (Dowling, 2016), women continue to vastly outnumber men in the uptake of both surgical and non-surgical cosmetic procedures (Okumus, 2020), so that our study focuses on the role of social media in the demystification and commoditisation of surgical procedures among young women today.

Media platforms focusing on beauty share a 'neoliberal rhetoric of choice and agency' (Dobson, 2017: 353), where consumers are seen as empowered agents (Gill, 2009) in control of the modification and display of their bodies. Within this neoliberal mindset, the body is equated to an 'asset', 'product' or 'brand' that can be moulded and utilised (Winch, 2015: 233). The body becomes a site of ongoing transformation and reinvention of the self, so that our 'body work' permeates in a very real way into our 'self work' (Jones, 2008). Body makeovers do more than alter our physical appearance, they feed into our psyches as well (Gill, 2009). In our newly modified bodies, we adopt a refreshed, confident, affirmative disposition, meaning that through aesthetic labour we embrace a subjectivity of who we *are* in the world as well as *how* we are seen (Gill and Elias, 2014).

Social media allows us to engage in the endless labour of ‘curating’ our visible selves (Dobson, 2015), including our bodywork projects. In fact, we have witnessed a sharp rise in the uptake of cosmetic surgery since the inception of social media platforms in 2004, whereby the UK alone saw surgical procedures more than triple in a ten-year span from 16,300 in 2004 to 51,000 in 2015 (BAAPS, 2019). Despite rich insight into the politics of body modification in other disciplines, research on cosmetic surgery remains nascent within the services literature (Klaus and Tsotsou, 2020). Our study contributes to this body of work on the body by fleshing out how cosmetic services have become commoditised through the aesthetic labour taking place on Instagram.

Instagram, a photo sharing application that allows users to edit and share content, has been at the heart of revolutionising social media marketing communication (De Veirman *et al.*, 2017). Over and above other social media platforms, such as YouTube and TikTok, Instagram is seen as the retail arm of social media, with brands incorporating Instagram into their marketing strategy (Clement, 2020). Instagram’s clout has resulted in the emerging popularity of online ‘influencers’, regular individuals who have utilised their Instagram platforms to carefully curate content that can be viewed as a source of inspiration, social reference and shopping recommendation for others (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017). As digital opinion leaders (Casaló *et al.*, 2020), influencers are perceived by their followers as more relatable and credible (Schouten *et al.*, 2020) than mainstream celebrities, whose lifestyles feel more out of reach (Jin *et al.*, 2019). Amidst an ample typology and hierarchy of influencers, our study centres on the influential work of beauty and lifestyle influencers as key social trend setters (Campbell and Farrell, 2020). Coupled with this highly visible aesthetic labour on behalf of influencers, we argue that the surge of face-filters (Yim and Park, 2019) and specifically the ‘try-before-you-buy’ augmented reality (AR) technology that

superimposes surgeries onto our selfies, drive consumers to the cosmetic servicescape in the hope of bringing these digitally-enhanced versions of themselves to life.

To better understand the commoditisation of cosmetic surgery in the wake of Instagram, our study asks how the aesthetic labour of female beauty and lifestyle influencers acts as the 'packaging' (Warhurst and Nickson, 2009) of the cosmetic servicescape. In answering this, our study contributes to theorising of aesthetic labour within the services marketing literature as we unpack the bodywork (Gimlin, 2007) of influential others not as employees but endorsers (Schouten *et al.*, 2020), who act like the 'walking billboards' (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003) of the cosmetic service industry.

To answer this, our paper first unpacks key theorising on the self within a digitally mediated world and the aesthetic labour of influencers. Our dual-qualitative approach combines netnographic (Kozinets, 2019) material from Instagram posts with interview data from women who have undergone or hope to undergo cosmetic surgery. Our findings examine the endorsement of influencers of the servicescape, the conspicuousness of body-projects and the reframing of pain, and the rise of the face-filter as a 'catfish' self. In our closing comments we address the darker side of social media sites on consumers' wellbeing, pointing to the 'lip service' that Instagram lends to the cosmetic servicescape, as well as addressing future trends of (unattainable) beauty ideals and the rise of post-human (Brandiotti, 2013) influencers.

## **The self, the influencer and the leverage of aesthetic labour**

### *A digitally mediated sense of self*

How the body is 'seen, treated, and handled' by others directly impacts our own sense of self (Orbach, 2017: vii). Our self-concept refers to an awareness that we have in terms of beliefs, thoughts and feelings, of who and what we are in relation to others (Hogg and Fragou, 2003). This relational theorising of the self is easily applicable to our contemporary, digitised media culture, where individual's self-esteem feeds off the positive reinforcement of others through 'likes', 'shares' or 'comments' (Ashman *et al.*, 2018).

How women present themselves online can shape how they relate to others (Elias and Gill, 2018), where the gaze of the other feeds into our own subjectivities (Gill, 2009). With digital communication, comes a socially mediated panopticism (Elias and Gill, 2018), so that platforms '[give] rise to a quantifiable self that is subject to a self-policing, metricized gaze' (Rome and Lambert, 2020: 504). Among female digital consumers in particular, we witness the rise of a 'girlfriend gaze' or 'surveillant sisterhood' (Winch, 2015) that replaces the once sexualised, male gaze (Gimlin, 2007). An obsession with the body induces a form of scopophilia, where women pore over the images of other female bodies (celebrities and peers) with scrutiny and envy (Elias and Gill, 2018). As women become more disciplined in self-grooming and self-presentation practices, they embark on an exhausting journey of aesthetic labour where 'no part of the body may escape scrutiny and work' (Lazar, 2017: 52).

Instagram, as the 'queen' of digital platforms, acts as the visual register and digital surveillance *par excellence* as she encourages us to put forward our best possible self (Goffman, 1990). Social media therefore lends itself to the study of self-presentation theory as a user's profile can be considered the 'front stage' of their carefully curated performance (Chua and Chang, 2016). The selfie becomes instrumental in this performance of self-presentation, communicating an ideal self to others (Cruz and Thornham, 2015) and

perceived imperfections inherent to the 'real' (material) self get swiftly filtered out before ever posting online (Chua and Chang, 2016).

Taken one step further, face-filters, made possible through AR technology, alter the body in real-time (Javornik *et al.*, 2021), so that a digitally-enhanced selfie propagates a formulaic beauty of (hetero)normative femininity. AR beauty apps allow people to 'try on' beauty products from makeup (Javornik *et al.*, 2021), to clothing (Huang *et al.*, 2019) and accessories (Yim and Park, 2019) and ultimately cosmetic surgery (Elias and Gill, 2018). In the cosmetic servicescape, we see how this technology enables users to visualise themselves with plumper lips, smoother skin, or smaller noses (Coy-Dibley, 2016). Although initially applauded in the retail literature for its interactivity, immediacy and heightened consumer engagement, AR technology can trigger 'a regime of forensic self-scrutiny and self-monitoring', whereby the female body becomes a 'site of crisis and commodification' (Elias and Gill, 2018: 74; 68). In an effort to bring these technologically-enhanced selfies to life, we see how some women undergo the very cosmetic procedures they 'try on' virtually.

### *Carving an idealised self through surgery*

If we understand that through symbolic consumption (of goods and services) consumers are able to portray idealised versions of themselves (Sirgy, 1982), the modification of the body acts as a site in which self-creation and self-enhancement is situated (Thompson and Hirschman 1995). As our 'fleshy body' is thought to represent who we are or aim to be, cosmetic surgery can be seen as a dramatic form of symbolic consumption, whereby it enables the attainment of a possible idealised self (Schouten, 1991). The more attainable this possible idealised self appears, the higher the likelihood of self-actualisation on behalf of the consumer (Schouten, 1991).

Whereas Schouten's (1991) study noted how cosmetic surgery patients visualised their possible selves via retouched photographs, our study shows how 'try-on' technology enables consumers to envision in real-time their surgically-enhanced possible self, thus feeding into a digitised form of body dysmorphia (Coy-Dibley, 2016). These digitally-enhanced depictions of our selves help 'accentuate the disparity between female bodies and the images women feel they must embody' so that women 'not only feel pressured to compete with socially generated beauty standards [but] with their own image too' (Coy-Dibley, 2016: 1-2).

Digital media can play a moderating role in eliciting self-discrepancy (Bessenoff, 2006), between our *actual self* (how we currently look), our *ideal self* (how we wished we looked) and our *ought self* (how we think we should look based on societal expectations) (Higgins, 1989) which may trigger self-esteem (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017; Jin *et al.*, 2019). As influencers are seen to embody idealised versions of ourselves, followers become motivated to 'imitate the influencers' appearance and acquire the luxury brand's products that get them closer to their ideal appearance' (Jin *et al.*, 2019: 572). However, the extent to which some consumers are persuaded to undergo cosmetic surgery because of influencers remains undeveloped within services literature. We suggest that influencers' endorsement of body modifications induces a discrepancy amongst followers, leading them into the cosmetic servicescape.

### *The aesthetic and emotional labour of influencers*

With the rise in popularity of posting selfies on social media comes the emergence of influencers as:

Any popular Instagram character with a high number of followers, who has a high taste in fashion and lifestyle, which enables them to monetise their appearance.

(Jin *et al.*, 2019: 569).

Given the new-found clout of influencers, there is growing interest in the effectiveness of influencers, equating them to celebrity endorsers (De Veirman *et al.*, 2017; Djafarova and Trofimenko, 2019). In fact, much of the extant literature on influencers emerges from celebrity culture research, drawing on theories on source credibility (Lim *et al.*, 2017), social comparison (Bergagna and Tartaglia, 2018) and social influence (Kapitan and Silviera, 2015). Unlike celebrities, however, influencers are seen to espouse more authenticity, credibility, and relatability among followers (Schouten *et al.*, 2020), so that influencers' opinions become more valued over their celebrity counterparts (Djafarova and Rushforth, 2016) thanks to their 'mediated intimacies' (Patterson and Ashman, 2020) and interactions (Jin, Muqaddam and Ryu, 2019). The recommendations (or eWOM) of these online communicators are seen to be true reflections of reality (Kareklas *et al.*, 2015) so that what influencers say or do resonates loudly with their followers (Casaló *et al.*, 2020).

As highly visible and reputable (Lim *et al.*, 2017) 'aesthetic entrepreneurs', influencers work on what Wissinger (2015) refers to as 'glamour labour'. Glamour labour works on both body and image, creating and maintaining 'one's "cool" quotient' (Wissinger, 2015: 3). It is not limited to work on the body, but also involves effort and time in performing personalities, developing relationships, curating lifestyles, and most notably using social media (Elias *et al.*, 2017). As such, influencers carry out aesthetic (Elias *et al.*, 2017) as well as emotional (Hochschild, 1983) labour in the glamourisation of their 'malleable' body (Wissinger, 2015). Previous research has shown how service industries act as prime sites for aesthetic labour,



where recruitment and training of retail and service staff has focused on the management of emotions and appearances of the labour force, for instance in the emotional work of the flight attendant (Hochschild, 1983) or the sexualised aesthetics of a Hooters waitress (Warhurst and Nickson, 2009). We argue that influencers (indirectly) perform emotional and aesthetic labour for the cosmetic surgery industry, whereby these influential others act as the bridge between the servicescape and the consumer.

Using examples to emotionally engage with potential customers has proved to be invaluable to businesses wishing to inform and attract new customers (Kapitan and Silvera, 2016). Cosmetic surgery businesses openly liaise with influencers, tapping into the intimate relationships they have developed with their followers. Much like the traditional role of the flight attendant (Hochschild, 1983), the pub landlord (Oldenberg, 1999), restaurant employees (Debenedetti *et al.*, 2014) and the coffee shop barista (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2007) where these service workers provide solace and enhance the experience of the third place servicescape, influencers - as emotional labourers - enact social support, familiarity and a sense of belongingness (Gurrieri and Drenten, 2019; Schouten *et al.*, 2020). We explore this further by examining how this bridge between the service and consumer is leveraged, bringing the back of stage of influencers' bodywork (Gimlin, 2007) to the fore.

It is clear that social interactions are vital to our assessment of who we are, as we seek to display our best possible self through the products and services we consume (Jin *et al.*, 2019). The inception of social networking sites has only intensified the ease of putting ourselves on display (Elias and Gill, 2018). However, there has been a myopic view of the effects of influencers, focusing primarily on their endorsement of brands and services. We argue that influencers have the clout to legitimise new notions of femininity (Elias and Gill, 2018) that help commoditise the cosmetic servicescape.

## Methodology

Our study explores the role of Instagram in the shifting of consumers' perspective toward cosmetic surgery. As well as being a key source of social commerce (Casaló *et al.*, 2020), Instagram's visual media ethos (Gurrieri and Drenten, 2019) makes it the uncontested content curator on social media today, allowing users to display, narrate, and critique their subject positionings (Rome and Lambert, 2020). To explore the power of Instagram in shaping beauty ideals (and our sense of self), our study adopts a dual-qualitative data-collection approach namely netnography, as an ethnographic approach for understanding online consumption-related aspects and digitised social interactions (Kozinets, 2019) and in-depth interviews (Charmaz, 2014) with young female Instagram users who have undergone or hope to undergo cosmetic procedures. The duality of our approach allows us to incorporate visual and discursive data to provide a rich(er) account of the normalisation and subsequent uptake of cosmetic surgery services.

Given our progression toward more digitised social interactions (Kozinets and Gambetti, 2020), netnography has become an essential (unobtrusive) data-collection tool, particularly for understanding the marketing of services (Heinonen and Medberg, 2018). Untangling the work of influencers as online content creators (Jin *et al.*, 2019) lies at the heart of much qualitative research today, given that influencers have become key cultural informants of contemporary social phenomena (Patterson and Ashman, 2020).

Following Locatelli (2017), our netnographic data-collection started by mapping pertinent hashtags (Highfield and Leaver, 2016) such as #dermalfiller #fillers #Botox #Bumlift #BrazilianButtLift, which were garnered from existing literature, social media buzzwords and our interviewees' responses. Netnography thus allowed us to locate ourselves or 'hang out'

(Jeffrey *et al.*, 2021) in the field of digitised aesthetic labour and make sense of the allure of influencers' stories (Patterson and Ashman, 2020). Coupling the visual of their storytelling, we saw how analysing influencers' captions and hashtags was critical to our understanding of the sense-making of Instagram posts, as the textual helps contextualise the visual. During our netnographic fieldwork, carried out between 2019 and 2021, we analysed over 250 images which were screen-grabbed and categorised (Locatelli, 2017) according to our emergent themes (Charmaz, 2014).

As well as capturing the cosmetic story-telling of influential others, our netnography analysed AR superimposed surgery 'selfies'<sup>1</sup>. Although face-filters were initially thought to encourage 'self expression' and 'playful conversations with friends' (Instagram, 2017), 'try-on' surgery filters on Instagram help propagate cosmetically-enhanced beauty ideals (Coy-Dibley, 2016). Posted on the 'Story Feature' of the platform, these images included brief superimposed text (see Plates 6, 7 & 8), alluding to a desirability of an idealised self through cosmetic surgery. Taken together, the visual (of the augmented-selfie) and the textual (of the insinuating caption) attest to the neoliberal femininity projects (Gill and Schraff, 2011) taking place on Instagram.

To couple our rich netnographic account, our study also included in-depth interviews (Charmaz, 2014) with 16 female Instagram users, known to the authorial team, who had had or hope to have some of the cosmetic procedures portrayed by beauty or lifestyle influencers (see Table 1). Lasting on average 45 minutes, our semi-structured interviews were digitally recorded either face-to-face (pre-pandemic) or online (mid-pandemic), manually transcribed

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<sup>1</sup> To better understand the significance of these 'try-on' technologies on our (female) subjecthood (Gil, 2009) and how new technology can feed into our embodied sense of self (Coy-Dibley, 2016), we also experimented with several face-filters throughout the data-collection and analysis process, although we never made these digitally-enhanced selfies public on our personal social media sites.

and thematically-coded (Charmaz, 2014). Thanks to our iterative netnographic fieldwork, we became familiar with both the visual content and sense-making taking place on the social media platform, affording us shared meanings (Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993) with our research participants' intimate body-projects (Rome and Lambert, 2020). Our questions centred on influencers as trend-setters of (a form of) aesthetic consumption, the conspicuous display of their cosmetic transformations, and the significance of 'try-on technology' on consumers' self-concept. We follow Pratt (2009: 860) in summarising our interview data as evidence (or 'proof quotes') in a data table (see Table 2 - Data Table) and weaving the most 'compelling bits of data' (or 'power quotes') into the main text.

Employing purposive sampling, we selected young females living in the UK aged between 18-30 who were active Instagram users and who follow influencers who have posted images and used hashtags relating to cosmetic surgery. Our young sample affords valuable insight on the recent popularisation of cosmetic procedures. Although previous research has revealed a prevalence of cosmetic surgery among an older, middle age female demographic (Okumus, 2020), our data reveal the emergence of a new, younger market for the cosmetic servicescape. Within our sample population, there was a balance between participants that had undergone cosmetic procedures as well as participants who had not. As our study centres on the 'ongoingness' of our body-projects (Rome and Lambert, 2020) through cosmetic modification, it was important to hone in on the impact of influencers' aesthetic and emotional labour on those who had taken the cosmetic plunge, as well as those still on the verge. Addressing the *process* of these body-projects, more so than the end-result of cosmetic surgeries, is particularly pertinent to the services literature (Klaus and Tsotsou, 2020).

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Considering the logo-centric and visual nature of our data, made up of visual and textual netnographic traces and in-depth interviews, we found Mediated Discourse Analysis (MDA) particularly helpful in making sense of the research context. MDA centres on the linkages between discourse (both visual and textual) and social action (Scollon, 2011). Applying MDA shaped our study in two key ways: firstly by helping us navigate our multi-layer data corpus (of visual and discursive material); and secondly by focusing on the significance of discourse on social action. In our application of MDA, we seek to further our understanding of how cosmetic surgery, as social action, has been reframed and commoditised by Instagram influencers and the popularisation of try-on surgery selfies. Weaving visual and discursive data together, our emergent themes (Charmaz, 2014) present our mix-media account of the normalisation of the cosmetic servicescape.

Lastly, we must consider ethical issues implicit in online research, namely the access and treatment of publicly accessible data. Social media sites – as online spaces – can be viewed as public, meaning that ‘netnographers like ethnographers can ethically capture the lived experience [of users] *in situ*’ (Jeffrey *et al.*, 2020:147). Stripping researchers from an ability to covertly ‘lurk’ (Jeffrey *et al.*, 2020) on social media, some argue, jeopardises the desired honesty, authenticity and naturalistic qualities of digitised social interactions (Heinonen and Medberg, 2018). For our study, we accessed publicly available accounts (Walther, 2002), analysed public interactions/comments from influencers and users, and duly anonymised any sensitive and identifying elements when presenting data. Our interview participants signed consent forms prior to being interviewed and have been fully pseudonymised in our findings.

### **Findings – (re)framing surgery, one post at a time**

### *Influencer endorsement of the cosmetic servicescape*

From our interviews, it was clear that Instagram reigned over participants' use of social media, particularly when it came to staying informed about the latest social trends (Clement, 2020). At the heart of their Instagramming, they explained how they preferred to see future purchases on 'real people' (i.e. Instagram influencers) rather than professional models or celebrities, thanks in great part to influencers' perceived similarity to themselves (Schouten *et al.*, 2020). On this relatability, Katie comments on the psychic and physical closeness between Instagram users (as followers) and influencers (as leaders):

*I definitely feel that they [Influencers] are more relatable because they are more similar to us... a lot of the time you see Influencers that live in your area who is just a normal girl who has gained some followers and is now an Influencer.*

[Katie]

This once 'normal girl' now turned opinion leader (Casaló *et al.*, 2020) directly impacts our purchasing decisions, so that:

*...it is good to follow beauty and fashion influencers to get an idea of what is popular and I definitely think when you see a lot of them endorsing the same product or following a certain trend that it creates hype around it and you want to try it for yourself.* [Victoria]

Influencers are effective advertisers and trend-setters, particularly when there is a congruent product-endorser fit (Schouten *et al.*, 2020). Similar to reality-TV celebrities, influencers shift

attitudes towards consumption, whereby followers seek to imitate these influential others in what Schouten *et al.* (2020) refer to as 'wishful identification' (Table 2, I/a). However, our participants noted how they identified more with influencers than celebrities, where celebrities' lifestyles appear 'worlds apart' from their own, explains Tamara. Although she may admire their 'designer clothes, holidays and beauty treatments', Tamara cannot in fact 'relate' to 'star-world reality' of celebrities.

Individuals that appear more identifiable inspire others to mimic their behaviour, buying into the products and services they endorse (Jin *et al.*, 2019). Thanks to their perceived likeness, the goods and services that influencers endorse appear more within our reach (Torres *et al.*, 2019). As such, we see how the reframing (and glamourisation) of cosmetic procedures helps destigmatise the servicescape, making it appear desirable as well as attainable. Once associated with 'old grannies', Botox - Emily explains - 'is absolutely everywhere', particularly among young women (Table 2, I/b). Similarly, Georgia noted how 'boob jobs' and 'bum lifts' (or BBLs) were 'all over Instagram' evincing the commonality of these procedures. Katie comments on the everydayness of these body enhancements, making cosmetic embellishment the 'in thing' (Table 2, I/c).

More than fashionable, body modification through cosmetic procedures sets new norms of beauty among our demographic. The 'everywhereness' of cosmetically enhanced bodies attests to the power of the surveillance (Winch, 2015) and scrutiny of the female form (Elias and Gill, 2018):

*Yeah I feel like I do that all the time.*

*I feel like you cannot help but compare yourself to people who come on your timeline, who have such nice lips or have a nice jawline and then you are like 'I haven't got that'.*

*It kinda portrays the perfect person you want to look like.*

[Lara]

In wanting to replicate ‘the look’ of particular influencers, and lamenting the ‘inadequacies’ of their own bodies (Dobson et al., 2017), our respondents openly contemplate cosmetic services as a means of achieving this desired femininity (Gill and Schraff, 2001). Thus, influencers help internalise beauty ideals among their followers (Walker *et al.*, 2019), which we see vividly in Emma’s change of heart regarding getting her lips done:

*I had my lips done and I didn’t ever think about getting anything done before but then Instagram got in the way and I saw all these people especially influencers with big lips that looked good and I thought... I want ‘that’.*

[Emma]

The ‘that’ that Emma is referring to is a cosmetically-enhanced, digitally mediated femininity (Elias and Gill, 2018). In line with self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1989), we see how influencers are looked upon by others as ideal versions of themselves, so that mediated body-projects (Rome and Lambert, 2020) help encourage followers to achieve the same look through body modification. But influencers are much more than new beauty icons (Warhurst and Nickson, 2009) and opinion leaders (Casaló *et al.*, 2020). They are valued for their expertise (Djafarova and Rushforth, 2017), as they educate audiences about the cosmetic industry (Walker *et al.*, 2019), and how it can help ‘fix’ our bodies (Table 2, I/d). In their endorsement of cosmetic services, influencers have become premier advertisers (Schouten *et al.*, 2020), directly impacting followers’ decision-making process (De Veirman *et al.*, 2017):



*Instagram made it easy because I would see certain influencers recommending a place... I thought it would be the most trustworthy and reliable place to find recommendations because there is a lot of influencers promoting it and it actually showed you pictures of what people's lips looked like after getting it done so I could judge if the end results were nice or not.*

*[Emma]*

The before-and-after imagery that Emma is referring to is commonplace in accounts of body transformation (Schouten, 1991), and can be instrumental in convincing onlookers about the efficacy and safety of procedures. However, as well as showcasing the results of their body transformations, we see how influencers regularly share the *process* that lies 'behind the scenes' (Goffman, 1990) of the cosmetic service. Although curated, the sharing of these 'intimate happenings' (Ashman *et al.*, 2018: 475) of cosmetic services gives influencers a perceived authenticity and vulnerability that celebrities and models simply lack. This imagery, which we will unpack further in the following section on conspicuousness, is confessional in tone (Patterson and Ashman, 2020) as it portrays influencers' body-projects in the making (Rome and Lambert, 2020).

In their visual storytelling (Gurrieri and Drenten, 2019), influencers not only strip the mystique out of the cosmetic servicescape, they provide real-world, tangible solutions in the form of recommendations, endorsements and clinic/beautician tagging (Table 2, I/e). More than active communicators of marketing messages (Djafarova and Trofimenko, 2019), influencers are also key advertisers (Schouten *et al.*, 2020) for the local cosmetic servicescape

(Campbell and Farrell, 2020), as followers value the opinions and recommendations of local influencers that live in their same city or region (Table 2, l/f). Talking about service providers 'near you', makes it all the more 'relatable', explains Katie, so the locality of influencers has a direct impact on the desirability and accessibility of the service, as well as the accuracy, credibility and trustworthiness of the messenger behind this service.

The cosmetic servicescape understands the allure of local influencers (Campbell and Farrell, 2020). We saw how promotional offers (e.g. *20% off getting lips done*) tagging local clinics did little to soil the perceived 'authenticity' of influencers (Schouten *et al.*, 2020). Paid marketing tactics helped inform our participants on *where* to go, *what* to get, and *how* it would 'feel'. Particularly effective were the posts depicting the 'during' stage of the cosmetic transformation, as these visual and textual narratives put potential consumers at ease. As such, influencers act as the 'walking billboards' (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003) of cosmetic services. The visual and textual narratives of these digitised billboards will be explored next, as we examine the aesthetic and emotional labour at play.

### *Conspicuous body-projects and the reframing of pain*

We understand cosmetic surgery to be a prime example of symbolic consumption (Schouten, 1991), not only because of the high costs involved, but because of the transformational narratives taking shape. Influencers - as entrepreneurial subjects (Gill, 2009) - portray the body as the (construction) site upon which they will erect their identity projects (Elias and Gill, 2018). Through the conspicuous display of their cosmetic transformations, we see how influencers help commoditise the servicescape whilst reframing the labour (and pain) involved.

Unsurprisingly, all our respondents noted how they actively engage in managing impressions (Goffman, 1990) through self-presentation techniques (namely selfies) that help put their best possible self forward (Chua and Chang, 2016). By curating their content, Instagrammers (influencers and followers alike) display their idealised selves (Zappavigne, 2016) for others to see. Instagram becomes the ‘front stage’ (Goffman, 1990) of influencers’ cosmetic body-projects, whereby undesirable ‘horror’ stories, for example, of botched surgeries, get filtered out:

*I have seen endless amounts of people and influencers on Instagram showing off their surgeries, but I have not seen one bad experience. There is surely one bad experience, but they’ve not posted about it. Probably because you never see that on Instagram... it’s usually only the positives.*

[Olivia]

Despite this known (and accepted) curatorship, influencers are still seen as ‘truer’ and more genuine than their celebrity counterparts (Schouten *et al.*, 2020), thanks in great part to the intimacy (Ashman *et al.* 2018) and openness (Djafarova and Rushforth, 2016) of their narrated body transformations. On transparency, Tamara comments how:

*Big celebrity names - say the Kardashians - deny having had any procedures done, they [celebrities] are not transparent about it... Kim Kardashian will still claim that her bum is real, but it is obvious it is not [or] Kiley Jenner saying that she just uses make up [to overline her lips] and no filler... Transparency makes someone, like, a more relatable person.*

[Tamara]

Influencers are not only admitting a 'need' for surgery, evidencing their self-perfection projects (McRobbie, 2015), but they are also showcasing a type of corporeal (if not emotional) vulnerability in admitting to surgery (Table 2, II/a).

Despite this perceived transparency, our data reveal how influencers often fail to highlight the risks involved in cosmetic procedures, depicting instead an idealised world not dissimilar to traditional marketing campaigns. What differs from traditional marketing, and from previous accounts of cosmetic transformations (Schouten, 1991) however, is the conspicuous display of what lies 'behind the look': the *process* of the surgical procedure itself and post-op recovery time (Plates 1 & 2). Displaying bruises, cuts, stitches and bandages equates the procedures to status symbols similar to scars and bruises endured in extreme forms of leisure (Scott *et al.*, 2017). In the realm of pain servicescapes, such as tough mudder races, we witness a two-tiered accrual of prestige, one for the material achievement of crossing the finish line, and another for embodying the process (and having the scars to prove it).

[Insert Plates 1 & 2 about here]

In their vivid depictions of their cosmetic interventions *in situ*, influencers are performing emotional work (Hochschild, 1983), as they try to mitigate the pain involved. In Plates 3 & 4 for instance, her selfies show no discernible sign of pain.

[Insert Plates 3 & 4 about here]

Coupled with this imagery, her caption reads, 'This looks sore but I genuinely never feel anything at all'. From our netnography, it became evident that the story of cosmetic transformations that was being told by influencers (and surveilled by onlookers) was

reframing the (painful) truth of the aesthetic labour involved. In Plate 5, for instance, we see a powerful post-filler testimonial, where the procedure ‘literally did not hurt one bit’ and achieved the desired ‘natural’ look she was after.

[Insert Plate 5 about here]

This mitigation of pain echoes Lazar’s (2017) work on recontextualizing aesthetic labour, particularly among young women and girls, as ‘fun’, easy’ and seemingly unlaborious (p. 64). The actual work, cost, effort, and inflicted pain of beauty practices, she argues, become suppressed, elided or overlooked. Similarly, our findings reveal how pain of cosmetic interventions is reframed, visually and discursively, through the stories of influencers. More than mere sales tactics, i.e. endorsing particular service providers over others (Schouten *et al.*, 2020), we see this mitigation of pain as part of influencers’ aesthetic entrepreneurship (Elias *et al.*, 2017) as they glamorise their bodywork as attainable, desirable, empowering and seemingly pain-free. In doing so, influencers perform emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) as they reframe how others should affectively experience cosmetic services, so that it is the *process* - rather than a clinic or beautician - that gets glamourised. Now destigmatised, cosmetic procedures are trivialised as simple beauty treatments (Table 2, II/**b**):

*Seeing influencers posting their lip procedures made it seem so easy –  
like as easy as getting your eyebrows waxed but this is like a false reality.*

[Georgia]

However, participants express discrepancies between Instagram’s idealized depictions (Zappavigne, 2016) and their own lived experience:

*When I got mine [lip & jaw filler] done it was awful...  
but I never shared that side of the procedure to my own Instagram.  
I had burst blood vessels and had to take time off work. I expected to experience what I had  
seen on Instagram not see blood coming out my face. I felt quite misled actually.*

[Georgia]

Although cosmetic procedures had been portrayed as 'effortless' and as 'normal' as any other beauty treatment, where the influencer 'hardly flinched' during the actual process, Georgia felt quite deceived noting she had 'tears running down [her] face' during her treatment. As the mask falls, revealing the performativity of it all (Table 2, II/c), followers become painfully aware of the actual labour involved (Lazar, 2017). Nevertheless, they keep coming back for more, so that neither their experienced pain nor the performed 'effortlessness' on the part of influencers act as deterrents (Table 2, II/d). Georgia, for instance, who was open about the pain she experienced when getting her lip and jaw fillers, is keen to undergo breast augmentation. The aesthetic and emotional work carried out by influencers - particularly in the reframing of pain - lures others into the cosmetic servicescape. Once in, they find it hard to leave, as these services offer real solutions for their never-ending body-projects (Table 2, II/e).

Cosmetic surgery is known to be addictive (BAAPS, 2019) and women can fall prey of this costly (and seemingly never-ending) bodywork (Gimlin, 2007). Hayleigh comments on friends who miss paying their bills because of 'an addiction to keep getting filler done'. Ava, for instance, finds herself in a compromising financial situation, where she is weighed down not only by debt but by the surveillant sisterhood (Winch, 2015) as well:

*It was nice to show off my new lips on my Instagram but I'm a student I can't really afford it. You are just so consumed with the idea that you have to look a certain way and want the status that badly that you will actually make yourself in debt for it.*

*[Ava]*

In line with Jarrin's (2015) work on the biopolitics of body modification, where surgery is seen as a tool for leveraging social worth, we see how cosmetic procedures - more than vain impulses - can become a necessity in people's lives.

Although cosmetic surgery has previously been identified as a status symbol within the conspicuous consumption literature (Carolan, 2005), we show how the conspicuousness of the backstage *process* of body transformations helps demystify the servicescape and reframe the pain involved. In the pursuit of their best possible self, young females continue to prioritise costly aesthetic labour (Lazar, 2017) over other financial responsibilities. Non-invasive procedures – such as fillers – remain the most popular on the market thanks to their comparative affordability and temporality vis-à-vis permanent surgeries. Fillers can help pave the way to more invasive procedures, as a way of 'testing out' a surgery before committing (Table 2, II/f). More temporary even are the 'try-before-you-buy' surgery face-filters that allow users to visualise their idealised selves through AR technology.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

*Face-Filters as 'Catfish Selfies' – toward a digitised body dysmorphia*

Although AR (and VR) technologies have been applauded by a range of service providers for affording more immersive and personalised shopping experiences (Yim and Park, 2019), we now see how these real-time body modification technologies can negatively impact users' self-concept (Javornik *et al.*, 2021), leading to a digitised form of body dysmorphia (Coy-Dibley, 2016).

Our informants admitted to regularly filtering their Instagram posts, from selfies to food porn, and face-filters in particular helped them to digitally mask or highlight (Goffman, 1990) their desired features (Table 2, III/a). This digitisation of our image through face-filter apps helps set new body standards (Coy-Dibley, 2016). Sculpting - through AR technology - an unattainable beauty (with flawless complexion, brighter teeth, wider eyes), becomes more of a necessity than a choice, where women can no longer 'visualise' themselves filter-less (Table 2, III/b). Although some informants dismissed these surgery filters as a 'fun' form of identity play (Schouten, 1991; Table 2, III/c), others commented on the power of the visual in shaping their sense of self (Chua and Chang, 2016), 'tempting' them to bring their digitally-improved selfie to life (Table 2, III/d). Quick, easy, and virtually pain-free, try-on selfie surgeries help users see their before-and-after selves in the here-and-now (Table 2, III/e). Some women use face-filters as a source of inspiration for future surgeries (see Plates 6, 7 and 8), openly sharing their desire for self-actualisation (Schouten, 1991) with digital others (Winch, 2015).

[Insert Plates 6, 7 & 8 about here]

Attesting to the influence of this digitised dysmorphia on our sense of self, one Instagram user posted a post-surgery 'selfie' with the caption 'trying to look like that Instagram filter', and our netnographic research found cosmetic services marketing their procedures as 'real-life filters' (Plate 9).



[Insert Plate 9 about here]

We see how the AR selfie creates a disjuncture between body and image (Coy-Dibley, 2016), potentially pressuring women to materialise these (virtual) beauty ideals

*I think there is a big pressure... like once you take [the filter] off you think why  
can't I look like this all the time? Then you think well if I get my lips done  
I could maybe look closer to the filter than I do now.  
Then it is a knock to your self-esteem when you put it back to normal and  
realise you don't [look like that].*

[Katie]

This discrepancy between our actual self (*sans* filter) and ideal self (*avec* filter) can drive women to the cosmetic servicescape (Table 2, III/f). This surgical self-improvement, in turn further feeds into societal expectations (Coy-Dibley, 2016), so that through surgical intervention young females live up to their 'ought self' (Higgins, 1989). A disjuncture between Instagram users' actual self-concept and their ideal or ought self can lead to heightened levels of self-consciousness (Rodulfo, 2020), which Clare referred to as a new form of catfishing<sup>2</sup>:

*I think it does lead me to have low esteem when I'm out because if I've used  
filters or whatever on Instagram, I always think people are going to see me and think  
'she's such a catfish - she looks nothing like she does on Instagram'  
and that's such an insult to my self-esteem.*

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<sup>2</sup> 'Being a catfish' is understood as making oneself look more attractive in pictures posted online, for example on Instagram, compared to reality, generally as a result of editing or use of filters.

[Clare]

As an 'outlet' that allows us to 'construct, deconstruct and reconstruct the self', we see how the AR selfies shape both our minds and bodies (Coy-Dibley, 2016: 5). More than empowering women (Gill, 2009) to visualise their body-projects, we see how face-filters can widen the discrepancy between our actual and idealised selves (Cruz and Thornham, 2015). Building on recent research that points to the (negative) impact of AR technology on self-esteem (Javornik *et al.*, 2021), we see how AR selfies provide a form of 'negative freedom' (Coy-Dibley, 2016), whereby Instagram users become more constrained to increasingly unattainable and socially internalised beauty ideals (Chatzopoulou *et al.*, 2020).

### **Concluding thoughts - Instagram as lip service**

Our study has shown how Instagram has lifted the veil of the cosmetic servicescape. Taken together, the aesthetic (Elias *et al.*, 2017) and emotional (Hochschild, 1983) labour of influencers are seen to 'package' (Warhurst and Nickson, 2009), propagate and demystify cosmetic body modifications. Alongside this bodywork (Gimlin, 2007) from these influential others (Elias and Gill, 2018), we show how digital apps using AR selfies that superimpose surgeries impress upon our sense of self (Sirgy, 1982), nudging us to self-actualise our ideal self through cosmetic procedures.

### *The work that lies behind the cosmetic servicescape*

Since Kotler's (1973) seminal paper, we have witnessed a plethora of research that explores the role of atmospherics in shaping servicescapes, whereby carefully curated retail spaces impact customers (with increased sales) and employees (with increased productivity) (Bitner,

1992). Moving beyond the physical environment, management studies have highlighted how the 'look' of the employee, as well as the 'look' of the space, can also influence the retail atmosphere, whereby aestheticized employees act as 'organization artefacts' that help 'evoke sensory affect in customers' (Warhurst and Nickson, 2009: 390). Our study takes this theorising further by fleshing out what the aesthetic labour of influencers - not as employees but as endorsers (Schouten *et al.*, 2020) - does to the uptake of cosmetic surgery services. In their depiction, narration, and reframing of their cosmetic transformations, influencers become the 'walking billboards' (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003) of the cosmetic services industry. We therefore see how service provider marketing becomes eclipsed by the work performed by influencers, where their human qualities, e.g. their likeability, relatability, credibility and perceived honesty (Schouten *et al.*, 2020; Lim *et al.*, 2019) make them sovereigns in the realm of digital marketing.

Our study builds on recent research on influencer endorsement (Schouten *et al.*, 2020; Torres *et al.*, 2019), arguing that influencers' can go beyond eWOM promotion of specific clinics, technicians/surgeons, cosmetic procedures or brands (De Veirman *et al.*, 2017, Jin *et al.*, 2019). Instead, we show how the curation of their cosmetic transformations acts as a key endorsement of the *process* of the cosmetic servicescape, so that, in the aesthetic and emotional labour that they perform, influencers help cement norms of femininity (Elias and Gill, 2018) that advocate for cosmetic intervention (Wissinger, 2015). Through their bodywork, influencers downplay pain, trivialise potential dangers linked to procedures, brush over the financial implications, and glamourise cosmetic intervention as the new status symbol.

Influencers also feed into the ongoingness of our body-projects (Rome and Lambert, 2020), as the cosmetic servicescape propagates an alarming 'cultural pathologization of

femininity', with new services that keep popping up to help us 'fix' our imperfect bodies (McRobbie, 2009). Most recently, we have seen procedures that offer to reverse cosmetic intervention, for example by dissolving lip fillers, which are being increasingly popularised by influencers in search of a more 'natural look'. These latest 'makeover paradigms' (Elias and Gill, 2018) reveal a commoditisation of the cosmetic servicescape, where users can simply 'return [their surgeries] to the shop' as our opening statement warns.

### *The dark side of new technologies on our body- and self-work*

Our study contributes to this journal's special issue by considering the perils of image-based platforms, like Instagram, on consumers' decision-making, addictive behaviour, self-esteem, and mental health. We show how the digital surveillance of our conspicuous body-projects shapes our physiques and psyches alike.

Whereas existing literature on visual story-telling (Gurrieri and Drenten, 2019; Cruz and Thornham, 2015) and the use of technologies such as augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) (Yim and Park, 2019) have highlighted the benefits of these features on consumers' wellbeing, interpersonal connectivity, and body image, our study reveals the darker side of this digital story. Face filters that were harmlessly introduced as 'fun' and 'entertaining' by the platform (Instagram, 2017), including the 'pillow face' cosmetically enhanced filter, have triggered wider societal concern for consumers' mental health (Rodulfo, 2020), so that by 2019 surgery filters had been banned from Instagram altogether (BBC, 2019). Beyond Instagram, Javornik *et al* (2021) have noted how 'try-on' technologies in the cosmetics industries can be detrimental to consumers' self-esteem. Our study shows how the superimposition of face-filters created a discrepancy between users' actual self-concept and that of their ideal or ought self (Higgins, 1989). Echoing recent research on the intersection

of Instagram and body dysmorphia disorder (Chatzopoulou *et al.* 2020), we argue that AR technology helps internalise beauty ideals (Kapitan and Silvera, 2016) that can only be materialised through cosmetic intervention. Also, although face-filters may be banned on Instagram, other image-driven platforms continue to offer body-modifying technology (e.g. Snapchat) further feeding users' insecurities about body image. Beyond software, there is also a need to address devices (smart phones) that alter images as a default setting. More unattainable yet are the technological breakthroughs we are witnessing with the rise of more-than-human influencers.

#### *Moving forward – on ethics and the (post)human influencer*

Our study lies in the shadow of numerous feminist accounts on the body (Gill and Schraff, 2001), where the female body has been dubbed a site of crisis and commodification (Elias and Gill, 2018) in need of (constant) aesthetic repair (Orbach, 2017). There is a need to broaden our horizons to also consider young male consumers in future studies on cosmetic surgery as the field remains predominantly preoccupied with women (BAAPS, 2019). Moreover, race, class and colonial dynamics remain significant factors propelling cosmetic surgery, made evident in Jarrin's (2015) vivid account of Brazilian public service surgery as a form of aesthetic eugenics. Although early research on the adoption of cosmetic surgery pointed to the privileging of hegemonic, Western (read: white) appearances, where other ethnicities attempt to 'fashion a Caucasian look', recent studies caution us against this cultural simplification (Elias *et al.*, 2017: 11). The recent popularisation of the Brazilian Butt Lift (BBL) testifies that beauty ideals of non-Caucasian women (e.g. of African descent) are now being appropriated by white women in the West.

The moral ground of cosmetic body modification becomes even shakier with the rise of more-than-human Instagramers or CGI virtual influencers (Robinson, 2020), like @lilmiquela (3M followers) or @shudu.gram (217k followers). Although technologically advanced, these purely digital influential 'others' appear morally behind important societal (and marketing) trends regarding body image and diversity (Gill and Elias, 2014). As brands turn to virtual influencers for endorsement, say @shudu.gram pairing with Fenty Beauty, there appears to be a repelling against a movement toward body inclusivity. With the rise of virtual models, the disparity between consumers' actual self and these idealised 'digital beauties' (Coy-Dibley, 2016) will only be heightened. Moreover, how will consumers engage with these post-human influencers? And will virtual influencers emulate the human qualities of influencers so sought after by followers? As research on the impact of AI on consumers and the marketplace remains in its infancy, new theorising on our (female) body-projects (Rome and Lambert, 2020) will need to address the influential role of these post-human influencers (Brandiotti, 2013) and how they will impact the marketing of services.

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Figure 1. Female influencer post-surgery – boob and butt-lift

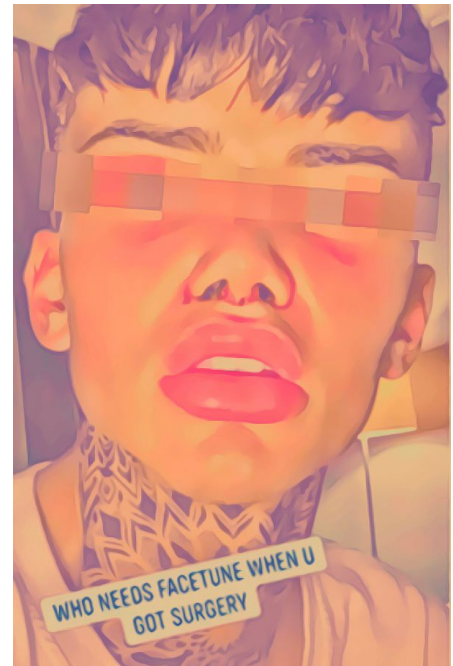


Figure 2. Male influencer post-rhinoplasty surgery

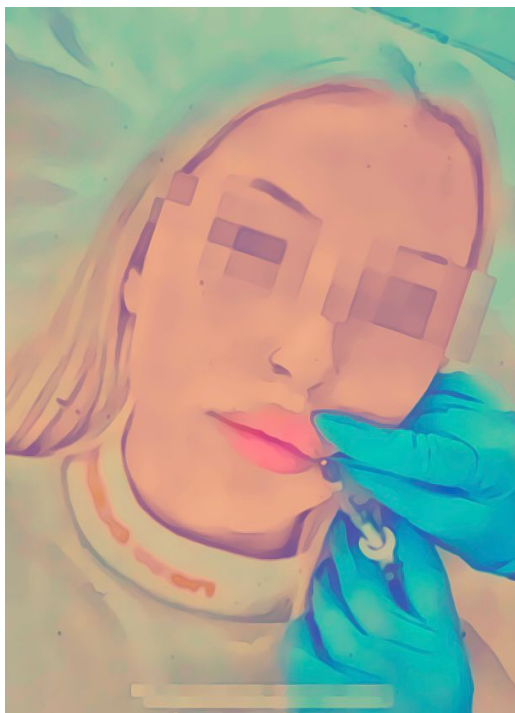


Figure 3. Influencer getting lip fillers

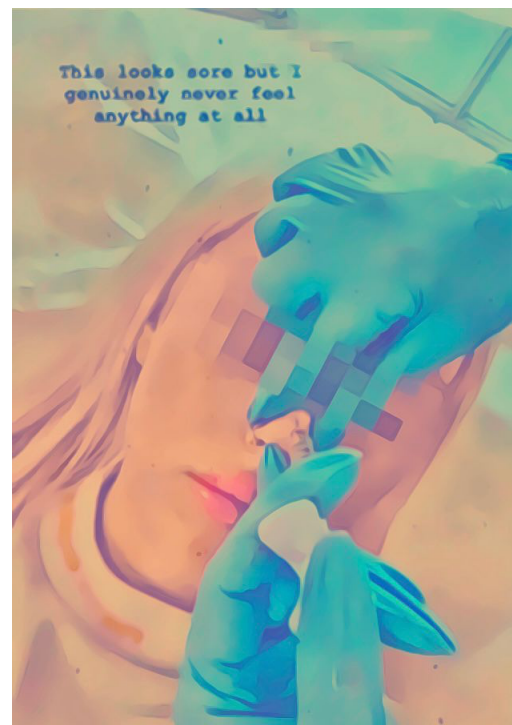
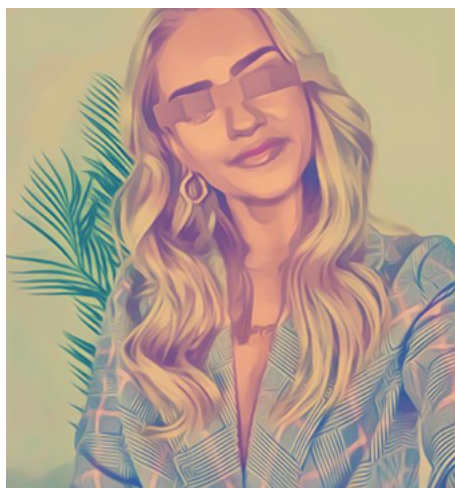


Figure 4. Influencer getting non-surgical nose job





♡ 💬 📌 and 2,340 others  
Guys 2 weeks ago today I got my lips done by @ and I honestly couldn't be happier with how they've turned out 😍 For anyone wanting to get their lips done ... It literally did not hurt one bit and feel like they look so natural which is exactly what I asked for!! I actually can't recommend enough 🙌  
Ps use code for off your next treatment (check my story for the before and after)

Figure 1. Influencer's cosmetic surgery review and endorsement



Figure 6. Instagram user with AR face-enhancing filter



Figure7. Instagram user with AR face-enhancing filter

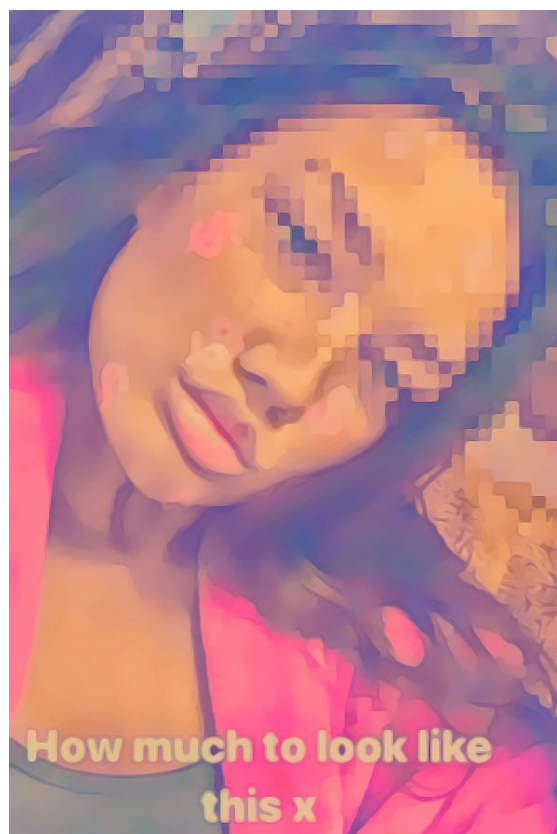


Figure 8. Instagram user with AR face-enhancing filter



Figure 9. Marketing of 'Real Life Filter' by an aesthetic brand