
You're Filtering Me Out: Reviewing Snapchat Lenses through a Rhetorical Lens

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It's long been taken-for-granted and expected that the "fairer" sex ought to be objects of riveting beauty, that her worth is somehow delineated by her attractiveness, but modern ideals are virtual and unrealistic (Sellnow 139, 145). Today's permutations of what's considered attractive aren't only generated by mainstream media; they're popularized locally by individuals who buy into the message. Women themselves venerate unnatural standards and proliferate them through social networks. Snapchat, which originally housed private, intimate interactions, became another mecca where over 150 million daily users curate and flaunt the best portrayals of themselves when it implemented augmented reality filters (Martins). Its live feature-modifying tool is easily accessed, relatable, and thus rhetorically effective and far-reaching. However, the overlaying doe eyes, diminutive noses and sculpted jawlines oppress viewers by escalating notions of beauty to the unattainable. Through a radical feminist perspective, Snapchat lenses will be examined as a preferred, occluded popular culture item that privileges the male gaze and perpetuates the objectification of women by enforcing the dominant ideology that women should be beautiful (Sellnow 141, 144-5).

Rhetorical Situation

The rhetorical event encompasses Snapchat's motives, the lenses' effect on users and users' responses. Amidst competing internet social sites, Snapchat cared to retain engagement, relevance and influence. The occasion spurred exigence for embedding instantaneous image- retouching tools to facilitate submissions, where previews could be finalized as posts within seconds. Snapchat designed and invented this technology. The lenses are the rhetors, imparting content and influence. In Doug Downs' cohesive template on rhetoric's main principles, "Rhetoric: Making Sense of Human Interaction and Meaning-Making," he poses that even *machines* can be rhetors and that "the roles of rhetor and audience are dynamic and interdependent" (466; 498). Because the rhetorical content is performed in interactive phases as users engage with the app and with other users, a compound rhetorical situation arises (Grant-Davie 503). When using the technology, the audience becomes a hybridized audience *and* rhetor that accepts and perpetuates the claim. Over 65% of Snapchat users regularly contribute content ("How Many"). The technology enables effortless intertextualization—the diversifying, blending and redistributing of rhetoric via "snaps" and stories—which serve to normalize edited representations (Porter 545). Some lenses are multi-person compatible and the rhetor-audience is instructed to involve friends (see Figure 1). With its in-person shareability, the app breaches the physical realm and expands its reach through user's immediate, tangible connections. The affected non-speaking audience are people who don't know of Snapchat or eschew

the app. They're without any modes of delivery and can't join in the process of dissemination, yet more than likely will encounter the discourse owed to its omnipresence on other venues, such as Facebook, Instagram and Tinder (Grant-Davie 497; Cherrington). The lenses' prevalence is



Figure 1: Prompting the reader to “try it with a friend.”

constrained by the scarcely numbered non- participating individuals that have retained immunity or ignorance, perhaps through lack of digital access, circumstance, or deliberate avoidance.

Five Canons

Snapchat lenses are rhetorically effective due to their invented urgency. Lenses are varied, cycled every few days and are geographically or seasonally restricted, which gamifies the platform



Figure 2: When flopped to selfie mode, the first few themes are already visible on the bottom right. Blue dots indicate a newly available lens.

and boosts popularity by rewarding constant activity. Their main invention, however, is their portable augmented reality that is easy to access. The content is delivered as users stare into their handheld device's front-facing camera and tap the screen. Edits are live, arranged above users' reflections, obfuscating who they are with their modified likeness. The lenses are conspicuously placed beside the snapshot button and are horizontally aligned such that selections can be instantaneously sampled with an effortless swipe (see Figure 2). Stylistically, the lenses are fantastical, cutesy, non-serious, and utilize softening blur effects, lovely pink hues, and squealing vocalizations. Filtered images and videos are shared from within Snapchat, or downloaded and immortalized (memorized) through other platforms. Virtual imprints are recorded on various social media outlets and memorable owed to the suggestive intimacy of interacting with a humanesque face, regardless of the constraining two-dimensional medium and abstraction (Jeong and Lee 275).

Rhetorical Appeals

Our modern society straddles a constant tension where connectedness is contingent on disembodiment. We yearn for presence. Unlike yesteryear's text-based posts and blogs, Snapchat revolves around photo and video transmissions that eschew digital permanence (as snaps vanish), which emulates the audio-visual ephemerality of our world (Jeong and Lee 275). The parallelism makes snaps compelling. Users consume 7 billion videos every day and app engagement rivals that of Facebook, which has approximately 15 times Snapchat's registered numbers ("How Many"). Despite their virtual distance and cropped, limited frames of reference, filtered selfies bear various degrees of truthful resemblance and convincingly supplant the real. By making us their primary focus and feature, the lenses appeal to ethos by diminishing its technology mediation and being relatable. The sense of familiarity also stems from the rhetor's ethos enacting upon delivery: friends and family quickly adjust to filtered portraits due to an identifiable likeness to someone that they already recognize, know, and trust (Sellnow 37). Concurrently, seeing a familiar face, a loved one, is emotionally stirring—an appeal to pathos that cures the insolvent loneliness of a digital age. And lenses range from humorous to alluring, connecting pathetically and sparking surficial commonality with their predominantly youthful demographic. The various effects being on rotation also provides an undercurrent of a fear of missing out, demanding that users persistently check in for updates and incorporate frames before they expire.

Without discernible researched or factual grounding, Snapchat lenses concert predominantly ethical and pathetic, rather than logical, appeals. However, when our inherent drive to self-improve is considered, lenses appeal to logos owed to their apparent enhancing and advantageous function. As Dale Carnegie expressed in his legendary self-help publication, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, people seek greatness and importance, or more simply, to be noticed and appreciated (19). Given the opportunity to self-select portraits to represent our online identity, it's beneficial to choose our more flattering photos (Murphy-Gill 17). Our facial composition suggests likely interactions and attitudes towards us. Prototypically good-looking faces are highly stimulating and elicit positive emotional responses that factor others being receptive towards them (Zebrowitz and Montepare 1497, 1500-1). Investing in our digital self accrues social capital that can be activated and exchanged for benefits much like actual financial capital (Phua et al. 116). Since attractiveness is a favorable attribute, it's substantiated by

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derivable advantages, such as gains in social worth or preferential treatment (getting a coveted job position, being asked out on a date). Our virtual landscape is exclusively, painstakingly curated. Impressionable onlookers will want to echo what glimpses they catch of successful celebrities' and influencers' lives. Despite Snapchat's seemingly light-hearted interface, the act of applying a filter is logically rooted in our inclination to self-improve and reap positive outcomes such as higher status, self-esteem and life satisfaction (Phua et al. 116). Thus, beautification extends beyond the superficial. It's taken-for-granted, or observed to be the case, that attractive people are more deserving (Zebrowitz and Montepare 1498).

Discussion

Third-wave feminism identifies and challenges covert instances of oppression that favor androcentrism (Sellnow 139). A radical feminist perspective is concerned with the objectification and devaluation of women, the non-privileged (Sellnow 144). Our ever-present digital sources acculturate women to the male gaze, to male-oriented desires. Aline Martins, an online journalist that stands against filters, anecdotally recounted in "#NoFilter" that while she and her female coworkers were entranced the day Snapchat released their version of filters, her male co-workers were "unfazed" (20). Their primarily targeting and connecting with a female audience is owed to Snapchat's most influential circle being predominantly male; 21 of its 24 uppermost are men (Martins 20). Snapchat lenses stress traditionally feminine markers that impel women to conform to "collectively-agreed-on" standards of beauty (see Figure 3). As users scroll and compare themes



Figure 3: Girlish affectation from pinkish tint, softened skin, blush, fuller bottom lip, long eyelashes, enlarged eyes and most prominently, glasses, which is associable with physical weakness, as diminished vision is an inherent sight disability. Many of the filters distort voices to higher pitches, which is characteristically feminine.

side-by-side, the prettifying filters have a more emotive impact and are more likely to be embraced and applied (see Figure 4). Unlike the extreme distortions that render the user unrecognizable, beauty filters impart subtler adjustments, such as slimming the face and Bambi-ing the eyes, gearing incremental adherence to something that is still unnatural as ultimately preferable and desirable due to its relative "normalcy" (Downs 477; Sellnow 152).



Figure 4: Presented with the above, the more “natural” look on the right would be more relatable.

Lenses serve as popularized instruments for women to self-perpetuate their own objectification. By equipping the rhetor-audience with the ability to display and promote their willing transformations to their peers, they deprive them of bodily ownership. Under cultural hegemony, women’s bodies are enacted as objects for others’ evaluation (Sellnow 139; Vencill et al. 471). Snapchat lenses are an occluded technology because they’re not obligatory, as users still need to opt in to initiate the filtering process. And yet they’re suggestively placed within twitchy-reflexes reach of the snapshot button (see Figure 2, above). Some filters are exaggeratedly detractive and deviate from the ideal, serving as lesser comparisons that indirectly uphold Snapchat’s claim of what *is* considered beautiful (see Figure 4). Even the lenses that *don’t* make the user “gorgeous” are nonetheless disruptive. While the various caricatures are un-hierarchized amongst themselves (there’s no explicit naming, ranking, or sorting of themes), they all *superimpose* the user, which transmits the message that *any* modified, dehumanized and reduced self is more redeeming (see Figure 5).



Figure 5: Animalized, cartoonified; made into a diminutive rodent.

Snapchat lenses empower male perspectives and subvert female sexuality by infantilizing and constraining women into submissive roles. Filters that “beautify” also neotenize (producing childlike features such as a large forehead, a small chin and large eyes, small nose and full lips) that increase perceptions of physical weakness and naiveté—qualities that parallel stereotypes of femininity (Jones et al. 728-9; Zebrowitz-Mcarthur and Berry 167; Zebrowitz and Montepare 1503). A woman’s appreciation and fecundity being conditionally rated by her relative youthfulness and attractiveness is taken for granted as intuitively, biologically obvious, but it’s more so self-prophesying as women conform to male standards (Jones et al. 726-7). Men interpret anomalous, older appearances to be less healthy, cognitive, and sociable but it’s the belief that actualizes expectations (Zebrowitz and Montepare 1499-501). The youthful bias stigmatizes the natural process of aging and marginalizes older appearances as abnormal, *other*, pressuring women to expend resources on makeup, cosmetic surgery, or otherwise to fill that expansive gap (Sellnow 139, 152; Murphy-Gil 18; Reiman). When women don’t refute the dominant ideology and instead internalize their own sexual objectification, they develop an observer’s perspective of their own attributes—a duality, a double consciousness—which depletes cognitive capacity and engenders chronic body monitoring and shame (Vencill et al. 471-2; Young 151). And beyond the psychological, complying with male desires by making oneself more youthful interferes with women’s autonomy and stagnates employability because it lowers estimations of their contribution. Baby-faced women are often restricted from difficult tasks and leadership positions, more likely to be found at fault for negligence and, yet, demanded to be congenial (Zebrowitz and Montepare 1502).

Because the notion that a woman’s attractiveness is of utmost importance persists, our society embraces appearance-altering despite current aspirations of beauty having *breached* the realm of possibility. Filtered selfies are prevalent and normalized, and photo-editing is viewed as intrinsic and non-negotiable. Social media is an inextricable, inescapable stream of popular culture texts that command our thinking. People constantly interpret and consume digital content in order to make meaning; however, as Christina Haas and Linda Flower observe in “Rhetorical Reading Strategies and the Construction of Meaning,” the issue lies in what readers “fail to construct” (Phua et al. 115; 564). Our modern digitized realm indoctrinates us to new modes of oppression that are disguised as tools for our convenience and self-improvement. But staring into our make-believe twin destabilizes our self-worth and diffuses insecurities into our offline bodies. In order to mitigate Snapchat’s androcentrism, the company could incorporate more female representation. And to diminish the persuasion of their occluded item, the edits could be made transparent and temperable; Instagram, for example, allows users to negotiate how much filter to apply. Lenses that don’t imbue any changes at all, yet express “this one’s our favorite,” should be cyclically introduced as a reminder to the user that they are their own very best form.

We can confront and deconstruct taken-for-granted structures that control, devalue, and prevent our moving forward by reading *rhetorically* and actively processing and being cognizant of intentions (Haas and Flower 572-3). While Snapchat is reprehensible for instilling pressures onto its young, absorbing audience, we’re on opposite sides of the screen. Apps may instrument hegemonic claims, but it’s *our* online performances that propel those myths. As participants in an internet era, we have to be discerning and firmly tether ourselves to what’s real.

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