

The Platformization of Beauty on Instagram

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Abstract

Instagram's pitch to the public is that it allows users to freely choose how to present themselves digitally. And yet, both the media and critics note that there's something we think of as an Instagram 'aesthetic', which is aspirational and curated (Lorenz, 2019). This aesthetic comes from the majority of people conforming to the same beauty standards and norms of self-presentation. To explore how users understand and make sense of ideas of self-presentation and beauty, I conducted in-depth interviews with 22 college students who use Instagram on a regular basis. Through this data, I show how Instagram fosters a pressure to "look good" and present one's "best life", which often leads users to edit their digital bodies in the name of beauty. Through my data I explore what I call the platformization of beauty, which is defined by the technological affordances of editing, long standing social pressure and gendered expectations, and the pursuit of metric gains. Even though Instagram users could in theory present themselves in more personalized and unique ways through images than ever before in the history of self-presentation, the data suggests that there is even more conforming as people, especially women, continue to prescribe to the same beauty and self-presentation habits. I close by exploring the implications for notions of beauty standards, labor dimensions, and gender dynamics.

Introduction

In December of 2019, *The New Yorker* published a piece titled “The Age of Instagram Face” which discussed the homogeny that is facial presentation on Instagram among female Instagram users. In the article, writer Jia Tolentino describes the Instagram face as “a young face, of course, with poreless skin and plump, high cheekbones. It has catlike eyes and long, cartoonish lashes; it has a small, neat nose and full, lush lips.” (Tolentino, 2019, para.1). The Instagram face, that is repeated over and over again on the platform, is based off of features held by the most idealized female celebrities and models, such as Kim Kardashian and Bella Hadid, and is created from a combination of good genes, make-up, photo-editing, and plastic surgery. Tolentino argued that this facial self-presentation has garnered traction in popular culture because it “instantly pops on a phone screen”, but its overuse results in a move “toward a generic sameness” (*ibid*, 2019, para.2). Within the framework of the Instagram face comes this belief that if you have enough money, you too could look like these beauty idols. Curious about the ways in which Instagram face is shaped by plastic surgery, Tolentino attended consultation appointments with a few top Beverly Hills celebrity plastic surgeons. To make Tolentino “look better”, the doctors suggested filler to her cheeks and chin, as well as botox to her jaw. The adjustments and procedures recommended by the plastic surgeons were informed both by universal beauty ideals of facial symmetry and facial harmony, and also by the faces of coveted celebrities on social media. Tolentino argued that Instagram face is a “single cyborgian look” that is both fillers and filters, and is both digital body manipulation and surgical body manipulation. The framework of her article also addressed the long history of the pressure placed on women to chase beauty through painful means; “Ideals of female beauty that can only be met through painful processes of physical manipulation have always been with us, from tiny feet in

imperial China to wasp waists in nineteenth-century Europe.” (Tolentino, 2019, para.7). The sentiments expressed in Tolentino’s article demonstrates one unique culture of beauty that exists on Instagram.

To Tolentino’s point, Instagram is informed by much larger, and older, rules of female presentation that have deep ties to patriarchal forms of control and power. Beauty has long been connected to the social, cultural, and economic incentives and practices throughout space and time, and Instagram is no different. Furthermore, beauty standards have also been accomplished through and created by technological innovations; new fashions were the result of the sewing machine, new facial presentations the result of the innovation and distribution of cosmetics, and new bodily expectations from the technological innovation of fitness machines (Peiss, 1998). Because of the relationship between technology and beauty’s deeper connection to social, cultural, and economic incentives, my study seeks to make sense of the way beauty is platformized, or exists, on Instagram and how that came to be.

Instagram is a visual presentation hub, and thus it is essential to think critically about the ways in which Instagram users are presenting themselves and making meaning out of their time on the platform. With over a billion active monthly users, Instagram is a significant way in which people today present themselves to one another (Aslam, 2020). In the year 2020, 56.3% of Instagram users identify as female, and 65% of the global Instagram audience is aged between 18-35 years old (ibid, 2020). These statistics suggest that the majority of Instagram users are women and younger demographics. Therefore, the gendered beauty that is presented, viewed, and circulated on this platform is worthy of critical analysis. It first seems useful to define some of the key features and cultural characteristics of Instagram.

It is necessary to highlight the specific affordances—or features that make and prevent certain practices—of Instagram. The term affordances is from Gibson (1979), but has been applied by Bucher and Helmond (2018) to discuss digital media. For the purposes of my research analysis, I am defining affordances as the platform specific technology that exists on the interface that is afforded to users: what the specific actionable technology allows users to do. Bucher and Helmond write that, “the concept of affordance is generally used to describe what material artifacts such as media technologies allow people to do.” (Bucher & Helmond, 2018, p.3). For example, the ability to post, like, comment, and share a story are all affordances of Instagram.

In-app editing, also referred to as photo-editing, photo-shop, and body-editing allows users to edit, alter, and enhance their photos or images that are posted to Instagram. Instagram affords its users to place a filter on any photo, as well as adjust aspects of the photo such as brightness, contrast, exposure, and saturation. In addition to the editing available on Instagram’s platform, there are also third-party editing applications. These applications, like Photo-shop, allow users to adjust specific aspects of facial and bodily features and presentations. The technology presented in Photo-Shop used to be limited to magazine editors, but it’s technological affordances are now accessible to anyone that can download an editing application on their smartphone. Awareness of photo-editing on social media platforms like Instagram has increased over the past five years. Body-editing on Instagram, and other social media platforms, has gained criticism due to its perceived reputation of increasing inauthenticity and negative body image (Jennings, 2019).

This paper addresses the way beauty culture has been defined in an era of platforms and against the backdrop of what scholars like Helmond (2015), Nieborg and Poell (2018) and others

have described as platformization. Platformization is a term that can be used to discuss the way a platform exists or the way something exists on a platform. For the purposes of this paper, Instagram is the platform and beauty is the subject of interest that exists on the platform.

Understanding what factors create a narrow norm of beauty self-presentations on Instagram seems especially crucial at this present juncture, where social media users are actively engaged in identity construction and self-presentation across Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Tik Tok, and more. How then, does beauty exist on Instagram's digital platform? What makes someone beautiful on the platform? What beauty is encouraged on the platform, and how?.

In response to these questions, my study examined how college students understand and perceive the beautiful, and photo-edited, images they see on Instagram. The data comes from 22 in-depth interviews with college students who signed up to participate in a study on "perceptions of Instagram photo-editing". I explain my findings through both the context of beauty as reflective of the wider society and through the context of social media self-presentation.

Building on the framework of feminist authors like Naomi Wolf (1991) and Kathy Peiss (1998), I introduce the concept of what I call the platformization of beauty to describe the ways in which young women's beauty standards are informed, created, and perpetuated on digital platforms. Understanding the platformization of beauty on Instagram serves to bolster the framework for why certain self-presentations exist on Instagram, why digital body altercations exist on Instagram, and what economic incentive is tied to conforming to this beauty standard. Based on my study, there are three distinct factors that together, work to describe how beauty is platformized on Instagram. Instagram's platform co-opts beauty, and creates its own beauty norms through the technological affordances of editing, the pressures derived from social comparison and gendered expectations, and the validation of metric gains (likes, comments, dms,

shares, saved, etc). I argue that the platformization of beauty, on Instagram specifically, often replicates traditional forms of beauty which are tied to technology, culture, and the economy.

Literature Review

Beauty as Reflective of Wider Culture in Society

Beauty expectations and standards are created and enforced through larger cultural norms in society; these norms are especially narrowly prescribed for women (Wolf, 1992; Peiss, 1998). As various researchers have made clear, beauty is shaped by a complex constellation of wider forces including economic incentives and patriarchal structures.

Scholars have studied the rise of beauty culture in the public sphere. Kathy Peiss (1998) describes how beauty culture came into existence in America. Peiss argues that beauty culture “should be understood not only as a type of commerce but as a system of meaning that helped women navigate the changing conditions of modern social experience.” (Peiss, 1998, p. 6). Beauty is rooted in economics as a product of commercial goods, but beauty also has social, political, and cultural meaning. Therefore, according to Peiss, beauty culture is reflective of social and cultural experiences, and in so doing, beauty communicates expectations for, and of, women. Peiss cites the rise of photography and the rise of the female purchasing power as two of the reasons for the birth of beauty culture in America. In the text, Peiss also underscores women’s role in creating the cosmetics industry, and in so doing, she argues that the women involved in this new industry benefited through economic gain. Peiss accounts “the ways women created the cosmetic industry and cosmetics created the modern women.” (*ibid*, 1998) However,

Peiss is critical of beauty cultures and acknowledges the role of male dominated social institutions in enforcing beauty cultures.

To Naomi Wolf (1991), beauty is reflective of a larger patriarchal form of control and power that is dominant in our American society. According to Wolf, beauty is a myth that was created to uphold male power. Wolf argues that even though women have more power and access than ever before, there is increased social control over women in the form of beauty standards, which she refers to as the professional beauty qualification. In the text, Wolf states that “for every feminist action there is an equal and opposite beauty myth reaction” that tries to control and distract women from progressing as social, political, and economic equals in America (Wolf, 1991, p. 28). Wolf also states that, “the closer women come to power, the more physical self-consciousness and sacrifices are asked of them.” (ibid, 1991, p.28) Therefore, Wolf believes that our patriarchal society uses beauty as a form of control, and does so by convincing girls and women to adhere to a certain form of self-presentation that is required in order to gain access into certain aspects of society and gain value within our culture. But, these female beauty norms are also simultaneously used to distract girls and women from gaining any true power.

Similarly to Wolf’s concept of beauty as a marker of capital, Holla and Kuipers (2016) discuss aesthetic capital. Holla and Kuipers define “aesthetic capital” as the way good looks, or beauty, is used as “a convertible social resource that is unevenly divided across people which leads to advantages in many domains, also outside the direct field of appearance and sexuality” (Holla & Kuipers, 2016, p.1). This means that attractiveness is *literally* an asset and has great value, like money or other means of capital. However, unlike Wolf’s assessment of beauty, Holla and Kuiper’s aesthetic capital is applicable to all genders. Research suggests “people found attractive are significantly more successful socially and economically than people with average

or unattractive looks" (ibid, 2016, p.3). Furthermore, beauty is a part of a person's human capital, functioning as part of a "package of skills, competencies, and qualities that lead to benefits both in the economic marketplace and in everyday life" (ibid, 2016, p.4). Therefore, a beautiful physical appearance *is* important. Additionally, aesthetic capital is not fixed at birth and can be enhanced through actions of aesthetic labor, "practices that are geared at attaining or shaping specific corporeal dispositions" (ibid, 2016, p.4). Aesthetic capital can also be understood as cultural capital in that different cultures and societies define their own beauty standards and attractiveness. However, the beauty standard in any culture is often modeled after the qualities of the elite class. Therefore, people's perceptions of beauty are linked and rooted in aspects of culture, which suggests that beauty is reflective of culture.

Not only is beauty reflective of social, cultural, political, and economic forces, but beauty is also reflective of technological forces including digital media.

Social Media and Self-Presentation

Self-presentation is a rich topic in social media research. The rise of visual social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, and Tik Tok is joined by a surge in curated self-presentations among users of these varied platforms.

Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation has been widely adopted in social science research to discuss social media self-presentation (e.g., Boyd, 2015; Marwick & Boyd, 2014; Herring & Kapidzic, 2015; Butkowski et al., 2020). According to Herring and Kapidzic (2015) self-presentation is motivated by "a desire to make a favorable impression on others, or an impression that corresponds to one's ideals." (Herring & Kapidzic, 2015, p.1). In their analysis of gender disparities between teenage boys and girls, they showed significant differences in self-

presentation habits across social media platforms. Girls choose to present themselves visually in “pictures that indicate a desire to appear attractive and sexually appealing”, however there was no clear pattern in boys’ visual presentations (ibid, 2015, p. 9). The paper suggests that these choices for visual presentations of the self “can be seen to reflect sexualized media portrayals” (ibid, 2015, p.9). Furthermore, it is clear that displaying gendered identities on social media is important to adolescents' digital self-presentation. The study suggests that self-presentation habits are informed by larger media presentations of celebrities and stars.

Social surveillance on social media may inform concepts of self-presentation. Marwick (2012) defines social surveillance as “the process by which social technologies like Facebook, Foursquare and Twitter let users gather social information about their friends and acquaintances.” (Marwick, 2012, p.13). According to social surveillance, social media users are aware that their friends or followers are indeed following their digital traces on these platforms (ibid, 2012). Marwick’s study suggests that social surveillance increases “digital intimacy” and connection to a larger community. However, Marwick’s research can be extrapolated and applied to issues of self-presentation. The crafting of self-presentation seen on social media platforms is a form of self-surveillance that is informed by issues of social surveillance on social media. This concept can be articulated as an “internalized surveilled gaze” which means “behavior modification as the result of being watched (ibid, 2012, p.4). The awareness of social surveillance could therefore increase self-surveillance which in return results in a curated self-presentation on social media platforms.

While there has been a lot of research on social media presentation, scholars have become increasingly interested in Instagram (Duffy & Hund, 2019; Butkowski et al., 2020). Body manipulated self-presentations on Instagram have profound negative effects on the

followers, or audience of the poster. Kleemans et al. (2016) found that exposure to “manipulated Instagram photos directly led to lower body image” (Kleemans et al., 2016, p.1). The researchers also found that the participants could not distinguish images that included body reshaping from original images (*ibid*). Kleemans et al. (2016) findings on Instagram are similar to earlier work by scholars like Slater et al. (2012), Clay et al. (2005), and Dittmar & Howard (2004) on the relationship between women’s visual media, photoshop, and negative body image. Although this study found that participants exposed to these images had lower body image, the study did not address the way participants think about these images and what causes people to edit their bodies in the first place.

With the rise of social media presentation also comes issues of inaccurate, overly-edited, and inauthentic forms of self-presentations on Instagram. Tiggemann and Anderberg (2019) studied the effects of the “Instagram vs. Reality” posts, an Instagram trend of side-by-side photos. These side-by-side posts consist of an idealized presentation of a woman in one photo and a more natural and relatable presentation of the same woman in another. In so doing, “Instagram vs. Reality” posts “seek to expose the falseness of social media and thereby discourage women from comparing themselves with idealistic and unrealistic images” (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2019, p.2). Tiggerman and Anderberg’s experiment consisted of three different sets of Instagram images: “Instagram vs. reality’ images, the “ideal” side alone, and the “real” side alone. The study found that viewing “Instagram vs. reality” images and the real images both “resulted in decreased body dissatisfaction relative to the ideal images” as well as decreased levels of appearance comparison (*ibid*, 2019, p.1). This study suggests that the exposure to differing forms of self-presentation have varying impacts on Instagram users perception of their own bodies.

When studying teenage girls' self-presentation through selfies on Instagram, researchers Chau and Chang (2016) found that teenage girls in Singapore "negotiate their self-presentation efforts to achieve the standards of beauty projected by their peers" (Chau & Chang, 2016, p.6). Chau and Chang (2016) concluded that even though participants believed in a wider definition of beauty, including inner beauty, they all adhered "to their peers standards of beauty and followed peer norms to guide their self-presentation" (ibid, 2016, p.3). In an attempt to adhere to culturally defined physical beauty norms, and please their peers, participants expressed using photo-editing (eye brightening, skin smoother, etc) in order to "make one self look good on social media" (ibid, 2016, p.4). According to the paper, this edited self-presentation was fostered by insecurity, low self-esteem, and social comparison. Lastly, the study found that selfie taking and posting was also used to garner positive quantitative feedback from peers. Therefore, self-presentation on Instagram, according to this study, is heavily influenced by the beauty standards held by peers.

The research referenced above either focuses on beauty, self-presentation, or social media. Rarely, if ever, does research combine the larger American societal forces of beauty with self-presentation in the context of a specific medium. This gap in the existing literature is important to analyze, and fill, because understanding people's self-presentations of beauty on Instagram in the context of beauty as a signifier of women's role in American society is an important area to examine in the context of identity politics on social media. This brings up two questions: What makes someone beautiful on a platform? and to what extent and in what ways is beauty encouraged on the platform?

Method

This article draws upon in-depth interviews with 22 college students. Participants were recruited through social media flyers and the Cornell SONA website for a study on perceptions of photo-editing on Instagram. All participants were frequent and regular Instagram users. Women were greatly over represented in the sample ($n=17$), which testifies to a wider gender disparity in Instagram usage (Smith and Anderson, 2018; Herring and Kapidzic, 2015). The 20-40 minute interviews were conducted in-person and, upon completion, participants were granted SONA credit for compensation. The interviews followed a semi-structured protocol on topics that included: what kinds of image editing they are aware of, why people edit their Instagram pictures, what they think about photo-editing on Instagram, gender and photo-editing, and permissible vs. non permissible editing, among other topics. Interviews were transcribed by the researcher and coded into categories using an inductive approach that followed what Glaser and Strauss (1967) define as grounded theory. Pseudonyms are used to protect participants' privacy.

Main Findings

Participants discussed Instagram's culture of beauty standards, particularly female beauty standards, as a product of three interrelated factors: technological affordances of editing, the pressures derived from social comparison and social expectation, and the validation of metric gains (likes, comments, dms, shares, saved, etc). Together, these comprise what I call the platformization of beauty on Instagram, or the ways in which standards of self-presentation are shaped/reconfigured by Instagram, and other social media platforms, through a combination of their technological affordances, social expectations, and the demand for metric visibility.

Therefore, the research suggests that Instagram users, females in particular, are posting a narrow presentation of beauty because 1. technology affords them that ability and 2. because the social pressure of the platform makes users feel as though they have to digitally edit their bodies to keep up with the beauty they observe, and 3. because these kinds of beautiful images get a lot of validation in the form of likes, comments, saves, shares, etc. All three of these concepts are interconnected, and together shape the way beauty is platformized on Instagram. However, for the purposes of analysis, these three components are discussed discreetly.

Technological Affordances of Editing

Interviewees made it clear during their expositions that the technological affordances of editing play a crucial role in creating what I call the platformization of beauty. There are two main ways of understanding the technology of editing as it pertains to Instagram.

Firstly, those in my sample said that Instagram encourages digital editing through its own affordances within the application. When a user selects an image to upload to Instagram, they are met with filter options as well as editing tools such as saturation, contrast, and brightness. Abby, when talking about Instagram, noted that “There are editing filters right on the account itself so it’s really easy to produce the best picture.” Brittney also discussed how Instagram has “so many built in effects” that make it “so easy” to edit. Instagram’s affordances not only directly encourage editing through its filters and editing tools, but also indirectly encourages posting edited images by allowing users to upload previously altered content. Although Instagram editing affordances do not include body-altercation technologies, Instagram does allow users to upload images digitally edited through other applications.

The second way of thinking about the technological affordances of editing is through third-party editing applications. Third-party editing applications usually contain more affordances than Instagram's editing tools, and because of their wide range of tools, editing applications have increased in popularity over the last five years. Two popular editing application platforms are Facetune and Perfect365. Facetune is an editing app that was released in 2013 and allows users to upload images and whiten teeth, smooth skin, enlarge/shrink body parts, and re-shape body parts, among others. Perfect365 is a face editing app that allows users to touch-up their face, apply makeup, and enhance or adjust facial features, among others. Interestingly, Perfect 365 defines itself as the “#1 augmented reality beauty platform” according to its own website.

When discussing how third-party editing applications are typically used as a precursor to posting images on social media platforms, Cathy shared that “a lot of people edit their photos before they upload it” to Instagram. This demonstrates that editing is a common practice and that photos posted on Instagram are likely to be digitally manipulated. Additionally, depending on the application, these mobile editing applications have the ability to alter both the face and the body. According to the participants, the technological affordances of these editing softwares allow users to “smooth their skin over”, “whiten their teeth”, “edit away part of their arm so their arm looks skinnier”, “make themselves look skinnier”, “appear curvier or make their butt look bigger”, and “put on makeup” to name a few. Importantly, the latter of these available manipulations are exclusively tied to larger modern cultural standards of feminine beauty and coded traits of feminine ideals.

The interviewee’s responses indicate that both Instagram and third-party editing applications encourage editing and make editing easy and accessible. Editing technologies allow

users to adjust, manipulate, and transform their bodies for the purpose of self-presentation on Instagram. Beauty on Instagram is therefore, in some ways, codependent on and informed by the affordances of editing technologies. Editing technology and the editing options available to users not only shape self-presentation but also define beauty on Instagram.

Pressure: Social Comparison, Expectation, and the “Vicious Cycle”

Expectations of Self-Presentation and Pressure

The second component of the platformization of beauty is centered on the self-presentation pressures participants feel on Instagram to present their best lives to imagined audiences (Litt, 2018). Issues related to social comparison and socialized expectations seemingly lead Instagramers, in particular girls and women, to feel pressure to edit their images and their bodies. According to the participants, the prevalence of edited bodies on Instagram is deeply influenced by the pressure that users feel to not only be the best version of themselves, but also to keep up with the beauty that they are surrounded by on Instagram.

On Instagram, participants feel as though there is a culture of pressure to present their best selves. Veronica, noted that, “Instagram is a platform for you to basically share the best photos of yourself”. Veronica also mentioned that there is “definitely a lot of social pressure”, and continued by stating that “Instagram is for all of your followers to see. And if it’s public, then everyone can see it. So you kind of just want to put your best self out there”. This pressure is presumably one factor that leads people to edit their bodies.

As mentioned above, aesthetic capital refers to the way beauty is viewed as capital. People tend to believe, knowingly or unknowingly, that enhancing their visual image literally

enhances their perceived social value, social capital, and ultimately aesthetic capital. Jake states that, “I feel like a lot of people will photoshop their photos to either make them look cooler, look more aesthetic, or to make themselves look better.” Editing, especially body editing, is a major way in which people elevate their presentation on Instagram with the hopes of presenting their best life, both in terms of their best embodiment, and also in terms of perceived happiness and success.

For some, this pressure to adhere to a narrowly defined acceptable form of self-presentation has resulted in a new standard of edited images. The pressure to post images that conform to narrowly defined beauty standards is especially prominent in female Instagram users. Nia states that, “Girls are usually less confident about their own bodies and it's harder for them to be comfortable in their own skin, so that's why they edit their own photos.” Nia’s comment suggests that girls and women feel pressure to digitally manipulate their body to conform to the beauty presented on the platform in an attempt to feel more confident and comfortable about their self-presentation. Furthermore, Sarah stated that she feels like “Instagram has the [sic] standard where it is edited and I haven't seen many unedited photos”. Another participant, Tiffany, claimed when talking about editing bodies on Instagram that “it seems like everyone does it.” Therefore, the platformization of beauty on Instagram is fueled by social expectations and these expectations lead users, mostly females, to engage in body-editing technologies.

Unattainably high beauty standards that circulate on Instagram seemingly drive people, in particular girls and women, to use body-editing technology. The pressure for beauty on Instagram is closely tied to the users exposure to celebrities and influencers. Influencers are Instagram users that have a large following and have an influence on that following. Instagram influencers have partnerships with brands and companies to create ads, paid for content, and

sponsorships on their Instagram account (Abidin, 2016). The majority of influencers are women, and influencers typically have a genre that they post about such as fashion, fitness, travel, etc (Abidin, 2016). Therefore, influencers often promote an idealized form of beauty. Exposure to the most idealized forms of beauty informs Instagram users of what they should look like on the platform. The participants believed that Instagram users are aware that celebrities and influencers use editing technologies to enhance their images. Tiffany discussed why she thinks that people choose to edit their images by stating that people “have an idea of what they are supposed to look like”. Tiffany believes that people use body editing technologies because “they have seen celebrities do it, or have seen their friends do it. So they think they have to do it.”

Influencers and photo-editing will be discussed later, but on the issue of social expectation, many participants also believe that influencers edit their bodies because they feel an enhanced pressure that is rooted in having a large following. The larger the following, the more expectation and pressure there is to adhere to the beauty standards of Instagram and to present themselves in a particular way. Abby articulated that she believes influencers edit their bodies in pictures “because they have so many followers so they feel more of a pressure to look great.”

Social Comparison and Pressure

Participants believe that the expectation to present one’s “best self” on Instagram is bolstered by comparing themselves to others on the platform. Social comparison theory argues that people compare themselves to others, and from there people understand their own value and worth based on how they stack up to those around them (Festinger, 1954). Ethan said that there is a “high number of comparable images that a lot of people can see on the day to day on Instagram.” he continued by adding that, “You are kind of just thrust upon all these pictures of

people". Another participant, Lauren, stated that "you post something, and you scroll down, and you see other people's pictures immediately" and "you are comparing yourself". Unlike social comparison in person which is limited to a pool of people you see in real life, Instagram allows its users to compare themselves to celebrities and influencers in the same way they compare themselves to their friends. Emma noted that "we compare ourselves to these people that are influencers". This is problematic because social comparison on Instagram results in engaging in increased upward comparisons of physical appearance, where people engage in comparing themselves to people who are "better" than they are, such as models, movie stars, and influencers. However, in real life interactions, people are engaging in both upward comparisons and downward comparisons, comparing themselves to people they are more proficient than. A constant upward comparison that occurs on Instagram when viewing people other than friends will increase negative social comparison effects such as feelings of inadequacy and self-dissatisfaction (Vogel et al., 2014).

The social comparison pressure to stack up against not only one's peers, but also celebrities and influencers can result in body-dissatisfaction and users editing their bodies to artificially enhance their image. The beauty standards on Instagram are elevated to unattainable heights, in part due to social comparison and the desire to be as beautiful as possible. On Instagram, users compare themselves to those that they follow and also mirror the behavior of those that they admire.

Cycle and Pressure

Participants articulated a negative cycle of body-editing that exists on Instagram in which users are chasing beauty, and this chase leads them to edit their bodies. The participants believe

that body editing is so prevalent, in part, because the more Instagram users see people use body-editing, or presenting a body that looks unattainably “perfect”, the more users will choose to edit their own bodies. Beauty on Instagram is so perfect, that the only way that the participants felt that users could replicate these norms is to engage in digital body-editing. Quite simply, Sarah states that, “people edit their images to make them look better because they see other people doing it”. Editing one’s body because they see other bodies that are edited feeds into a cycle of body editing on Instagram. Abby stated that, “when you edit your photo and make yourself look great” it feeds into this “competitive atmosphere on Instagram that creates this cycle of everyone wanting to produce their best self and it’s totally unrealistic”. Other participants argued that if you want to keep up with the beauty posted by everyone else, then there is not really a choice but to edit your pictures. Tiffany stated that:

“It’s like if everyone is cheating you have to cheat too just to even the playing field. If everyone’s doing it, you do it too or else you look different compared to everyone else.”

Tiffany also described this phenomenon of editing to keep up with everyone else as a “vicious cycle”. She highlights how viewing edited images on Instagram can result in negative thoughts about one’s own body, which results in the desire to edit their body. Tiffany stated:

“The way you think about your body will be affected by what you see on Instagram. If you are seeing a lot of edited pictures on Instagram and are not processing that it’s edited, you might kind of have a negative body image that might affect how much your editing

or how you edit your pictures because you want to keep up with everyone else on social media.”

Olivia describes this phenomenon as a “negative feedback loop”. She believes body editing is a negative feedback loop because “people want to edit their pictures because everyone seems more perfect, and everyone seems more perfect because everyone is editing their pictures.” The participants all agreed that this body-editing cycle, or loop, is negative and bad. Olivia stated that she “just wishes it would stop because it [body editing] doesn’t matter at all.”

The Validation of and Competition for Metric Gains

Influencers and Metric Gain

As noted earlier, digital body-editing is used to make the body more conventionally beautiful to whatever the current standard of beauty is in society. Influencers, Instagram users with a large following and use the platform in pursuit of economic gain through sponsorships, ads, and promotions, are believed to use body-editing in their content.

Participants believe that influencers use body-editing technology more often than regular Instagram users. Influencers post pictures of themselves as their job, and thus they feel more pressure to present a certain form in order to attract enough attention, garner a following, and make money. Jake states, “I feel like influencers probably do it [body editing] more than the average person. I feel like their money almost comes from how aesthetic their pictures look. So even if I didn’t notice, they probably do it [edit their body] for every picture they post.” Another participant, Ethan, highlights an example to describe influencers’ rationale for using body-editing technology in their posts on Instagram:

“If you are sponsored by a makeup company or a fit tea company it's a lot harder for these individuals [influencers] to differentiate themselves and look better than the model that's right underneath them on the feed. So they have to make sure they get consistent likes and get consistently more followers for these sponsors to say ‘hey we will pay you this much money if you post with this tea’. Especially if it's a sponsored deal, I feel like a lot of the Instagram influencers want to make sure they look good because they are representing this brand for this sum of cash.”

For influencers, presenting their best self is a business. As Brittney stated, “they have a job, so they are trying to be as perfect as they can be.” However, idealized self-image, as the participants point out, is not necessarily an accurate presentation of what they look like in real life, but is rather a presentation that will bolster their self brand, and increase their value on the platform. When I asked Lauren how often she sees images posted by influencers that she thinks have been body-edited she replied, “probably every picture I see from an influencer has been edited”. For influencers, being perfect is their job. Adam states, “In a way for them that is their lives: to look good in pictures. So they need to make sure it looks perfect because that is how they make money basically by looking perfect.”

The beauty presentations of influencers are designed to garner a following, get attention, and gain influence (Butkowski et al., 2020). The higher the metrics on the content influencers post to Instagram, the more economic benefit they receive from brand deals, sponsors, ads, etc. The platformization of beauty is, in part, fueled by the allure of metric gain and economic gain. So for influencers, body-editing can result in increased metrics which literally translate into

dollar signs. However, for regular, non-influencers on the platform, body-editing brings the allure of seeing higher metrics in the form of likes, comments, shares, and saves, which to some, feels just as good as seeing dollar signs.

Regular Instagram Users and Metric Gain

Self-presentation and the pursuit of metric gain go hand in hand (Gandini, 2016). The better the self-presentation, the higher the metrics a post will receive. Well, at least that is the idea. Some participants articulated that Instagram metrics do not just reward “the best” version of someone, they simply reward the best-looking version of someone. Lisa states, “It is this competition to be perceived as attractive, hot, perfect and reciprocating these unrealistic beauty ideals, rather than just being the best version of yourself.” According to Abby, “people care a lot about their likes so it's competitive in that way and then they want to get the most likes and followers as possible.”

Metrics on Instagram are a form of validation; if a post does well *you* do well, but if a post does poorly *you* do poorly. Adam states, “I think that people put a lot of weight on their Instagram. They think that it has a lot of determination about what people think about them.” Instagram metrics in the form of likes, comments, shares, saves, etc. translate into social capital, and increased aesthetic capital, for the person who posted that image. Therefore, self-presentation on Instagram is a heavy responsibility that can determine not only their social capital in terms of Instagram metrics, but also their social standing amongst their peers and friends.

The participants suggested that the desire to experience Instagram validation and obtain high Instagram metrics leads users to present themselves in any way necessary to garner that

reaction. Abby takes us through a scenario in which exposure to photos with edited bodies may lead someone to edit their own body with the ambition of attracting higher metrics and validation:

“well if one person posts a picture of themself edited and it gets a ton of likes and a ton of comments, and you see this then you think ‘oh they look great I want to look great and get all these likes and comments too’ so that it creates this cyclical nature for everyone to do the same thing.”

The Instagram economy of likes, comments, saves, and shares are a central driving force for defining the platformization of beauty on Instagram.

Discussion and Conclusion

There exists, across cultures and contexts, a long history of technological advancements influencing beauty. Before there were in-mobile editing applications, there was Photo-Shop for desk tops. But, even before modern technology in the form of hardware and software, there was a different kind of technology that was not a “ware”, but that was worn: make-up. The technological advancements of store-bought make-up in the 1920’s changed beauty forever (Peiss, 1998). Other beauty technologies include skin care products, hair products, and clothing (ibid, 1998). In fact, many participants in the study equated the technology found in these mobile editing apps that allow users to artificially superimpose make-up onto their faces as an equivalent to putting on make-up in real life. But, just like make-up serves a larger purpose beyond

“beauty”, so does the technology of mobile application editing. The technology of mobile editing through editing applications serves to alter both economic gain and cultural norms.

The study suggests that technology and platforms are reshaping beauty on Instagram.

This reshaping of beauty on Instagram is a process that is informed by a confluence of social, cultural, and economic forces. I call this process the platformization of beauty. The continual innovation of editing applications and their affordances revolutionize the ways in which users can self-create their digital presentations.

The findings suggest that technological affordances work to enhance economic gain of Instagram users. For celebrities and influencers, this economic gain is literal in the form of paid sponsorships and paid content. For Instagrammers that do not make money on the platform, the enhanced economic gain of technological affordances results in increased Instagram metrics (likes, comments, shares, saves, etc.), social capital, and aesthetic capital. Technological affordances aid in bolstering the Instagram economy in that the edited, more perfect looking photos often result in higher-traffic and higher metrics. Therefore, the implementation of sharing in-app edited images on Instagram is associated with a larger following, more trafficked content, and more user engagement. Edited images are edited to digitally enhance the image, both in terms of the background and in terms of the person that is photographed. It has become somewhat of a social media instinct that the higher quality the photo, the clearer the photo, the more vibrant, and cohesive, and ultimately perfect looking, the “better” the image will “do”. Therefore, this technology is used to increase economic gain for its users on the platform through likes, comments, and shares, aesthetic capital, and cultural capital.

Technological affordances of Instagram also work to reinforce new cultural norms.

Technology both creates a new norm of editing and creates a new pressure for beauty. Editing

images elevates the standards of beauty into a realm of unattainable beauty since the images are manipulated and designed to align with perfection. The usage of this technology has been normalized, especially in the influencer cultures, and is also widely known by “regular” users of the platform. The study’s participants expressed that this technology was originally used to aid people in “getting ahead” by enhancing their appearance. However, participants suggest that digital body-editing seems to be the latest “keeping up with the joneses” of beauty, and is unique to the Instagram platform experience. On Instagram, the benchmark for beauty is unattainably high and can only be achieved by the masses through digital body-editing. This digital editing technology is so easily accessible, that instead of being used to get ahead, it is now being used just to keep up with everyone else. In so doing, this access to editing and image sharing has created a new pressure for beauty that is at the center of the platformization of beauty.

The research findings both reaffirm and serve as modern extrapolations of Wolf’s ideology of beauty. Wolf claims that women took on the role of “professional beauty”, and arguably the girls and women of Instagram have done just that, especially among female influencers (Wolf, 1991, p. 27). In the text, Wolf states that “The model fantasy is probably the most widespread contemporary dream shared by young women from all backgrounds” (*ibid*, p. 41). And doesn’t Instagram allow each user to act as a model of their own? Each girl on Instagram is the cover girl or centerfold of her own platform profile. In fact, so many young women today are presenting themselves in the likeness of models on Instagram that there is even a term for them: Instagram models. Instagram models are models that gained popularity from Instagram, and may or may not model outside of the platform. (Look no further than Esquire Magazine, a men’s magazine, that published an article in 2018 entitled “The 29 Hottest Heirs To Emily Ratajkowski’s Instagram-Model-Of-The-Moment Throne”). Today’s women and girls still

aspire to model, perhaps more now than ever before, because they can do so through Instagram and gain exposure on the platform. Additionally, the findings suggest that digital body editing is not only widely accessible, but is also widely utilized on Instagram. In the text, Wolf articulates her anti photo-shop sentiments and states “To airbrush age off a woman’s face is to erase woman’s identity, power, and history.” (Wolf, 1991, p. 83). On Instagram, airbrush editing, now referred to as “skin smoothing” is commonplace to increase the youthfulness, health, and flawlessness of girls and women on the platform. Towards the end of the text, Wolf expresses that “we do not need to change our bodies, we need to change the rules.” (*ibid*, p. 289). In applying this quotation to our modern world and Instagram, the participants articulated a desire for a world in which we do not need to change our bodies through in-app body-editing, we instead need to change the rules of self-presentation to reflect wider definitions of beauty, or even not be tied to beauty at all.

Therefore, the platformization of beauty on Instagram builds on old traditions of beauty as it pertains to the interconnectivity between beauty and technology, culture, and the economy. This has implications of beauty standards, labor dimensions, and gender dynamics in the digital age. Firstly, the findings have implications for beauty standards in the digital age because the findings suggest that platformized beauty is narrowly defined and seemingly unattainable through natural and uncurated means. Secondly, conforming to the platformization of beauty on Instagram has implications for the way we can think about Instagram labor and aesthetic labor. In the offline world, creating content and photographs that adhere to the platformization of beauty on Instagram takes time, resources, and energy. Therefore, the configuration of beauty on Instagram results in increased labor in creating a digital self. Instagram users spend time and energy both on learning the affordances of editing platforms, and in actually editing their

photographs. Thirdly, the findings also have implications of gender dynamics in the digital age because the standards of beauty for women are more narrowly defined than the standards for men. Furthermore, the affordances of these editing technologies reflect beauty norms of women, such as tools to enlarge the appearance of breasts. The relationship between body manipulation in photo-editing and gender has implications both for gendered self-presentations and gendered perceptions of beauty on Instagram.

This research serves to contribute to the growing field of social science scholarship that examines social media self-presentations of beauty. By examining the way college students make meaning out of the beauty presentations they see on Instagram, I aim to create a foundation for future discussion on topics surrounding what I call the platformization of beauty on Instagram.

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