

THE BEAUTY PROJECT: COSMETIC CULTURE AND ITS REPRESENTATION ON INSTAGRAM

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Abstract: Transhumanism refers to an ontological state wherein individuals possess “chemically, surgically and technologically modified bodies” (Nayar 13). Jia Tolentino in an article in *The New Yorker* (2022) talked about the concept of an Instagram face which according to her is premised on a certain idea of sameness and is seen as a corporation resulting in better opportunities and wider outreach in a social media-ridden world. In my proposed study, I intend to study the representations of the body in a tech-mediated culture which results in AI-modified body images and digitally enhanced physicality, thus generating interesting conversations around it. I plan to look at how on the one hand, it leads to an empowering stance on body image issues and on the other, undercuts the notion of body positivity by constructing and propagating a certain body and beauty type which is harvested and disseminated through technology. My study would also look at various intersectional markers for instance class, culture, race etc which influence or govern the privileging of a certain body-discourse. The resulting similarity tends to challenge the idea of differences in a world which is increasingly getting shaped by a ‘trend’, ‘meme’ or ‘viral representations’. I intend to look at a list of such viral representations and trends on Instagram that have shaped our collective understanding of the ideas of beauty.

Keywords: *Transhumanism, Instagram face, AI-modified bodies, digital beauty culture, body positivity, intersectionality, viral representations*

The paper explores the possibilities of the intersection of humans and technology in a transhumanist framework and assesses the resultant possibilities. Popular culture is invested with references related to beauty generated by a tech-driven world. Conventional ideas of beauty have been challenged by newer possibilities where technology has established itself at the centre of the discourse. This paper aims to use Post-humanist theory to understand contemporary and emerging body-fashion trends as a means to bring about a cultural and social shift. It also aims to understand the gradually shifting meanings of cultural identity in a world interspersed with cosmetic markers, thereby pointing at newer definitions of selfhood in the contemporary scenario.

According to Julian Huxley, “Humans will attempt to overcome the limitations of their nature in the next step by means of scientific and technological explorations” (Huxley 12).

When one looks at the recent popular trends on digital spaces; one observes a revision of the existing relationship between body and identity. Fashion theory becomes a relevant interdisciplinary field of study to understand cultural trends premised on the idea of fashion and body within the framework of gender, race, class markers. On the one hand, we see trends celebrating body positivity, for instance no fat shaming, challenging ableism or ageism, going against the 'fair is beautiful' idea etc. But at the same time, we see a glaring rise in trends supporting cosmetic surgery procedures claiming that everyone has the right to their body and decisions regarding the same. The body thus becomes an interesting site to register and propagate meanings.

Body-politics in the contemporary world acquires new connotations since it is increasingly being defined in relation to social media references and technological innovations. Cosmetic procedures like implants, plastic surgery, cosmetic surgery, injections, sex reassignment etc. have led to a revolution in the way one looks at self and beauty. While there are a lot of physique-related procedures, aligning the face with the current beauty standards becomes a fascinating case-study. Face being the most recognizable part of the human body acquires a cyborgian character when its uniqueness is mechanized and erased in the face of trending beauty norms like plump lips, tanned skin, chiselled face and sharp noses. In the past, theoretical frameworks like Structuralism and Phenomenology have been used to contextualize the body in the larger space of meaning-making and cultural significance, leading to construction of social hierarchies and power-politics. Body has also been understood as an object that is invested with power equations as per Foucault.



A Cyborgian face (*freepik*)

A lot of research has gone into how social media, especially Instagram is used by the users for self-promotion and validation. As per the latest research, Instagram has 2 billion

monthly active users (Sprout Social, 2024). Since it is a photo-oriented app; there is a lot of focus on visual aesthetics. A number of tools are used to provide the users with desired effects. Ranging from selfie-features, photo filters, reel mix-overs and music-induced photographs; Instagram thrives on an inexhaustive loop of sensory display. Since it allows the users to enter into a discourse with each other; the responses are usually overwhelming. It advances the risk of being under constant surveillance which gets accentuated with every feedback. At the same time, it also gives the impression of FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) as it is expressed in the Urban lingo. The picture-palatte on Instagram makes one feel excluded and ‘othered’ resulting in an excessive desire to ‘fit in’ and belong. As per a report pertaining to a research conducted in 2021, The Wall Street Journal reports that 32% of teenagers, mainly girls, said that when they felt bad about their bodies, Instagram made them feel worse (Frier & MacMillan, 2021).

Jia Tolentino’s article *The Age of Instagram Face* mentions a cyborgian face which as per the celebrity makeup artist Colby Smith, “It’s Instagram Face... It’s like an unrealistic sculpture. Volume on volume. A face that looks like it’s made out of clay.” She underlines the trait of sameness that is a part of Instagram faces, prompted by a certain aesthetic that is selling a certain kind of beauty. She also enlists the use of multiple such apps which provide filters and assistive techniques to perfect facial features as per global beauty trends. Apps like Celebface and Facetune allow users to track these popular beauty trends as per the celebrity demands and gives accessibility to such constructed spaces to even laymen who were previously unfamiliar with such techniques. The Instagram face seems to be an amalgamation of too many dominant ethnic facial features which appears very de-contextualized and rootless.



The Instagram face by Jia Tolentino (*Reddit*)

From the earliest face-fixing techniques like makeup, foot-binding, waist-tying etc. to the tech-integrated cosmetic procedures now; the world has seen a mind-numbing shift in the ways we understand physical beauty today. Anne Balsamo in *Technologies of the Gendered Body* talks about cosmetic surgery procedures in the contemporary scenario and its impact in shaping ideas related to body-politics. The body is seen as an object of technical restructuring. Balsamo mentions how, according to Carole Spitzack, cosmetic surgery uses three intersecting mechanisms of cultural control: inscription, surveillance and confession. The gaze is significant here; which labels and identifies a certain body type or trait or physical feature as 'abnormal' or ugly or worthy of being dismissed. This "cancel-culture" is a part of the new lingo that characterises appearances on the Gram. The gaze of the so-called elites decides what is to remain and what should be eliminated, thereby creating a power-structure which eventually culminates in the medical apparatus.

Cosmetic surgery is a manifestation of the material reproduction of an idea of beauty. It talks about the connection between materiality and culture in the age of Instagram. Examples of such trends which are based on a certain body-aesthetic are: plump lips, tanned skin tone, hour-glass curvaceous figure, sharp noses etc. The dissection that thus happens divides a person into parts and the reconstruction of those body parts is supposed to give the person a new identity. This reconstruction works on the principle of internalizing the abnormality as a disease which should be set right. This entire framework of addition and deletion of body parts is aligned with the larger framework of keeping it in sync with an ideal beauty type. This beauty type is culturally coded and this cultural coding is premised on Instagram aesthetics and algorithms. This restructuring of the body is to be understood because this body carries certain markers. It is mostly a white and affluent female body. All these markers have to be studied to understand the visual politics associated with such practices.



The construction of an ideal, symmetrical face promoted by Social media (*illinoisstate.edu*)

Body-aesthetics are established through a set of representative trends and viral projections. Race is also an important marker when it comes to defining beauty aesthetics and cosmetic surgery. It is important to note how, even to undergo cosmetic surgery, one needs to be of the 'ideal skin color' since the effect is supposed to be different on different bodies. Nelson Powell and Brian Humphreys talked about how Black patients are not readily accepted by cosmetic surgeons due to the fear of post-surgical complications, mostly resulting in keloid formation and hyperpigmented scarring specific to this type of skin. The cultural definition of an ideal beauty type is increasingly getting shaped by a cosmopolitan, rootless world. In the 1990s, as Anne Balsamo underlines, there was an increasing shift towards getting a more Westernized appearance, especially in the non-Western women. Ageism is also hijacked as a marker by cosmetic surgery enthusiasts. It is interesting to note how the ageing process, which is actually a very real and natural process, is labelled as unnatural. The whole question of what is natural and unnatural is reversed in the current scenario. Obsession with a slim body for women in the 1980s and 90s resulted in a huge number of women demanding cosmetic surgery procedures. The psychological analysis of such procedures point out a glaring observation and deficiency in the current beauty market where 'fixing' is done not for healing or functioning but solely for aesthetic pleasure! It reminds us of Frankenstein's 'monster' who was unjustifiably dismissed just because he looked like 'a filthy mass' to the world. Only if Frankenstein had the bliss of cosmetic surgery! In a way, it does come with the potential of lifting the world for people who have been under the curse of being born with conventionally unappealing looks. It does give hope to the afflicted to survive in a world that prioritizes looks over substance. But its overuse has made beauty an obsessive,

mercenary project where the one who has money rules the roost. Frankenstein's monster would have been able to redeem himself only if he had the money.

It is especially pervasive in showbiz where looks can make or break the deal. In relation to the mainstream Hindi cinema, one can see how the current lot of female actors are unapologetic about the fact that they have gone under the knife. The whole culture of hushing about natural beauty fads has been replaced by the culture of 'coming out' and acknowledging the 'fixing' with confidence. In a recent episode of a popular talk show *Two Much with Kajol and Twinkle* hosted by actors Kajol and Twinkle Khanna; the actor Janhvi Kapoor talked about how the reconstruction of outer beauty does not change the core of a person and in the same tone, exclaims, — "I know I look smashing.." This unabashed acceptance of a technologically induced beauty also leads to normalisation of the whole process where it becomes a part of the discourse. The sheer act of incorporating it in the linguistic framework by inventing words for it allows more focus on the procedure. It makes the whole act less problematic and more acceptable. Having actors promoting or talking about this thing works in two ways: One, it gives the masses a licence to believe that they are lacking in so many ways. The confession underlines the lack. At the same time, it also gives freedom to women to choose what they want to do with their bodies. Yvonne Forster in "From Digital Skin to Digital Flesh: Understanding Technology Through Fashion" mentions the idea of digital flesh and digital skin which influences our biological and cultural setting to a great degree. It also brings in the question of environment and aesthetics. The newly formed bodies tend to undergo a huge shift in relation to identity-politics as the newly generated body-aesthetics construct a new identity; eliminating the existing identity equations. Through technological progress, man is able to re-envision gender identities.

This interesting opposition and its implications are rooted in the idea of the feminine body as a signifier which talks about the connotations that a woman's body carries beyond physicality. It is also seen as the carrier of culture and tradition. What a woman does to her body is seen as the prerogative of the culture or social group that she belongs to. Cosmetic culture when seen through the prism of gender uncovers interesting findings: How does one understand the idea of a woman choosing to be beautiful in a world which is governed by the sole notion of a woman's merit in being aesthetically appealing! It does give a woman a lot of agency to free herself from the pre-ordained physical framework and facilitate choice for herself. Cosmetic surgery is seen as an agent in the technological reproduction of gendered bodies. Men and women are associated with cosmetic surgery for different reasons. While women are supposed to opt for it to enhance their aesthetic appeal; men are associated with it for better career prospects. Although the choice of engaging in cosmetic work gives women a lot of control over their bodies which have been dangerously and obsessively controlled by men across cultures. But at the same time, the reconstructed bodies also seem to be appeasing men who are seen to be the eventual

receivers of the aesthetic delight. It also brings in the class factor which again problematizes the notion of freedom and choice for women in relation to beauty. What kind of women are eligible to choose? This beauty project thus dismisses and excludes the marginalized women who on account of their subservient positions cannot access the privileges of the select few. This is how we can understand the technological perpetuation of gendered bodies.

While we have spoken enough about the connection of cosmetic culture and women's bodies; the recent trends also highlight men's obsession with cosmetically enhanced bodies. There was a lot of buzz around Bollywood actor Rajkumar Rao's artificially chiselled jawline which apparently did not go well with the netizens. It does take away a lot of attention from women's bodies for a while and puts the men on the spot in beauty-related discussions but it also underlines a growing fascination towards plastic beauty which can be artificially constructed. Men can now get picture-perfect six pack abs through cosmetical procedures. According to a cosmetic surgeon as per Anne Balsamo, — "the reason for some men's new concern about appearance is linked to the increasing competition for top jobs they face at the peak of their careers from women and Baby Boomers..." (67) This transition hints at the gradually eroding strict boundaries of male and female identities.

The reasoning in men and women related to cosmetic procedures reveals the hidden biases and stereotypes about men and women's relation to beauty. Women's desire for correction of their physical features stems from patriarchy's prioritization of a woman's worth in sync with her beauty standards. She is also seen as inferior in relation to a man and hence the attempt to correct or improve herself stands justified. A man, however, has to create reasons to justify his action of going under the knife since it is not culturally required of him. Here, the whole body versus face binary again becomes important. A woman's alignment of her face in relation to ideal femininity is equivalent to a man's strengthening of his body and muscularity. For women, the face becomes the ideal marker while for men, the body is seen as the focal point of their physicality.



The Rise of Male Plastic Surgery and its depiction on Instagram (*aedit*)

Thus, as Diana Dull and Candace West observe in their study, “discussion and marketing of such procedures usually constructs the female as the typical patient.” (Balsamo, 69) The gender boundaries have become very fluid since the increase in the number of sex reassignment surgeries. Technology has made it possible for people to attain the desired physicality which in relation to transgenders acquires a different meaning altogether. What is noteworthy in the recent Instagram trends on the same is how even during the reassignment surgery from a man to a ‘woman’; the face is also realigned as per the trending beauty standards. The ‘feminine’ face becomes the defining trait of a woman. It does bring in health concerns as well, both physical and mental. One can find multiple such incidents where some obsessive fans in an attempt to look like their favorite celebs end up getting multiple surgeries. Dr. Susan Chobanian, a Beverly Hills cosmetic surgeon, claimed that cosmetic surgery is addictive for a lot of people and how “it is a body-image disorder..” (71, Balsamo) Physically, it might completely alter the facial or body structure and even interfere with the normal functioning of the body cycle. Michael Jackson is the classic example of Pop culture and the bodily insecurities that come with your constant exposure to the public. His face underwent a significant transformation from the time he first appeared on stage to the end of his life due to the multiple surgeries that he engaged in. His case is also interesting since he did not merely alter his physical features but also attempted to lighten his skin color. This becomes crucial in the light of his racial identity. In a world which is marred with the evils of racial segregation and apartheid, attempting to transform one’s skin color and looks becomes revolutionary but also complicated and limiting.



The Pre and Post-Surgery face of pop icon Michael Jackson (*itstartswithadam.com*)

Mental health is a major concern related to beauty fads in today's world. The idea of discursive propagation and representation of an ideal beauty standard is to be studied to understand how it plays with the psyche of the people. Instagram in the contemporary scenario has become the platform for Gen-Z to share and own body images and their perceptions.

The current world on Instagram has gone beyond fillers now and has embraced the world of filters where faces can be shaped in any desired way. The recent Gemini trend where everyone on the Gram was obsessively uploading aesthetically polished pictures of themselves using the Gemini app showed the glaring desire to be picture-perfect.



Gemini's viral AI Saree trend which took the Internet by storm (*Livemint*)

What is interesting is how the multiple selfie filters used by people at one point, blur the distinction between real and virtual. The Virtual becomes the new real in a posthuman world where our identities are necessarily mediated by technology. A Cyborgian identity is thus seen as the result of the interesting intersection of humans and technology. Balsamo feels that the female body is related to the cyborg body and is a fundamental part of the contemporary cyborg-ian narrative as it was considered and categorized as a “lack” and “lacking”, historically. The conventional definition of a female body being governed only by the reproductive capacity, establishes a definition of the female body as always lacking and needing control. Balsamo rereads Foucault through various feminist studies to acknowledge the historical construction of the gendered body.

The meaning of Body has evolved with respect to the passing of time. During Modernity, Body was seen as a machine while Postmodernist discourse considers Body as a discourse. In the contemporary scenario, the body is being seen as a product and perpetrator of the consumerist culture. The Cyborg has become the apt embodiment of the Posthumanist anxieties and concerns regarding the body where it goes beyond the human framework and adopts other connotations. What is interesting about the Cyborgian body is how it tends to challenge the inherent binaries of the traditional framework and makes way for ambiguous, hybrid identities. As Donna Haraway claims, “the cyborg has the potential to disrupt the persistent dualisms (culture/nature, male/female, reality/appearance, real/artificial) that have been “systemic to the logics and practices of domination of women, people of color, nature, workers, animals.” (33) Female body and the need for correction is brought up by theorists like Paula Treichler who claimed that the Female Body is inherently pathological. Technology and body-politics has been studied by

scholars like Donna Haraway who claimed that biotechnologies are the “crucial tools recrafting our bodies.... Technologies and scientific discourses can be partially understood as formalizations, i.e., as the frozen moments, of the fluid social interactions constituting them, but they should also be viewed as instruments for enforcing meanings” (82-83). Donna Haraway has looked at the idea of otherness related to Cyborgian bodies since they do not belong or neatly fit anywhere.

The trolling, cyber-bullying of people who engage in Cosmetic surgeries or procedures for attempting to violate Nature can be seen in this light. Virtual reality seeks to go beyond the physical limitations set by the body. They tend to reverse age, change color, trim facial features and rid people of all the insecurities that they might have. In one way, it does away with a world where race, gender and cultural barriers sharply divide the world. In today’s era, all these discourses seem to have vanished in the light of a cosmetic reality. As Arthur Kroker warns us in his book *Spasm*,—“Not only will sound be digitally reinvented, but all the senses in the universal media archive: virtual eyes, cyber-fingers, liquid crystal skin, feel patches for the quick repolarization of the body’s magnetic field. Ours will no longer be a prepackaged digital environment; everybody will be a media hacker, recording the electronic frontier at will. The crash body, therefore, as a fast digital cut disturbing, intercepting and mutating the vast galactic space of data.” (Kroker, 15) This Cyborgian Face or as Arthur Kroker calls it — The Transistorized Face — is constructed by the plastic surgeons who are the new creators/Gods/mothers in the post-human world. This face challenges temporal and spatial divides; it takes on new shapes and forms and in this process keeps effacing history. History that is etched on the body; history that seems to be preserved in the physicality of women; in the skin-tone and touch becomes invalidated.

It also raises new and interesting questions about the existing schools of thought in relation to our identity markers. For instance, how do we now understand the discourse of Caste which is premised on the idea of physical touch in this new virtual world? Is Racism redundant now since the body can be metamorphosed into a desired shape that is at the centre of the beauty-discourse? Is the class marker the only reality today which privileges the one who has access to it and therefore, redefines their physicality. The resultant questions are complex and too many. Recently, Internet sensation Uorfi Javed took the internet by storm when she uploaded a video of her puffed face and swollen lips; showing in close detail the after-effects of cosmetic surgery on bodies. Uorfi decided to undo her surgery; which has also become fashionable amongst the people. This is one of the ‘coming out of the closet’ events where Influencers and Celebrities are attempting to address the ‘Elephant in the room’ by keeping it real.

Posting pictures of one’s ‘corrected’ and ‘filtered’ self on Social-media platforms like Instagram comes with consequences. It allows one to track the transition through constant feedback from viewers and followers. Also, cosmetic surgery is one topic on which everyone feels entitled to share their opinion. It is one of the most discussed and volatile

issues on Instagram. A lot of actors and Instagram celebs have shared their harrowing experiences related to cyber-bullying. It becomes an interesting Spatial juncture where the private-public distinction is laid bare. Thus, imperfect chiselling is dissed and perfect chiselling is judged. There is nowhere to go from the swarm of online expert opinions. “I think there’s consistently a selective memory bias towards unattractive results, and that constantly drives people's requests,” says Renata Khelemsky, a facial cosmetic surgeon, who operates out of New York and Florida as per Anne Balsamo’s book on techno-gendered bodies.

Kim Kardashian and Kylie Jenner-inspired face look dominates the Cosmetic surgery market which is seen as the most sought-after template. The result is an army of similar faces which look more like products than faces. The individuality is eliminated owing to similar packaging and polishing. People dissolving their fillers is also being seen these days, thereby pointing at an oppositional trend which tends to celebrate all that is raw and organic. The demand for subtlety is at the centre of such trends. This is a reflection of the changing cultural landscape of Instagram and celebrity profiles where subtle asymmetrical features garner more spotlight in the midst of similar-looking Instagram faces.

This also shows the connection between employment market and physicality where especially after the COVID era; due to the persistence of online meetings; ‘the facelift’ feature has been in demand due to the need to turn on the front camera for better engagement. More engagement in virtual spaces means the constant self-surveillance through the front camera which tends to magnify every blemish or asymmetry. The question of influence is important to take up in relation to Instagram. Constant scrolling leads to more engagement and hence more attention on looks and desirability. Instagram is replete with videos and posts related to ‘subtle’ physical correction through trusted cosmetic surgeons. The idea of an “imaginary audience” posits how vulnerable minds are more susceptible to negative self-worth and mental disorders.

On one hand we have the perfectly curated pictures made aesthetic through fillers and filters and on the other hand we see a plethora of body-positivity influencers and celebrities who promote beauty in diversity and imperfections. The resulting contradiction is interesting to study in a tech-driven world where both trends seem to be doing well in the market. Be it Sabyasachi’s campaigns to celebrate beauty in all forms and sizes or L’oreal Paris’ ads featuring all beauty types; inclusivity is a catchphrase in some of the most popular Instagram handles. But we also know how the Botox hair, facelifts, cosmetic eyebrows and pouty lips have created the ideal beauty aesthetic. The constant tussle between these contrary trends is what the current Instagram space is all about.



The trend of Body-positivity stories on Instagram (*rawpixel*)

The standards of beauty and aesthetics have evolved over time and have a different meaning in every culture. Instagram has, in a way, provided a uniform stamp to it by coalescing diverse beauty parameters. A survey from the Pew Research Center indicates 71% of adolescents and young adults (AYAs) between the ages of 18-24 use Instagram. According to Lauren Kelly, a study was conducted in 2019 to understand the impact of Instagram on body-image issues of the youth. Top 100 Instagram accounts were chosen using the hashtag #bodypositive using multiple variables and it was observed that the accounts addressed issues related to body-positivity and inspiration, body size/image, identity, love, mental health, physical health, and feminism etc. The results revealed that exposure to such profiles led to a positive impact on the mindset of young women who are the most vulnerable in terms of beauty and body-related concerns.

There is another study which was conducted in 2021 by Ayla S. Gelsing to understand the impact of body-positivity trends on Instagram. Ayla states that the Body-Positivity

movement began in 2012 on Instagram which aimed at countering the unnecessary hype created by picture-perfect shots on Social media. The body positive hashtag was seen as a space where people could share their raw pictures without being judged or shamed by the viewers and receive encouragement and acceptance. Ayla eventually deduces that the “Findings of past research studies on Instagram and body image informed the hypothesis that the Body Positive Movement was falling short in its efforts to combat the thin ideal and unrealistic beauty standards.” (Spectra, 2021)

The cyborgian face and body represent a new frontier in the construction of identity, raising important questions about agency, control, and the impact of technology on human experience. The digital self seems to be a separate identity which is carefully constructed in accordance with one’s need for external validation. Schroeder and Behm-Morawitz analysed the impact of using slimming beauty filters on one’s face and how it leads to this interesting phenomenon called “social self comparison”, their term for what happens when a person compares their actual appearance to a digitally enhanced version.” (Satisfied, 2025) Instagram has made beauty-projects accessible to all by allowing even the laymen to post and consume beauty-related content. But at the same time it has also led to the homogenisation of beauty standards, which is mostly algorithm-generated and filter-enhanced. In conclusion, one can ponder upon the functioning of a ‘human identity’ in a world where it is increasingly being marked and mixed with technology, virtual spaces, social media etc and how the future will be influenced by it.

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