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The ugly side of beauty filters

Idealised images gradually affect self-esteem and emotional well-being

PETALING JAYA: Beauty filters and curated livestream personas are increasingly influencing how people present themselves online, but psychologists warn that the real concern arises when digital identities begin to replace individuals' sense of self.

Dean of the Faculty of Psychology and Social Sciences at the University of Cyberjaya, Assoc Prof Dr Anasuya Jegathevi Jegathesan, said filters allow users to construct virtual versions of themselves that can sometimes feel more real than their offline identities.

In today's digital environment, she said, individuals can create online avatars that attract admiration or emotional attachment, even if they differ significantly from reality.

"People may fall in love with the image rather than the person behind it," she said.

While some individuals consciously use curated appearances as part of personal branding or income generation, she said psychological risks emerge when filtered identities start shaping how people see themselves.

"If someone feels comfortable with both their online persona and their offline self, there may be no issue. The concern begins when individuals start disliking who they are without filters," she said.

She said research increasingly links frequent use of beauty filters to body dissatisfaction, heightened self-criticism and anxiety, especially when users compare themselves to digitally altered standards.

Such pressures, she said, affect both women and men, although

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men's concerns often centre on body shape or muscularity.

Meanwhile, founder and president of the Mental Illness Awareness and Support Association, Anita Abu Bakar, said the technology itself is not inherently harmful, but repeated exposure to idealised images can gradually reshape internal standards of attractiveness and self-worth.

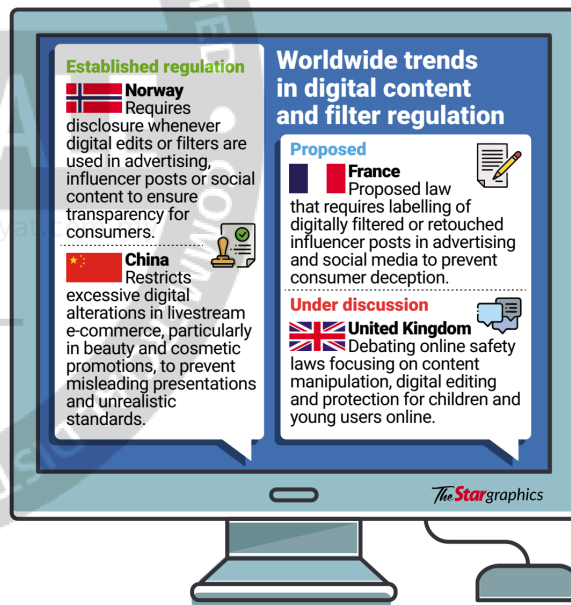
She said casual use of filters has become part of modern digital culture and can sometimes help individuals feel more confident.

However, Anita cautioned that reliance on altered appearances may signal deeper issues tied to identity and validation.

"Frequent exposure to heavily filtered faces can slowly redefine what is perceived as normal or attractive," she said, citing research from the University of Waterloo linking media imagery to body dissatisfaction among adolescents.

She said livestreaming environments may intensify these effects by creating a strong sense of authenticity and closeness with viewers.

Citing a 2025 study in Royal Society Open Science, Anita said the study also found that digitally enhanced faces were rated not only as more attractive but also as more trustworthy and sociable,



illustrating how appearance can influence perceptions of personality.

While platforms such as TikTok have introduced limits on some beauty filters for minors, she said safeguards should be paired with digital literacy and mental-health awareness.

"Filters are tools. The concern arises when self-worth becomes tied to a filtered identity or when validation depends on an altered appearance," she said.

Eve Psychosocial Rehabilitation Centre general manager Rozana Anthony said Social Comparison Theory explains how it can shape

identity and belonging, but when pitted against digitally perfected images, the result can be discouraging and damaging.

"Skin with natural texture, asymmetrical faces or bodies that do not match the 'ideal' can suddenly feel inadequate. What starts as awareness can slowly evolve into self-doubt and dissatisfaction.

"Research in Developmental and Social Psychology shows that repeated exposure to unrealistic beauty standards affects self-esteem and emotional well-being. Some young people may become overly focused on perceived

flaws, a pattern linked to conditions such as Body Dysmorphic Disorder.

"These pressures also shape how young people view each other. When certain appearances are repeatedly celebrated, popularity and acceptance can become tied to fashion, status or looks rather than kindness or character," she said on how false beauty standards can be harmful.

Rozana said social media reinforces another layer of pressure as the pursuit of digital approval can make relationships performative rather than grounded in shared experiences, trust and empathy.

This can lead to superficial connections replacing meaningful ones, she added.

As such, she urged parents, educators, elders, influencers and the media to restore balance by reminding young people early that their worth lies not in filtered perfection or online approval but in their character, kindness and humanity.

Recently, the Chinese Entertainment Industry Association issued regulations on beauty filters and heavy makeup in its huge influencer industry, prohibiting them from using excessive beauty enhancements, inducing consumer spending or engaging in ranking comparisons that encourage viewers to compete financially for attention.

Several cases were reported involving a 62-year-old man who spent 500,000 yuan and then borrowed an additional 100,000 yuan on virtual relationships, and another man spending over 300,000 yuan on an influencer who was dating four other men.

Harmful content is regulated by Online Safety Act

PETALING JAYA: The best interests of users, particularly children, will guide any future regulatory considerations on the use of beauty filters and digital alteration tools in livestream selling, says the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC).

In a reply to *The Star*, the MCMC said the Online Safety Act 2025 was already designed to strengthen online safety in Malaysia by regulating harmful content and setting out clear duties and responsibilities for licensed service providers.

Amid growing concerns about the rise of beauty filters in livestream sales, the commission said platforms must conduct risk assessments to identify potential online safety risks arising from their features and content practices.

"These include obligations to reduce the risk of users being exposed to harmful content, ensure the safe use of services by child users, and put in place appropriate safeguards through their Online Safety Plans.

"In this context, the commission expects platform providers to ensure their service design,

recommendation systems and features do not expose users, particularly children, to content that may be misleading, exploitative or detrimental to their well-being," it said.

The MCMC added that any further regulatory considerations would be guided by a balanced, proportionate and technology-neutral approach, taking into account platform accountability, consumer protection, commercial transparency and the best interests of child users.

"We will continue to work with relevant stakeholders, including platform providers, industry players and relevant authorities to ensure Malaysia's online ecosystem remains safe, transparent and responsible," it said.

On Jan 1, China implemented a ban on the excessive use of beauty filters in the livestreaming industry to curb online deception and address psychological harm linked to unrealistic portrayals.

However, cybersecurity specialist Fong Choong Fook said Malaysia should not rush to adopt a similar blanket ban, noting that widespread abuse of beauty filters has not been observed locally.

"We will continue to work with relevant stakeholders to ensure Malaysia's online ecosystem remains safe, transparent and responsible."

MCMC

He said China's move was driven by the scale of filter use among streamers there, where digital enhancements are frequently used to market products.

"China's ban may appear excessive, but it reflects the scale of the issue there. I do not think it is a major concern outside China, as streamers elsewhere are not widely abusing filters for deception," he said.

Fong added that while beauty

filters can sometimes be detected during livestreams through visible distortions when a person moves, the technology is evolving.

"At present, there is no clear cybersecurity framework specifically designed to detect beauty filters, although distortions during movement are often seen as signs of digital alteration," he said.

He noted that no other countries have introduced specific regulations targeting beautification tools, though Malaysia already has laws addressing online scams and fraudulent practices.

Be My Protector vice-chairman Prof Dr Isdawati Ismail said concerns over digital identity and filtered appearances must also be viewed in the broader context of how much time children now spend online.

She said many young users are increasingly exposed to social media content designed primarily for entertainment and engagement rather than healthy development.

"Children today are spending a significant amount of time online, and excessive smartphone use is already affecting sleep patterns, attention span, emotional regula-

tion and real-world social interaction," she said.

At the same time, she stressed that children are rights-holders who cannot simply be excluded from the digital environment, which has become essential for education, communication and access to services.

Isdawati said the challenge is therefore not whether children should be protected online, but how to do so responsibly through stronger digital literacy, better platform accountability, privacy protection and continuous monitoring of the impact on young users.

She cautioned that blanket age bans on social media may offer temporary control but risk oversimplifying a complex issue if not paired with proper safeguards.

"The goal should not be unlimited digital freedom or total restriction, but structured, age-appropriate and developmentally sound digital engagement," she added.

She said protecting children from harm while preserving their rights should be seen as a duty of care shared by parents, educators, policymakers and digital platforms.