



**FILTERS AND BEAUTY: EXPLORING IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AMONG
GHANAIAN WOMEN ON TIKTOK**

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FILTERS AND BEAUTY: EXPLORING IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AMONG
GHANAIAN WOMEN ON TIKTOK

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DECLARATION

I, Eyram Michelle Aku Yorgbe, hereby declare that this project titled “Filters And Beauty: Exploring Identity Construction Among Ghanaian Women On Tiktok” is my original work carried out under the supervision of Dr. Benedine Azanu (PhD). This work has not been submitted, in whole or in part, for the award of any degree or certificate elsewhere. All sources of information and data used in the study have been duly acknowledged in accordance with academic standards.

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CERTIFICATION BY SUPERVISOR

This dissertation has been prepared and presented under my supervision according to the guidelines for supervision and formatting of Project Work laid down by the University of Media, Arts and Communication UniMAC-GIJ.

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Supervisor	Signature	Date
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this study to God, my dearest mummy Peace Ama Penni, Cindy Moyek and Mr. Daniel Arthur.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

“The challenge these days, is to be somewhere, to belong to some particular place, invest oneself in it, draw strength and courage from it, to dwell in a community.”

- bell hooks

This work was completed with the contributions of many incredible individuals in my community. Their support has made my journey of curiosity, growth, and setbacks a rewarding one. “Mutu ni watu” a Swahili proverb meaning “a person is people” reminds us that we all need one another.

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines how women in Ghana use TikTok filters to construct and negotiate their digital identities. While research often focuses on younger users, this study addresses a gap by investigating women aged 35-45 in Ghana. Using hermeneutic phenomenology, the research analyzed semi-structured interviews with eight participants and 28 TikTok videos created during October 2025. Guided by Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory and Symbolic Interactionism, it addressed three objectives: to examine the motivations for filter use, to explore the meanings women attribute to filters, and to examine the factors shaping their engagement. The findings reveal a complex practice where participants use filters not merely for enhancement but as essential tools for social navigation. Filters function symbolically as protective shields against anticipated judgment and as practical sources of confidence, enabling women to feel camera-ready without physical preparation. Three factors shape this use: TikTok's seamless platform design, which makes filters easy to access and normalizes their use as a routine step in content creation; social beauty standards that privilege eurocentric features like lighter skin and smooth complexions; and peer-driven validation networks where women observe and imitate each other to keep up with shared aesthetic norms. The study recommends future research exploring intersectional aspects of commercial versus personal filter use, investigating how filters mediate romantic connections, and examining platform design features that influence women's self-presentation.

Keywords: TikTok, beauty filters, online identity, Ghanaian women, symbolic interactionism, Goffman dramaturgical theory

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

In this chapter, an overview of the research is presented, beginning with the context and background of the study. It then outlines the research problem, the study's aims, and the key questions guiding the investigation. Additionally, the chapter highlights the significance of the research, describes the organization of the following chapters, and concludes with a summary.

1.1 Background of Study

In the era of digital connectivity, user-generated photos and videos drive engagement on platforms like TikTok and Instagram (Kulaga, 2024). These platforms function as environments that extend communication beyond socialization, serving as critical instruments for identity construction and self-presentation. TikTok has emerged as one of the central arenas where individuals curate their identities and establish social status through visual content (Jang, 2023; Marwick, 2010; Cho et al., 2024). A key feature enabling this is the filter, which alters image to create specific visual effects (Papagiannis, 2017; Manovich, 2013). The popularity of filters suggests that these tools tap into specific needs that users are motivated to satisfy (Javornik et al., 2022).

Existing studies show that younger users use filters for identity construction, though usage patterns differ: men use filters to enhance features such as beards and hairlines, while women use filters for skin smoothing and facial reshaping (Maes & de Lenne, 2022; Appel et al., 2023). However, research on filter use has predominantly focused on these younger users, leaving women aged 35–45 underexplored. This study therefore examines how women aged 35–45 in Ghana use TikTok filters to construct identity, exploring their motivations, the meanings they assign to filter use, and how cultural and technological factors shape their filter usage.

According to Bamberg (2011) and Woodward (2004), identity is not a fixed construct but develops through the qualities, symbols, and images with which individuals choose to express themselves. For women specifically, their identities are often shaped by cultural standards that prescribe how they should act, look, and live (Fardouly et al., 2017). However, social media has created new spaces where women can present themselves on their own terms, experimenting with different aspects of self-expression and countering the narrow, stereotypical images that mainstream media and society has long promoted (Perloff, 2014; Bailey et al., 2013). TikTok's filters have gained widespread popularity because they allow users to enhance their appearance quickly and effortlessly through adjustments such as smoothing skin, brightening complexion, or simulating makeup application without requiring additional tools or skills (Chua & Chang, 2016). They are also customizable, allowing users to control the intensity of the effect to align with their personal aesthetic preferences, often reflecting dominant beauty norms, including eurocentric beauty standards (Herman et al., 2025).

In addition, women constitute nearly 60% of TikTok's user base globally (Kemp, 2025). However, the platform's age composition has evolved significantly. While younger users aged 18–24 once dominated TikTok, this group now represents 30.7% of the global user base in 2025, whereas the 25–34 demographic has grown to 35.3%, signaling broader age diversification (DataReportal, 2025). This shift is also evident among women aged 35 and above, who now account for 15.5% of female TikTok users, challenging the perception of the platform as exclusively youth-oriented (Yaguara, 2023). Within the Ghanaian context, 81% of people aged 16 and above use the internet to access TikTok each month, representing approximately 7.95 million users (DataReportal, 2025). Females constitute 59.7% of TikTok users in Ghana, while males account for 40.3% (Start.io, 2025), with women aged 35–44 representing approximately 10% of users (Start.io, 2025). Taken together, these figures suggest

that women in this age group are not merely consuming content but are also actively shaping digital culture on the platform (Dovie et al., 2019).

A strong body of evidence also establishes that filters serve multiple functions in identity construction. They support users' desire for an idealized self, enhance confidence and mood (Chua & Chang, 2016), and enable experimentation with self-presentation in a flexible, semi-private space (Marwick, 2013; Herring et al., 2025). For women aged 35-45, negotiating visible markers of aging distinguishes their use of TikTok filters from that of younger users, who primarily focus on experimenting with aesthetic effects (Dang, 2022). Rather than accepting marginalization in youth-oriented platforms like TikTok, many older women actively claim digital spaces to challenge age-based stereotypes and reframe their visibility online (Xue et al., 2022). In the Ghanaian context, women aged 35-45 use filters in ways that may carry additional layers of meaning. These women negotiate not only global beauty and age standards but also local, social norms around beauty and appropriate behaviour for women of their age (Ahonsi et al., 2019; Clark, 2000; Lambrecht et al., 2018).

Notwithstanding, existing literature establishes that social media promotes narrow beauty standards and unattainable body ideals (Jung, et al., 2022). Constant exposure to highly edited, filtered images on platforms like TikTok contribute to appearance dissatisfaction and low self-esteem (Fardouly et al., 2015; Markey et al., 2024). Nevertheless, it appears that the impact of filter use on women, particularly in the Global South, has been largely overlooked, as existing studies, including those conducted in Africa and Ghana, have predominantly focused on young adults (Lo-Destro, 2024). Given the increasing use of TikTok and its filters among women aged 35 to 45 (Bazile, 2019; Nazworth, 2022), the experiences of this demographic remain largely unexplored. In particular, little is known about how beauty filters interact with local cultural norms, social roles, and communal values in non-Western contexts, highlighting the need for further investigation into how they use filters for identity construction.

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite rising participation of women aged 35-45 on TikTok in Ghana and across Africa, research has yet to examine how they use filters to construct and negotiate identity (Bazile, 2019; Nazworth, 2022). A knowledge gap exists regarding the motivations, meanings, as well as the factors that drive women to use filters on TikTok. This gap is particularly pronounced in Ghana where cultural norms around beauty, aging, and age-appropriate behaviour intersect with global digital practices (Lambrecht et al., 2018). What is at stake is not merely the ways in which these women use TikTok filters, but the meanings they attribute to filters as they navigate identity and visibility within a digital environment largely focused on youth.

In Ghana, beauty is often understood through lenses of motherhood, social respectability, and communal responsibility rather than individualistic expressions (Clark, 2000; Ahonsi et al., 2019). Moreover, filter use in this context intersects with cultural understandings of beauty that incorporate both local Ghanaian values and global digital aesthetics. Thus, women's filter use may serve to negotiate visibility, manage appearance-related concerns, and engage with the youthful, western-centric aesthetics entrenched in TikTok's platform design. Meanwhile, a symbolic annihilation (Gerbner, 1970) occurs in the media through the absence or underrepresentation of certain groups such as women aged 35 to 45, rendering them invisible while emphasizing societal marginalization.

Furthermore, neglecting women aged 35 to 45 in digital discourse risks promoting ageist assumptions that position them as passive or overlooked users (Rosales & Fernández-Ardèvol, 2020), while leaving significant gaps in understanding how filters shape identity across different age groups. This oversight has broader implications for understanding how identity, gender, age, and technology intersect across diverse cultural contexts, challenging Western-centric assumptions about digital beauty practices. Therefore, this study examines how women aged 35 to 45 use TikTok filters to construct their identities. More specifically, how do these

women employ TikTok filters to construct identity? What motivations drive their filter use? What factors intersect in shaping their digital self-presentation practices?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

This study seeks to examine women aged 35-45 in Ghana use TikTok filters to construct and express their identities within a rapidly evolving digital culture. Specifically, the study seeks to understand the motivations behind their filter use, the meanings they attach to appearance modification, and how these practices reflect or challenge prevailing beauty norms in Ghanaian society. By focusing on a demographic that has been largely overlooked in both global and local scholarship, the study aims to provide an understanding of how Ghanaian women engage with TikTok's visual tools to shape their self-presentation and navigate the social expectations surrounding identity and beauty.

1.4 Research Objectives

The objectives that guide this study are:

RO1. To examine the motivations behind use of TikTok filters by women aged 35 – 45 in the construction of their identities.

RO2. To explore the meanings women aged 35- 45 attribute to TikTok filters in relation to their identity.

RO3. To examine factors that influence the ways women aged 35- 45 engage with TikTok filters.

1.5 Research Questions

The study is guided by these research questions:

RQ1. What is the motivation for filter use among women aged 35- 45?

RQ2. What meanings do women aged 35- 45 attribute to TikTok filters?

RQ3. What are the factors shaping participants engagement with TikTok?

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study provides critical insights into how women aged 35 to 45 use TikTok filters to construct identities and navigate culturally specific beauty ideals, contributing to Media and Communication Studies. By focusing on this demographic, the research illuminates how global digital platforms are adapted to reflect Ghanaian social norms and lived experiences (Dovie et al., 2019). The findings contribute to knowledge on digital practices and online literacy, while providing evidence for stakeholders to develop digital literacy initiatives addressing identity, beauty norms, and gender issues online.

1.7 Scope and Limitations

This study focuses on women aged 35-45 in Ghana who use TikTok beauty filters for personal purposes, excluding professional content creators whose filter use is commercially motivated. The Ghanaian context was selected to explore how local social norms shape filter use (Clark, 2000; Lambrecht et al., 2018). Currently, existing Ghanaian research on digital beauty practices focuses on platforms other than TikTok, limiting comparable local literature. While Goffman's dramaturgical theory and Symbolic Interactionism effectively address self-presentation and meaning-making, these frameworks cannot fully explain psychological body-image processes or broader structural power dynamics that may influence filter use.

1.8 Organization of Chapters

The study consists of five chapters. Chapter One presents the research background, identifies the problem, and outlines the objectives, research questions, significance, and scope. Chapter Two reviews literature and theories on social media, identity, TikTok filters, and beauty. Chapter Three describes the research methods, participants, data collection, and analysis. Chapter Four presents and discusses the findings. Chapter Five summarizes the study, draws conclusions, notes limitations, and offers recommendations.

1.9 Chapter Summary

The chapter has presented the background, research problem, objectives, and research questions, providing a foundation for the review of related literature in the next chapter. It has also highlighted the study's significance. The following chapter reviews the existing literature and theoretical frameworks that inform this research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

In this section, existing scholarship on filters, identity construction, and beauty is critically discussed. It examines research along three axes: filters, identity, and beauty, and introduces the theoretical perspectives guiding the analysis: Goffman's Self-Presentation Theory and Symbolic Interactionism. The present review also identifies and highlights existing research gaps.

2.1 Literature Review

2.1.1 TikTok Platform and Filter System

TikTok is a social networking service owned by ByteDance, characterized by short-form, visually oriented content that functions as a space for creative expression and identity construction (Marwick, 2010; Cho et al., 2024). TikTok videos frequently combine filters, music, sound effects, and other features, allowing users to curate identities, personal styles, and modes of self-presentation (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Lahooti et al., 2023). While TikTok is often stereotyped as youth-oriented, the participation of middle-aged users challenges this notion, indicating that the platform facilitates identity work across age groups (Ng & Indran, 2023). Central to TikTok's capabilities is its integrated filter system. These filters include enhancement tools (skin-smoothing, brightening), transformation features (virtual makeup, age-modification), and environmental adjustments (lighting, backgrounds) that enable users to curate their appearance and content (Ibáñez-Sánchez et al., 2022; Caravelli et al., 2025).

However, filters are not neutral tools. They limit what appearances users can achieve, promote specific ideas about what is beautiful, and favour some users over others in their ability to enhance their appearance online (Barta & Andalibi, 2021). Filter use varies across cultural contexts, with users in different regions engaging with filters in ways shaped by local beauty

standards and cultural tensions between Western and traditional ideals (Herman et al., 2025; Nguyen, 2024). While some users apply filters to conform to dominant beauty norms, particularly eurocentric features (Hussain et al., 2025), filters can also function as sites where users negotiate features shaped by gendered and regional expectations. This interaction between platform architecture and cultural norms reveals a fundamental tension in identity work on TikTok, where users exercise agency in selecting and applying filters while platform features and social expectations simultaneously guide and limit these choices.

2.1.2 Culture and Social Media

Herring et al. (2025) examined filter use cross-culturally by interviewing young adult users from China, India, South Korea, Spain, and the United States. Using Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor for self-presentation their study revealed that filter practices vary across social relationships and cultural contexts, with users strategically adjusting filter types based on audience and social distance. Beauty filters dominate public presentations, while silly filters appear in intimate contexts, demonstrating that filter use reflects careful social negotiation rather than simple self-expression. More significantly, the authors identified a pronounced East-West cultural divide. For East Asian women, particularly Korean and Chinese participants, beauty filters function as an almost default mode of public presentation, integrated seamlessly into everyday self-presentation on platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok. The authors note that Koreans favoured minimal, natural enhancements, while Chinese users embraced more dramatic transformations with enlarged eyes and sculpted features. In contrast, Western users more frequently deploy playful filters in public contexts, treating enhancement tools as sites for humour rather than routine beautification. East Asian practices show different cultural values: using beauty filters heavily signals social skill and competence rather than inauthenticity, contrasting with Western views that see heavy filter use as potentially inauthentic. However, this study focuses only on young adults from Asia, Europe, and

America, leaving non-Western regions, including Africa, largely unexplored, where filter use and beauty norms may differ.

Interestingly, Ghanaian beauty standards reflect ongoing conflicts between indigenous values, colonial legacies, and global influences, with lighter skin tones persistently associated with higher social status and attractiveness (Hunter, 2011; Blay, 2011). Within this context of competing beauty ideals, TikTok filters, often designed to lighten skin and enhance eurocentric features, become spaces where Ghanaian women negotiate between local social values and platform beauty standards, promoting colourist hierarchies by normalizing lighter skin as the standard for digital self-presentation (Doh et al., 2025). For women 35-45, these pressures take on additional complexity. Clark (2000) demonstrates that women's identities in urban Ghana are understood through roles as mothers, traders, and community members rather than solely through individualistic ideals. This cultural framework is important for understanding filter use in Ghana, as it suggests that women's digital self-presentation may be shaped by communal expectations and social roles rather than individual aesthetic preferences alone. This suggests filter use among Ghanaian women aged 35 to 45 may involve different considerations and carry different social meanings than documented in existing research, highlighting the need to examine filter use from a cultural and social perspective focusing on local beauty standards and collective meaning rather than individual psychology.

2.1.3 Women's Identity Construction through filter use

Filters present a core tension in how women construct their digital identities. On one hand, they enable self-expression and experimentation; on the other, they impose certain beauty standards that restrict real autonomy. Marghitu and O'Meara (2024) examine this tensions through their qualitative analysis of facial beauty filters on TikTok and Instagram, arguing that these tools enable users to explore gender fluidity beyond traditional categories. Their case studies demonstrate how image-focused platforms create spaces for self-reflective expression

that challenge binary gender norms. However, their analysis reveals a troubling contradiction: the very technologies meant to liberate expression may simultaneously restrict it. Filters that smooth skin, enlarge eyes, and sculpt facial features reinforce Eurocentric beauty ideals and demand continuous self-maintenance, particularly for cisgender women. This raises a critical question about how identity experimentation can be meaningful when the available options are designed toward specific beauty standards. The study also assumes that users experience these effects uniformly, which may overlook individual or subcultural variations in interpretation.

El-kssiri and Elalamy (2024) approach these tensions differently, framing filters through Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque. They highlight how filters provide temporary liberation from everyday identities, allowing users to playfully embody celebrities, supermodels, or political figures. Their focus on humor and impersonation suggests that even within structured templates, users find space for creative expression. However, their analysis also confirms Marghitu and O'Meara's observation that escape from platform-embedded norms remains limited. The key difference lies in interpretation: one foregrounds restriction, the other emphasizes playful negotiation within boundaries. Both studies rely heavily on case studies from similar contexts, which may limit understanding of how these dynamics operate elsewhere.

2.1.4 Age and Digital Self-Presentation

The relationship between age, social media use, and appearance consciousness among women has received growing scholarly attention in recent years, though middle-aged women remain an overlooked group (Rodgers et al., 2024). Akram et al. (2023) examined the relationship between perceptions of aging, appearance-related social media consciousness, and self-perception among middle-aged professional women using survey-based analysis. The authors found that aging perceptions correlated significantly with negative self-perception,

with married women displaying heightened appearance awareness compared to unmarried women, and postgraduate women demonstrating higher appearance concerns, though education didn't alter overall self-perception. These patterns indicate middle-aged women navigate digital spaces with considerations extending beyond the identity experimentation characteristic of younger users, incorporating aging visibility concerns, established social roles, and culturally specific age-appropriate femininity expectations. The authors assert social media engagement amplifies appearance concerns and aging anxieties, reinforcing beauty standard pressures and influencing online self-presentation. However, the study's focus on academic/professional women limits understanding across diverse occupational contexts and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Wiesbrock's (2021) discussion of age differences in social media behaviour highlights how comfort online, personal disclosure, and post-related reflection vary across the lifespan. The study used a survey method to analyse participants' self-esteem, comfort with online activity, degree of disclosure, and subsequent reflections on their posts. According to the author, older adults' confidence in navigating digital spaces is closely tied to both self-esteem and the likelihood of later questioning content they shared, indicating a more cautious approach shaped by limited familiarity with these platforms. By contrast, younger and middle-aged users demonstrate a stronger alignment between their comfort with social media and the frequency or depth of what they share, reflecting familiarity and ease across multiple platforms. Wiesbrock suggests that middle-aged adults' higher levels of post-related reflection may result from managing multiple social roles, complicating how they present themselves online. These patterns reveal that online identity construction is influenced by age-specific experiences, social responsibilities, and levels of digital literacy, rather than by platform features alone. The author concludes that engagement with social media is a dynamic process, shaped by both

personal negotiation and broader age-related trends in digital interaction, and the survey method allows for broad patterns across age groups.

2.1.5 Impact of TikTok filters on body image

TikTok filters allow expression of identity and experimentation with self-presentation while also influencing perceptions of the body and standards of beauty. Doh et al. (2025) position beauty filters as technologies of governance that actively shape and enforce beauty standards based on race, gender, and ability. These filters operate by making eurocentric features like lighter skin, enlarged eyes, and narrower noses the default enhancements, effectively constructing these characteristics as universal beauty ideals. According to the authors, this technological framing is particularly problematic because it presents these modifications as user choices and empowerment tools, obscuring how the underlying algorithms systematically guide users toward conformity with narrow beauty norms. The authors note that TikTok filter naming conventions reveal how language re-emphasizes these standards. Names like princess makeup, pure eyes, and prettiest construct associations between beauty and idealized youth, innocence, and purity, creating an order of desirability where smooth skin, facial symmetry, and delicate features become markers of attractiveness. The authors argue that users may believe they are freely experimenting with appearance, yet the available options consistently channel them toward beauty ideals that align with racialized and gendered norms, intensifying self-surveillance and creating a disciplining effect where technology becomes the mediator of beauty.

This technological influence translates into measurable psychological effects. Caravelli et al. (2025) examined 397 undergraduate TikTok users for two weeks to investigate how different types of facial filters relate to body image outcomes. According to the authors, both appearance-enhancing and goofy filters connect with body image concerns when examined separately. However, when analyzed together, only appearance-enhancing filters maintain

significance, suggesting different psychological impacts between filter types. The authors situate their findings within the tripartite influence model, arguing that filters can replicate the comparison process seen in Body Dysmorphic Disorder, as users instantaneously generate and compare themselves to algorithmically enhanced versions, potentially accelerating the cycle of anxiety and dissatisfaction. However, the study's cross-sectional design means it remains unclear whether individuals with pre-existing body image concerns use filters more frequently, or whether filter use generates these concerns over time.

Anani et al. (2024) provide crucial evidence from the Ghanaian context, examining beauty filter use among university students and revealing patterns that both align with and complicate global findings. The authors found that Ghanaian university students use beauty filters extensively, with female students demonstrating significantly higher usage compared to their male counterparts and reporting decreased self-acceptance. This gender disparity demonstrates how digital technologies perpetuate traditional gender roles even within Ghanaian educational contexts, providing empirical evidence that excessive use of beauty filters can significantly alter self-perception and identity formation among young Ghanaian women. The authors note that there is a paradoxical relationship between education and filter use: higher education levels, particularly among bachelor's and postgraduate students, are associated with increased engagement with beauty filters rather than decreased use. This finding suggests that educational pursuits may influence digital behaviours, possibly due to increased exposure to social media and digital technologies within academic environments, challenging assumptions that higher education necessarily leads to more critical engagement with beauty standards.

To summarise, the literature demonstrates that TikTok beauty filters shape digital identity through technological, psychological, and social mechanisms (Barta & Andalibi, 2021; Doh et al., 2025; Marghitu & O'Meara, 2024; Herring et al., 2025), with filters influencing

body image through feedback loops between platform design and internalized ideals (Caravelli et al., 2025; Wang, 2023). Age mediates this engagement, as women negotiate concerns about aging and social roles (Wiesbrock, 2021; Akram et al., 2023). Two gaps emerge: first, women between 35-45 remain underrepresented in research; second, scholarship concentrates on the Global North, limiting insight into how non-Western contexts shape filter use (Blay, 2011; Clark, 2000). These gaps highlight the need to study filter use among women aged 35-45 in Ghana.

2. 2 Theoretical Framework

2.2.1 Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory

Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory conceptualizes identity as formed and expressed through social interaction, where individuals adjust behaviour according to context and audience expectations, managing impressions to align with social norms (Ytreberg, 2002; Lupinetti, 2015). This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding how women aged 35-45 use beauty filters on TikTok to construct identities that are both personally meaningful and socially intelligible. Central to this framework is the distinction between frontstage and backstage behaviour. The frontstage encompasses public performance, where individuals carefully regulate actions and appearance to convey competence, respectability, and social acceptance (Goffman, 1959). On TikTok, frontstage performances are curated through filters enabling participants to project images aligning with beauty standards. The backstage represents relative privacy where individuals prepare and refine identity aspects before public disclosure (Hochschild, 2019; Hogan, 2010; Duguay, 2016). For women 35-45 on TikTok, age adds complexity to impression management as they negotiate age-appropriate self-presentation on youth-dominated platforms. Filters function as frontstage props, technological tools enabling them to meet platform beauty norms while navigating age-related visibility, requiring

more deliberate construction than younger users whose youthful appearance naturally aligns with platform aesthetics.

Building on Goffman's theory, recent scholarship examines digital identity management. Hogan (2010) emphasizes online platforms enable selective self-presentation, highlighting intentionality in digital performance. Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) argue appearance modification online extends these strategies. Zeng (2023) conceptualizes an online pseudo-backstage where private self aspects are controlled yet revealed, bridging frontstage and backstage dynamics, showing identity is dynamically constructed and continuously negotiated through social relationships and technological affordances. Within this framework, beauty filters function as digital props that both enable and constrain performances. Unlike traditional props, filters are algorithmically designed, embedding particular beauty standards into default settings, raising questions about user agency. Are women expressing chosen aesthetic identities or conforming to technologically-mediated beauty norms? For women aged 35-45, filters smoothing skin or reducing aging signs may enable platform participation while supporting ageist beauty standards equating beauty with youthfulness.

However, Goffman's theory has limitations. Raffel (2013) argues it underestimates individual agency, focusing too heavily on performance at self-determination's expense. Women's filter choices may reflect personal aesthetic preferences and creative experimentation, not merely reactive performances. Additionally, Goffman's Western-developed theory requires adaptation for the Ghanaian context where beauty ideals incorporate local preferences regarding skin tone, features, and adornment differing from global beauty standards encoded in commercial filters. Women aged 35-45 navigate multiple, sometimes contradictory beauty standards, making their performances sites of complex negotiation. For this study, Goffman's theory provides conceptual and methodological direction. TikTok content represents frontstage performances, curated and filtered presentations for public

consumption, while in-depth interviews access backstage experiences including motivations, decision-making processes, and personal reflections. These reveal why participants choose specific filters, what beauty standards they feel accountable to, tensions they navigate between authenticity and audience expectations, and how age and cultural context shape their strategies.

2.2 .2 Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionist theory, based on Mead's (1934) work and advanced by Blumer (1969), holds that social reality is shaped through interaction and shared interpretation. Individuals participate in ongoing processes of meaning-making, where identity emerges through interpretation, negotiation, and the use of shared symbols. The self is not static but fluid, continuously adjusted in response to social cues, cultural norms etc (Charon, 2009; Stryker, 1980). Individuals draw upon language, gestures, and symbolic resources to communicate who they are and negotiate how they are understood, positioning identity as both socially and personally enacted.

Snow (2001) extends symbolic interactionism by emphasizing human agency, arguing that individuals actively interpret, modify, and sometimes resist shared symbols. On TikTok, filters serve as symbolic tools whose meanings are negotiated between individual creativity, audience reception, and cultural norms. Chen et al. (2020) demonstrate that technology carries both intrinsic and symbolic meanings. While intrinsic meaning reflects designed features, symbolic meaning emerges through user interpretation within social contexts. The same technological feature can be experienced differently depending on user intentions, social interactions, and situational context. For middle-aged Accra-based women, filters may carry symbolic meanings distinct from those of younger or Western users, representing not just aesthetic enhancement but also strategies for age-appropriate visibility, cultural beauty ideals, or social respectability. Applied to filters, this means that the technological feature of skin smoothing carries intrinsic functionality, but its symbolic meaning; whether it represents self-

care, vanity, or creative expression, arises through user interpretation within specific social and cultural contexts.

Beauty is understood as a socially constructed symbol whose meanings emerge through interaction and shared interpretation rather than as objective quality (Reischer & Koo, 2004). For middle-aged women on TikTok, filters represent complex symbolic negotiations simultaneously referencing global beauty ideals encoded in platform design, local Ghanaian aesthetics privileging specific skin tones and features, age-appropriate presentation norms, and personal creative expression. The symbolic meaning of a skin-smoothing filter cannot be predetermined; it emerges through how users interpret it, how audiences respond, and how cultural values shape these interpretations, revealing that beauty is actively negotiated by users bringing diverse cultural frameworks to their filter practices rather than imposed by platforms. Together, Goffman's theory and symbolic interactionism provide complementary frameworks: Goffman explains how women perform identity through filter use as frontstage props, while symbolic interactionism illuminates how meanings are constructed through social interaction.

2.2 Chapter Summary

This chapter critically discussed existing literature on filters, identity construction, and beauty, outlining how previous studies have approached these themes. It also introduced Goffman's Self-Presentation Theory and Symbolic Interactionism as the theoretical frameworks guiding this study.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

In this chapter, the research methods and procedures for data collection and analysis are outlined, alongside the systematic measures adopted to guarantee the trustworthiness, reliability, and validity of the findings.

3.1 Research Philosophy and Paradigm

This study is grounded in an interpretivist research philosophy, situated within the constructivist paradigm. Interpretivism assumes that social reality is not fixed or objective but is instead socially constructed through human interaction and interpretation (Schwandt, 2000; Crotty, 1998). From this perspective, meaning is produced through individuals' lived experiences and the ways they make sense of their social worlds. Ontologically, the study assumes the existence of multiple realities, as individuals may experience and interpret the same phenomenon in different ways (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Epistemologically, knowledge is understood as subjective and co-constructed through interaction between the researcher and participants rather than discovered as an objective truth (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). These assumptions align with qualitative inquiry, where understanding emerges through engagement with participants' perspectives and interpretations. Creswell and Poth (2018, p. 22) similarly emphasize that qualitative research is underpinned by the belief that meaning is constructed through interaction and that researchers seek to understand participants' subjective experiences within specific social and cultural contexts. Adopting an interpretivist stance therefore provides a good philosophical foundation for exploring how women use TikTok filters to construct their identity.

3.2 Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative research design to explore how the participants use TikTok filters. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to examine participants' meanings, interpretations, and experiences in depth (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The study was exploratory in nature, allowing patterns and insights to emerge from participants' accounts rather than being imposed through predetermined categories. This design supported an in-depth examination of how TikTok filters are used, understood, and negotiated in relation to their identities. The qualitative design informed key methodological choices, including the use of hermeneutic phenomenology as the guiding methodological approach, snowball sampling to recruit women aged 35–45 who actively use TikTok filters, and the combination of semi-structured interviews and video analysis as data collection methods. Interviews enabled participants to articulate their personal experiences and motivations, while video analysis provided direct access to filter use as they occurred on the platform. Together, these methods provided a comprehensive understanding of filter use by combining interview data with observed uses of filters.

3.2.1 Hermeneutic Phenomenological Method

This study utilised a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to explore how women aged 35-45 experience and interpret their use of TikTok filters in constructing identity. Hermeneutic phenomenology, rooted in Heidegger (1962) and developed by Gadamer (1975), aligns with a constructivist paradigm where meanings are co-constructed through interpretation rather than objectively discovered (Laverty, 2003; Finlay, 2009), making it suited for understanding how these women interpret filter use in relation to identity and beauty. Unlike Husserlian descriptive phenomenology which seeks to bracket researcher assumptions to access the essence of experience, hermeneutic phenomenology recognizes that interpretation is always situated within the researcher's cultural, historical, and experiential context

(Gadamer, 1975; Van Manen, 1990). The researcher does not claim neutrality but engages in reflexive interpretation, acknowledging how personal background, theoretical frameworks, and cultural positioning shape understanding of participants experiences. Within this framework, researcher and participant are collaborative partners who jointly construct meaning through dialogue (Finlay, 2002). As Rubin and Rubin (2012) note, each interviewee is an individual with distinct experience, knowledge, and perspective not interchangeable with anyone else, emphasizing the value of individual interpretive accounts. The hermeneutic circle, the iterative process of moving between parts and whole, between understanding and interpretation, guided the analytical approach (Gadamer, 1975). By foregrounding participants lived experiences while recognizing the researcher's role in shaping analytical insights, the hermeneutic approach enabled deep exploration of how participants make meaning of their filter use.

3.2.2 Platform Selection

This research was conducted on TikTok by examining videos created and shared by the study participants. The platform served a dual role: first, as the digital space where they actively engaged with filters; and second, as the site of data collection, where their publicly shared videos were observed and analyzed. Ghana was selected as the geographical focus because women aged 35-45 are increasingly engaging with TikTok across the country, and the context was familiar to the researcher. The snowball sampling approach subsequently led to participants from various regions across Ghana. All data collection occurred online, including the analysis of participants' TikTok content and follow-up interviews via audio recorded WhatsApp interviews.

3.2.3 Sample Size

Sampling refers to the process of selecting participants from a target population (Oribhabor & Anyanwu, 2019). This study employed snowball sampling to recruit eight women aged 35–45 who actively used TikTok filters and were willing to share their

experiences. All participants had post-secondary education and were engaged in professional or skilled occupations and are therefore described as elite women. Initial participants who met the inclusion criteria were asked to recommend other women within the same age range who also used TikTok filters, making this approach suitable for accessing a specific, experience-based population through trusted social networks (Browne, 2005; Sulaiman-Hill & Thompson, 2011). Consistent with hermeneutic phenomenology’s emphasis on depth rather than breadth (Van Manen, 1990; Gadamer, 1997), a small sample of eight participants was sufficient for achieving rich, detailed accounts. This sample size aligns with Peterson’s (2019) recommendation of five to eight participants for small-scope qualitative studies. Although not predetermined, variation in participants’ occupations, geographic locations, and educational backgrounds emerged during recruitment, enriching the analysis by reflecting multiple contexts of TikTok filter use (Nelson & Gilbert, 2024). The snowball sampling process further supported openness and trust during interviews.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics and Interview Dates of Participants

Participant	Pseudonym	Age	Occupation	Interview Date
1	Jess	38	Marketing Executive	December 1, 2025
2	Ewoe	37	Trader	December 1, 2025
3	Yvonne	35	Student	December 2, 2025
4	Maame Yaa	37	Nurse	December 2, 2025
5	Beatrice	36	Entrepreneur	December 5, 2025
6	Flora	38	Media Personnel	December 5, 2025
7	Lorrie	35	Corporate Governance	December 4, 2025
8	Ursula	39	Secretary	December 4, 2025

3.3 Data Collection Method

This study employed a qualitative data collection strategy involving both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were generated through semi-structured interviews with

women aged 35–45, while secondary data consisted of participants’ existing TikTok videos that visibly demonstrated filter use. This combination enabled the study to capture both participants’ articulated experiences and their everyday filter practices as they occurred on the platform.

3.3.1 Pilot Testing

A pilot study was conducted to assess the interview guide’s clarity, structure, and effectiveness. Pilot testing in qualitative research refines instruments, identifies problematic questions, and ensures data collection can generate relevant, meaningful data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saunders et al., 2019). Three participants meeting the inclusion criteria completed preliminary interviews using the semi-structured guide planned for the main study. This enabled evaluation of how participants understood and responded to questions, and assessment of interview flow and sequencing (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2018). Pilot insights revealed participants did not identify as middle-aged despite meeting the age criteria, referring to themselves simply as women. This prompted revision of the study title to align with how participants identified themselves. The pilot also identified needed modifications to interview questions, leading to adjustments in wording and order to enhance clarity and coherence (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Pilot data were used exclusively to refine the interview guide and methodology and excluded from final analysis, following established qualitative research practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.3.2 Data Set

Following the pilot testing and refinement of the research instruments, the final dataset for this study comprised two sources: transcripts from eight semi-structured interviews conducted in December 2025 and 28 TikTok videos created by participants during October 2025. This method allowed flexibility in probing individual experiences while maintaining consistency across interviews (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Purposive sampling guided the video selection process, enabling the inclusion of videos most relevant for supporting and enhancing

the study's findings (Patton, 2015). All 28 videos selected were based on visible filter use and analyzed for filter types, appearance transformations, accompanying captions, and recurring patterns in identity presentation. The interview transcripts provided participants' own interpretations and experiences with filter use, offering insights into their motivations, perceptions, and the meanings they attach to their TikTok filter usage.

3.4 Data Analysis Methods

Data was analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), a systematic method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data. This approach was selected for its flexibility in interpreting rich qualitative data from both interviews and video content. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase process, which includes familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. All eight interviews were transcribed verbatim using Turboscribe, an online voice-to-text transcription app. The transcripts were read multiple times to ensure full immersion in the data, and initial codes were generated using Microsoft Word, with color-coding to distinguish patterns across the dataset. Segments related to filter use and identity expression were systematically coded, and related codes were collated into broader categories to identify overarching patterns. Themes were reviewed iteratively against both coded extracts and the entire dataset, with some refined, merged, or split to accurately reflect participants' experiences. Video analysis followed a similar open-coding approach, documenting filter types, behavioural patterns, and non-verbal responses. Findings from both data sources were integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding of participants' filter practices and identity construction. This triangulation strengthened the validity of the findings by capturing behaviours not always verbalized in interviews. Direct quotes from participants were incorporated throughout the findings to ground the analysis in their own words.

3.4.1 Interview Analysis

Interviews were conducted through WhatsApp audio calls between 1st and 5th December 2025. WhatsApp was selected due to its accessibility and familiarity among participants. With informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and lasted between 20 and 60 minutes, averaging approximately 45 minutes. A semi-structured format allowed flexibility for probing and follow-up questions, enabling participants to articulate their understandings of TikTok filter use (Kvale, 2006; Hammersley, 2017). Analysis followed a systematic process of preparation, organization, reduction, and interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rather than applying predefined categories, themes emerged through sustained engagement with participants' narratives, while the interview guide provided initial direction. Transcripts were read closely and repeatedly, with analytical pauses between readings to allow patterns and meanings to surface.

Several recurring ideas became apparent: participants' emphasis on maintaining a polished appearance, references to convenience, heightened awareness of aging and facial changes, and use of filters as substitutes for physical preparation such as applying makeup. These recurring ideas informed broader thematic categories discussed in the findings chapter. Following theme identification, interpretive analysis examined how participants' accounts corresponded with, or diverged from, patterns in their TikTok videos. This comparative process was central to understanding how verbal reflections aligned with visual practices on the platform. The interview method suited this study by aligning with symbolic interactionist and Goffmanian perspectives, providing access to participants' subjective meanings, interpretive frameworks, and self-presentation strategies in digital spaces (Carter & Lamoreaux, 2023; Vassenden & Mangset, 2024).

3.4.2 Video Analysis

Video analysis complemented the in-depth interviews by examining how participants presented themselves visually in their videos on TikTok (Bryda & Costa, 2023; Harvey, 2021). Twenty-eight videos were purposively selected from participants' TikTok pages, providing direct visual access to filter use, facial expressions, and body language relevant to the research questions. . With informed consent, videos were accessed without prior notification to reduce reactivity and enable observation of routine, unprompted platform behavior. Analysis followed an inductive open-coding approach, deriving meaning from sustained engagement with visual material rather than predefined categories. Each video was viewed multiple times with intervals between viewings to allow patterns to emerge.

Recurring visual patterns became apparent: consistent use of beauty-enhancing filters, particularly skin-smoothing and brightening effects such as Flawless Skin and Natural Glow; frequent smiling and positive affect; and performative body language characterized by deliberate posing, expressive gestures, and camera orientation, suggesting awareness of audience visibility. Coding focused exclusively on visual elements. Comments, captions, hashtags, background settings, other individuals, external audio, and content unrelated to filter use were excluded. By examining existing videos rather than requesting produced content, the analysis captured routine filter practices within participants' everyday TikTok engagement, minimizing performance shaped by researcher intervention and strengthening authenticity of observed behaviors (Gioia, 2021; Marroun & Young, 2024).

3.5 Validity and Reliability

To ensure credibility, all interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim, enabling accurate representation of participants' accounts. Triangulation was achieved by analyzing both interview data and TikTok video content. Direct quotations were incorporated throughout findings to allow readers to assess the fit between themes and

participants' words. The researcher maintained reflexivity throughout, acknowledging her positionality and its potential influence on interpretation.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Media, Arts and Communication's DRID before commencing fieldwork. To protect participants' identities, all were assigned code names: Jess, Yvonne, Ewoe, Maame Yaa, Beatrice, Flora, Lorrie, and Ursula. Real names and identifying information were removed from all transcripts and materials. All audio recordings, transcripts, and field notes are stored securely in a password-protected folder on the researcher's laptop, accessible only to the researcher. Files were coded to further protect identities, and no personal information is shared with third parties. The researcher remained attentive to participants comfort throughout interviews, and no distress was reported during or after data collection.

3.7 Informed Consent

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before interviews (Manti & Licari, 2018). Participants were informed of the research aims, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. They also granted permission for the researcher to access their TikTok profiles for video analysis, though the specific timing of observations was not disclosed to maintain authenticity of their online behavior. Participation was voluntary, and no compensation was provided.

3.8 Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the qualitative methodology, data collection methods, analytical framework, and ethical considerations. The next chapter presents the findings.

CHAPTER FOUR

PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

4.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the thematic analysis of data collected for the study. It focuses on interpreting the responses from eight participants and 28 TikTok videos to answer the research questions. The analysis, guided by Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory (1959) and Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969), explores the key themes and sub-themes derived from the data, offering insights into how women in Ghana use TikTok filters to construct and negotiate digital identity. Each section links the findings directly to the study's research questions, providing critical interpretations informed by the study's theory.

RQ1. What motivates women's use of TikTok filters?

RQ2. What meanings do women attribute to TikTok filters?

RQ3. What are the factors shaping participants engagement with TikTok?

4.1 FINDINGS

This section outlines the participants' responses in line with the study's research questions. As explained in the methodology, all responses have been anonymized and coded to meet the ethical requirements of the research.

4.1.1 Motivations for Filter Use Among Women

Research question one (1) sought to understand the motivations driving filter use among the participants. The thematic analysis identified two major themes: filters as tools for curated identity, and managing age-related changes in appearance.

4.1.2 Filters as Tools for Curated Identity

Filter use among participants was a strategic choice for managing online identity rather than casual experimentation. Participants described multiple functions of filters: as substitutes for physical preparation, as enhancement tools to make content more visually appealing, and as features that influenced audience engagement. Jess articulated the first purpose clearly:

So, I wanted to send a video to a friend, but I wasn't polished enough, for my own liking because if I put anything online it has to look a certain way... usually when I'm going out of course I will do my makeup, my hair and everything will be nice, so, I wanted to send a video and I wasn't in my ready mood, so I used the filter of course to polish my image up before I sent it across... Since then, I started using filters because for me, it's easier and it helps me maintain that image I've created online for myself (Jess, personal communication, December 1st, 2025).

Similarly, Flora described filters as enhancement tools that improved her appearance while maintaining authenticity, selecting specific filters that refined her look without drastically altering it:

...So, I often use filters like bold glamour, soft beauty, natural glow and sometimes smooth skin or vibe, those are those are the filters I use for enhancements. Without it making me look like a different person for my videos (Flora, personal communication, December 5th, 2025).

Other views expressed included:

"... it makes my videos, my face glow... I like how they end after using filters... It gives my videos life, actually, because without using them, it's like the whole thing is dull... You feel like if you don't use filters, your natural pictures become very dull. Some of the filters, they add colour, like vibrant colours to my pictures and videos, you know (Ewoe, personal communication, December 1st, 2025).

"...the first time I used a filter on TikTok was because I was having this kind of blemish on my face. And I wanted to post something. It had been a while since I updated my profile. So, at that moment, I wanted to post something to engage with my followers. And then I used the filter and luckily it was able to cover up my blemish, since then I have continued using filters (Yvonne, personal communication, December 2nd, 2025).

Beatrice’s experience, however, highlighted a different aspect of filter use. She noticed that filters affected how people responded to her videos on TikTok.

“... when I used to post my old videos without the filters, people would normally not engage with it because they are looking at an old face. Nothing is attractive about it. But when I still use filters on my face, sometimes just because somebody thinks that’s my natural colour or that’s my natural face, it makes them to come to my DM and my comment section and then they will also be commenting on whatever I am saying. So, the filter alone attracts. Somebody is scrolling and they just see like a fair face, maybe some lipstick. Meanwhile, it’s not my face, but they will stay and watch my videos...

(Beatrice, personal communication. December 5th, 2025).

Additionally, Maame Yaa described filters as serving both aesthetic and entertainment purposes: So, with the filter...I think I just wanted to explore. I just wanted to see what it looked like. I think it was really like the one with the dog ears, yeah, and other ones that would brighten your skin or smoothen it. So, I only use it for laughs. It was actually kind of fun (Maame Yaa, personal communication, December 2nd, 2025).

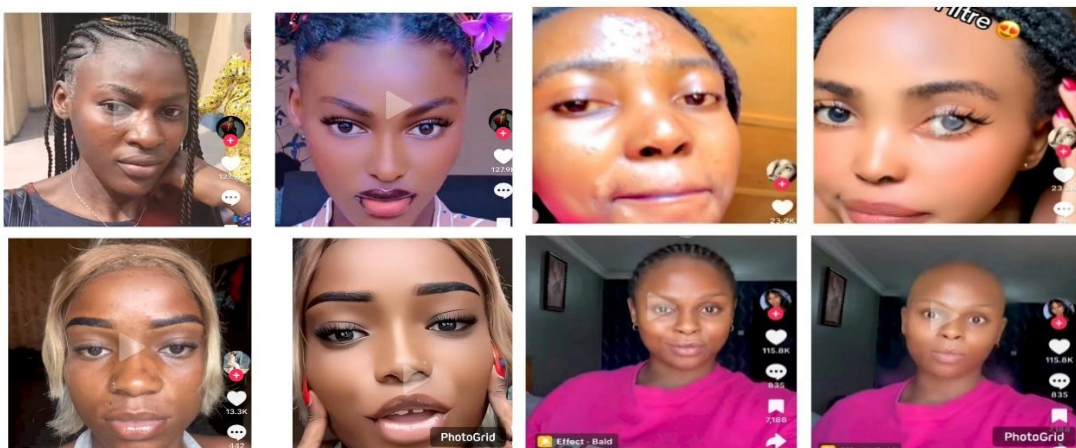


Figure 1. TikTok Beauty Filter Effects

Note. Comparison frames from selected participants’ TikTok videos showing unfiltered faces on the left and filtered faces on the right. Filters applied include *Flawless Skin* and the *Bald*

filter, demonstrating typical effects such as even complexion and feature alteration through hair removal. December 2025. Used with permission.

4.1.3 Age-related Motivation for filter use

Participants were highly conscious of their age on TikTok, especially on a platform that prioritizes youthful appearances. Seven out of the eight women interviewed highlighted minimizing visible signs of aging as a key reason for using filters. Ewoe expressed this concern directly, stating:

... there are a lot of young people there on TikTok, you understand? So, and with my age, I have started getting some wrinkles. They are not that visible, but it's coming a little. So I have to use skin smoothing to help me smoothing my face. Okay. So to look younger and keep up (Ewoe, personal communication, December 1st, 2025).

I am 36 years old, let me use filter to cover something? I think that is more reason why. Because, if you look at some of us who are growing, our faces are like younger people coming. So, if you don't use the filter, they will see all your dark spots on your face. So, the filter is really helpful. So, I think my age people, when you come and you see those of us who are my age, we use that a lot. Because we have lots of things to hide on our face (Beatrice, personal communication. December 5th, 2025).

Other participants linked age-related concerns not only to wrinkles but also to tiredness, work demands, and the need to appear refreshed and confident online.

At my age I am more conscious about looking tired or having visible lines... maybe I am coming from work or something looking so exhausted so using my filters it kind of helped me feel confidence without needing to glam up or put on makeup (Flora, personal communication, December 5th, 2025).

So, I think with my age, I have a little wrinkle. So, most times, I need it to smoothen my face and also give me a little, you know, bright or glow...depending on my mood (Ursula, personal communication,2025).

4.1.4 Discussion

The findings reveal that participants actively construct their digital identities through filters rather than merely concealing perceived flaws. However, this construction operates within rigid parameters that privilege youth and eurocentric features. Analysis of participants' TikTok videos provided behavioural confirmation, showing that beauty-enhancing filters such as Glow X Pro, Smart Makeup, Bold Glamour, and Natural Glow were used in 28 of 28 videos, confirming that enhancement has become participants' default practice rather than an occasional choice. The universal use of beauty-enhancing filters demonstrates deliberate identity work, where filters function as foundational, not optional, components of online self-definition. Participants framed this practice as strategic self-presentation to "maintain that image I have created online," yet simultaneously described their unfiltered selves as "dull" and possessing "things to hide." This reveals identity construction through negation: an acceptable digital self is achieved by technologically erasing perceived imperfections rather than affirming one's authentic being. Age emerged as the central axis structuring this process. Participants explicitly positioned visible aging as incompatible with legitimate platform participation, framing wrinkles and tiredness as deficits requiring correction to "keep up" in a youth-dominated space. Age is thus not a background factor but a defining condition of their digital performance. From Goffman's perspective, filters are the essential frontstage props for managing this visibility. However, the performance exceeds mere impression management. As Beatrice noted, "it's not my face" but "the filter alone attracts" engagement, an acknowledgment that the validated identity is a technologically mediated ideal, not their real self. This tension aligns with Rodgers et al.'s (2024) link between aging perceptions and

negative self-perception, and extends Akram et al.'s (2023) finding that platform environments amplify age anxiety. Here, age operates as the key lens through which participants assess their legitimacy and desirability. Consequently, digital identity construction is not a playful experimentation but a compensatory practice shaped by the need to navigate age-related stigma, reinforcing platform norms that position youth as the standard for belonging.

4.2 Meanings participants attribute to TikTok Filters

Research Question Two examined the meanings participants attributed to TikTok filters. Two primary meanings emerged: filters as shields of protection and filters as confidence-building tools. Participants described filters as protective barriers that shield them from social judgment about visible imperfections such as scars and blemishes. Additionally, participants positioned filters as sources of self-assurance that enable them to feel presentable and capable of engaging online. Yvonne captured this clearly when she stated:

...filters remove all these kinds of impurities on your skin. So, at least when you post it, you don't have to show that kind of inferiority yet. Because if I have this kind of skin pimples or any other blemish, the filters cover it up (Yvonne, personal communication, December 2nd, 2025).

Similarly, Ewoe described how filters protect her from negative attention about a facial scar:

You know, sometimes... when you post with... for example, I have a scar on my face, right? And if you post it just like that, instead of people giving you nice comments like complimenting you and all that, they rather concentrate on the scar and be trolling you. And for me, I don't want anything like that on my comment section. So, I just cover it. I just want everything to be smooth (Ewoe, personal communication, December 1st, 2025).

Flora positioned filters as tools for negotiating authenticity and appearance expectations online:

So, for me, it means navigating the pressure to look good while still wanting to be authentic. Women in their 30s or 40s have more responsibilities More stress and less time

for makeup or perfect lightning so filters become a quick solution to feel confident and relevant online but at the same time, you know we are aware of how many filters that we easily use and can change how we see ourselves... (Flora, personal communication, December 5th, 2025).

Several participants interpreted filters as symbols of efficiency and polish, attaching meanings of convenience and readiness to their use.

It cuts my work so instead of maybe instead of me having to do makeup put on my wigs or whatever to be nice and take normal regular videos or pictures filters make it very easy (Jess, personal communication, December 1st, 2025).

So the quick way to go about it is just go on TikTok... put on the one that suits you... Then you put it on your video, you are good to go (Lorrie, personal communication, December 4th, 2025).

4.2. 1 Filters as Source of Confidence

Within this theme, participants consistently framed TikTok filters as tools that boosted confidence and provided emotional reassurance. Filters were described as reducing self-consciousness and helping users feel “camera-ready,” enabling more comfortable engagement on the platform. Yvonne’s response captures this experience:

There’s this filter I like... that gives me an instant glow. When I use it, I don’t even need to put on makeup... Sometimes I just wake up, apply the filter, and record immediately. It saves me a lot of time but still makes me look ready and confident for the camera (up (Yvonne, personal communication, December 2nd, 2025).

This sense of readiness was echoed by Ewoe, who emphasized how filters transformed both her appearance and the overall quality of her content:

First of all, it makes my videos, my face glow. Yes... It gives my videos life, actually, because without using them, it's like the whole thing is dull (Ewoe, personal communication, December 1st, 2025).

Both Flora and Beatrice connected filter use to time constraints and the practical realities of their life stage, describing how filters addressed their inability to maintain constant physical preparation:

So, for me, it means navigating the pressure to look good while still wanting to be authentic. Women in their 30s or 40s have more responsibilities, more stress and less time for makeup or perfect lightning, so filters become a quick solution to feel confident and relevant online but at the same time, you know we are aware of how many filters that we easily use and can change how we see ourselves (Flora, personal communication, December 5th, 2025).

...filters boost your confidence. They boost your confidence because it's not the time your face will be looking nice. And you might not have to always carry makeup around you...I cannot apply makeup because I am busy looking for money. So, I just apply the filter on my face, that attracts people. So, I think it boosts my confidence to create these videos and post them (Beatrice, personal communication. December 5th, 2025).

Overall, these accounts show that participants understood confidence as closely linked to how they expected others to perceive them on TikTok. Feeling confident was associated with looking presentable, avoiding visible signs of tiredness or imperfection, and meeting perceived social expectations about appearance.

4.2.2 Discussion

Both interview accounts and video analysis reveal troubling patterns regarding women's relationship with their appearance and self-worth on TikTok. Of the 28 videos examined, beauty filters appeared in all 28 (100%), with the most common types being skin-smoothing

filters (Flawless Skin, Smooth Skin), glow-enhancing filters (Natural Glow, Glow X Pro), and feature-enhancing filters (Bold Glamour, Soft Beauty). This universal adoption indicates that filter use has become the default mode of self-presentation rather than an optional enhancement. Participants' framing of filters as sources of "confidence" and "readiness" masks a deeper dependency on digital enhancement for basic self-acceptance. When participants describe feeling unable to post without filters because their natural faces look "dull" they reveal that confidence has become conditional upon modification. This dependency aligns with Caravelli et al.'s (2025) findings that appearance-enhancing filters maintain psychological significance, replicating the comparison process seen in Body Dysmorphic Disorder as users instantaneously generate and compare themselves to algorithmically enhanced versions. The enhanced, filtered version has become the standard against which natural appearance is judged and found wanting. This aligns with Chen et al.'s (2020) distinction between intrinsic and symbolic meanings of technology. Although filters technically smooth skin or conceal marks, their symbolic meaning is produced through users' expectations of how others will respond. Participants collectively understand filters as protective "armour" necessary to avoid social judgment about scars, blemishes, and age-related features, functioning as symbols that manage social interaction by reducing the risk of negative evaluation. However, this shared understanding reveals normalized insecurity rather than empowerment. When women collectively agree that natural features represent vulnerability requiring technological concealment, they reinforce appearance-based hierarchies. This creates a troubling cycle where filters solve immediate presentation problems while potentially deepening long-term dissatisfaction with natural appearance.

4.3 Factors shaping participants engagement with TikTok

In addressing research question three, this analysis examined the factors shaping participants' use of TikTok filters. Three thematic themes emerged: Social beauty standards, social

validation, and technological accessibility. Participants' engagement with filters was not framed as a matter of individual aesthetic preference but as a socially shaped practice.

4.3.1 Social beauty standards

Social beauty standards formed a powerful influence on filter use. Participants described using filters in response to societal ideals concerning skin tone, complexion, and body shape, framing their use less as a choice and more as a social necessity for maintaining attractiveness and acceptability online. Ewoe and Ursula articulated this sense of obligation clearly:

Here in Ghana, you know, you have to be having flat tummy, like you have to be having a banging body, you, see? ...with a slimmer face, the hourglass shape, you understand? And all that, so you definitely have to use filter to keep up (Ewoe, personal communication, December 1st, 2025).

It's hard not to use smooth skin, even complexion and glowing face are seen as beautiful here in Ghana, hmm and many filters we use just has exactly that, so sometimes, I choose filters that align with what is culturally admired (Ursula, personal communication, 2025).

Yvonne also connected her filter choices to a social preference for lighter skin, treating it as a strategic complement to her presentation:

Naturally, people see fair skin as beautiful. So, if I'm wearing an outfit that I think should complement my skin tone, I use filters. Sometimes, with my neutral skin tone looking a bit dark, certain outfits don't complement me it makes me look like a clown. So, those filters give me that vibe [...] (Yvonne, personal communication, December 2nd, 2025).

This alignment with cultural aesthetics was echoed by other participants who tailored their filter use to navigate gendered expectations. Jess noted that while "Ghanaian men... want to see your hips, your buttocks," women scrutinize the face, leading her to use filters to perfect her makeup and presentation for a female audience. Similarly, Maame Yaa selected filters that provided a "neat look" and a brighter, lighter effect because "that's seen as attraction," directly

linking her choices to local desirability norms. Flora confirmed this pattern, stating she consciously chose filters that provided the “smooth skin, even complexion and glowing face” culturally coded as beautiful in Ghana. However, three participants did not connect their filter use to Ghanaian beauty standards. Instead, they gave different reasons. Lorrie explicitly rejected the pressure to conform, arguing that filter use should be separate from social trends. She framed her practice as a technical choice for video quality, stating that “I am not someone who follows strict social rules about beauty. I choose filters based on technical video quality” (Lorrie, personal communication, December 4th, 2025). Ursula described herself as a “naturist” and said she does not follow cultural standards just like Beatrice who stated she likes to behave differently from everyone.

4.3.2 Social Validation

A noticeable theme was social validation. While participants often downplayed others’ influence, the video analysis provided concrete evidence of peer influence. The analysis of 28 videos showed that beauty-enhancing filters dominated, with the most commonly used types being skin-smoothing filters (e.g., Flawless Skin, Smooth Skin), glow-enhancing filters (e.g., Natural Glow, Glow), and feature-enhancing filters (e.g., Bold Glamour, Soft Beauty). When asked about this widespread use of similar filters, their accounts revealed a consistent tendency to compare themselves with women their age on TikTok. Their explanations for this pattern directly revealed they were copying what they saw others doing.

I won’t lie for that one, you know, women, like you have to keep up, right? Women, most of us are like that. So, you always want to look, you always want to also look fly, you see, beautiful and all that (Ewoe, personal communication, December 1st, 2025).

I don’t necessarily compare myself with them, but, you know, these are your peers, you understand. These are your peers...It’s not something that is spoken out about. You know,

at that age level, at that age range, there are certain expectations. So, we try to match up here and there myself (Jess, personal communication, December 1st, 2025).

You know, women, like you have to keep up, right? Women, most of us are like that. So, you always want to look, you always want to also look fly, you see, beautiful and all that (Ursula, personal communication, 2025).

This pressure fuelled active research and community learning. Ewoe explained how observing others led her to seek out specific filters:

I have been seeing other people looking snatched and all that. So sometimes I have been doing research on, you know, filters that you can use to achieve their particular look [...]

So, that I will also use them (Ewoe, personal communication, December 1st, 2025).

When asked how she conducted this research, she revealed a network of private information sharing: “sometimes I have been asking them privately.” This indicates that while the competition may be unspoken publicly, women actively exchange knowledge behind the scenes to meet collective aesthetic standards. Yvonne described how comparison with peers in her age range created a specific pressure to emulate certain looks, even if ambivalently:

Well, some content creators advertise certain skin brands. When you see them especially those in your age range you feel a pressure to gain your peers ‘trust, that can lead you to do things you might not otherwise do. So, in a way, it does influence you (Yvonne, personal communication, December 2nd, 2025).

This pursuit of validation extended to romantic objectives. Beatrice and Yvonne expressed this by stating:

When I started using the filter, sometimes you see that the man will come into your DM. Oh, yeah, you look pretty. You are fine. Yes... They really give us a lot of compliments [...] through that I found love, even though we are no longer together (Beatrice, personal communication, December 5th, 2025).

I am currently talking to a guy who complimented me after I used the Flawless Beauty filter. We are talking and I want to see where it will go (Yvonne, personal communication, December 2nd, 2025).

4.3.3 Technological Accessibility

Another strong theme that emerged as a factor encouraging filter use was TikTok's design. On TikTok filters are optional but easy to find and use. Their prominent placement makes applying them a simple, one-tap step during video creation. Video analysis confirmed this universal adoption: beauty-enhancing filters were used in all 28 videos analyzed (100%). The specific filters employed, such as Bold Glamour, Natural Glow, and Smooth Skin, were consistently selected from the most visible and trending categories within the app's interface. This demonstrates that the accessible design led to habitual filter use, creating a consistent, platform-shaped look across participant's content.

I open TikTok, right? Click on the plus sign. You will see effects. After clicking the plus sign, before you make a video, you will see effects column on the left side, on the lower side of the screen. So, you click on it. There are lots of filters on there. So, yeah, I just choose the one that will suit my video (Ewoe, personal communication, December 1st).

Jess explained how the platform's integrated design reduced her struggles dressing up, stating:

The platform's design cuts my preparation work. Instead of the labour of applying makeup and styling hair to look presentable for a video, the filters make it very easy (Jess, personal communication, December 1st, 2025).

In all, participants consistently highlighted the seamless integration of filters into TikTok's interface as a key technological factor enabling their use. Lorrie described the streamlined process, noting, "The quickest method is to open TikTok, select a suitable filter, and apply it then your video is ready to post" (Lorrie, personal communication, December 4th, 2025).

Yvonne emphasized how this design provided an instant alternative to physical preparation,

explaining, “A preferred filter gives an instant glow, removing the need for makeup. I can apply it immediately and start recording” (Yvonne, personal communication, December 2nd, 2025). Consequently, the platform’s design effectively transformed aesthetic enhancement from a deliberate choice into an embedded, routine step in the content creation process.

4.3.4 Discussion

These accounts show that social beauty standards on TikTok remain strongly shaped by eurocentric ideals, with filters operating as a technology that reinforces these hierarchies. Participants’ preference for filters that lighten skin, smooth complexion, and create a “glowing” appearance reflects the enduring colonial beauty hierarchies described by Hunter (2011) and Blay (2011), in which they state that lighter skin signifies higher status and attractiveness. This aligns with Doh et al. (2025), who argue that beauty filters function as tools of governance by making eurocentric features the default enhancements and presenting them as universal ideals. Perhaps most striking is the extent to which filter use shapes real-world relationships. When participants report finding romantic connections through filters, it reveals how deeply filters have become integrated into social and relational life, raising questions about authenticity and the sustainability of relationships initiated through digitally modified identities. Again, the findings further show that TikTok’s algorithmic design perpetuates these hierarchies by promoting filters that guide users toward racialized beauty norms while framing these choices as user-driven. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, beauty on TikTok becomes a socially constructed symbol negotiated through platform affordances and peer validation. Although contemporary movements celebrate natural African features, TikTok creates a digital environment where colonial beauty hierarchies are reproduced through technological design and social feedback, positioning lighter skin and eurocentric features as markers of desirability and belonging.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

5.0 Introduction

This chapter presents a summary of the research findings, draws conclusions based on the study's objectives, and offers practical recommendations for future practice and research. The insights outlined here are derived directly from the data analysis and discussions in the preceding chapter, ensuring that the conclusions and suggestions are grounded in the evidence gathered throughout the study.

5.1 Summary of Findings

The study examined the use of TikTok filters among eight women aged 35–45, complemented by the analysis of 28 videos. It addressed three questions: What motivates filter use? What meanings do participants attribute to filters? What are the factors shaping participants engagement with TikTok? Regarding motivations, the primary driver was maintaining a curated, consistent online identity with minimal effort. Secondary motivations included managing age-related appearance concerns. In terms of meanings, filters were seen as essential for confidence, functioning as digital makeup, protective shields against online criticism. Some participants also used filters to attract romantic attention while maintaining culturally valued traits. Finally, engagement was shaped by three interconnected factors. Technological affordances and platform design made filtering seamless and strategic for visibility. Social beauty standards created pressure to conform to local ideals for skin tone and body shape. Social networks facilitated peer-driven learning, producing shared aesthetic norms within the cohort.

5.2 Recommendations

Future research could extend this study in several directions. An intersectional approach focusing on Ghanaian women aged 35–45 who use social media for personal branding or

influencer work would help distinguish how filter use operates under commercial pressures compared to non-business users. Additionally, future research should examine how TikTok filters enable women to find love, including how filters shape romantic visibility, attract potential partners, and influence relationship formation on social media. Further, TikTok and similar platforms should review how their filter designs promote specific beauty standards that can negatively affect women's self-image, especially in non-Western contexts.

5.3 Conclusions

This study contributes to media and communication scholarship by offering a Ghanaian perspective on filter use, responding to the limited representation of women in the Global South in existing literature. By focusing on Ghanaian women aged 35–45, the study brings attention to how digital beauty practices are shaped by both global platform cultures and local social meanings. The study examined the practices and perceptions of TikTok filter use among women and found that filters function primarily as dramaturgical tools for managing an age-conscious digital persona rather than for playful identity experimentation. Filter use is socially embedded, reflecting the interaction between platform affordances and Ghanaian social beauty standards, which creates spaces of negotiation and tension. Choices around filters are socially mediated through peer networks rather than driven by individual exploration. Overall, age-related anxieties and performative pressures are key factors driving filter use among participants. The recommendations aim to promote more critical engagement with digital enhancement tools and support the online well-being of women in this age group.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself and what you do?
2. What led you to start using TikTok?
3. What do you usually do when you are on TikTok?
4. Can you tell me about your experience using filters on TikTok?
5. Can you recall the first time you used one? What was that like?
6. How easy or difficult do you find it to use filters on the app?
7. How do you decide which filter to use for a video?
8. What do you usually hope a filter will do when you apply it to a video?
9. Are there certain filters you use regularly? Can you tell me about them?
10. How would you describe the difference between seeing yourself in a video with a filter and without one?
11. How do you feel about your appearance when you use filters versus when you don't?
12. What does "beauty" mean to you in the context of TikTok filters?
13. Do the choices you make about your appearance on TikTok relate to anything you see offline?
14. In your view, what role do filters play in how you express yourself on TikTok?
15. Do you ever notice differences in how people of different age groups use TikTok filters?
16. How does the way the app is designed influence whether or not you use a filter?
17. What does it mean to be a woman in your 30s/40s on TikTok using filters?

APPENDIX B

University of Media, Arts and Communication (Institute of Journalism)

INFORMED CONSENT

Topic: Filters And Beauty: Exploring Identity Construction Among Ghanaian Women On

Tiktok

I am Eyram M.A. Yorgbe, a Master of Arts in Journalism student at the University of Media, Arts and Communication (UniMAC- IJ). I am conducting a research study on the topic: Filters And Beauty: Exploring Identity Construction Among Ghanaian-Based Women Aged 35-45 On Tiktok. The purpose of this study is to understand how women between 35 -45 in Ghana use TikTok filters to express their identities and femininity. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any point without providing a reason. All information you share will be treated with the highest level of confidentiality. Your name and personal details will not appear anywhere in the study, only pseudonyms will be used. There is no form of payment or material reward for participating.

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research.

Signature: Date: