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THE PHENOMENON OF AUGMENTED REALITY FACE FILTER USAGE ON INSTAGRAM AMONG COMMUNICATION SCIENCE STUDENTS OF THE 2019 COHORT AT PATTIMURA UNIVERSITY, AMBON

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to describe the reasons, actions, and meanings behind the use of augmented reality (AR)-based facial filters on Instagram by Communication Science students from the 2019 cohort at Pattimura University, Ambon. The research employs a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach to understand social actions and the meanings embedded within them. Informants were selected purposively, consisting of active Instagram users, identified based on the intensity of their platform usage. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis. The results of the study indicate that the primary motives for using facial filters include affective motives, the need for reputation, and the drive to maintain existence in the digital space. Each of these motives influences user behavior, ultimately reflecting how individuals interpret life satisfaction through their interactions with AR technology. This study contributes new insights to social and humanities research, particularly regarding the role of AR technology in shaping social experiences and the digital identities of young generations. The novelty of this research lies in uncovering the dynamics of AR filter usage as a form of self-expression and digital image creation. The study recommends further research to explore the impact of AR technology on social interaction patterns and the construction of digital identities, while also offering new perspectives for the development of communication theory in the digital era.

Keywords: *Augmented Reality (AR), Digital Identity, Facial Filters, Self-Expression, Social Actions*

INTRODUCTION

In the increasingly advanced digital era, the use of social media has become an inseparable part of daily life, particularly among younger generations. One of the most popular platforms is Instagram, which offers various interactive features, including augmented reality (AR)-based face filters. This phenomenon not only reflects technological advancement but also signals a shift in how individuals express themselves and construct their digital identities (Widada, 2018). At Pattimura University in Ambon, particularly among Communication Science students from the 2019 cohort, the use of AR face filters has become a trend that draws attention (Zahra et al., 2022). However, despite its growing prevalence, there remains limited understanding of the reasons, actions, and meanings behind the use of this technology. This study is essential to explain how AR technology influences digital behavior and social interaction

among the youth, while also addressing the literature gap in communication technology studies.

Augmented reality (AR) technology has become an increasingly popular topic of study in recent years, mainly due to its ability to create interactive experiences in digital space. According to Pradipta (2023), AR is a technology that merges the real world with virtual elements in real time, providing users with immersive experiences. In the context of social media, such as Instagram, AR is implemented through face filters that allow users to modify their visual appearance. Several studies indicate that users utilize these filters as tools to express identity, enhance visual appeal, and construct a digital image (Agustin et al., 2019; Febrianti et al., 2023; Fitriah & Ita, 2022). This shows that AR technology serves not only as a form of entertainment but also as a social tool that influences self-perception and interpersonal interaction.

Studies on the motives behind AR face filter usage reveal various psychological and social reasons for this phenomenon. Research by Arifuddin & Irwansyah (2019) and Mayuni & Anwar (2022) shows that the primary motivations for using interactive social media features involve the need for existence, social validation, and the strengthening of social relationships. Additionally, Gustina & Fachri (2015) found that features like face filters are often used to create an ideal version of oneself that cannot be realized in the real world. Among young people, AR filter use is often driven by a desire to follow trends and conform to group norms (Hu et al., 2014; Putra, 2020; Rafiq, 2020).

Further studies indicate that the use of AR on social media may affect mental health and social relationships. According to research by Agustina (2020) and Andina (2021), excessive use of AR filters can distort self-perception, leading to anxiety or dissatisfaction with one's physical appearance. On the other hand, AR filters can also function as tools to boost self-confidence and provide enjoyable experiences for users (Putri et al., 2016). This reflects the complex psychological impacts of AR technology on users, which deserve further examination.

In the context of digital identity, AR face filters play an essential role in shaping self-image in digital spaces. Studies by Cahyono (2016) and Untari & Fajariana (2018) show that social media users often create alternative versions of their identity through AR filters, which in turn influence how others perceive them. In some cases, these filters are also used as tools to express creativity and personalize visual communication (Purbohastuti, 2017). This indicates that AR filters are not merely aesthetic modification tools but also serve as a form of communication that reflects individual preferences and values.

However, studies on AR filter usage in Indonesia, especially among university students, remain very limited. Most existing literature focuses on users in developed countries with different cultural backgrounds. Research such as that conducted by Hu et al. (2014) in South Korea highlights the importance of cultural context in influencing the adoption of AR technology, but these findings have not been widely applied in the Indonesian context. Moreover, comprehensive understanding of the motives, actions, and meanings of AR filter usage—particularly among Communication Science students in Indonesia—still requires further exploration. This study offers a new perspective by adopting a phenomenological approach to

reveal the personal and social experiences of AR filter users on Instagram. This approach not only enriches existing insights but also highlights affective aspects, the need for reputation, and efforts to maintain digital existence that shape user behavior. Therefore, this research aims to contribute new knowledge to the development of digital communication theory, particularly in understanding the role of AR technology in shaping social experiences and digital identity among Indonesia's youth. It also opens up possibilities for further exploration regarding the impact of AR technology on future patterns of social interaction.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach to gain a deep understanding of the experiences, meanings, and actions of Communication Science students at Pattimura University, Ambon, in using augmented reality (AR)-based face filters on Instagram (Creswell, 2017). The phenomenological approach was chosen as it allows researchers to explore the subjective experiences and individual interpretations of the phenomena they encounter. Through this approach, the study aims to uncover the meanings behind users' motives and actions in utilizing AR filters as part of their digital activity.

Participants in this study were selected purposively, focusing on active 2019 cohort students who are frequent Instagram users. Selection criteria included frequent use of AR face filters, willingness to share their experiences openly, and the ability to reflect on the meaning of such use. A total of nine informants were selected to provide a sufficiently varied and in-depth range of perspectives, taking into account factors such as gender, usage frequency, and social and cultural backgrounds.

Data were collected using three primary techniques: in-depth interviews, observation, and document study. In-depth interviews were conducted to explore personal experiences and detailed motives behind the use of AR filters. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and was recorded—with participant consent—for further analysis. Observation was used to examine informants' behavioral patterns in using Instagram, including the types of filters used and the social contexts of their usage. Additionally, document study involved analyzing the informants' Instagram posts, including the use of AR filters, captions, and interactions with followers.

The collected data were analyzed using an interpretive phenomenological approach, with analytical stages including the description of informants' experiences, identification of key themes, and interpretation of deeper meanings. This process began with repeated readings of interview transcripts to understand emerging patterns, followed by grouping findings into themes such as affective motives, reputation needs, and the drive for digital existence. These findings were then contextualized within the social and cultural backgrounds of students as social media users in Indonesia. To ensure the validity and credibility of the data, this study employed triangulation by comparing data from interviews, observations, and documentation to identify

consistency and detect potential bias. Additionally, the researcher conducted member checking by asking participants to review preliminary analysis results to ensure that the interpretations aligned with their actual experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Informant Descriptions and Patterns of AR Filter Usage

This study involved nine informants who were students from the Communication Science Department at Pattimura University, Ambon. The informants varied in gender, Instagram usage intensity, and frequency of using augmented reality (AR)-based face filters on Instagram Stories. Each informant had unique habits when uploading their Instagram Stories, ranging from one to six times per day, depending on daily activities and personal motivations. Most informants used the Story feature to share everyday moments, express themselves, or enhance their social presence in digital spaces.

Based on the collected data, the informants were divided into two main groups based on their activity levels on Instagram Stories. Three of the nine informants typically posted one to two Stories per day, often driven by a casual need to share relaxing or entertaining moments. In contrast, the other six were more active, posting between two to five or more Stories daily, indicating a stronger motivation to maintain a visible presence on social media. Some informants, such as SAH, posted up to five Stories a day due to work demands, while others, like SS, sometimes posted six Stories depending on their mood and activities.

The types of filters used varied widely, ranging from simple face filters for enhancing appearance to interactive filters that added visually engaging elements. Informants tended to choose filters based on the context and their needs. In formal settings, such as documenting campus activities, they used more natural filters to improve lighting and highlight appearances without altering their original identities. In contrast, during informal or relaxed situations, animated or decorative filters were commonly used to express creativity and provide entertainment.

Most informants—especially the more frequent posters—viewed AR filters as tools that helped them appear more attractive and confident in front of their digital audiences. For instance, MK and NL expressed that they felt more confident posting photos or videos with filters, as the effects made their appearance look more polished on camera. This aligns with the need to meet social expectations in digital environments.

Observational data revealed that the informants' filter choices were influenced by both social and emotional contexts. In casual settings, such as being at home or with friends, they tended to experiment with various filters for entertainment or to express specific moods. In formal situations, their choices shifted to simpler and more neutral filters to maintain a professional impression. Researchers also noted that filter selection habits were often influenced by trends and the popularity of certain filters on Instagram. For example, several informants

saved trending filters for future use, indicating that their preferences were not merely personal but also shaped by prevailing social norms and trends.

Based on the frequency of posting and interview responses, the main motives for using AR filters were self-entertainment and enhancing social media presence. Three informants reported using filters primarily for fun, particularly as a way to cope with boredom. Meanwhile, the remaining six had stronger motivations related to asserting their presence and building an ideal self-image on Instagram. This indicates that filters serve not only aesthetic functions but also fulfill psychological and social needs. Of the nine informants, the majority used Instagram Stories to strengthen their presence on social media. These findings are consistent with existing literature, which states that adolescents tend to use social media as a means of self-construction and to gain social validation.

Motives for Using Augmented Reality Face Filters: Affective and Reputation Motives

After considering the various reasons and responses provided by the informants, this study refers to phenomenological theory to explain apparent reality. Apparent phenomena are reflections of reality that do not stand alone, as they contain meanings that require further interpretation. Through a phenomenological approach, the deeper meanings behind everyday phenomena can be uncovered. As such, phenomenology is closely related to self-image as perceived by individuals (Putri et al., 2016; Rafiq, 2020). According to Jefkins (2015), this is influenced by three main components: motives, actions, and meaning.

The nine informants in this study, who are students of the 2019 cohort from the Department of Communication Science at Pattimura University, also demonstrated these components—motives, actions, and meaning—in their use of augmented reality-based face filters, as explained by Frank. A motive is a drive related to a specific goal. It indicates a systematic relationship between an individual's response and a certain internal urge. If the urge is innate, the motive is a result of learning processes.

Various scholarly perspectives on motives provide broader understanding. Purbohastuti (2017) defines a motive as a series of drives that facilitate an individual in taking certain actions to achieve specific goals. Meanwhile, Dewa & Safitri (2021) and Widada (2018) argue that motives are potential and latent constructions shaped by experience and relatively enduring, though they may change. Motives function to drive and direct behavior toward a goal. Based on these views, it can be concluded that motives include all internal drives, reasons, or impulses that cause specific human actions. Essentially, all human behavior is motivated—consciously or unconsciously. Even seemingly simple daily activities are driven by certain motives.

To facilitate the analysis, the researcher categorized the various informants' responses regarding the motives for using augmented reality (AR) face filters on Instagram into two groups based on interview and observational data: affective needs and reputation factors, which are explained below:

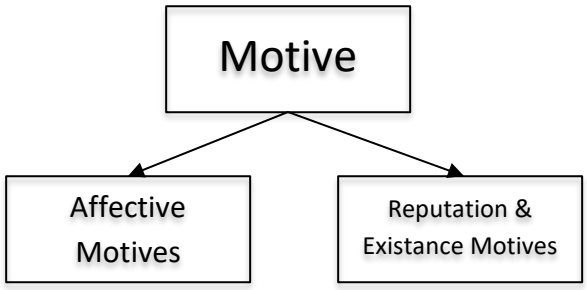


Figure 1 Motives for AR Filter Usage among 2019 Cohort Communication Science Students

First, affective motives refer to the need to seek pleasure, entertainment, or emotional release. In the context of AR face filter usage among students of the 2019 cohort in the Department of Communication Science at Pattimura University, Ambon, this indicates efforts by account owners to fulfill their emotional needs—especially when using filters in Instagram Story uploads. These emotional needs relate to one's mood, such as joy, sadness, or other feelings deemed important.

This is in line with Afdhal et al. (2022) and Zahra et al. (2022), who state that the rapid development of mass media has generated new user motivations. Various media innovations, including face filters, have created new needs, one of which is affective needs. The informants revealed that face filter usage was often seen as a way to fulfill entertainment needs or to experience joy, especially when feeling bored. One informant, LOKA, stated that they often used Instagram's filter feature to add effects to existing photos. They found the built-in filters on Instagram to be more practical, requiring no third-party apps. According to LOKA, these filters are convenient because they can be adjusted according to personal preference, offering ease and efficiency in photo editing.

The emotional level that someone reaches is often reflected in actions aligned with their desires and mood. This emotional level manifests in various forms of pleasure, influencing how Instagram users represent themselves through face filters. In this sense, face filter usage is closely linked to fulfilling emotional needs such as entertainment or personal satisfaction.

Reputation, meanwhile, is an important aspect of one's life, especially once basic needs are met. At a certain point, reputation can even outweigh material needs. Existence relates to an individual's recognized presence within a social environment, where one seeks acknowledgment from others. According to Purbohastuti (2017) and Sampurno et al. (2020), existence is the recognized presence marked by the influence someone has—either through responses or acknowledgment from others. Andina (2021) and Putra (2020) also assert that the value of existence is significant as proof of an individual's performance or work in their environment. Below are several Instagram screenshots from the informants using AR face filters.



Figure 2 Actions in Using Augmented Reality Face Filters
Source: Account @khalilabdul (2022)

Within the context of using augmented reality face filters on Instagram, users are often driven by the desire to enhance their presence and reputation on social media. Using Instagram filters, users can present the best version of themselves to gain recognition and positive responses from their followers—through features like "likes" and "replies." For example, one informant, NL, explained, "I often use filters for my Stories because I post on Instagram every day. To appear more confident and attractive to my followers, I frequently use Instagram filters in my Stories." (Interview, May 16, 2023)

According to Weber, affective social actions are determined by the mental state and emotions of the individual performing them. These actions often arise spontaneously based on the emotions being felt. Ritzer & Yagatich (2015) note that affective social actions are driven by emotional impulses. This is evident in how informants used AR face filters on Instagram. One such informant, LOK, stated, "I add Instagram filters to photos that I already have. With added effects, my photos look more interesting and different. Some photos seem too plain to me, so I often add effects according to my mood or preferences." (Interview, May 16, 2023)

These actions reflect a motive to meet entertainment needs and beautify photo results. Augmented reality filters make it easier for users to add effects to photos or videos before uploading them to Instagram. Another informant, Faisal Ismail, added, "I usually like using classic-style filters to get a certain feel. Even though the photos in my gallery are random, I often add filters—sometimes just to keep them, and sometimes I upload them when I feel like it." (Interview, May 4, 2023)

Such actions are consistent with the uses and gratifications theory, which states that individuals actively choose media to meet their needs. In this case, the informants used

augmented reality filters as a source of entertainment, especially when feeling bored. Another informant, ARA, affirmed this by saying that they frequently took selfies using the Instagram app because it already includes visual effect features. ARA mentioned having around 20 saved effects, and the use of each depends on their mood. Usually, after taking a photo or recording a video, the result is saved privately and only occasionally uploaded to Instagram Stories when they feel like sharing.

Below is a screenshot from the informant's Instagram account showing the informant taking a selfie using an augmented reality filter:



Gambar 3 Actions in Using Augmented Reality Face Filters
Source: Account @gellrmd_ (2022)

Based on the informants' statements, it can be concluded that actions involving the use of augmented reality face filters on Instagram are driven by diverse motives—from fulfilling emotional needs to enhancing reputation and existence on social media. These filters are not merely aesthetic tools but also serve as means for individuals to express themselves and meet psychological needs.

Bridging the Gap Between Physical Reality and Digital Idealization

AR filters provide a space for users, especially teenagers and university students, to visually express themselves. Informants in this study revealed that using filters allows them to showcase a creative side that may not always be visible in face-to-face interactions. Some informants feel that filters give them the freedom to experiment with their visual identity, such as trying different facial appearances, artistic color effects, or decorative elements that are impossible to find in the real world. This self-expression is closely related to an individual's need to be "seen" and "appreciated" in the digital world. In the context of digital communication, AR filters function as visual media that mediate the messages users want to convey to their

audiences. For instance, funny or unique-themed filters are often chosen to express a cheerful mood, while filters that smooth the appearance of the face are used to strengthen a positive or professional impression.

One of the key findings is that AR filters are used as tools to bridge the gap between users' physical realities and the ideal images they wish to present on social media. In interviews, many informants expressed that they felt more confident when using filters because their appearance looked more "perfect." Filters allow users to alter facial elements such as smoother skin, better lighting effects, and more symmetrical facial features. From the perspective of digital communication sociology, this phenomenon can be explained through Erving Goffman's theory of self-presentation, where individuals strive to manage the image they present on the social "front stage," namely social media. AR filters become one of the "dramaturgical tools" used to create an ideal impression for the audience. Physical reality that may not meet societal expectations or ideal beauty standards can be "corrected" through filter technology, thus helping users achieve the social existence they desire (Ritzer & Yagatich, 2015).

The relationship between the use of AR filters, life satisfaction, and digital identity is also clearly reflected in this study. Informants who actively use filters feel that the filters help them build a more positive and attractive digital identity. This digital identity, in their view, is an extension of themselves in the real world, but with additional elements that reflect their aspirations and the values they wish to achieve. The life satisfaction derived from using filters is related to the social validation received, such as the number of likes, positive comments, or attention from audiences on social media. Informants stated that positive responses from their followers often provided emotional encouragement and a sense of social acceptance. However, this also has the potential to create pressure to continuously maintain the same ideal image, which can affect their self-perception in the long term.

In the sociology of digital communication, the phenomenon of using AR filters reflects the complex dynamics between individuals and the digital social environment. Social media, as a virtual public space, creates new norms about how one should appear and interact (Mulitawati & Retnasary, 2020). AR filters become a tool to fulfill these norms but also present new challenges related to authenticity and social pressure. Technologies such as AR reinforce the phenomenon of hyperreality, where the digital image becomes more "real" or more desirable than reality itself. Teenagers, who are in the stage of identity exploration, are highly vulnerable to this phenomenon due to their need to be accepted by peers and the broader society. AR filters symbolize this duality, where users may feel more confident in the digital world but may also experience a dilemma between their authentic and digital identities.

Self-meaning in the context of AR filter use can be understood as a process in which individuals reflect on and construct their identity through digital activities. AR filters allow users to control how they want to be perceived by others, which in turn influences how they see themselves. This process aligns with Carl Rogers' concept of the "self-concept," where individuals form their self-image based on their experiences and feedback from the social environment

(Ritzer & Yagatich, 2015). The use of AR filters also reflects a paradigm shift in how individuals build identity in the digital era. Identity is no longer fixed but dynamic and modifiable according to needs. Through filters, users not only present who they are but also who they want to be. This makes AR filters an important tool in the narrative of digital identity, which continues to evolve alongside technological change and digital culture.

Mediated Self-Expression and the Construction of Digital Identity Through AR Filters

The use of augmented reality (AR) face filters on Instagram has become a popular medium of self-expression among digital-native users, especially youth and university students. These filters provide users with the ability to creatively manipulate their visual appearance in real time, ranging from subtle enhancements to fantastical modifications that do not exist in the physical world. For Communication Science students at Pattimura University, the act of applying AR filters is not merely cosmetic; it reflects a conscious effort to express moods, aspirations, and aesthetic preferences. Informants in this study revealed that filters help them project parts of themselves that may not always emerge in face-to-face interactions, making AR filters a form of mediated self-representation.

This mediated self-expression is deeply tied to the concept of digital identity, which encompasses how individuals choose to present themselves in online environments. The data show that users engage with filters as tools for curating an idealized version of themselves. Through visual enhancements such as smoother skin, altered lighting, or stylized facial features, individuals build a digital persona that aligns with their desired self-image. This process reflects Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory, where users perform a “front stage” version of themselves before an audience — in this case, their social media followers. The AR filter thus functions as a technological prop in constructing a socially acceptable and often aspirational self.

At the same time, the use of AR filters underscores a growing tension between authenticity and idealization in digital communication. While filters offer a sense of empowerment and control over self-presentation, they also risk reinforcing unrealistic beauty standards and psychological dependence on digital validation. Informants shared that they often felt more confident using filters, as they perceived their filtered appearance to be “better” or “more acceptable” than their natural look. However, this confidence is conditional and situational — tied to likes, positive comments, and other forms of social affirmation. As a result, some users experience internal pressure to maintain this idealized identity, blurring the line between real and digitally-constructed selves.

This phenomenon resonates with the theory of self-concept proposed by Carl Rogers, in which individuals develop their self-image based on personal experiences and feedback from their social environment. In the context of AR filter usage, digital feedback plays a crucial role in shaping how individuals perceive themselves. Informants in this study described the sense of emotional gratification and social belonging that followed positive audience reactions to their filtered content. However, overreliance on such feedback can alter self-perception in ways that

may affect long-term well-being, especially for young users still navigating their identity formation.

Ultimately, the use of AR face filters on Instagram highlights how digital tools are reshaping both self-expression and identity construction in contemporary youth culture. Far from being passive consumers of technology, students actively utilize AR filters as cultural resources to negotiate their place within digital spaces. While offering opportunities for creativity and personal branding, these tools also invite critical reflection on issues such as digital authenticity, mental health, and the performative nature of online life. As digital communication becomes increasingly visual and interactive, AR filters serve as both mirrors and masks — allowing users to both reveal and conceal who they are in their search for connection, validation, and self-understanding in the virtual world.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the use of augmented reality (AR) face filters on Instagram among Communication Science students of the 2019 cohort at Pattimura University is a multifaceted social phenomenon rooted in emotional, social, and existential motivations. The act of applying AR filters extends beyond aesthetic enhancement; it represents a deliberate form of self-presentation and identity negotiation within the constraints and affordances of digital platforms. Users engage with AR filters not merely for entertainment, but as a means to construct and project idealized versions of themselves that align with digitally mediated norms of beauty, popularity, and relevance. The findings reveal that AR filters serve as cultural tools that mediate the interplay between authenticity and hyperreality, allowing individuals to navigate the pressures of digital visibility while maintaining a sense of agency over their self-image. This research highlights the critical role of AR technology in shaping contemporary experiences of selfhood and social interaction, offering novel insights into the sociotechnical dynamics of identity formation in virtual environments. As such, the study contributes to the broader discourse on digital communication by illuminating how technological artifacts, like AR filters, participate in the ongoing construction of digital identities among youth in the era of social media.

ETHICAL STATEMENT AND DISCLOSURE

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles, including informed consent, protection of informants' confidentiality, and respect for local cultural values. Special consideration was given to participants from vulnerable groups to ensure their safety, comfort, and equal rights to participate. No external funding was received, and the authors declare no conflict of interest. All data and information presented were collected through valid research methods and have been verified to ensure their accuracy and reliability. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) was limited to technical assistance for writing and language editing,

without influencing the scientific substance of the work. The authors express their gratitude to the informants for their valuable insights, and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the content and conclusions of this article.

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