

#FILTERDROP: ATTENDING TO PHOTOGRAPHIC ALTERATIONS

Claire Anscomb

ABSTRACT

It is well-documented that the alteration of portrait photographs can have a negative impact on a viewer's self-esteem. One might think that providing written disclaimers warning of alteration might help to mitigate this effect, yet empirical studies have shown that viewers continue to feel like what they are seeing is real, and thus attainable, despite knowing it is not. I propose that this cognitive dissonance occurs because disclaimers fail to show viewers how to look at the contents of a photographic image differently. Consequently, viewers have the same perceptual experience, where the picture appears to faithfully resemble a direct visual experience of the subject, which conflicts with their changing sense of warrant. However, I argue that the degree of perceived similarity, and so contact, may be subject to change depending on what a viewer is attentive to during their viewing of an image, including subtle but unrealistic signs of alteration.

KEYWORDS

Photography, Digital Manipulation, Body Image, Aesthetic Attention, Epistemic Contact

1. IDEALISED IMAGES

Photographs are frequently altered to idealise the appearance of those who pose for selfies, fashion images, and advertising campaigns. While media photographs have a history of being altered, thanks to the rise of smartphone cameras, apps, and social networks it is now increasingly common for people to edit their own photographs.¹ This may involve the removal or reshaping of the visual features of images, or “airbrushing” these, with the use of apps, such as Facetune, and filters. A well-documented effect of idealised photographic images is the negative impact that they can have on a viewer’s self-esteem—particularly in relation to face and body satisfaction. To mitigate this effect and see “more real skin” on Instagram, makeup artist Sasha Louise Pallari started the #filterdrop movement. In doing so, she successfully convinced the Advertising Standards Agency to advise ‘that influencers, brands and celebrities should not be using filters on social media when promoting beauty products if the filter is likely to exaggerate the effect that the products are capable of achieving’ even if the filter is referenced in the Instagram story.² This final detail is important. One might think that written disclaimers warning of alterations should dispel the impression of reality that these images can give, yet empirical studies have shown the opposite.

At best, it has been found that written disclaimers, regardless of the size of the label, tend to have no significant impact on reducing the negative effects of idealised images.³ A number of studies have actually seen a “boomerang effect”.⁴ In these cases, some subjects were provided with written disclaimers, warning that the images they viewed were digitally manipulated to enhance the appearance of the models, and reported decreased physical self-esteem and an increased desire to look like the models. This was despite knowing that the images failed to represent a realistic and therefore achievable appearance. To account for this effect, Kristen Harrison and Veronica Hefner suggested that: ‘If retouching is generally assumed to have occurred, being told that retouching has occurred would have little or no effect compared to simply viewing the retouched photos without the discounting information.’⁵ However, studies that have examined the effects of generic disclaimers (e.g., “Warning: This image has been digitally altered”) against specific disclaimers (e.g., “Warning: This image has been digitally altered to trim arms and waist”) have in the latter condition observed greater visual attention to specific areas of the body, which was associated with increased body dissatisfaction.⁶ Harrison has proposed that the disclosure that celebrity and

advertising images are retouched can make viewers feel worse about themselves as increased awareness 'of what others edit may heighten our awareness of our own supposed flaws. That may encourage us to spend longer using digital tools to repair them.'⁷ Fiona MacCallum and Heather Widdows have likewise proposed that such enhanced attention reinforces conceptions of beauty ideals, such as thinness, which they argue function as ethical ideals.⁸

There are then, multiple factors, including norms pertaining to objects of desire and beauty ideals, that feed into the negative effects generated by these idealised images. But it is notable that these discussions always centre around photographic images. As theorists who have produced studies in postfeminist digital sociality have highlighted, photo editing and social media apps tend to help perpetuate youthful, white, slim, and non-disabled beauty ideals that contribute to an intensified, judgemental surveillance of women's appearance.⁹ Why is it that photographic, and not other kinds of, images have the strongest effect in promoting these norms to the extent that even when alterations are known about viewers still react to these images as though they represent a realistic and therefore attainable appearance, despite knowing this is patently untrue? I propose that this cognitive dissonance is the result of a divergence between the perceptual and cognitive experiences of viewers. Significantly, photographic images present these ideals with a kind of perceptual immediacy which makes them seem realizable (whether or not this is actually the case).

2. EPISTEMIC CONTACT

To make an image by photographic means entails registering patterns of light reflected from objects on photosensitive surfaces. Photography, as standardly practiced, is an easy and efficient way to produce images that cast patterns that are similar to those cast by the real subject.¹⁰ Photographs can thus function as valuable sources of "spatially undemanding" visual information.¹¹ This is reflected in our cognitive responses to photographs. As Dan Cavedon-Taylor notes, we tend to automatically assent to the contents of photographic images,¹² and only withhold this if we 'possess reasons *against* thinking the photograph creditworthy'.¹³ This sense of warrant, in the beliefs formed on the basis of photographic pictorial experience, is not the only response that tends to be triggered. Photographic pictorial experience is also highly likely to prompt a sense of "epistemic contact".¹⁴ This is a feeling of immediacy where the experience of seeing the visual

properties of the subject of the image is similar to the visual experience one would have, seeing these face-to-face.

This phenomenon is caused by the arrangement of marks on the surface of figurative pictures ‘which, when presented to our visual systems, cause those visual systems to operate in more or less the same ways as they have been caused to operate had they been exposed [...] to the things of which they are pictures’.¹⁵ Images produced by photographic means are particularly powerful triggers of our visual systems in this respect due to extra surface and texture detail.¹⁶ Although photographic images may exhibit grain or only monochromatic tones we are still familiar with the perceptual experiences that viewing such images generate, Scott Walden has argued, given their resemblance to visual experiences we have in low-light settings.¹⁷ Nonetheless, the amount of brightness seen in many historic black-and-white photographs, for instance, does not resemble our experiences of encountering subjects in low-light settings very well.¹⁸

Indeed, there is evidence that the experience of epistemic contact can vary in degree. For example, digital colourist Marina Amaral has meticulously restored and colorized a great number of degraded black and white historic photographs, commenting that ‘when you see a photo in colour I think you instantly feel more connected to what you are seeing.’¹⁹ Hence, a stronger sense of contact is likely to be generated if the visual experience of the picture more faithfully resembles a direct visual experience of the subject.²⁰ Importantly then, while historic analogue black and white photographs might be perceived as very realistic with respect to the configuration of the features of the subject, they are unlikely to trigger as strong a sense of epistemic contact as contemporary digital photographic images, which can be produced with extremely high fidelity especially with regards to the tonal and chromatic properties of the subject.

Significantly, given that the experience of epistemic contact is contingent upon, and triggered by, the viewer’s perceptual experience of the image it follows that, as per Amaral’s testimony, this may be subject to change. However, I propose that it is not only the act of making changes to an image that can alter the degree of perceived realism. Given that our perceptual experiences are subject to ‘all kinds of top-down influences from non-perceptual processes’,²¹ how a viewer attends to an image upon receiving further information about it may also alter their sense of epistemic contact with the subject.²² For instance, upon first glance at the photograph *Heinz Riefenstahl, Frau Dr. Ebersberg, Leni Riefenstahl*,

Adolf Hitler and Ilse Riefenstahl in the park of the Reich Chancellery, 1937, one gets the impression of “seeing” a moment in which Hitler and his company are conversing. However, as Paloma Atencia-Linares highlights, this is an instance of ‘deceptive photography’.²³ If it is pointed out that a figure, namely Joseph Goebbels, has been removed from the right-hand side of the photograph, the slightly blurred area which is lighter in tone next to the woman on the far right becomes obvious and results in a less visually compelling impression of the event. That is, upon further inspection, the image, or at least this part of the image, no longer appears to have a high degree of similarity to the subject and so, accordingly, the viewer’s sense of epistemic contact decreases. Prior to this omission being highlighted however, it is likely that the viewer has suffered from inattentional blindness - the phenomenon where salient stimuli right in front of an observer’s eyes pass unnoticed—and failed to spot anything amiss.

The potential for a sense of contact to alter shows that, contra some of the most recent work on this topic,²⁴ it is not only the viewer’s cognitive responses to a photograph that can change, but perceptual aspects of their photographic pictorial experience may also change. Crucially, these cognitive and perceptual experiences may change independently of one another and potentially come into conflict, as we have seen in the case of the digitally altered photographs. In such cases, I propose that a sense of epistemic contact with the subject of the image can persist, as viewers continue to have the same perceptual experience, which conflicts with their changing sense of warrant. As I have just outlined, if told or shown that an analogue photograph has been subject to alteration, such as the removal or reshaping of its visual features, it can be easy to see and for a sense of contact to alter accordingly, but is it possible to attend to altered digital photographs so that they cease to appear as realistic as they initially seem?

3. ATTENDING TO PHOTOGRAPHIC ALTERATIONS

It no longer takes a huge amount of training and equipment to convincingly alter a photograph. Not all digital alterations are convincing of course and, interestingly, professional retouchers have spoken of finding alterations produced by amateur retouchers as being highly unconvincing.²⁵ So, it is possible to see less than realistic marks of certain kinds of image alteration if you know where to look and what signs to look out for. As Christine Lavrence and Carolina Cambre’s focus groups with participants aged 18–30 demonstrate, some viewers are attuned to looking for evidence of

editing, such as warped lines on walls behind thin bodies, which delegitimises selfies.²⁶ Indeed, as per the proposed account, once such alteration becomes visible the degree of experienced realism (i.e., of the physics of the scene) decreases and so the sense of contact lessens.²⁷

Spotting these giveaways is not, however something that tends to come naturally. Studies have shown that people frequently neglect information, like whether shadows and reflections in a scene are consistent, that could aid them in detecting whether an image has been altered.²⁸ This helps to further explain the inefficacy of generic disclaimers: they fail to show viewers how to look at the contents of a photographic image differently. I propose that the same is likely true of specific disclaimers. Being told that an image has been altered to “trim” a waist might direct attention to that area but does not necessarily help viewers to see less than realistic signs of alteration and so reduce their sense of epistemic contact. As with the analogue case earlier, it may be that viewers suffer from inattentive blindness if they miss signs of alteration that it is possible to spot through visual inspection. Thus, teaching viewers how to attend to photographic images to spot signs of alteration on social networks and media outlets could help to align their perceptual and cognitive experiences if written disclaimers become more widely adopted. This approach could prove helpful as a part of a broader visual literacy education which is less concerned with achieving literacy through images,²⁹ but more with critical forms of literacy³⁰ that confront beauty ideals. Specifically, through formal and less formal means, as in the #filterdrop movement and social media accounts highlighting the extent of editing in celebrity selfies, a way of looking can be fostered, which is not judgemental and comparative,³¹ but that identifies alterations to reduce cognitive dissonance and interrogate the socio-cultural factors contributing to their being made.

Nevertheless, it is possible to forecast limitations to the proposed approach. The alteration that is most difficult for viewers to detect is airbrushing,³² a form of photographic image alteration that is now pervasive. It could take days to airbrush an image using analogue means.³³ But with digital techniques, any smartphone user can apply filters, which could make alterations that are virtually imperceptible. For example, the Instagram “Paris” filter **Fig. 1** is said to be the ‘most dangerous filter of them all. If the person using it is wearing a lot of makeup or demonstrating skin-care it’s almost impossible to tell what’s what.’³⁴ Airbrushing, and like kinds of convincing alterations, are difficult to detect by



ashleylouisejames
London, United Kingdom

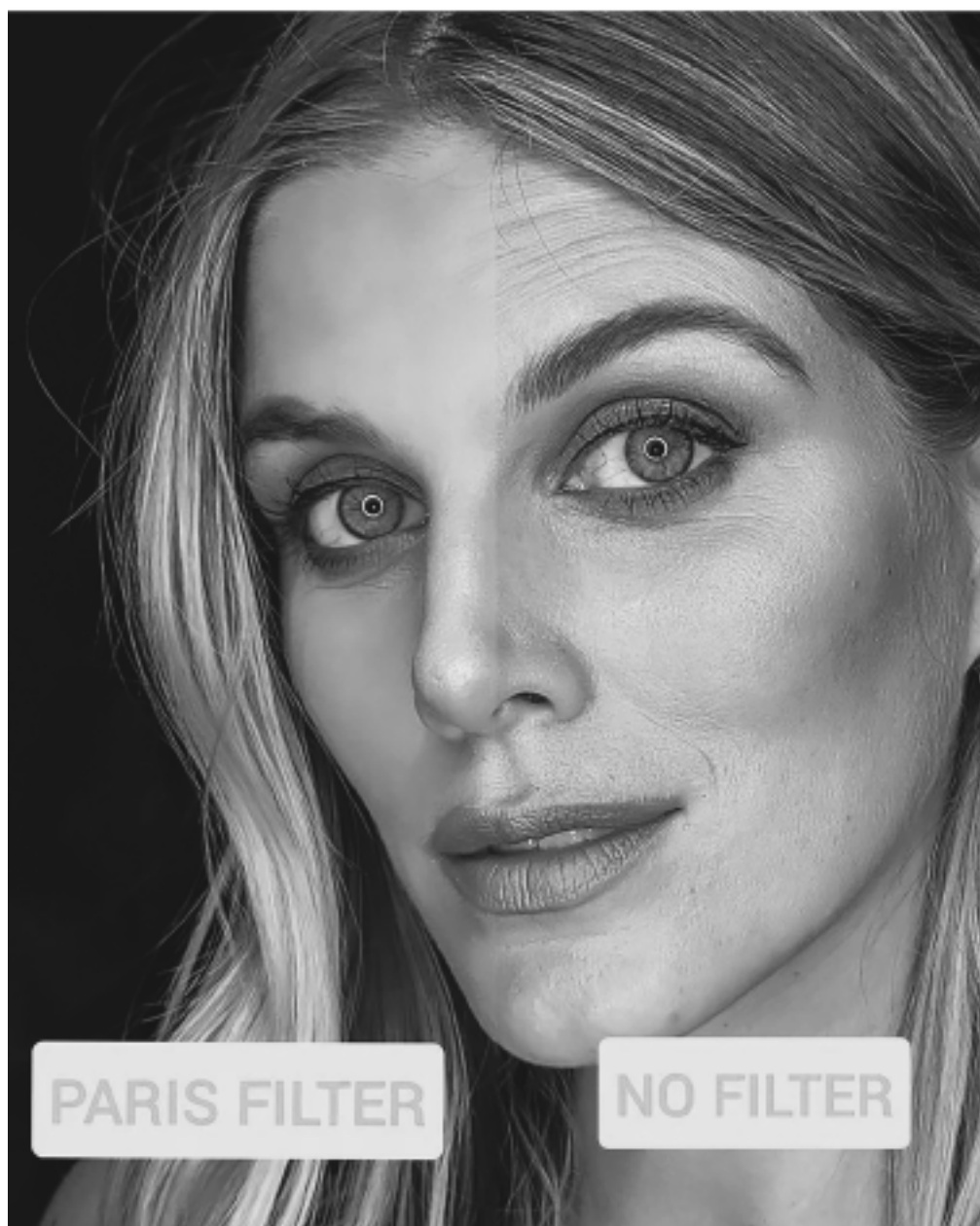


Fig. 1
Ashley Louise James.
Instagram Post September 13 2020.

visual inspection alone. Indeed, participants in Lavrence and Cambre's study generally believe that selfies are filtered but when looking at less conspicuously edited idealised images reported thinking, in conflict with their scepticism, "she's so pretty".³⁵

"Before" and "after" images can show the unreality of convincingly altered photographs. One study, for instance, demonstrated that viewing both "natural" and idealised images reduced the negative impact of the idealised images on women's facial appearance satisfaction.³⁶ Other studies have demonstrated that interventions involving videos demonstrating the alteration process in relation to thin-ideal images may be effective in the short term to successfully prevent reductions in body satisfaction.³⁷ However, as Harrison and Hefner have pointed out: 'It is not feasible to locate unretouched versions of all retouched imagery in commercial visual media to provide real-time before-after comparisons'.³⁸ Teaching viewers how to attend to images differently could lessen the sense of epistemic contact formed with the subjects of altered photographs and reduce the need to have the "before" image at hand in certain cases. Ultimately, challenging the underlying norms that contribute to the drive to alter photographs in this way would be the most effective means of combating the negative effects of this practice.³⁹ In addition to collective action, like more diverse images of beauty in mainstream media, the proposed form of critical visual literacy could contribute to challenging and reshaping the socio-cultural dimensions of this practice.⁴⁰

- 1 Emma Hallett, "Instagram photo filters targeted by model's #filterdrop campaign," *BBC News*, September 7, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-bristol-53784938>.
- 2 Annie Vischer, "The Way Influencers Use Filters On Instagram Is About To Change In A BIG Way," *Grazia*, February 3, 2021, <https://graziaday.co.uk/beauty-hair/makeup/sasha-louise-pallari-filter-drop/>.
- 3 Amelia C. Couture Bue and Kristen Harrison, "Visual and cognitive processing of thin-ideal Instagram images containing idealized or disclaimer comments," *Body Image* 33 (March 2020): 152–63, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2020.02.014>. Marika Tiggermann, Zoe Brown, Mia Zaccardo, and Nicole Thomas, "'Warning: This image has been digitally altered': The effect of disclaimer labels added to fashion magazine shoots on women's body dissatisfaction," *Body Image* 21 (April 2017): 107–13, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2017.04.001>.
- 4 Kimberly L. Bissell, "Skinny Like You: Visual Literacy, Digital Manipulation and Young Women's Drive to be Thin," *Studies in Media and Information Literacy Education* 6, no. 1 (February 2006): 1–14. Kristen Harrison and Veronica Hefner, "Virtually Perfect: Image Retouching and Adolescent Body Image," *Media Psychology* 17, no. 2 (March 2014): 134–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2013.770354>.
- 5 Harrison and Hefner, "Virtually Perfect," 147.
- 6 Belinda Bury, Marika Tiggermann, and Amy Slater, "Disclaimer labels on fashion magazine advertisements: Impact on visual attention and relationship with body dissatisfaction," *Body Image* 16 (October 2015): 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2015.09.005>.
- 7 Amy Odell, "Read my lips: the rise and rise of photo-editing," *The Economist*, July 2, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/1843/2018/07/02/read-my-lips-the-rise-and-rise-of-photo-editing?fsrc=scn/fb/te/bl/ed/beautyreadmylipstheriseandriseofphotoediting1843&fbclid=IwAR3xXUuYwrek6POWdH3QenA8oL9050Jx54ezwrLRaQMxW4CWbPz7X8GShrM>.
- 8 Fiona MacCallum, and Heather Widdows, "Altered Images: Understanding the Influence of Unrealistic Images and Beauty Aspirations," *Health Care Analysis* 26 (July 2016): 235–45, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10728-016-0327-1>.
- 9 Ana Sofia Elias, and Rosalind Gill, "Beauty Surveillance: The Digital Self-Monitoring Cultures of Neoliberalism," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 21, no. 1 (February 2018): 59–77, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549417705604>. Christine Lavrence and Carolina Cambre, "'Do I Look Like My Selfie?': Filters and the Digital-Forensic Gaze," *Social Media + Society* (October 2020). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120955182>. Rosalind Gill, "Being watched and feeling judged on social media," *Feminist Media Studies* 21, no. 8 (February 2022): 1387–92. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1996427>.
- 10 Scott Walden, "Transparency and Two-Factor Photographic Appreciation," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 56, no. 1 (January 2016): 33–51, <https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayv042>.
- 11 Jonathan Cohen and Aaron Meskin, "On the Epistemic Value of Photographs," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 62, no. 2 (May 2004): 197–210, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-594X.2004.00152.x>.
- 12 Dan Cavedon-Taylor, "Photographic Phenomenology as Cognitive Phenomenology," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 55, no. 1 (April 2015): 71–89, <https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayu098>.
- 13 Dan Cavedon-Taylor, "Photographically Based Knowledge," *Episteme* 10, no. 3 (August 2013): 283–97, 294, <https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2013.21>.
- 14 Claire Ansbomb, "Look a Little (Chuck) Closer: Aesthetic Attention and the Contact Phenomenon," *British Journal of Aesthetics* (July 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayab050>.
- 15 Walden, "Transparency," 39.
- 16 Joshua P. Salmon, Heath E. Matheson, and Patricia A. McMullen, "Photographs of Manipulable Objects Are Named More Quickly Than the Same Objects Depicted in Line Drawings," *Frontiers in Psychology* 5 (October 2014), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.01187>.
- 17 Walden, "Transparency," 43.
- 18 Ansbomb, "Look."
- 19 Sky HISTORY UK TV Channel, "Meet Marina Amaral a Historical Colourist," *Sky HISTORY UK TV Channel*, 2019, <https://www.history.co.uk/article/meet-colourist-marina-amaral-history>.
- 20 Claire Ansbomb, "Why Draw Pictures that Already Exist?" *TRACEY* 16, no. 1 (April 2022): 15–28, 21–2.
- 21 Bence Nanay, *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 7.
- 22 Ansbomb, "Look."
- 23 Paloma Atencia-Linares, "Fiction, Nonfiction, and Deceptive Photographic Representation," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70, no. 1 (February 2012): 19–30, 27, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6245.2011.01495.x>.
- 24 Cavedon-Taylor, "Photographic Phenomenology." Walden, "Transparency."
- 25 Odell, "Read my lips."
- 26 Lavrence and Cambre, "Do I Look," 5.
- 27 Ansbomb, "Look."
- 28 Sophie J. Nightingale, Kimberley A. Wade, Hany Farid, and Derrick G. Watson, "Can people detect errors in shadows and reflections?" *Attention, Perception, & Psychophysics* 81 (June 2019): 2917–43, <https://doi.org/10.3758/s13414-019-01773-w>.
- 29 See, for example, James Elkins, ed. *Visual Literacy* (London: Routledge, 2007).
- 30 Geoff Cox, "Ways of Machine Seeing as a Problem of Invisual Literacy," in *The Networked Image in Post Digital Culture*, ed. Andrew Dewdney and Katrina Sluis (London: Routledge, 2022), 102–13.

-
- 31 Sarah Riley, Adrienne Evans, and Alison Mackiewicz, "It's Just between Girls: Negotiating the Postfeminist Gaze in Women's 'Looking Talk,'" *Feminism & Psychology* 26, no. 1 (February 2016): 94–113, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353515626182>.
 - 32 Sophie J. Nightingale, Kimberley A. Wade, and Derrick G. Watson, "Can people identify original and manipulated photos of real-world scenes?" *Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications* 2 (July 2017): 30, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41235-017-0067-2>.
 - 33 Michael Zhang, "Beauty Retouching from the Early 1900s: A Portrait of Actress Joan Crawford That's 'Photoshopped'," *PetaPixel*, October 17, 2014, <https://petapixel.com/2014/10/17/beauty-retouching-early-1900s-portrait-actress-joan-crawford-thats-photoshopped/>.
 - 34 Vischer, "Influencers."
 - 35 Lawrence, and Cambre, "Do I Look," 9.
 - 36 Jasmine Fardouly and Ronald M. Rapee, "The impact of no-makeup selfies on young women's body image," *Body Image* 28 (January 2019): 128–34, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2019.01.006>.
 - 37 Emma Halliwell, Alice Easun, and Diana Harcourt, "Body Dissatisfaction: Can a Short Media Literacy Message Reduce Negative Media Exposure Effects Amongst Adolescent Girls?" *British Journal of Health Psychology* 16 (March 2011): 396–403, <https://doi.org/10.1348/135910710X515714>.
 - 38 Harrison and Hefner, "Virtually Perfect," 149.
 - 39 Rachel Cohen, Jasmine Fardouly, Toby Newton-John, and Amy Slater, "#BoPo on Instagram: An experimental investigation of the effects of viewing body positive content on young women's mood and body image," *New Media and Society* 21, no. 7 (February 2019): 1546–64, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1461444819826530>.
 - 40 With great thanks to an anonymous reviewer for their helpful suggestions and to the audience at the Nordic Society for Aesthetics 2021 Conference, where this article was first presented.