Asian Beauty: Beauty Concept, Whiteness, and Ideology in Generative AI

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Abstract

This study is a continuation of our previous work and examines the ways whiteness' influence on AI dictates the beauty standards it deems suitable for Asian people. Guided by a humble research question: "*How does AI interpret the concept of beauty for Asians?"* multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) was employed to analyze both textual and visual data generated from three AI platforms. Data in this study were generated by recycling and repurposing our previous studies' data, where 66 images of Asians rendered from the three AI platforms were downloaded and uploaded back to them, along with two simple prompts that asked the programs to beautify the Asians in the images and explain the changes they made. Through this study, we argue that AI interprets the concept of beauty for Asians in a way that corresponds with global beauty standards, which are highly influenced by whiteness. Nevertheless, AI describes the beautification process homogeneously. We also offer a practical suggestion for those interested in uncovering hidden ideology in AI discourse using MCDA

Keyword: MCDA, Generative AI, Beauty, Asians.

Introduction

The term "beauty" may be one of the oldest and most contested notions in human history, with each and every culture having its own evaluation of what it takes to be beautiful. Beauty discourse has developed alongside the emergence of human beings (Dimitrov & Kroumpouzos, 2023). Within Jewish and Islamic religious traditions, for instance, this notion is widely believed to be the culprit of the first bloodshed in human history involving Cain and Abel, in which Cain killed Abel as Cain desperately wanted to marry a more beautiful woman designated for Abel. Beauty has drawn scholars to examine it from different perspectives because not only does it entail various dimensions and is contingent upon diverse historical periods and cultures (Sisti et al., 2021), but it is also imbued with sociopolitical benefits. People who are socio-politically considered beautiful are perceived to be more successful in personal and professional life (Vashi, 2015) due to acquiring more opportunities in the job market and hypergamy

(Elder Jr, 1969; Li et al., 2008).

Research Method

This study is guided by a humble research question: "*How does AI interpret the concept of beauty for Asians?"* This simple research question was then operationalized into more specific questions to examine the ways whiteness' influence on AI dictates the beauty standards it deems suitable for Asian people.
Data in this study were generated by recycling and repurposing our previous studies' data, where various prompts were used to generate 66 images of Asians with different ages, genders, and occupations in 3 generative AI program.



Picture 1. Skin tone chart

Multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) was selected as the analytical lens for this study. As the superset of critical discourse analysis (CDA), MCDA allows researchers to scrutinize both language and images to discover what lies beneath the surface of a discourse shaped by the multimodality of language and image (Machin & Mayr, 2023). It offers a way to critically reveal the motives and ideology behind a constructed discourse (Fairclough, 1989).

As a heterogeneous field with no single, fixed analytical step or procedure (Dijk, 1993), primary (image) and secondary (text) data were analyzed employing different approaches. We carefully compared the 66 source images with 198 AI-beautified images, focusing on skin tones, nose shapes, and eye structures. Inspired by Li et al. (2008), we examined skin tones using L'Oréal's skin tone classification, consisting of 45 skin shades (Fuller, 2024)..



Picture 2. Skin tone comparison

Discussion & Result

Reflecting on the findings of this study, we infer that AI interprets the concept of beauty for Asians in a way that corresponds with global beauty standards, which are highly influenced by whiteness. Beautiful or attractive Asian entities are those in binary opposition to ugly or unattractive Asians, with racialized facial features of puffy and slanted eyes and a flat and wide nose that convey negative stereotypes, as reported by Kaw's (1993) participants, of being dull, passive, not intelligent, not alert, and lacking sociability and prestige. In this case, AI can be perceived as an assessment tool that determines a benchmark for Asian entities to be considered beautiful based on beauty criteria established from global beauty standards rather than local aesthetic values. As seen in Figure 5 above, for instance, puffy eyes and single-folded eyelids are considered ugly or unattractive, resulting in AI's intervention in eye beauty enhancement, visually inspired by double eyelid surgery that is historically influenced by whiteness and global beauty standards (Chen, 2021; Kaw, 1993). Meanwhile, an examination of how ancient Chinese and Korean societies perceived eye beauty suggests that their aesthetic values favored single eyelids over double eyelids. (Fakhro, Yim, et al., 2015).

Conclusion

The three Gen AI programs see beautiful Asians as those having lighter skin tone, wide eyes and double-folded eyelids, and a narrow and projected nose. They also translate Asian beauty into cosmetic enhancements that converge unidirectionally toward Western- and whiteness-idealized figures. In this case, Asian beauty is all about enhancements that follow the thoughts and looks of white racial groups: the thoughts of white entities that determine which aspects of Asian bodies need beautification and that influence Asians to adopt this view, and the looks of white entities that inspire Asians to attain similar features. AI-mediated beautification not only reflects real-world practices of Asian cosmetic enhancements deemed aesthetically suitable for them, but it also projects into the normativity of Asians (and most likely other racial groups) to embrace the similarity originating from the Western perspective.

This study suggests that examining ideological work in AI studies via MCDA is fruitful if the inquiry not only scrutinizes visual and textual artifacts, but also observes how those artifacts are produced, consumed, and distributed. In this case, those processes that belong to Fairclough's discursive practice dimension can be best examined by observing how AI's algorithms are composed and trained, which online data are available to scrape, and what ideology saturates those available data.