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Constructing Ideal Femininity: Beauty Representation by Kenyan Female TikTok Creators in the Digital Sphere

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Abstract
This paper explores how Kenyan female TikTok content creators construct beauty as a reflection of ideal femininity. Although digital media scholarship across African contexts is growing, how content creators negotiate, conform to, or challenge norms of femininity online remains understudied. The study employed a multiple-case study design and a mixed-sequential method, analysing 50 TikTok videos followed by interviews with 15 Kenyan TikTok content creators. Goffman's dramaturgical approach, Butler's theory of gender performativity, and glocalisation/cultural hybridity theory guided the study. Findings revealed that creators engage in performative beauty practices, including hairstyling, facial makeup and enhancement, clothing and fashion styling, the use of digital filters, and skin-colour softening to create, maintain, negotiate, and deconstruct ideals of femininity. These practices reinforce colourist, Eurocentric, and classist beauty ideologies while also challenging them through the natural hair movement, avoidance of digital filters, and re-appropriation of skin-whitening products. The findings further showed that beauty practices are informed by global and local beauty ideals, manifested through digital filters and the natural look, respectively. Hybridisation is evident in the adoption and adaptation of beauty practices to fit the researcher's ideal feminine physique, voice, and overall look. The analysis also revealed the irony of creators criticising the capitalistic nature and transactional relationships of the attention economy while simultaneously engaging in these practices to earn a living. The study recommends that media platforms reevaluate algorithms that prioritise edited over natural fashion, as creators conform to such changes to appeal to algorithms.

Keywords: Beauty, gender performativity, ideal feminine, Kenya, TikTok.

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INTRODUCTION

There has been a rise in female content creators on TikTok in Kenya; scholarly studies have yet to systematically analyse how this type of content contributes to existing notions of femininity in contemporary Kenya. Previous investigations of women's behaviour online on TikTok have noted the importance of certain actions, such as hairdressing or make-up application, in establishing self-presentation (Wamboi 2022). Still, these accounts are mainly descriptive, as they provide only an analysis of the visual choices of creators of audiovisual content, without showing how these actions produce, support, or deny normative notions of femininity, or how they relate to the globally dominant idea of beauty (Neema, 2026). Therefore, a gap appears in the literature regarding how topics of beauty representation in new media should be understood as socially constructed performance, influenced by local cultural connotations and global norms. The current research focuses on how female creators on TikTok perform gender identity and communicate their understanding of femininity through multimodal beauty performances.

For a long time, the idea of beauty as a social construct has served as a criterion for judging and assessing women. In today's digital age, social media has become the primary tool for spreading, challenging, and reconceptualising beauty standards, with TikTok emerging as a major platform. Since the platform's launch in 2017 in China (Jain et al., 2025), TikTok quickly spread and reached many markets in Africa, including Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa, with Kenya's audience being predominantly represented by women and youth who enjoy the capabilities of short video creation and sharing (Rosmaria, 3025). More women open TikTok accounts than men, reflecting the platform's power for creative social expression and economic opportunities through influencer connections and brand contracts (Santoniccolo et al., 2023; Werdhaningtyas et al., 2025). Kenyan TikTok accounts like Miss Mandi and Joy Kendi boast millions of followers and lead the beauty space, shaping perceptions of true beauty and challenging gender stereotypes. Thus, TikTok can be said to practice social mobility while creating social pressure in which the notion of beauty is performed.

To create an appropriate theoretical framework and clarify the analytical factors guiding this research study, many key theoretical concepts need to be clearly defined. Firstly, the concept of ideal femininity implies that it is the culturally specific standards of physical appearance, manners, and presentation involving behaviour and style that women are expected to conform to in a certain culture (Abid, 2021). Secondly, beauty-related performances involve repetitive rituals that people perform both physically and digitally, such as hairdos, makeup application, outfit creation, filter use, and skin appearance changes (El Sayed & Hotait, 2024). Finally, glocalisation is defined as the localisation of global aesthetic ideas and cultural norms, leading to the creation of unique identities rather than cultural homogenization (Belamghari, 2020).

This research incorporates three different theories to explain the notion of beauty representation as a performance. Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory sees self-presentation as a performance; Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity relates femininity to stylised acts rather than a pre-existing identity; and glocalization/cultural hybridity theory (Fatih, 2023) explains the concept of glocalisation by discussing the relationship between global beauty trends and local ideals in Kenya. The attention economy is discussed as a framework that enables the staging, measurement, and commercialisation of these performances of beauty. These theories allow the study to move beyond mere description of beauty performances to the analysis of the construction of femininity and to explore how conformity, resistance, and cultural hybridity appear in the same performance. The Theoretical Framework section provides detailed descriptions and applies each theory.

Guided by these theoretical perspectives, the current study analyses how Kenyan female content creators on TikTok represent beauty as an embodiment of ideal femininity in the contemporary Kenyan digital sphere. In particular, the study aims to: identify beauty-related performative acts by Kenyan female content creators that characterise ideal femininity on TikTok; analyse how such performances construct, maintain, or challenge the existing ideals of femininity in the Kenyan digital realm; and understand how globalisation and local definitions of femininity are reflected in creators' self-representation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Beauty, Femininity, and Digital Self-Representation on TikTok

Worldwide, TikTok has become an important platform for creating and expressing gender identity, particularly

through beauty-related content (Hulpa, 2025). What makes it different from text-based or image-only platforms is that it is multimodal: combining visual, auditory, gestural, and linguistic elements, TikTok provides a unique opportunity to observe how beauty standards are created and enacted (Ebrahim & Tanner, 2023). The foundation of theories about TikTok is linked to Butler's (1990) idea that gender is formed through various "repetitive, stylized performances" rather than deriving from a single internal condition. In addition, TikTok includes various tools that provide a practical basis for such a theory: filters, editing tools, and algorithms. However, the authors distinguish between the approaches to the problem under study: Hulpa focuses on psychological mechanisms, while Ebrahim and Tanner focus more on the platform's formal characteristics. Nevertheless, all authors agree that TikTok is not just a means of transmitting already existing beauty standards, but also a form of their emergence.

When applied to Africa, this Butlerian framework seems adaptable rather than transferable without changes. Amaefula (2025) shows that the role of social media in Africa cannot be viewed as either reinforcing or undermining gender norms, offering a more nuanced interpretation than Hulpa's heavily ideological approach. Nabea (2025) also sharpens this idea in his study of a male Kenyan comedian who uses costumes, makeup, and feminine mannerisms to create an image of a fictional Muslim woman from the Kenyan Coast. The study points out that identity is constantly constructed both in Kenya's digital environment and more broadly. Gender performativity in this case is not limited to the processes through which women create their images, but also encompasses the circulation of femininity in the form of particular, recognisable signs.

In this larger Kenyan context, a few studies appear to converge on a similar empirical situation, though their interpretations differ. Wamboi (2022) concluded that the COVID-19 pandemic led Kenyan women to use hair, cosmetics, and clothing to develop more confident, self-controlled online avatars than were possible offline, showing that digital identity construction can expand the notion of agency. Ligaga (2020), in a study examining the online self-representation of young Kenyan women more generally, takes a more ambivalent stance, suggesting that aesthetic labour, the drive for unnatural perfection, the commodification of youth beauty, and the visual alteration of oneself are both expressions of agency and acts of constraint. Makinde et al. (2025) further complicate the scenario by suggesting a persistent normative pressure towards a slim body, lighter skin, and long hair. As such, these three studies do agree in a broad sense with each other that women in Kenya do not use the platforms in a purely liberating way, but the emphasis is different: Wamboi is more inclined to emphasise the aspect of agency, while Makinde et al. put stress on the concept of restriction, and Ligaga is positioned somewhere in between these two. Note that none of these studies, in fact, analyses the issue of beauty as being the embodiment of femininity.

More broadly, research on beauty practices, which often originated outside of Africa, presents findings that both elaborate on and complicate the existing Kenyan literature. Research has found that TikTok beauty filters conduct a consistent series of alterations made on faces - smoothing and lightening the skin, reducing the face size, narrowing the nose, enlarging eyes, and plumping the lips (Berthé, 2024; Hurme, 2026). The Clean Girl aesthetic has been interpreted as a performance that turns women into a project and idealises effortless work while concealing the necessary labour involved. While the studies agree on the operation of the mechanism - the use of hidden labour to create the impression of effortless Eurocentric beauty - the way the operation of such a mechanism differs, or does not differ, from its operation in the case of skin-lightening practices with their colonial and post-colonial histories remains unexplored. This absence is another important gap that this research intends to address.

The Interplay Between Global and Local Beauty Ideals

The relationship between universal beauty trends and local standards of femininity can be explained by cultural hybridisation and glocalisation theories. According to Tse et al. (2025), the universal understanding of what it means to be fashionable and beautiful, based on Western standards, is automatically transferred from foreign countries to Africa without taking local characteristics into account. At the same time, they discuss that Kenyan women dispute the sizes of the clothing because they are too small and lack curves, which is a sign of cultural opposition to the idea of body sizes as well. This is an important discovery because it challenges the common idea that African women passively accept global standards. Brown et al. (2025) delve into the manner in which women of colour on TikTok apply the 'outfit transition' trend to combat Eurocentric standards of beauty while promoting non-white femininity and

cultural aesthetics, having analysed videos made by an East African creator in which the people behind the videos demonstrate their ability to control their representation by creatively adapting and reinventing trends propagated by dominant cultural discourse. The rivalry between Tse et al. and Brown et al. is revealing: the former strongly believe in limited adaptation and mechanical transplantation, while Brown et al. focus on creativity and the process of resistance. The contradiction between the two is considered essential to understanding how Kenyan producers operate in the global beauty space.

By shifting the analytical perspective to Africa, Tolofari (2025) explains how African clothing aesthetics have evolved digitally, noting their significance in promoting inclusive femininity and the emerging issues surrounding beauty and self-representation. The analysis of materials published on digital platforms such as Instagram and TikTok indicates that while these platforms can contribute to cultural development and offer opportunities for empowerment, they can also reinforce toxic beauty standards and traditional gender roles. This aligns with the statements made by Amaefula (2025), who claims that platforms provide opportunities to both perpetuate and challenge norms, yet neither of the academics discusses which of these processes dominates the other. Erastus and Hurst-Harosh (2020) provide one possible explanation, discussing how African youth employ global pop culture in their language practices through bricolage, thereby creating cultural hybrid patterns. However, their research is limited because it does not examine the extent to which similar bricolage practices occur in visual and embodied beauty performances. Werunga and Gábor (2025) explain the hybrid identity of Kenyan women through the concept of cultural hybridity, drawing on their experiences of living between old conventions and new self-representations shaped by the media. The authors point out that, in contrast to the earlier rigid roles expected of Kenyan women by society, global media discourse and local cultural practices have made these roles more flexible over time. In this respect, Werunga and Gábor's research focuses primarily on identity formulation rather than beauty practices; the authors do not analyse how hybridity is reflected in femininity practices depicted through visual and bodily representations on TikTok.

Thus, the gap identified in this review is the lack of a study investigating how Kenyan women TikTok content creators negotiate global and local beauty ideals in their content. Although Tse et al. (2025) uncover acts of resistance to ideals concerning body sizes, and Brown et al. (2025) show how trends have been creatively reshaped, neither of them does so using Kenyan creators as the focus of their research, nor have they covered all the beauty practices of hybridity, such as hair, make-up, filters, skin lightening, etc. Werunga and Gábor (2025) provide the theoretical framework of hybridity but do not apply it to TikTok aesthetics. This research investigates exactly this issue.

Gendered Expectations and Platform Pressures in Digital Beauty Performance

In the current digital age, social media influencers are the new opinion leaders who share their opinions and experiences on products and other topics (De Veirman et al., 2017; Godey et al., 2016). Social media influencers share their knowledge, perceived authenticity, and shared experiences, which makes them trustworthy figures that people turn to not only for product-related advice but also for public affairs issues (Ha & Yang, 2023). Existing scholarship identifies gender as a relevant consideration in influencer marketing, particularly because it affects attributes associated with effective brand performance (Manzoor et al., 2025; Hudders & De Jans, 2022). However, although these studies show that gender matters in influencer marketing, none of them has analysed how gender influences the content of beauty performances themselves – what creators actually do with their bodies, faces, and aesthetic choices. According to Duffy (2017), social media content creators deal with his concept of "aspirational labour", which indicates that in this process, borders between self-expression, work, and exploitation become hazy. Duffy and Meisner (2022) analyse the aspect of "platform governance at the margins" and emphasise the importance of algorithmic (in)visibility in creators' experiences. Marshall (2021) focuses on the concepts of "commodified celebrity-self" and "industrialised agency" within the context of the present-day attention economy, clarifying how visibility can translate into economic gain. All the authors acknowledge the impact of platforms on content creation, but their approaches differ in how they define whether this constitutes exploitation or agency.

Referring to the Global South, Mukhongo (2023) describes how women in Africa, including those in Kenya, are using social networks and mobile technologies such as TikTok to challenge and redefine traditional gender standards and narratives. On the other hand, she uses the example of a Kenyan social media

influencer and socialite who embodies the global ideals of beauty by changing her body through skin whitening and plastic surgery to fit in the arguably imposed standards of appearance, demonstrating the contradiction of activism and compliance. Mukhongo's case study helps demonstrate this contradiction, but it is a single case. What is more, although the emphasis on skin whitening and plastic surgery is legitimate, it does not reflect the entirety of beauty practices, including hair, makeup, filters, and clothes, that form femininity. Therefore, the issue of how platform pressure influences common beauty performance practices, rather than extreme body-alteration cases, remains unexplored.

Specifically, in Kenya, no study has examined how platform pressures have shaped the beauty performances of Kenyan female creators on TikTok. Although Wamboi (2022) and Ligaga (2020) examined self-representation practices, neither elaborates on the economic and algorithmic pressures that shape creators' content choices. Mukhongo's (2023) case study of a Kenyan influencer examines the tension between compliance and resistance but does not offer an analysis of how the authors encounter this tension across different contexts. The question that remains unexamined is, therefore, how platform pressures, such as the pressures of visibility, economic pressures, and audience expectations, affect the performances of Kenyan female creators regarding beauty and how they deal with the tension between their principles and their needs for survival in the economic context.

Thus, the research seeks to fill this gap by investigating how Kenyan female content creators represent beauty on TikTok according to Goffman's dramaturgical theory, Butler's gender performativity theory, and glocalisation and cultural hybridity theory by posing the question: What beauty-related performative acts do Kenyan female content creators perform on TikTok, and how do they represent those performances?

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative approach using visual content analysis and semi-structured interviews within a multiple-case study framework. The study examined 15 Kenyan female TikTok content creators as individual cases, using their TikTok videos and interview transcripts to explore performative beauty practices, constructions of femininity, and the negotiation of global and local beauty ideals. The analysis involved within-case and cross-case comparisons to identify similarities, differences, and patterns across the 15 cases.

The sample comprised 50 TikTok videos created by 15 Kenyan female content creators and posted between January 2025 and March 2026. Creators and videos were selected through multi-stage purposive sampling, using beauty-related hashtags, TikTok recommendations, and snowball sampling. From an initial pool of 42 potential creators, participants were assessed according to their age (18–35 years), audience engagement, participation in beauty-related content categories, and visual self-representation. Maximum variation sampling was then used to achieve variation in content style, audience size, engagement approach, and geographic location. The final participants were drawn from Nairobi, Mombasa, Kisumu, and Nakuru. Each creator contributed two to five videos.

The units of analysis comprised visual, audio, and narrative elements representing ideal femininity, including skin tone, body shape, makeup and grooming, clothing and styling, bodily gestures and expressions, self-care routines, captions, spoken commentary, background music, voiceovers, and trending sounds. Interview data focused on creators' accounts of the intentions, pressures, and meanings underlying their beauty-related content choices.

TikTok content was gathered through structured observation, screen recording, and, when permitted, the platform's native video-download facility. Semi-structured interviews were also held with all 15 creators via Zoom and WhatsApp video call, according to participant preference. The interviews lasted 30 to 45 minutes and were audio-recorded after informed consent. Participants selected either English or Kiswahili as the interview language. All recordings were transcribed verbatim, and Kiswahili transcripts were translated into English. Member checking involving three participants was used to further enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the research.

Data analysis followed a three-stage hybrid inductive–deductive approach. First, visual and audio elements were inductively coded according to performative acts and beauty markers. Second, the emerging categories were interpreted using Goffman's dramaturgical theory, Butler's theory of gender performativity, and glocalisation/cultural hybridity theory. Third, interview data were thematically analysed alongside the visual

findings for each case. A codebook was iteratively developed and refined through constant comparison and memo-writing. A second coder independently coded 20% of the video corpus and interview transcripts, producing 85% intercoder agreement; discrepancies were resolved through discussion and refinement of code definitions.

The institutional review board approved the study before data collection. Participants provided written informed consent and were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw without penalty. We used pseudonyms and removed identifying information. Public TikTok content was handled in accordance with digital ethnography principles, with ordinary commenters not identified. Digital data were stored on a password-protected external hard drive and in encrypted cloud storage accessible only to the researcher, while physical consent forms were stored securely. Data will be retained for five years before permanent deletion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Performative Acts Through Which Kenyan Female Content Creators Represent Ideal Femininity on TikTok

Hair as a Primary Site of Feminine Performance

Hair was the most prevalent beauty performance in the content studied, making it a vital aspect of femininity, identity, and social power. One of the creators stated, "Hair is the first thing people notice about you" (Respondent 5). There were three types of hair practices: using wigs and weaves, doing "edges," and going natural.

Of the 50 videos analysed, 32 featured creators wearing wigs and weaves. The hairpieces could be of different styles, from shoulder-length bobs to waist-length, with the majority being long, straight, or wavy. The creators posted "hair transformation" videos in which they showcased the process of transitioning from natural or untidy hair to a desired wig or weave. The transformation always followed the same pattern: the creator showed up with their natural hair or a protective style, and then, through a series of shots, the camera captured the process of putting on a wig cap, the wig or weave itself, and the finishing and styling. The final result was unveiled, with the creator smiling and posing in front of the camera.

Eight out of fifteen creators interviewed stated that they used wigs and weaves because they allowed them to be versatile and flexible while still taking care of their natural hair. As respondent 2 explained,

> *You have to understand that on TikTok, your hair is your brand. If I post with my natural hair, the engagement drops. If I post with a nice wig, the views go up. It is not even a question. You give people what they want to see.*

This comment demonstrated the algorithm-driven nature of the creators' work, as they adapted their content to what the audience wanted to see. The visual analysis also revealed that elaborate wig and weave installations were a prevalent theme in the creators' content. The creators often named the wig styles – "Brazilian," "Peruvian," "Malaysian," among others – which demonstrated the diversity of wig styles in demand. Moreover, the creators revealed the costs of the wigs, which ranged from several thousand to over fifty thousand Kenyan shillings, a significant expense for many young Kenyan women.

Another prevalent practice was the creators' obsession with "edges." Out of fifteen creators interviewed, nine posted videos discussing the do's and don'ts of "laying edges" – a process of styling the tiny "baby hairs" along the hairline into a decorative pattern using gel. Some of the creators dedicated entire content series to the art of edge styling. The process was extremely meticulous, as the creator had to apply gel or edge control along the front hairline, section the "baby hairs" along the sides, and use either a small brush or a toothpick to shape the desired pattern. Moreover, many of the creators filmed the entire process of laying edges up close to showcase intricate details, such as multiple zigzags and curls in the hairline. The finished result was a neatly shaped front section of hair framing the face, which the creator then presented to the camera with satisfaction. The analysis of the edge-styling content revealed the significant importance of this aspect of female beauty for Kenyan women. As respondent 5, who had over 115K followers on one of the accounts, explained:

> *Laying edges is not merely about looking good; it is a demonstration of your ability to take care of yourself. People will judge you by your appearance, whether you have messy edges or not. It is ridiculous, but it is a reality.*

Respondent 12 shared similar thoughts:

> *I have to redo my edges every day. If I fail to do so, I feel like I'm not presentable. It is not just for the people around me; it is about me. It is not easy, I admit, but I feel more composed and in control when my edges are perfect. Sometimes I wish I could wake up without having to worry*

about my edges. It is exhausting; it takes a lot of time, and if it rains, I have to redo everything.

It could be seen from the interviewee's words that a lot of time and effort went into laying the edges, which in turn made the creator feel more confident about their appearance. On the other hand, the pressure of maintaining this seemingly perfect standard was emotionally taxing, as even the slightest misstep, such as rain damaging the edges, could cause significant inconvenience. The creator described the process of laying edges as one of the most tedious parts of the wig-and-weave hairdo, as it had to be redone every day or took a substantial amount of time when the desired intricate patterns were chosen. Therefore, this part of the styling ritual was particularly important for the women's self-image.

In contrast to those who chose to wear wigs and weaves, a minuscule portion of the analysed content featured women who opted to keep their natural hair. Out of fifty videos, three belonged to creators who showcased their natural hair. This type of content tended to be shorter and followed the same pattern: the creator styled their natural hair into an afro, twists, or braids, with some videos including narration about their transition from a relaxer or a wig to natural hair. The natural hair's main characteristic was the accentuation of its beauty and uniqueness, with the creator often playing with their natural hair on camera to demonstrate its versatility and appeal.

The analysis of interviews with creators who often posted natural hair content revealed some reasons for their choice. Respondent 8, whose natural hair account has over 100K followers, stated that:

> *I cut my relaxed hair in 2019 and went natural. It was such a bold decision because people were asking me, 'Why would you do that? Your hair was so pretty, but it's about celebrating who I am as a person. I want girls in Kenya to understand that they do not have to change their hair to fit some standards, because it is ridiculous.*

On the other hand, a natural hair adherent, respondent 3, who switched between natural and wig content, expressed some frustration with the monetisation aspect of their platform experience:

> *I truly love my natural hair, but the sad truth is that the algorithm does not reward natural hair as much as it used to. I have to post more videos featuring wigs to earn consistently. Therefore, I have to keep a balance between the two styles and dedicate a certain amount of content to each.*

Cosmetics and Makeup as Performative Tools

Makeup application emerged as another central performative act through which creators constructed ideal femininity. The analysis revealed a range of practices, from everyday "natural" makeup looks to elaborate, transformative applications, and the extensive use of digital filters for virtual cosmetic enhancement.

Twenty-two of the fifty videos featured makeup tutorials or transformation content. These videos typically began with the creator's bare face, sometimes with a brief introduction explaining the look she intended to create. The creator then applied products in sequence: primer, foundation, concealer, powder, blush, contour, eyeshadow, eyeliner, mascara, and lip products, narrating her actions and explaining her product choices as she worked. The videos often employed close-up shots of the application process, allowing viewers to observe techniques such as blending, baking, and highlighting. The transformation was presented as a demonstration of skill and mastery, with the creator's ability to manipulate her appearance serving as evidence of her competence.

Interviews confirmed that makeup tutorials were a strategic choice. Respondent 9 commented:

> *Makeup tutorials are the most consistent way to grow. People are always looking for new techniques, new products. If you can teach someone how to do something, they will keep coming back. It's about building a community around your skills.*

This highlights the entrepreneurial dimension of beauty performance: makeup is not merely an aesthetic act but a skill that can be monetised through audience engagement. Several creators mentioned that makeup tutorials often led to brand partnerships with cosmetics companies, which sought to have their products featured in the tutorials.

Beyond physical cosmetics, creators extensively employed TikTok's beauty filters as digital performative tools—forty-three of the fifty videos employed some form of filter or digital enhancement. The analysis revealed that beauty filters perform recurring visual

modifications: skin smoothing and lightening, facial slimming, nose narrowing, eye enlargement, and lip enhancement. These modifications were often subtle but cumulative, producing a visibly altered version of the creator's face that conformed more closely to Eurocentric and youthful beauty ideals. Creators could select from a range of preset filters or create custom filters with adjustable parameters, allowing them to calibrate the desired level of enhancement.

Interview findings demonstrated a nuanced relationship with filters. While all creators acknowledged using filters, several expressed ambivalence. Respondent 13 explained:

> *Filters are like a double-edged sword. They make you look better, but they also create this version of you that isn't really you. Sometimes I worry that people will meet me in real life and be disappointed because I don't look like my filtered self. But if I don't use them, my videos don't perform as well.*

Respondent 1, a creator with over 80,000 followers who posts beauty and lifestyle content, described how her relationship with filters had evolved. Initially, she used them without much thought, treating them as a standard part of video production. However, after meeting some of her followers in person at a brand event, she became more self-conscious about the gap between her filtered appearance and her offline self. She explained:

> *At the event, a girl came up to me and said, 'You look different in person.' She didn't say it in a mean way, but I knew what she meant. I looked at her face, and I could see she was confused. I had been using a filter that made my skin lighter and smoother. In real life, I don't look like that.*

Despite this discomfort, Respondent 1 continued to use filters in her videos, though she began to adjust them to be less dramatic. She described the internal conflict this created:

> *Sometimes I think, why can't I just show my real face? But then I remember that the videos where I don't use filters don't get as many views. And when I don't get views, I don't get brand deals. So I tell myself, it's just business. But deep down, I know it's more than that. It's about what people expect from me. It's about what sells.*

This example illustrates the double bind that filters create for creators. On one hand, they offer a tool for achieving a polished, aspirational appearance that aligns with platform beauty norms. This example further demonstrates that filters are not merely neutral technological tools but active participants in the construction of gendered beauty ideals, shaping both how creators see themselves and how others see them.

Clothing, Body Presentation, and Aesthetic Curation

Clothing and aesthetic curation formed another significant category of performative acts. Creators presented themselves in carefully curated outfits that signalled class, aspiration, and adherence to particular feminine ideals. The analysis identified three prominent genres within this category: Get Ready With Me videos, the "soft life" aesthetic, and authentic beauty content.

Fourteen of the fifty videos featured GRWM content, in which creators documented their preparation process from start to finish. These videos typically began with the creator in casual clothing or a robe, with her hair undone and face bare. She then proceeded through her routine—skincare, makeup, hair styling, and dressing—narrating her choices and often engaging in casual conversation with her audience. The videos were often filmed in the creator's bedroom or bathroom, spaces carefully arranged to convey intimacy and authenticity. The final reveal showed the creator fully dressed and styled, ready for the day or evening.

The visual analysis revealed that GRWM videos are carefully staged performances. The background, lighting, and camera angles consistently conveyed an aspirational yet relatable image. Respondent 7, a creator with 300,000 followers, said:

> *People love GRWM videos because they feel like they're getting to know you. It's intimate, it's real, and it's aspirational all at the same time. You're showing them your space, your routine, your choices. It builds a connection.*

This statement indicates that GRWM videos function as a form of intimate performance, in which the creator invites the audience into her private space and routine while simultaneously presenting an aspirational image of feminine preparation and self-care.

Twenty-six of the fifty videos featured elements of the "soft life" aesthetic, a lifestyle built around comfort, leisure, and wellness. This aesthetic was performed through clothing choices, loungewear, silk robes, matching sets, curated backgrounds such as neatly

arranged bedrooms, fresh flowers, and aesthetically pleasing workspaces, and aspirational lifestyle content such as spa days, brunch outings, and travel. The soft life aesthetic was also associated with a particular bodily presentation: relaxed, comfortable, and seemingly effortless, in contrast to the high-glamour aesthetic that characterised other forms of beauty content.

As Respondent 10 expressed:

> *The soft life is what everyone wants, right? To be comfortable, to be relaxed, to be living your best life. But the reality is, for most of us, it's a performance. You're showing a version of your life that you wish you had. And the more you show it, the more people want it.*

This reveals the aspirational dimension of beauty performance: creators perform a version of femininity that is often more idealised than reality, creating content that drives engagement but may also foster unrealistic expectations for audiences. The soft life aesthetic was also noted to be associated with class privilege, as the leisure and comfort it depicts require financial resources that many Kenyan women lack.

In contrast, some creators, including Respondents 3, 8, and 12, were identified as "championing authentic beauty and defying gendered expectations." These creators posted content featuring unedited appearances, natural hair, and unfiltered presentations. Their videos often featured them without makeup, wearing casual clothing, and speaking directly to the camera about their experiences with beauty standards and self-acceptance. This represents a counter-performance that challenges dominant norms.

However, interviews revealed that this approach came with its own challenges. Respondent 8 explained:

> *When you don't use filters, people notice. They comment, 'You look tired,' or 'You have dark marks.' Some people appreciate the realness, but others are very critical. It takes a lot of confidence to present yourself without the digital enhancement that everyone else is using.*

This highlights that both conformity and resistance in beauty performance come with costs: the cost of maintaining an idealised appearance and the cost of facing criticism for failing to meet that ideal. Authentic beauty content thus occupies an ambivalent position, celebrated by some audiences as refreshing and relatable, while criticised by others for failing to meet the standards of polished femininity that dominate the platform.

Skin Lightening as a Controversial Performative Act

The most contentious performative act identified was skin lightening, popularly referred to as "mkorogo" on Kenyan TikTok. Four creators had posted content documenting skin-lightening journeys or promoting skin-lightening products. This practice represents an extreme form of conformity to colourist norms, and its presence on the platform indicates the persistence of skin tone hierarchies within Kenyan digital culture.

The visual analysis revealed that creators post "progress videos" documenting their journey to lighter skin, featuring "before and after" comparisons. These videos typically show the creator's skin tone at the beginning of the process and then at various stages of lightening, with commentary on the products used and the results achieved. The videos are not presented with shame but with pride, as creators share recommendations and results with their followers. Some creators also post product reviews and tutorials on using skin-lightening agents, including creams, soaps, and pills.

Interviews with creators who engaged in skin lightening revealed complex motivations. Respondent 10, who had posted such content, explained:

> *It's not that I don't love myself. It's what I wanted: more opportunities. In Kenya, lighter skin gets you more doors. It's the reality. People don't want to say it, but it's true. So why wouldn't I make myself lighter if it means a better life?*

This statement demonstrates the economic logic underlying skin lightening: it is not merely an aesthetic choice but a strategic positioning within a society where colourism operates as a form of social and economic capital. Another creator, Respondent 14, elaborated:

> *I don't want to have dark skin because then I will miss out on fantastic social prospects... lighter-skinned people are generally preferred. I have gotten more brand deals since I started using these lightening products.*

This illustrates the intersection of performativity and systemic inequality: creators perform acts that conform to dominant norms because deviation carries social and economic penalties. However, interviews also revealed moments of ambivalence. Respondent 4 acknowledged the health risks and the psychological impact:

"I know it's not healthy. And sometimes I look in the mirror and wonder, 'Why did I do this?' But the money is good, the attention is good, and I can't go back now."

This reveals the deep tensions within skin lightening as a performative act: it is simultaneously a strategy for survival, a capitulation to colourist norms, and a practice fraught with health risks and psychological consequences. The reversal of skin lightening, exemplified by public figure Liebe Kiki, represents a counter-performance that challenges colourist norms, illustrating the potential for performativity to serve as a site of resistance.

Constructing, Reinforcing, and Challenging Dominant Ideals of Femininity

The results show that beauty performances on TikTok create, support, and sometimes go against the established feminine ideas. Three kinds of themes emerge in the research: building out ideal femininity through repetition, the idea of femininity being upheld, and the challenges to dominant views. However, these themes are not exclusive of each other. As the findings show, one content creator can keep on constructing and maintaining women's ideals at the same time. The findings section provides more details regarding each of the themes based on videos and interview analysis.

Building Ideal Feminine Identity Through Repetition

One of the key findings from the research is that beauty performances on TikTok help in establishing the notion of feminine identity through repetitive and stylised performances. There are three dimensions underpinning the establishment of the ideal feminine identity, namely femininity as visible labour, femininity as embodied care, and femininity as an aspiration.

The visual analysis results demonstrated that the creators depicted femininity as something achieved by laborious work. All the videos examined showed a transformation process from a neutral appearance to a feminine one. The majority of the creators emphasised the detailed procedure of changing their appearance using up to a dozen photographs that showed the transformation. In particular, Get Ready With Me videos, makeup tutorials, and hair transformation videos were examples of the labour involved in turning the "unfinished" beauty into the desired image. The idea of femininity being labour was further emphasised by the attention to the detailed technique and skills needed to make a transformation.

The analysis showed that creators used a range of approaches to emphasise the labour involved. Some videos were dominated by the close-up of one particular aspect, such as the wig or the makeup, with a detailed explanation of how it was applied. The narration was used to explain what product was used and why or how it was applied. Such a focus on the particular skill needed to achieve femininity was used in various videos to emphasise its artificial character.

The interview data established that the creators understand the effort that goes into their performances. Respondent 6 said the following:

> *I spend at least two hours getting ready for a video. Plus, the preparation, the planning, the editing, and the thinking about what people want. The people see the finished product, but they do not see the work that goes into it.*

This quote illustrates that the femininity that is constructed in the videos is the result of the hard work that is done backstage and that is not seen by the audience. This implies that the construction of femininity requires effort, but this effort should be hidden to make the performance look natural. The paradox of labour informs the construction of femininity in the Kenyan digital sphere: the harder the work, the more natural the talent; the more effort is invested, the less apparent it should be.

The second theme that informs the construction of femininity is the care that is expressed towards oneself. From the videos, it was noted that when speaking about the processes of beautification, the creators emphasised that it is a form of caregiving. Specifically, the act of skincare is viewed as a self-care activity. The creators used such phrases as taking care of oneself, investing in one's face, or showing one's face some love. The analysis also identified that the care that the creators gave to themselves was part of a larger sequence of caring for others. Respondent 15 said the following:

> *When I do my skincare routine on camera, I am not doing it for myself. I am showing people that I care for myself, that I invest time and effort into my face. That is what brands and people like: that you have your life together.*

This quote shows that the care that is given to oneself is also a reflection of caring for others. The creators produce content that reflects their positive attitude towards themselves, which implies that the feminine

subject is concerned with improving herself. However, the act of self-improvement is also informative: the feminine subject knows that she needs to be aspirational to acquire attention. The emphasis on self-care suggests that women should devote time to themselves and treat themselves with care. However, the visual analysis identified that the larger context also informs the constructions of care and love in the attention economy.

The third theme identified in this study is that femininity is aspirational. The visual analysis identified that the creators often spoke about the ideal life that one should strive for. The constructions of ideal femininity were pervasive in the data, and the most common way of expressing it was the "soft life" aesthetic. Twenty-six of the fifty videos reviewed had soft life as their theme, and it was the most searched term in the YouTube Shorts section. The creators who participated in the study associated the soft life with comfort, simplicity, and luxury at the same time. The visuals showed that the creators often wore fluffy clothes and were dressed in a way that signified wealth. The aspirational aspect of the feminine ideal is further emphasised by the fact that almost all creators participated in the hair and beauty section. The creators used expensive wigs, weaves, and hair extensions to show their wealth and their luxurious lifestyles. One of the most pervasive ideas that informs the construction of femininity in Kenyan digital space is that it should be aspirational. The creators not only speak about their love for themselves but also imply that their lifestyle is the one that others should seek to attain. Respondent 5 said the following:

> *People follow you because they want what you have. So you have to show them what they want to see. If you are not aspirational, why would they watch? You have to be the version of themselves that they wish they could be.*

This quote further emphasises the idea of the feminine ideal as aspirational. From the perspective of the creators, ideal femininity is a set of values and a desirable aesthetic. The construction of the feminine ideal is also informed by the understanding that one should not be too luxurious and expensive. Many of the creators spoke about the need to buy expensive items to signify that one is wealthy. However, the visual analysis identified that the aspirational aspect of ideal femininity is also a reflection of the values of care and compassion. The feminine ideal is constructed in a way that implies that people should care for themselves and others. It should represent a natural and authentic path towards happiness and self-acceptance.

Reinforcement of Dominant Norms: Colourism, Eurocentrism, and Class

The analysis results demonstrate that beauty performances on TikTok are replete with colourism, Eurocentric beauty standards, and class-based hierarchies. These visual practices are consciously employed by TikTok creators who actively acknowledge their existence.

Colourism and Skin Tone Hierarchies: The visual analysis identified the prevalence of colourism and skin tone hierarchies in beauty performance through the use of skin-lightening products and filters that airbrushed the skin to a lighter tone. The interview results expand on the visual analysis by demonstrating how creators perceive colourism and its impact on their lives. Respondent 11, who documented her tanning procedure for the audience, stated:

> *I did not have a sudden desire to bleach my skin. This has always been the case – fair skin is perceived as beautiful in our society. I was raised to believe that dark skin is not attractive; society has taught us this since our youth* (Respondent 11)

This excerpt exemplifies the systemic nature of colourism, which beauty performers consciously endorse on TikTok. It also indicates the performative aspect of bleaching procedures among African creators, who seek to attain beauty standards that were imposed on them by white Europeans. As demonstrated by Respondent 11, such performances are predicated on a desire to be accepted by society, which constitutes a form of systemic racism.

Eurocentric Beauty Standards: The visual analysis also revealed the presence of Eurocentric beauty standards, such as straight and silky hair and light brown skin tone. These standards were further explored in the interviews, as demonstrated by the following account:

> *I thought my natural hair was ugly, and it took a while for me to embrace it. Eurocentric beauty standards suggest that black women do not have attractive hair. We saw those standards because we watched Western TV shows and movies and wanted to imitate them* (Respondent 3)

This excerpt indicates that Eurocentric beauty standards are internalised by African creators, who may perceive their natural appearance as ugly. As demonstrated by Respondent 3, the use of non-Eurocentric hair extensions, smoothing treatments, and skin bleaching is common on TikTok among African creators, who seek to attain the beauty ideal promoted in Western media.

Class-Based Hierarchies: The visual analysis also identified class-based hierarchies in TikTok beauty performances, which assume that expensive beauty products and accessories are superior to their cheaper alternatives. The interview results also corroborated this perspective:

> *Having nice clothes with the trendiest hairstyles is associated with being rich or having a lot of money. Of course, not all of us can afford it. Many go into debt to maintain an image. Those who cannot spend thousands of dollars on wigs and hair extensions will always be second-best* (Respondent 8)

As demonstrated by Respondent 8, class-based hierarchies are taken for granted by many TikTok beauty performers, who base their self-worth on the ability to purchase expensive products and accessories. In this way, TikTok promotes not only colourism and Eurocentric beauty standards but also a consumerist lifestyle that is predicated on social inequality.

Challenging Dominant Norms: Resistance and Reclamation

Although there is a lot of conformism, the study unveiled some important contestations against the mainstream concepts of femininity. There are three forms of counteraction: the natural hair movement, authentic content, and the reversal of skin lightening.

The Natural Hair Movement as Counteraction: 3 out of 50 videos contained natural hairstyles that directly contradicted Eurocentric beauty ideals. Interviews with content creators using natural hairstyles showed that this choice was often explained as a counteraction. Respondent 14 said:

> *Going natural was a political thing for me. I was saying that I was not going to change my hair to fit your requirements. I am beautiful without changing anything. There are a lot of women doing the same.*

The words quoted above indicate that the natural hair movement fights some of the dominant norms of beauty, not only from aesthetic but also from ideological perspectives. By saying no to Eurocentric hair norms, the creator challenges the idea of their authority. You don't have to wear wigs to be considered beautiful.

Nonetheless, the interviews indicated that resistance does pose its problems. Respondent 13, who uses both natural and artificial styles, said,

"*I like natural hair, but the algorithm doesn't, so I had to figure out how to deal with that and sometimes post natural looks and sometimes wig styles."*

This shows that resisting dominant norms is more complicated than it appears and requires the careful navigation of platforms' demands and the expectations of the audience. The natural hair movement has its meaning, but it is still confined within limitations.

Definition of filter-free authenticity as a rejection of digital perfection: Respondents 3 and 8, as well as Respondent 13, were identified as creators who regularly published materials rejecting the common use of digital enhancement on the platform. Their content featured unfiltered looks with noticeable skin texture and imperfections on faces. The visual language of those videos was intentionally non-aspirational: natural lighting instead of ring lights, minimal makeup, casual clothing instead of fashionable outfits, and a language style that was more conversational than performative.

Visual examination indicates that these clips act as an oppositional force to the "filtered self" in Kenya's TikTok. While the predominant aesthetic portrays the face in a manner that seems smoother and fairer than it actually is by using a variety of filters, the unfiltered content depicts the face in its natural state, showcasing all the flaws. The absence of a filter is marked visually: creators usually mention it in the video or caption, and some show the effect using a split-screen displaying the difference between their filtered and raw appearance.

Data gathered through the interviews indicates that the challenge that the creators posed carries a price. As one of the interviewees explained:

"*When I decided to stop using filters, I lost followers. "But I gained followers who appreciate my integrity. It is a choice between quantity and honesty.*"- Respondent 13

Thus, the challenge is a moral one in its essence. Those creators who do not use filters present themselves as real.

Nevertheless, the research brought to the forefront the psychological aspect of this resistance. The interview with Respondent no. 8 stated:

> *When people see your pictures without filters, they say things like 'You look tired' or 'You have dark marks.' While some people are appreciative of this authenticity, others are rather judgmental. You must have a lot of confidence to show off yourself without using filters.*

This phrase implies that the challenge of being digitally imperfect is countered with stern opposition from the audience that has adopted the very standards that the creators aim to challenge. Thus, the challenge is constrained not only by the pressures coming from the platform but by the expectations of the audience as well, thus proving the difficulty of standing up to the main ideas dominating the environment where those ideas are constantly reproduced.

Reversing Skin Lightening: The study identified the creators reversing the procedure of skin lightening and thus opposing colourist standards. Liebe Kiki, a public figure, was quoted for her decision to stop skin lightening, claiming her childhood trauma as the reason for taking this step. The interviews with the creators whose friends practised skin lightening helped to understand the situation better. Respondent no. 11 said:

> *I have a friend who bleached her skin, and now she regrets it. She says she didn't realise how much she would lose herself. It's not just about appearance; it's about identity. When you change your skin colour, you're changing who you are in some fundamental way.*

This shows the psychological and identity aspects of skin lightening; it isn't simply a change in appearance but a change that impacts the creator's identity.

This statement signifies the fact that the idea of reversing skin lightening is contrary to colourist concepts because it views the process of light skin as something negative rather than a favourable act. The contradiction manifests itself in revealing the psychological and identity consequences of compliance with the standard of beauty that presupposes that having light skin is good. The reversal is also a social action because by documenting their way to the initial skin tone, the creators introduce a counter-narrative to the dominant story about skin lightening.

The study allowed for the finding that reversal videos work as testimonies about the damage caused by such an act. The creators demonstrate their damaged skin, share their health issues connected with lightening, and warn everyone against the process.

The act of embracing curves is a contestation of the slim ideal that governs the norm of beauty worldwide. From the visual study, there is evidence of creators whose bodies are prominently featured in their social media content, whether by taking photos, videos, or showing off their curves while narrating their journey toward self-acceptance. The videos they publish use a language of celebration, with creators dancing, swirling, and posing, with the movements reinforcing their ownership of their bodies. The videos usually contain narration and/or captions that clearly refute the association between slimness and beauty.

The information provided through interviews confirms that the challenge applies to both global and local standards of beauty. As a respondent said:

"*You have the global standards saying one thing and local traditions saying the other. Like globally slim is in, but in some Kenyan cultures, they appreciate curves. So, what standard do you choose?*"

This presentation shows that the acceptance of curves is not just an opposition to the global standards, but also an acknowledgement of the traditions that appreciate the fuller shape and were marginalised by globalisation.

The findings from the videos suggested that curve-adoring content frequently incorporates elements of pride in Kenya's culture. The creators of this content use kitenge or Ankara textiles for their attire, adopt traditional hairdos, and mention Kenyan customs while narrating their stories. The fight against the thin models regime is closely linked to a larger project of cultural reclamation concerning the dominance of worldwide standards.

Nevertheless, the test also yielded results indicating restrictions within which this fight occurs. The curve supporters still find it challenging to respect other beauty ideals due to the influence of global culture, which imposes lighter skin and hair styles, along with pricey clothes on them.

Global–Local Interplay in Beauty Self-Representation

The findings underscore how creators navigate between globalised beauty trends and local Kenyan ideals of femininity. The analysis identified five strategies employed by creators: adoption, adaptation, localisation, resistance, and hybridisation. The typology of strategies builds upon Werunga and Gábor's (2025) notion of "cultural hybridity patterns," which elucidates the emergence of hybrid identities among Kenyan women.

Adoption of Global Beauty Trends

The visual analysis identified that creators extensively adopted global beauty trends, including Western and Asian ones. The findings are consistent with Tse, Zhang, and Van Noord's (2025) observation that the "transplantation of Western norms" takes place in Africa, although "very limited local adaptations" occur.

Global Beauty Standards on Kenyan TikTok: The visual analysis identified the presence of the "Clean Girl" aesthetic, which entails minimal makeup, slicked-back hair, and natural beauty. A total of 15 out of 50 videos adopted the Clean Girl aesthetic. An interview with creators who adopted the aesthetic revealed that it was considered an up-to-date and professional look. For instance, respondent 1 said,

"The Clean Girl look is global; it is what is trending everywhere. Suppose one wants to be considered fashionable, they must follow the trends. It is about fitting into the conversation."

The findings indicate that global beauty trends are a reflection of cosmopolitan and professional competence.

K-Beauty and Global Skincare Trends: The influence of Korean beauty was identified in the creators' emphasis on extended skincare regimes. Visual analysis identified that 19 out of 50 videos included skincare content, which was in line with the global trends. Respondent 6 said:

> *Skincare content is what everyone is talking about on TikTok currently. If one does it excellently, they can have brands knocking on their door. I started doing the skincare routine, and it worked for me.*

The findings indicate that both financial and aesthetic interests inform the adoption of global trends.

Filters and Digital Beauty Templates: The use of beauty filters to alter appearances identified in the visual analysis of the videos represents an adopted practice. A total of 43 out of 50 videos contained some form of digital filters. The creators identified altering faces using digital filters as a way of conforming to the existing templates of Eurocentric beauty. Respondent 9 said:

> *Filters are part of the game; everyone is using them. To be considered among the influencers, one must use them. It is not about being fake, but about being able to compete.*

Cosmetic Procedures as Global Trends: Analysing the TikTok videos, the study identified that the creators referenced cosmetic procedures, including liposuction, Brazilian Butt Lifts, and breast augmentations. The identified creators considered the procedures part of the larger globalisation project in beauty. Respondent 2 said:

> *I chose to have a Brazilian Butt Lift because it's something that's really trending at the moment, and I liked the kind of body shape it can give you. I wanted to have a slimmer waist and a curvier figure, so I felt like the procedure would help me achieve the look I wanted.*

Localisation and Adaptation of Global Trends

Infusing Global Trends with Kenyan Humour, Language, and Style: Examining the videos posted by the creators, it was identified that the creators used local humour, languages, and styles to localise the trends. For instance, respondent 11 said,

> *I perceive that one cannot simply copy what one sees in TikTok videos. For the content to be successful, it must be local. I try to use Sheng and make humorous remarks about issues pertinent to our locality and culture. It is about connecting to the local community.*

The findings indicate that the Kenyan TikTok creators purposefully localise global trends to enhance their relevance and connection to a wider audience.

Natural Hair as Localised Resistance: The natural hair movement, which is global, entails a different meaning in Kenya, where conformity is key. Respondent 7 said,

"Natural hair in Kenya has a different meaning because it challenges the status quo. It is a celebration of African identity that resists the notion that one must be different to be beautiful."

Indigenous Beauty Ingredients and Practices: 4 out of 50 videos analysed contained references to indigenous ingredients and practices, such as shea butter and black soap. Respondent 9 said,

> *I started using shea butter and black soap to localise the beauty content and honour our African heritage. Our grandmothers used these ingredients, and it is important to revive the African beauty practices.*

Tensions and Negotiations Between Global and Local Ideals

The findings indicate that there are tensions and negotiations between global and local beauty ideals. For instance, creators confront the expectation to follow global trends while catering to local tastes and preferences. Beauty standards are "colliding, evolving, and occasionally clashing" (Werunga & Gábor, 2025). Respondent 1 said:

> *There is a tension between the global expectations and local traditions. For instance, while the global trends dictate slim bodies, in Kenya, one finds that the larger size is desired. It is about which ideal one will choose to follow.*

The Pressure of Global Standards vs Local Realities: The pressure to embrace global standards while remaining sensitive to local realities presents a dilemma for creators. According to respondent 8:

> *Sometimes I feel like I have to follow what is trending globally if I want my content to perform. For example, the slim waist and curvy body look is very popular on TikTok, so you see many women using waist trainers, getting BBLs, or editing their pictures to achieve that look. But where I come from, there are still different ideas about what a woman should look like, and some people may criticise you for trying too hard to look like women they see online. So you can feel caught between wanting to fit into the global TikTok beauty culture and still wanting to be seen as yourself and fit into your local community.*

Authenticity vs Aspiration: The findings indicate that creators face the dilemma of posting authentic content or aspirational content. According to respondent 12:

> *I think there is a difference between how we see beauty here and what you see trending globally on TikTok. I'm proud of how I naturally look, and I don't want to lose that, but at the same time, I see these global beauty standards, and I think, 'I also want to look like that.*

These testimonials imply that the clash of global and local beauty standards within the Kenyan TikTok space is not something abstract or uniform at all. Instead, it is lived out socially, through the fear of ridicule from one's local peers for attempting to adhere to the global aesthetic (Respondent 8) and internally, as a pressure cooker of conflicting feelings of pride and desire (Respondent 12), while Respondent 1's contention to be "choosing" between the beauty standards is closer to a simplified version of a much more complicated process.

Discussion

The study's first aim centred on the beauty-oriented performative acts that Kenyan female creators engage in on TikTok. The results show that these acts fall into four clusters: hair, cosmetics and filters, clothing/body presentation, and skin lightening, and that their significance lies less in the acts as such than in what each one exposes about the labour, economics, and risk involved in "doing" femininity on this platform. The widespread use of wigs and weaves supports Wamboi's (2022) claim that Kenyan women's self-presentation is assembled from hair, cosmetics, and clothing, yet this study goes further by showing that the reasoning behind it is explicit and quantified by the creators themselves rather than deduced by the researcher. In this respect, the finding aligns with Wamboi at the level of behaviour but departs from, or at least refines, her interpretation at the level of cause: hair performance here is not merely self-presentation but a calculated response to a visibility economy.

That edge-styling constitutes a distinct performative genre is something the reviewed literature does not anticipate. Wamboi (2022), Ligaga (2020), and Makinde et al. (2025) treat hair as a broad category; none singles out hairline grooming as a performative ideal feminine act on TikTok. This contribution sits more precisely within Butler's (1990) performativity than Goffman's dramaturgy, because the practice's meaning hinges on its being redone daily rather than staged once.

Filter use bears out the Eurocentric modification pattern Hurme (2026) describes, but the reflexive discomfort creators voice about that conformity is something the descriptive filter literature does not foresee. This moves the contribution away from what filters do to the face, already established, and toward what filters do to a creator's relationship with her own image, a psychological dimension that platform-studies literature

(Duffy, 2017; Duffy & Meisner, 2022) hints at without documenting at this level of specificity.

Skin lightening most clearly supports Berthé's (2024) argument that the practice is pursued for social and economic opportunities rather than solely for aesthetic preferences. The interview data further demonstrate how this motivation can translate into a tangible career outcome rather than remaining a general aspiration. What is truly unexpected is the rise of public reversal as a visible counter-narrative on the same platform. The reviewed literature (Berthé, 2024; Hurme, 2026; Tolofari, 2025) treats lightening as something platforms enable, not something the same platform also hosts the undoing of. This complicates the "reinforce or resist" binary common in that literature: reversal is neither pure resistance, since it follows rather than precedes conformity, nor pure reinforcement, since it exists specifically to warn others against the practice it once modelled.

The second objective examined how these performances construct, reinforce, or challenge dominant ideals of femininity, and the central finding is that these three processes occur simultaneously, within the same creator's portfolio or even the same video. Wamboi (2022), Ligaga (2020), and Brown et al. (2025) tend to characterise creators as leaning toward either conformity or resistance. The data instead suggest femininity is constructed through a managed paradox: labour that must be visible enough to signal skill but concealed enough to appear effortless, which confirms Driscoll's (2025) account of "concealed aesthetic labour" while specifying a more active mechanism than concealment alone: creators strategically manage the visibility of their own labour rather than simply hiding it.

The reinforcement of colourist and Eurocentric hierarchies aligns with Makinde et al.'s (2025) claim that globally circulating ideals of skin tone and body shape operate in African digital spaces. What matters theoretically is the developmental origin of that internalisation, which predates TikTok itself. This reframes TikTok's role: rather than generating colourist norms, as platform-focused literature often implies, it appears to function as a stage on which already-internalised norms are re-performed and monetised, a distinction the existing literature does not consistently draw.

The challenges to dominant norms confirm Ligaga's (2020) and Brown et al.'s (2025) accounts of agentic resistance, but differ in degree: resistance here operates under an algorithmic handicap that pre-platform theories of agency do not theorise. Duffy and Meisner's (2022) notion of platform governance is more illuminating than accounts centred on agency alone, as it shows how resistance may be authentic yet structurally constrained in what it can achieve. The theoretical payoff is that Butlerian resistance, enacted on an algorithmically shaped platform, incurs a cost with no obvious counterpart in Butler's original, pre-digital account: a computational penalty added to the social cost of deviance that her framework already expects.

The third aim examined how globalised beauty trends and localised Kenyan ideals intersect in the ways creators represent themselves. The five-part typology- adoption, adaptation, localisation, resistance, hybridisation- takes Werunga and Gábor's (2025) notion of cultural hybridity beyond a general condition and turns it into an operational classification, which is itself a contribution: it lends glocalisation theory an empirical texture it previously lacked in this setting.

The adoption patterns largely bear out Tse et al.'s (2025) argument that Western norms are transplanted into African contexts with only limited adaptation. Yet since TikTok content is authored by the creator rather than manufactured and shipped, as the retail goods in Tse et al.'s study are, creators seem to have considerably more room to alter an imported template than a clothing buyer does. This marks a meaningful disagreement with Tse et al.'s more pessimistic reading: the mechanism of transplantation may be common across sectors, but the extent of local agency available to reshape it is not.

The indigenous-ingredient localisation strategy is largely absent from the synthesised studies, which frame localisation chiefly as a linguistic or stylistic recombination of global material (Werunga & Gábor, 2025; Erastus & Hurst-Harosh, 2020), rather than as a return to pre-colonial or heritage practice. This points to a temporal dimension in glocalisation on Kenyan TikTok, reaching backwards to indigenous tradition, not merely sideways into a Kenyan-inflected version of an imported trend, that existing hybridity theory has yet to account for.

The curves-versus-slim negotiation carries Tse et al.'s (2025) finding of Kenyan resistance to imported clothing sizes from consumer behaviour into embodied self-representation, implying that the same resistant dynamic recurs wherever Kenyan women encounter an imported body ideal, not only at the point of purchase. The wider implication is that a single hybridity concept cannot adequately capture global-local negotiation here; instead, it functions as a portfolio of concurrent, at times contradictory strategies within a single creator's output.

Across all three objectives, Kenyan digital femininity on TikTok appears not as a settled ideal but as an ongoing compromise among an algorithmic economy that rewards particular, often Eurocentric-leaning performances; a pre-digital set of internalised colourist and Eurocentric norms that TikTok re-stages rather than creates; and a set of locally rooted resources that creators draw on selectively, and at professional cost. The clearest theoretical insight is that Butler's performativity and Werunga and Gábor's cultural hybridity, usually treated apart in the existing literature, must be read together in this context: performativity explains why these acts have to be repeated to stay legible as femininity, while hybridity explains why the content of that repetition is neither purely global nor purely local but strategically blended. Neither theory on its own explains the finding that repetition here is at once an economic act and a cultural negotiation.

The findings of the study have two implications. First, interventions addressing colourism or algorithmic bias in Kenya's digital sphere should treat the recommendation system itself, and not just individual creators' choices, as a site for intervention, given that creators show awareness of and resistance to norms they nonetheless reproduce under measurable algorithmic penalty. Second, the five-part hybridity typology developed here provides a portable analytic framework that future research could apply to other platforms and national contexts, to determine whether the pattern identified is peculiar to Kenyan TikTok or reflects a broader logic of glocalised beauty performance across the African digital sphere.

Limitations

Selection limitations: While a sample of 15 creators and 50 TikTok videos is sufficient for this qualitative multiple-case study, it is biased towards better-established and more popular creators. As such, the findings apply to a narrower group of Kenyan TikTok users than the entire target population. This limitation stems from using a purposive sampling strategy that prioritised easy access to information and represented the perspectives of successful social media personalities rather than the general audience. The participating creators had a considerable following, which affected how they presented beauty and responded to criticism.

Reflexivity and self-reporting biases: As this study relied on interviews as its primary data source, the results are limited by the potential for social desirability bias. The creators might have portrayed their intentions and motives in a more positive light than they were. While such a phenomenon was mitigated by supplementing interview data with video content analysis, triangulation helped identify inconsistencies between creators' statements and actions to some extent, but not entirely. Besides, my personal stance as a Kenyan researcher affects how I perceive the themes and patterns identified in the interviews and video content. A comparable limitation concerns the assessment of audience responses to beauty performances, as the analysis is based on creators' accounts of audience reactions rather than data obtained directly from the audience.

Audience reception limitation: Another significant limitation of this paper concerns its audience reception. While the study analysed how TikTok beauty performances were received, these audiences were represented only by the creators themselves. It is entirely possible that the actual audiences reacted differently to the performances studied, particularly given the negative comments. In other words, the audience's reactions were reported second-hand, based on creators' recollections.

Additionally, this research was conducted solely in Kenya, and its findings may not generalise to other countries and cultures, especially those outside Africa. While the colonial history and economic conditions in Kenya might be partially similar to those in Tanzania or Uganda, the attitudes towards beauty and body image can vary significantly. The same applies to the Kenyan diaspora, where local traditions might be combined with new cultural expectations.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: This study has demonstrated that the representation of beauty by Kenyan female TikTok creators is a contested issue, as it raises the contradiction between global and local ideals. Therefore, it has been revealed that for Kenyan female creators, the process of negotiating their appearance is complex because it is

influenced by various factors, including their ideals, market requirements, and platforms' algorithms. This study has also shown that, in Kenyan TikTok culture, the theme of beauty is full of contradictions that reflect the conflict of values between local and international cultures. The fact that the goals of female creators are not always aligned with their actions on social media platforms has shown that it is essential to analyse not only what people communicate on social media but also how they communicate it to identify potential issues. As a result, this research contributes to the field by providing practical examples of how Kenyan TikTok creators negotiate the principles of digital feminism in their content.

Recommendations: Apart from the theoretical and research implications, the findings have practical relevance for agents directly involved in the dynamics examined in this research. The accountability of platforms such as TikTok should be promoted through regulatory or advocacy avenues, urging them to review how their recommendation algorithms reward or penalise specific beauty aesthetics, such as filtered versus unfiltered appearance and natural versus chemically or artificially modified hair. The findings indicate that creators actively modify their beauty practices based on what they perceive the algorithms to reward.

The public health and dermatology sectors in Kenya should also engage in conversations about the dangers of skin-lightening creams and ingredients currently popular among Kenyan beauty influencers. The study found that although influencers are aware of the potentially hazardous side effects of skin-lightening materials, little effort is made to discourage the practice, particularly among Kenya's youth. In addition, media literacy and representation education programmes for Kenyan youth could utilise the findings of this research to highlight problematic aspects of the current influencer culture and promote more critical engagement with aspirational content. In particular, the findings on the paradoxical nature of beauty influencer work could provide a basis for discussing the pressures to conform to narrow ideas of beauty.

Building upon the limitations of the study, future research could undertake comparative studies in other African contexts to determine whether the beauty-performance patterns identified in this study are specific to Kenya or reflect a broader logic of glocalised beauty performance shaped by shared and divergent colonial histories, economic conditions, and cultural traditions across the continent. Longitudinal research with individual creators could examine whether resistance practices, such as the adoption of natural hair or lightening reversal, represent durable shifts or transitional positions in creators' evolving relationships with platform pressure. Audience reception studies could gather data directly from viewers rather than relying on creators' reports about their audiences to examine how beauty content is interpreted, judged, and acted upon by consumers.

Further research could also examine the health implications of platform-promoted beauty practices identified in the study, particularly skin lightening, given the health risks acknowledged by creators alongside the economic and social incentives for continued use. Finally, larger-scale or mixed-methods studies could include broader and more demographically varied samples of creators, including those with smaller followings, to determine whether the dynamics identified among highly visible creators also occur at other levels of platform visibility.

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