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Dis-playing gender: From ludic reconfiguration to utopic outcomes in gender-swap apps

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Abstract

An increasing number of AI-based gender-swap applications have become a popular trend in our social media platforms and communities, rising controversial issues beyond their apparently playful intent. The primary ludic function informing the use/consumption of such apps opens to further signification and valorization of the produced images. In many cases, the portrait pictures, modified through a system of filters, assume an existential and utopic value for (transgender and nonbinary) users who have the possibility to reimagining and reperforming their gender identity. At the same time, the social availability and disposability of such images risk to trivialize the subjective and highly complex process of sexual and gender transition undergone by many people on their own material body in real life. The aim of this paper is to point out the ambivalences and the possibilities opened by gender-swap apps for what concerns the issue of gender identity. Through the analysis of a corpus of promotional messages and users' responses to the gender-swap apps, it is argued that these trans-faces, far from operating a flawless passing from a gender to the other, constantly dis-play the social construction and deconstruction of sexual and gender binary identities.

KEYWORDS
face, filters, gender-swap apps, ludic and utopic

1 | INTRODUCTION

This work aims to provide initial insights into the configuration—and reconfiguration—of the semiotic category of 'gender' through media technologies. Without falling into the rigidities of technological determinism or total relativism, the objective is to emphasize the forms of

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hybridization between the human and technology (Haraway, 1991; McLuhan, 1964), human and nonhuman actors (Latour, 2005), that foster the creation of new body and gender identities through the rewriting of constitutive traits. To transform this dialectic into a constructive dialogue, the discourse about technology, which ideologically reflects the disciplinatory power implemented by technological apparatuses on material bodies and their sexuality (Foucault, 1977, 1978), will be confronted with the actual performative practices enacted by users, which partly subvert any prescriptive norms and hegemonic narrative (Butler, 1990, 2004). In particular, we will see how specific categories or communities of users exceed the role of Model User imposed these technological texts (Eco, 1979) and are able redirect the operations implemented on their bodies and images. As will be emphasized, such a ludic and reflexive use, besides preceding any practical function or entertainment purpose, underpins the actualization of existential and utopian gender ideals (Floch, 2001). In this regard, it will be argued that the face—as the primary object of identification and manipulation—does not appear as the superficial expression of an already given, natural, deep (gender) identity, but as a stage for the performance of such identity, which only exists in the moment of its social visibility and circulation (Leone, 2021; Wight, 2011).

2 | THE PROMOTIONAL DISCOURSE: FEATURES AND VALUES OF GENDER-SWAP APPS

The primary object of this study are some digital applications that have gained significant popularity, particularly on our social media platforms, in recent years. Specifically, I will be discussing the phenomenon of 'gender-swap apps'. As the name suggests, these applications enable users to digitally transform their appearance to resemble the opposite gender and sex. They utilize artificial intelligence to scan facial features in a face photograph and subsequently apply lenses to the image. In particular, the filter adds typically masculine or feminine facial traits and elements and make them fit to your face picture (Figures 1 and 2). Initially, this technology was introduced as a simple filter tool within popular image-based social media platforms like Snapchat and Instagram. Subsequently, developers have created standalone apps designed specifically for this purpose.

In this regard, I have gathered a couple of sentences from two promotional websites[1] that describe these apps' general functionality and purpose. Now, I want to focus specifically on some features and values that are usually highlighted when commercials advertise this product:

1. *A gender swap app makes you look like the opposite sex [...] The resulting images are usually funny, so people are quick to join the bandwagon.*
2. *Something that's become a trend a few years back and nowadays a lot of people like to do is to use gender swap apps, to turn them into men or women... or better, to apply a more typically masculine or feminine look to themselves!*

The first part of the first description expresses the basilar and main aim of these apps; the fact that looking like the opposite sex can result as 'funny' adds an entertaining aspect— probably the main reason why many people 'like' to employ these filters, to the point that this has *quickly* become a popular 'trend'. Continuing with the second sentence, 'to turn them into men or women' seems quite similar to the initial description, but with a different shade: if in the first case, it appears quite clear that we are discussing a matter of 'appearance', as confirmed by

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[1]https://cellularnews.com/mobile-apps/gender-swap-apps/; https://www.apptuts.net/en/tutorial/android/best-gender-swap-apps/.

FIGURE 1 Gender-swap app, male to female.

the use of terms like 'look' and 'images', in the second case, what is being proposed is a transformation of a more profound and 'essential' nature; immediately followed by an explanation or, more accurately, explication of the modalities through which such a transformation occurs.

Subsequently, starting from promotional messages related to each of these popular gender-swap apps,[2] I attempted to highlight, and differentiate—by using the same tones and shades of colour—similar recurring patterns of features.

3. *[FaceStory] is an AI face app that turns your selfie into exciting effects […] just in one tap! Continuously added new AI photo effects, photo filters, and photo editors that serve your need of sharing hilarious and marvellous selfie. Let's make your life story full of joy! […] you can look like the opposite sex just in a second! It is hilarious to see yourself as a man or a woman with lots of fun for friends and family. […] It's a lot of fun to make virtual manipulation with your face and see what you would look like 'what if' […] All the process happens pretty fast so you and your friends won't have to wait for long minutes.*

4. *[FaceApp] Using it is extremely easy. You just need to take a selfie and hit any of its buttons to apply filters. The results will be given out extremely quickly, and it is an amazing option for anyone. The app is super fun to use […] The most interesting thing is that the results are not just realistic, but also they are immediately visible […] FaceApp is a very funny photo-editing application that allows you to make changes to your pictures and you end up with funny results that can be shared through social networking apps installed on your smartphone […] If you decide to post it, the app will be promoting it automatically.*
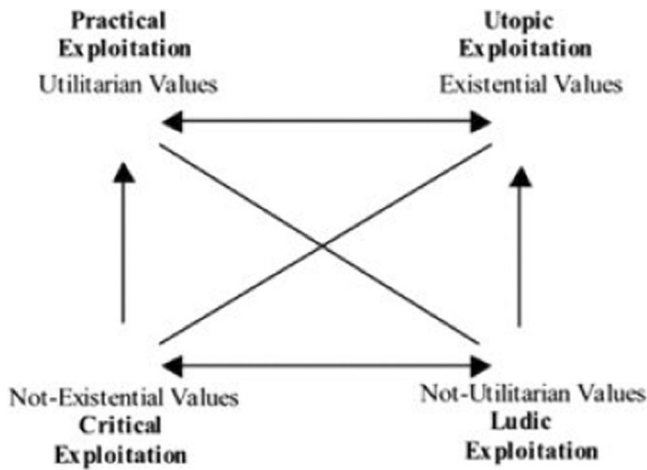
The same operation has been conducted on advertisements[3] of gender-swap filters related to specific social media platforms, like:

[2]https://cellularnews.com/mobile-apps/gender-swap-apps/.
[3]https://www.technologyreview.com/2022/06/29/1054561/social-media-filter-gender-identity/.

FIGURE 2 Gender-swap app: female to male.

FIGURE 3 Floch's semiotic square.

5. *TikTok's* 'Bearded Cutie' *makes you look like more masculine, by* adding 'heavy brows' and 'scruffy facial hair' *to your face picture* and, of course 'is super fun to use'.

6. *[Snapchat] 'My Twin' operates an inverse gender transition: it* 'smooths skin to porcelain' *and adds* 'subtle glam makeup', *causing* 'excitement in social networks'.

As a final step of this textual analysis, I have tried to sum up and organize the highlighted patterns according to Jean-Marie Floch's square of consumption (…). This is a common semiotic analytical tool, implemented to point out the types of narrations employed by ads and commercials to promote a certain product. Each of its four vertexes corresponds to a different kind of value (Figure 3):

- The **practical valorization** (color red) can be understood as the degree-zero of advertising: it simply expresses the use-value of the product as a tool and, in the specific case of gender-swap apps, it consists in (the presentation of) the general function and main outcome of the filter: swapping the gender of your selfie to make you look like the opposite sex.
- On the same upper side of the square, in opposition to the practical valorization, there is the **utopic valorization** (color purple), aimed to highlight the existential value of the product, meaning what the product can represent for its consumer, in terms of personal and social identity; in the case of the app, it represents the possibility to imagine, turn and exhibit yourself into the opposite gender/sex: here, the focus is much more on the user-subject rather than on the object (the image), that is a simple tool to achieve a higher and desired identity value.
- On the opposite site of the square, the **critical valorization** (color blue) corresponds to the negation of the utopic values, since it stresses on more practical features, including for example, the convenience, the usability, the sociability, the quality/price and the innovation/cost ratio of the product. In the case of the apps, this valorization tend to point out how you can produce and have your gender-swapped picture very quickly, easily and for free; this availability is often linked to the possibility to share your picture in the social media arena, as a new popular trend; at the same time, this implies also the disposability of the picture itself.
- At last, we have the **ludic valorization** (color yellow and orange): probably this is the most spotted and the most ambivalent value of these apps; it stresses on the playful, funny and sometimes grotesque aspect in using this app; it corresponds to the negation of the use-value, since it implies, despite its apparent superficial entertaining effect, a deep reflection on its internal causes, specifically, on the technical mechanisms and cultural logics that sustain such a funny outcome.

3 | THE CONSUMERS RESPONSE

Floch's square can be applied not only to advertising texts, as the ones we have just analyzed, but represents an effective instrument to analyze and understand the usages and valorizations implemented by actual consumers of these apps. In this regard, LGBTQ+ users—in particular, transgender and nonbinary subjects—represent a peculiar commercial and social target, able to highlight some controversial features and issues related to a gender-swap app. For this purpose, I tried to collect some reviews, critiques or simple comments made by this community of consumers: this doesn't represent an accurate statistical sample, but just some emblematic pieces of text that can point out how the gender swap apps can assume different and ambivalent values according to the specific sensitivity and experience of the users.

3.1 | Utopic values

Let's start from the utopic valorization and relative existential meanings. Especially for transgender people, these gender-swap filters and apps are useful to find out and explore their gender identity, but also to get an accurate gender expression.
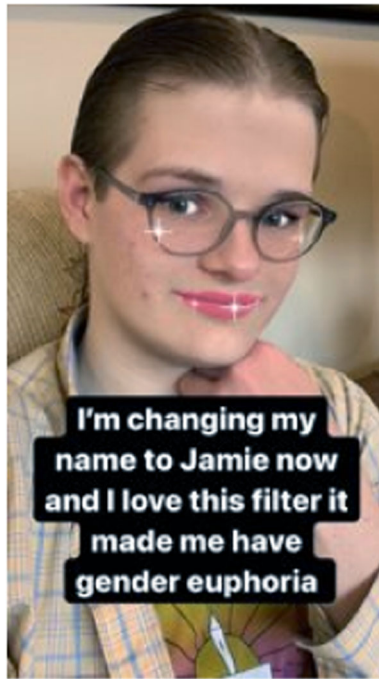
FIGURE 4 Gender euphoria.

To this purpose, Charlie Knight, a nonbinary editor and activist, declares that: 'Exploring gender and different genders than the one you were assigned is a good thing, I encourage it. You may learn new things about yourself that surprise you, and you may find yourself kinder to trans people'.[4] In line with Knight's positive response, Cat Graffam, an artist, adjunct art professor and trans woman, seems very enthusiast about the potentialities of the apps: 'Oh my gosh, this is going to make so many people realize they're trans! […] I actually had someone reach out to me… and tell me it was like a catalyst for realizing they needed to transition, because you're able to see yourself in a way you didn't think was possible'.[5]

What emerge from these users' reactions is that they credit filters with finally 'cracking their egg', a rite of passage in the trans community when someone admits to themself that their gender identity is different from what was assigned at birth. Thus, in opposition to what is generally conceived as 'gender dysphoria', filters can actually provide a fundamental dose of 'gender euphoria', that is the rush of joy a trans person feels when their external appearance aligns with their perceived gender identity (Figure 4).

In this regard, it is really interesting what affirmed by Josie, a young trans woman from Cincinnati: '[I] saw something that looked more "me" than anything in a mirror, and I couldn't go back'.[6] Through this comparison, Josie highlights the semiotic principle and logic sustaining the functioning of a gender-swap apps and the efficacy of its utopic and existential value. The app does not work as a *mirror*, providing an objectified image in which the subject must reflect to find correspondence, unity and identity—that can be really problematic for trans people and easily lead to dysphoric outcomes; it instead works *through* and *as filter*, which is a specific semiotic device that does not reproduce a subject's fixed and stable identity, but produces signs

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[4]https://thenextweb.com/news/why-gender-swap-photo-filters-are-still-problematic.
[5]https://time.com/5590491/snapchat-filter-gender-swap-trans-community/.
[6]https://www.technologyreview.com/2022/06/29/1054561/social-media-filter-gender-identity/.

through which (especially trans) subjectivities can find, build and express their identity beyond themselves. In other words, the filtered image is as an external semiotic and technological 'prosthesis' (McLuhan, 1964) which offers a repertoire of virtual gendered elements and enables users to perform and realize their utopic gender (Haraway, 1991). Here, gender expression is not tied to a predefined gender identity, but predates both gender and identity (Butler, 1990).

Such a potentiality of the filtered image is evident in another of its key functions; transgender users often employ the apps to map future physical transitions and operations required to reach the desired gender identity as displayed by the filtered image. As affirmed by Etta Lanum, a 32-year-old trans woman from Seattle: 'The filters on FaceApp showed me how little my face needed to change to present more feminine […] It demonstrated how a change in eyebrows and facial hair alone could get me where I needed to be'.[7] Similar is the user-experience of Andrew, a 17-year-old FtoM; as a minor, he is not able to undergo hormone or surgical treatments, so he uses FaceApp to deal with gender dysphoria and prospect his desired appearance and identity: 'With hormones, you don't really know how you'll look afterwards. Seeing the results of FaceApp and seeing that it looked like a normal person gave me hope for the future'.[8]

3.2 | Critical values

If the utopic values are expression of the positive side of the gender-swap apps and their filtered images, critical valorization raises some *criticality* in the overall discourse of and about these same apps. As highlighted in the last paragraph of the previous section, filters can be a way to play with gender expression without resorting to expensive make-up, intrusive hormonal treatment and surgical operations. The critical valorization of the product is built precisely around such an economic aspect, both in money and time. Especially for transgender people, something they feel, wants, desire can be suddenly crystallized and realized: 'Just hit a button, and you're "transformed" into a woman. The beard disappears. The face and jaw smooth out. The hair floats jauntily around the shoulders […] A swipe and another click. Suddenly you're a square-jawed man—heavy of brow, sporting five o' clock shadow'.[9] It really looks like a simple idea: a filter lets users alter images of themselves to look like a different gender. However, for the trans and nonbinary community, it is much more complicated[10]: for these people who have longed for a button that would change them in real life, the portrait parade is not always perceived as a game. Indeed, if for most heterosexual consumers "these filters are a lark, quickly forgotten once they stop trend", trans users "find themselves drifting back to the apps again and again, staring at their gender-bended reflection" (Brown, 2022).[11]

Once again, Cat Graffam's words are exemplificative; she confesses that changing her gender has been a major part of her life, while for cisgender users, the *same* experience through the gender-swap apps is highly condensed and constantly disposed, 'At the end of the day, [they] get to just turn it off and it's not sort of a reality for [them]'. The same ambivalence is pointed out by Rose Dommu, a staffer for LGBTQ magazine *Out*; she said: 'this filter is literally an instant transition, and the humorous way I'm seeing it shared is…not cute'.[12] Bailey Coffman, a 31-year-old transgender woman from New York, expresses the gravity of what

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[7]https://www.technologyreview.com/2022/06/29/1054561/social-media-filter-gender-identity/.

[8]https://www.vocativ.com/424293/faceapp-gender-swap-trans-users/index.html.

[9]https://nypost.com/2019/05/17/snapchats-gender-swap-photo-filter-is-no-game-for-trans-people/.

[10]https://time.com/5590491/snapchat-filter-gender-swap-trans-community/.

[11]https://www.technologyreview.com/2022/06/29/1054561/social-media-filter-gender-identity.

[12]https://time.com/5590491/snapchat-filter-gender-swap-trans-community/.

transition has meant and implied in her life: 'My gender's not a costume [...] This story that I feel is very real. I lost a lot to be who I am, and I fought really hard for the body that I'm in'.[13] Andre Cavalcante, an assistant professor in the departments of Media Studies and Women, Gender, and Sexuality at the University of Virginia), criticize the function of the gender-swap apps that could be seen as using gender identity as a 'commercial gimmick' since they turn 'users into extreme simplifications, into cartoonish renderings of men and women [...] In this way, gender is reduced to a mask or a costume, something that can change with (literally) a snap'.[14]

Another controversial aspect related to such an economic commodification and simplification of gender is that the marketing discourse often promises results that can be hardly achieved in reality. As highlighted by Elizabeth Anne Brown in her article,[15] 'Some trans people feel that the technology sets them up for disappointment and dysphoria, showing results that are physically impossible to achieve even with plastic surgery, artful makeup, or hormone therapy'. Moreover, Charlie Knight affirms that these same apps overtly simplify or subtly negate what trans people actually go through: 'Some guy sees himself as a woman through the filter and thinks—*Oh man, I'd be really pretty. I'd do me*. There's a failure there to see what that guy would actually have to do to meet the standard that filter created. And when trans people inevitably don't meet that standard or need medication, surgeries, and so forth to even near it, these things don't help us gain any empathy'.

3.3 | Ludic values

Similarly to critical values, the response on the ludic outcomes of the product highlights a sharp contrast depending on users' gender identity. As already pointed out at the beginning of this paper, advertising communication usually supports the idea of such filters as a tool for a playful and entertaining digital experience. However, this kind of valorization goes against the actual experience of transgender users, who point out how the funny (direct) effect generated by a gender-swapped picture often serve as a vessel for (indirect) mockery and bigotry against trans and nonbinary subjectivities and communities. The crucial point of the argument is still the difference between what can be considered a trivial gender play and what trans people have to face in real life.

To this purpose, I have collected many statements from transgender and nonbinary users that somehow felt offended from the playful and mocking use of gender as enhanced and enabled by these apps:

> When certain people post it and write about how silly it is and how goofy they look with this filter [...] it makes light of the transgender experience. (Bailey Coffman)

> Having people make light of something that I get brutalized for is patronizing, to say the least. (Celeste Divinity)[16]

> It just reads as really hypocritical when cis people can use it to treat gender as a convenience and a joke for fun and laughs, while they turn a blind eye to trans and non-binary people and our struggles. (Vanessa Klark)[17]

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[13]https://nypost.com/2019/05/17/snapchats-gender-swap-photo-filter-is-no-game-for-trans-people/.
[14]https://time.com/5590491/snapchat-filter-gender-swap-trans-community/.
[15]https://www.technologyreview.com/2022/06/29/1054561/social-media-filter-gender-identity/.
[16]https://www.vice.com/en/article/qv7jvx/snapchats-gender-swapping-photo-filters-can-result-in-real-transphobia.
[17]https://www.vice.com/en/article/qv7jvx/snapchats-gender-swapping-photo-filters-can-result-in-real-transphobia.

FIGURE 5 Less serious gender.

It's made into a joke and that bleeds into the way most of society—most of the people using these filters—consider our transitions a joke. (Charlie Knight)

The filter makes a joke out of transitioning […] Before you post your next manipulated selfie, maybe take a second to wonder: is it funny to imagine what you'd look like as a woman? Because that thought is all that gets some folks out of bed in the morning. (Rose Dommu)

In his article, Tristan Greene affirms that this way to trivialize and fetishize gender works as a form of 'passive aggressive transphobia'; indeed, as suggested by the same author, 'When you laugh about how "funny" or "shocking" it is to see someone you might assume to be cisgender presenting as trans in a photo, it serves to hurt trans people and potentially erase nonbinary existences'.[18] However, the hypothesis that this contribution aims to put forward is that it is somehow necessary and positive for transgender users not to take gender too seriously or, at least, not to make it 'a personal issue'. This, of course, does not imply condoning or even endorsing mocking reactions and gestures bordering on transphobia, nor does it mean belittling or even trivializing the experience of transitioning. Instead, it suggests embracing and emphasizing the ludic modality through which gender is constructed and presented in these apps, namely as a variable and performative element (or set f elements), in constant reconfiguration and transition, and therefore not rigidly and normatively ascribable to an individual and an identity. The boundary between this ludic construction of gender and its amusing, mocking and somewhat offensive effect is very subtle, perhaps even inexistent, as the two are intertwined. Yet, it is precisely here that the ambivalent valorization and overall significance of these apps comes into play. In some ways, it would be desirable for this ridiculous and at times ridiculing understanding of gender to occur outside of apps and social media, in the real world (Figures 5 and 6). Here, other statements from trans and nonbinary users:

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[18]https://thenextweb.com/news/why-gender-swap-photo-filters-are-still-problematic.

FIGURE 6 Less serious gender.

> There's a fine line between encouraging people to take gender less seriously and not considering trans realities or carelessly perpetuating misunderstanding about trans identities. (Dana Vivian-White)[19]

> An inherent joy and beauty to metamorphosis, and I think that's something that's appealing to people, [this must] include people who actually go through that metamorphosis. (Natalie Wynn)[20]

> These new Snapchat filters got y'all out here having fun with gender roles, joking about sex with your homeboys, and sporting beards with lashes. All we ask is that you keep that same energy when you interact with actual transgender and non-binary ppl. (Savannah Daniels, @Miss Clean Legs)[21]

4 | PLAYING WITH GENDER BINARISM AND BEYOND

The ridiculous effect generated by the filtered images is not only due to seeing friends or acquaintances (or oneself) transplanted into a gender nonconforming their sex, but also because this transplant rarely appears well-executed. In fact, despite their high level of technological development and sophistication, these apps always leave traces of their 'semiurgical' operations, perhaps intentionally, revealing the signs of transition and their own artifice. In this way, alongside the forced parallelism between gender identity and sex, there is inevitably a reinforcement of the binary scheme that characterizes both sex and gender. This is because gender is not treated as an organic or essential category, but simplified and reduced to a set of codified and standardized elements and traits. As a result, the gender-swap apps foster the idea that 'normal' women and men are and look in a certain way—that is very problematic for transgender and nonbinary subjectivities that often feel and suffer forms discrimination, exclusion and mockery due to their nonconformity to such a binary standard.

According to Pidgeon Pagonis, an intersex educator and activist, FaceApp and other apps like it 'prop up the false notion that there is a clearly discernible binary opposite to one's gender

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[19]https://www.vice.com/en/article/qv7jvx/snapchats-gender-swapping-photo-filters-can-result-in-real-transphobia.

[20]https://time.com/5590491/snapchat-filter-gender-swap-trans-community/.

[21]https://nypost.com/2019/05/17/snapchats-gender-swap-photo-filter-is-no-game-for-trans-people/.

FIGURE 7 Breaking up gender traits.

[…] The belief in the dogmatic idea that sex and gender exist in a neat binary'.[22] On the same issue, in a tweet, @astroblob states that: 'the most interesting and miserable thing about any gender swap filter is what it implies about the way those companies conceptualise "men" and "women" as distinct groups + maybe more importantly the way they think "men" and "women" conceptualise themselves + each other'.[23] Therefore, as stated by Charlie Knight, 'I think nonbinary would be impossible here. If they'd tried it, what they would actually come up with would be androgynous, and calling that nonbinary—when nonbinary is not one single appearance or identity—is problematic, too. So automatically nonbinary people are excluded from this'.

However, it is necessary to go further and observe how these applications do *reinforce* gender binarism, to the point of *forcing* its own assumptions, revealing its artifice, exposing its construction, and effectively deconstructing it. In fact, to perform the transition, the filter breaks up the specific gendered facial features, exaggerating or even replacing them with those of the opposite gender, creating an artificial hybrid with an undefined gender identity and appearance (Figure 7). The ludic aspect of such apps consists precisely in this grotesque exaggeration and recomposition of typically feminine and masculine facial traits through the filter. We are asked to play through and beyond the rules of the game, to put to extreme the binary logic through which the gender and its masculine or feminine effects are technologically constructed. Therefore, although femininity and masculinity are naturalized and normalized in a rigid binary scheme, these apps are able to create funny but also uncanny and slightly creepy versions of men and women, that questions the normal, natural and binary essence of gender and of its elements.

[22]https://www.dailydot.com/irl/faceapp-transgender/.
[23]https://thenextweb.com/news/why-snapchats-new-gender-swap-feature-is-problematic-for-trans-people.

FIGURE 8 Gender (swap) repetition to unconventionality.

Such a playful (de)construction of gender binarism employed by the users through technological means is quite analogous to the performative (de)construction of gender employed by LGBTQ+ people outside these apps, in the so-called real world and life. To this purpose, Cáel Keegan, assistant professor of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and Liberal Studies at Grand Valley State University and a trans man affirms that, 'Playing with gender has always been a major part of trans culture and representation […] Trans people have appeared for a long time in circuses, drag shows and in Hollywood. These shows are fetishistic, but they can give trans people some control over how they are represented'.[24] Now the same possibility is extended to the social media arena and offered also to cisgender and heterosexual users. According to Jessie Daniels, professor at the City University of New York professor and an expert in digital sociology states, 'for people unfamiliar with the concept of gender as fluid—not innate and not binary; that is, not strictly male or female—such filters can be both radical and transformative […] They get a chance to play with gender in a way that many of us who are LGBTQ have played with gender our whole lifetimes and understand the social construct part of it'.[25]

Although this playful practice lacks the more bodily, physical and material component, that is the actual embodiment of a gender identity through its performance, it can be conceived as its digital *virtual* transposition, in which 'virtual' has to be understood in its semiotic meaning as 'potential'. Indeed, the possibility of swapping gender enabled by these apps highlights its underlying *social* basic premise and core principle. According to Butler (1990, 2004), gender is never a natural principle in itself, but a naturalized social outcome of recurring and repetitive features, traits and practices that progressively becomes contrived conventions—pushed to the limits of unconventionality by LGBTQ+ subjectivities and their performances offline and online (Figure 8). Rather than focusing on the discrete (meta)physical subject in terms of identity, the playful use of gender-swap apps by LGBTQ+ users promotes the development of a common language that reflects on gender as its shared linguistic code, upon which the community can advance a counter social discourse. From this perspective, the utopian aspirations of LGBTQ+ users in using these apps do not oppose the critical and playful motives of most cisgender heterosexual users but rather build upon them to establish a solid foundation, find original expression and gain social visibility.

Artificial intelligence that rules the functioning of gender swap-apps are made by humans and inevitably contain our own biases (Gross, 2023). Nevertheless, A. I. does not merely *mirror*

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[24]https://time.com/5590491/snapchat-filter-gender-swap-trans-community/.
[25]https://nypost.com/2019/05/17/snapchats-gender-swap-photo-filter-is-no-game-for-trans-people/.

sociocultural conventions, schemes and categories, but *filter* them as an operator of constant translation and, consequently, of new social and natural configurations—just like human intelligence. Its difference from the human subject lies not in its supposed objectivity but rather in its potentiality, which far exceeds that of an individual and is actualized by constantly integrating the expression of many. In this sense, artificial intelligence is not only a simple operator, but a multiplier of possible forms of gender expressions and identity for a subject, in turn called upon to realize and perform the infinite virtualities and combinations offered by a binary code.

5 | CONCLUSIONS: BEYOND THE HUMAN-TECHNOLOGY BINARISM TOWARD A UTOPIC FUTURE

As previously argued, it is important to highlight the difference between techno-ludic activities aimed at altering gender expression and proper performativity of gender identity, as theorized by Butler, emphasizing, for what concerns the former, the lack of an actual material grip on the subject's body and, on the other hand, the lack of active incorporation by the subject of their technologically modified gender image. If the overcoming of gender binarism cannot certainly be limited to the transfiguration of the subject into their medial image, then perhaps it is necessary to overcome precisely the distance between the subject identity and the medial expression: a binarism between human and technology that underpins all others. First, it is necessary to move beyond the typically semiotic dualism that reduces matter to a sensible expression of a pregiven content. From a more strictly aesthetic point of view, the relationship between the terms is partially reversed, but the same binarism is maintained: the sensible image is conceived as an immaterial reflection of a material body. Building on the study conducted here, the perspective to be advanced is that of transcending a metaphysics of representation, which links the sense of sight to a perspectival distance and judges the image solely in terms of its authenticity in relation to the object represented, towards a sort of physics that seeks to enhance the presentative and performative function of the image, directing its visibility toward bodily tactility. As observed, the technologies under examination not only produce images of a subject but also cause these images to adhere to, apply to, and overlap with the subject's face. Such adherence to the user's face, not in terms of a true, authentic image of the face itself, is valid only within a medial context and a social discourse that exceeds the identity and corporeality of the individual subject. At the same time, this should not be seen as a limitation but rather as a potential that urges us to recognize identities and bodies precisely in terms of the reciprocal relationships they establish by virtue of the medial and technological extensions. It is in this sense that the figure of the cyborg, as theorized by Donna Haraway, constitutes a synthesis of gender and technological issues, a ludic hybridization of the element pertaining all these domains, a utopic horizon for the transgender and transhuman subject.

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