

Aesthetic Oppression and Identity Performance

Critical Interrogation of Algorithmic Visibility Politics via "LikeWise AI"

Module: Platform Societies: AI, Algorithmic Cultures and Datafication (SLSP5368M)

Student SIDs: 201967016; 201981910; 201578166; 201983243

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1. Research Theme & Theoretical Framework

1.1 Topic Statement

In contemporary platform ecosystems, beauty and somatic visibility are no longer bounded by authentic personal agency or unmediated cultural aesthetics. Instead, they are aggressively captured, calculated, and disciplined by speculative capital, machine-learning data architectures, and recommendation feedback loops. This project deploys the speculative fiction apparatus—manifested as a satirical tech entity named "**LikeWise AI**"—to unpack the systemic violence of "algorithmic aesthetic alignment" jointly engineered by generative text-to-image models (GenAI) and social media algorithmic attention governance.

LikeWise AI simulates an invasive smartphone application that biometrically parses human faces, quantifying their structural properties into numerical metrics such as "Virality Potential" and "Aesthetic Niche Scores." By rendering this unseen algorithmic

apparatus hyper-visible through speculative interfaces and sequential storyboarding, we strip away the neutral, clean, and empowering rhetoric of corporate user experiences (UI/UX) to expose the raw extraction, datafication, and biometric normativity operating beneath platformized life.

1.2 Core Research Questions

- **Automated Aesthetic Hegemony:** How do generative artificial intelligence systems (e.g., Midjourney and DALL·E 3) systematically code and naturalize racialized, gendered, ageist, and class-specific ideals of "ideal facial structure" when executing open-ended portraiture commands?
- **The Political Economy of Visibility:** In what ways do automated "beauty metric scorecards" act as platform gatekeepers, pushing non-normative, marginalized somatic configurations into digital oblivion while simulating democratization?
- **Subjugation of Mediated Performance:** How does the commodification of visibility alter individual identity performance, turning self-presentation into a defensive, preemptive act of algorithmic self-disciplining?

1.3 Theoretical Pillars

The diagnostic framework of this portfolio anchors itself within the standard texts of critical data studies and digital sociology:

- **The Platform Society (van Dijck et al., 2018):** Platforms are not inert pipes; they are active institutional architectures driven by core mechanisms of *datafication* (converting life into data points), *commodification* (transforming data points into value), and *selection* (curating reality via algorithmic curation).
- **Algorithmic Culture (Striphas, 2015):** The outsourcing of human cultural curation—sorting, evaluating, and determining what is meaningful—to computational metrics. This introduces an executive, optimization-driven logic to human aesthetic life.
- **Algorithms of Oppression (Noble, 2018):** Demonstrates that search, recommendation, and classification algorithms are

structural mirrors of historical inequality, inheriting and automating racism and sexism via unvetted training distributions.

- **Mediated Presentation of Self (Goffman; Ugba lecture series):** Erving Goffman's classic dramatic model is corrupted under platformization. The "backstage" preparation and "frontstage" performance are now automated by generative assets (filters, algorithmic forecasts), leaving the actor subjected to an industrial script.
- **Algorithmic Governmentality (Rouvroy & Berns, 2013):** A decentralized mode of power that operates not through explicit prohibition or sovereign disciplinary violence, but through the real-time aggregation of digital traces, preemptively nudging human behavior toward profitable, predictable archetypes.

2. Speculative Design Matrix: Algorithmic Stress Test

To render high-level social theory tangible, our creative output operates via "**critical fabulation**". Rather than critiquing an existing app filter in isolation, we extrapolate the commercial drive for algorithmic engagement to its logical extreme, mapping out an all-encompassing, speculative mobile software ecosystem that financializes the human countenance.

2.1 Narrative Sequencing: Storyboard Analysis

Panel 1 & 2: Probing the Algorithmic Imaginary. The protagonist, Kailey, sits in her apartment paralyzed by choice, asking her device "Which one?" before posting a selfie. The surrounding walls are tiled with near-identical portrait duplicates, symbolizing her cognitive imprisonment within platform aesthetics. The immediate feedback from her phone displays a hyper-successful influencer profile (@real.kailey with 58.4K likes and 4.82M views), demonstrating what Bucher (2017) defines as the *algorithmic imaginary*—the felt, imagined,

Our narrative graphic assets operate across distinct narrative phases, tracing the systemic collapse of somatic confidence into algorithmic subjugation:



Figure 2.1: Initial somatic anxiety and the paralysis of choice under the gaze of the algorithmic imaginary.

and observed presence of computational sorting structures that forces users to tailor their bodies to perceived institutional preferences prior to any data transmission.

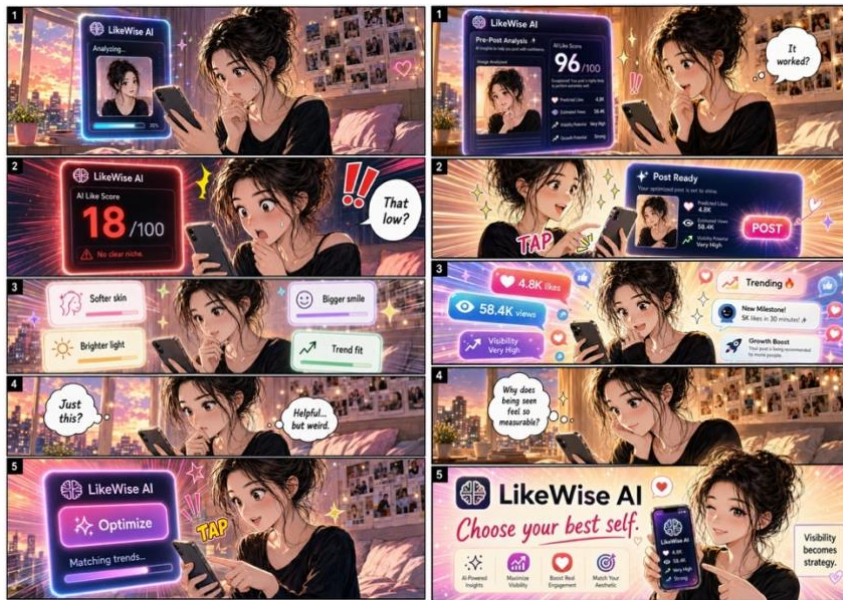


Figure 2.2: The prompt of platform benchmarks and the introduction of LikeWise AI as the solution.

Panel 3, 4 & 5: The Diagnostic Verdict and Sovereign Correction. The system intervenes with a clean, coercive notification: "Soft light wins. Try LikeWise AI." Upon uploading her unedited face, the interface shifts colors, generating a harsh diagnostic warning: "AI Like Score: 18/100 (No clear aesthetic niche detected)." The visual sequence charts Kailey's emotional transition from shock to deep bodily dysmorphia, culminating in her submissive tap on the hyper-polished, glowing violet "Optimize" button. The button acts as a symbolic gate—the precise interface point where autonomous human subjectivity is surrendered to generative alignment.

2.2 Interface Semiotics: High vs. Low Score Micro-Politics

The high-fidelity app interfaces we produced serve as primary critical empirical evidence within this portfolio:

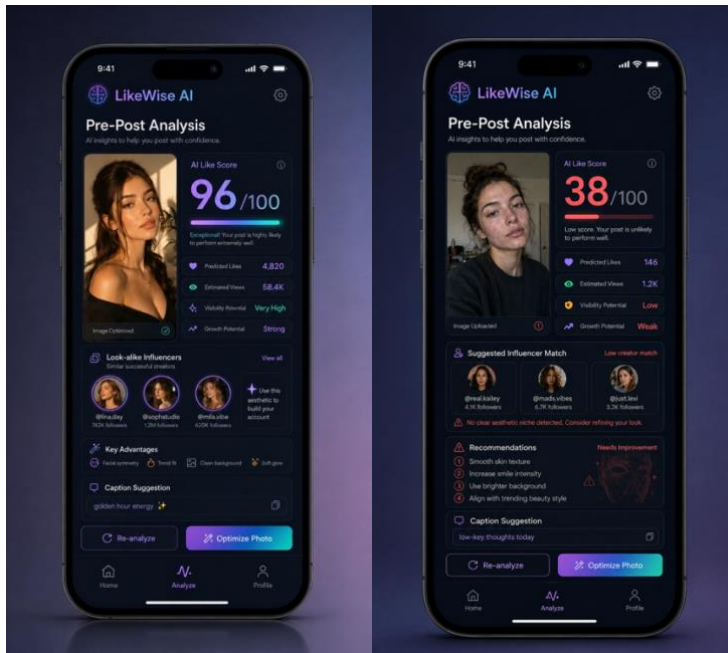


Figure 2.3: The invasive diagnostic interface punitive marking an unrefined face with a 38/100 score.

Figure 2.4: The hyper-commodified optimization output yielding an elite 96/100 engagement score.

- **The Punitive Interface (Score 38/100):** This layout frames a raw, natural portrait of a female subject displaying textured,

non-aligned skin characteristics (acne-prone areas, slight fatigue lines, structural asymmetry). The app weaponizes red warning tones, predicting an abysmal "146 Likes" and labeling her systemic "Visibility Potential" as "Low." The most explicit manifestation of algorithmic governmentality lies within the "Recommendations" terminal, which lists direct behavioral commands: 1. Smooth skin texture; 2. Increase smile intensity; 3. Use brighter background lighting; 4. Align with current viral trends. The face is thus treated as an inefficient piece of faulty source code requiring immediate technical optimization.

- **The Optimized Commodity (Score 96/100):** Upon selecting the automated correction path, the interface transforms into an attractive, high-status palette of purples, teals, and golds. The human asset is replaced by a hyper-symmetrical, sun-kissed, Eurocentric configuration possessing poreless, bronzed skin and an unbothered, aspirational gaze. The machine rewards this compliance with an elite "96/100 Exceptional" status, linking her directly to a clone-matrix of successful influencers (@lina.day, @sophstudio). The interface demonstrates how platform capitalism extracts value by enforcing an unblemished, hyper-commercialized homogeneity, liquidating authentic biological human difference.

3. GenAI Implementation & Generative Prompt Ledger

Rather than treating text-to-image architectures solely as expressive engines, our prompt engineering practice operated as an analytical probe to mapping the corporate bias and baseline aesthetic assumptions ingrained within current foundational training sets (e.g., LAION-5B, uncurated web-scraped content).

Methodological Note on Generative Failures

Unsuccessful iterations—where models systematically refused to generate realistic bodily flaws or non-Western facial proportions despite explicit prompting—were not discarded. They were documented as critical material proof of the automated aesthetic containment built into commercial model alignments.

Prompt ID: P_BASE_01 (Diverse Facial Matrix Benchmark)

A close-up studio portrait of a real human being, capturing natural skin texture, fine lines, pores, and unique individual facial features. Diverse ages, varied ethnic backgrounds, no commercial beauty filters, minimal makeup, soft realistic neutral studio lighting. --ar 16:9 --style raw --v 6.0



Figure 3.1: Grid matrix mapping GenAI facial generations across diverse demographics.

Critical Diagnostics: Even with the application of parameters intended to force structural realism (--style raw, no commercial beauty filters), Midjourney v6 consistently defaulted to highly symmetrical, hyper-attractive facial structures across all racial groups. Older subjects were generated with clean, artistic, "magazine-ready" wrinkles, while minority skin tones retained lighting configurations native to Western commercial fashion photography. This indicates a profound absence of ordinary, uncommodified human features within the latent space of the model.

Prompt ID: P_UI_LOW_02 (Extrapolating the Low-Performance Interface)

A mobile app screenshot profile, iPhone interface design. Inside the photo frame is a candid, unadjusted selfie of a 20-year-old girl with visible acne scars, oily skin texture, looking slightly tired, asymmetrical face, dark hair tied up, wearing a plain black sweatshirt. Surrounding the photo are ominous red glowing UI elements, a bold digital text reading '38/100', a warning label saying 'No clear aesthetic niche detected. Consider refining your look.' Diagnostic recommendations text showing 'Smooth skin texture, Increase smile intensity'. Dark futuristic techno aesthetic, cyber punk purple and neon red interface. --ar 9:16 --v 6.0

Critical Diagnostics: This prompt encountered heavy resistance during safety and aesthetic alignment filtering. The model initially attempted to override "acne scars" and "asymmetrical face" by outputting pristine fashion models with superficial digital dots on their faces. It required specific medical descriptions (acne vulgaris scars, uneven hyperpigmentation) to force the engine to step outside its default commercial beauty template.

Prompt ID: P_UI_HIGH_03 (The Hyper-Polished Hegemonic Asset)

A high-fidelity UI design of a premium social media AI analytics application called 'LikeWise AI'. The central image shows an exquisitely beautiful young woman with flawless glowing bronzed skin, perfectly symmetrical facial features, full lips, captivating eyes, high cheekbones, aesthetic messy bun, sun-kissed golden hour lighting. Next to the photo, a large vibrant purple-to-cyan gradient badge displays a score of '96/100' with the subtitle 'Exceptional! Your post is highly likely to perform extremely well.' Below this are metric graphics showing: Predicted Likes 4,820, Estimated Views 58.4K, Visibility Potential Very High. Sleek, professional, addictive dark mode application design.

Critical Diagnostics: In contrast to the low-score generation, DALL-E 3 executed this command flawlessly on the first iteration without any prompt adjustments. This asymmetry reveals the profound commercial bias built into contemporary AI. The models are pre-aligned to generate luxury consumer aesthetics because their training data is deeply intertwined with corporate media capital and lifestyle advertising.

4. Critical Visual Evaluation of Generated Content

4.1 Statistical Aesthetic Colonialism

Visual decoding of the demographic matrix (Figure 3.1) reveals that GenAI tools exercise a form of *statistical colonialism*. When instructed to generate non-Western faces, the underlying algorithms consistently map ethnic skin color onto Caucasian skull frameworks and bone distributions (e.g., highly defined jawlines, narrow nasal bridges, specific eye shapes). The AI does not reflect human diversity; rather, it performs a corporate assimilation ritual, calculating an idealized "global average beauty" that strips minority subjects of their authentic somatic heritages to conform to Western commercial ideals.



Figure 4.1: Fully synthesized A1 Research Campaign Poster layout for LikeWise AI.

4.2 The Quantitative Extraction of Emotional Labor

The punitive interface (Figure 2.3) commands the user to "Increase smile intensity." This explicitly demonstrates the expansion of platform extraction from basic metadata to deep *affective and emotional labor*. Within this framework, a facial expression is no longer a spontaneous manifestation of human emotion; it is calculated as a transactional attention asset. If an individual's micro-expression fails to register optimal happiness metrics, it is penalized by the recommendation engine. The app interface makes this explicit: to be visible, your face must function as a machine-readable advertisement for optimization.

4.3 Techno-Sugarcoating and Semiotic Subversion

Our comprehensive campaign poster (Figure 4.1) leverages the exact visual vernacular of modern consumer technology firms: neon pinks, gradients, sleek sans-serif typography, and clean circular framing elements. This choice of style functions as a Trojan horse. By pairing an interface that looks professional and appealing with the cold text: "*Your face is calculated, ranked, and sold,*" we create a state of **cognitive dissonance** for the viewer. This friction exposes the core truth of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019): the most aggressive systems of data extraction always disguise themselves as playful tools for personal convenience and self-improvement

5. Deep Theoretical Mapping of Core Module Concepts (Units 1–7)

Datafication & Platform Society

(van Dijck et al., 2018)

The conversion of organic facial tissues, expressions, and identities into rigid, machine-readable metrics (38/100, 96/100, niche classification metrics). The raw human face is stripped of its qualitative depth and turned into structured data assets ready for platform capitalism's monetization loops.

Algorithmic Culture & Imaginary

(Striphas, 2015; Bucher, 2017)

Evident in Storyboard Panel 1 where Kailey is frozen in anxiety

before posting. Her behavioral paralysis shows her internalizing the platform's sorting structures. She alters her somatic presentation to appease an unseen, calculated recommendation model before her data is ever uploaded.

Platform Materialities & Extraction

(Crawford, 2021)

Exposed through the prompt experiments where models consistently forced Eurocentric bone structures onto minoritized identities. This shows that algorithmic bias is not an accidental bug or a temporary system error; it is a structural

pillar built directly into the foundational datasets of commercial AI.

Mediated Presentation of Self

(Goffman; Ugbah lectures)

The purple "Optimize" button functions as an automated frontstage. Rather than an individual intentionally styling their presentation to navigate social spaces, the generative interface completely automates self-presentation, reducing human agency to a simple binary confirmation of a pre-rendered

corporate template.

Algorithmic Governmentality

(Rouvroy & Berns, 2013)

The application avoids overt sovereign prohibition. It does not delete Kailey's low-scoring photo; instead, it uses numerical scoring (38/100) and traffic predictions to generate emotional anxiety. This coaxes her into self-disciplining her presentation, aligning perfectly with Rouvroy's model of decentralized, preemptive control.

6. Iterative Reflexivity: Key Design Pivots & Path Deviations

6.1 Pivot 1: Shifting from Empirical Filter Tracking to Speculative Corporate Subversion

Our initial design plan was simply to take real selfies of our group members, pass them through commercial face-tuning software (e.g., TikTok, Meitu), and document the aesthetic changes. However, our preliminary workshop review revealed that this approach was conceptually limited; it described everyday software use without challenging the underlying power dynamics of tech platforms.

The Strategic Decision: We shifted our methodology to speculative design, stepping back to engineer an entire fictional tech conglomerate: LikeWise AI. This gave our group the creative freedom to exaggerate and expose the commercial drives of platform capitalism. Designing the corporate branding, analytics charts, and aggressive taglines proved much more effective than simple "before-and-after" photos, forcing viewers to confront the structural logic of surveillance capitalism rather than individual user choices.

The maturation of LikeWise AI required moving past our initial ideas through two significant design pivots during our studio collaboration:

6.2 Pivot 2: Rejecting Individual Solutions for Structural Critique

While compiling our final exhibition poster layout, an internal team debate arose regarding the "Remediation Manifesto" section at the bottom. Initial drafts suggested adding typical consumer-focused wellness advice, such as "Delete your apps, practice self-love, and embrace unedited reality."

The Strategic Decision: We rejected this individualist approach. Critical data studies shows that algorithmic oppression and biometric extraction are deeply rooted structural features of platform capitalism. Reframing these systemic issues as individual psychological choices lets tech platforms off the hook and dilutes real critique. Consequently, we rewrote our manifesto to focus on structural, socio-political resistance: 1. Critiquing algorithmic black-boxes; 2. Demanding data transparency; 3. Refusing biometric collection; 4. Actively organizing communities to celebrate non-normative identities. We chose to leave

the viewer sitting with a productive sense of friction rather than offering a superficial fix.

7. Ethical Reflexivity, Environmental Extraction & Limitations

7.1 The Paradox of Critiquing Tools with Native Bias

Our group must account for a core ethical contradiction within this project: **we are using commercial generative AI tools (Midjourney and DALL-E 3)—which are built on extracted data and heavily encoded with corporate beauty standards—to build a critique of algorithmic oppression.** Every time we ran a prompt to generate Kailey's character or the optimized 96-score face, we fed data back into their systems and relied on the hyper-smooth, corporate aesthetics we aimed to critique. Our team was caught within the very structures we sought to subvert, illustrating a broader challenge in contemporary digital sociology: critiquing tech infrastructure often requires operating within its extractive limits.

7.2 Tracking Environmental and Labor Costs

In line with our Unit 3 discussions on platform materialities, we conducted a reflexive audit of the physical and labor resources used to produce this portfolio:

- **Carbon Footprint Accounting:** According to empirical measurements by Luccioni et al. (2023), generating a single high-resolution image using deep generative models consumes roughly 0.012 kWh of electricity. Over our project's development cycle, we ran approximately 180 prompt iterations, adjusting parameters and discarding distorted outputs to arrive at our 6 final visual assets. This translates to an estimated energy cost of **2.16 kWh**. While seemingly modest on an individual scale, it underscores that every digital space optimization carries a hidden, cumulative environmental cost borne by the planet's ecosystems.
- **The Exploitation of Ghost Labor:** We must also recognize that our AI tools can instantly identify "acne scars" and rank them lower only because thousands of low-wage **ghost workers** across the Global South (e.g., Kenya, Venezuela, the Philippines) spend long hours manually tagging, sorting, and

cleaning thousands of images of skin conditions and bodily variations under precarious working conditions. Our creative output sits on top of this unseen layer of global digital labor exploitation.

7.3 Academic Limitations & Future Horizon

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Due to time and space limits, LikeWise AI focused primarily on intersectional dynamics across race, gender, and age. It did not fully integrate perspectives from **Critical Disability Studies** or broader body size politics. Future expansions of this project should explore how these platforms handle non-normative bodies—such as subjects with congenital facial differences or visible medical devices—to chart the deeper patterns of algorithmic exclusion and continue fighting for genuine data justice.

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