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Maja Tabea Jerrentrup

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Ugly on the internet: from #authenticity to #selflove

MAJA TABEA JERRENTRUP

This article aims at understanding why people deliberately share ugly photos of themselves on social media. After categorising the ugly pictures, the motivations for posting them are in focus: some people stress authenticity in times of 'fake' and a deeper understanding of social media, some refer to coolness, understood as the 'apathy to cool', or to a counter-culture, which applies different definitions of beauty and ugliness. Furthermore, there are people on social media using the ugly pictures as tools for empowerment and acceptance, as well as expressions of body-positivity and self-love. Finally, photography also has the power to transcend the body and its appearance when it no longer stands for an individual but is staged to express a concept.

1. INTRODUCTION

Assuming that people would like to be perceived positively, it seems to be counter-intuitive that some people present portraits of themselves in social media that show 'ugly' features. Therefore, the research questions guiding this article are why people consciously post ugly photographs of themselves on social media and what they want to express with them.

Obviously, some forces must be stronger than the fear of rejection or embarrassment. Aiming at understanding the ugly photographs, their social dynamics, and their implications, this article builds on previous research on internet aesthetics (i.a. Douglas 2014; Hall et al. 2012; Marcus 2016; Sastre 2016), but also considers popular sources (i.a. Brad 2011; Bennett 2014) and refers to more general aspects about beauty and ugliness (i.a. Henderson 2015; Eco 2007; Geiger 2008; Adorno 1997; Foucault 2005). After characterising ugliness and looking at the way it is present in media, the methods will be explained, a qualitative study of a sample of 'ugly' photographs. Looking at the sample, various categories of ugliness will be identified. To explain the phenomenon, we will point out five distinct motivations for posting ugly photographs. Finally, some thoughts on transcending the medium of photography will be reflected.

2. DEFINING THE UGLY

'The ugly is an unwelcome phenomenon that, like a weed in a garden, should be avoided in – or eradicated from – landscapes, artworks, quotidian objects, and even human beings' – this way Forsey and Aagaard-Mogensen (2019) start their book about the ugly. They go on asking whether ugliness is defined by its opposite, beauty, yet a lack of beauty is not automatically ugly, but could be neutral. If it is not the opposite of beauty, what is ugly instead? Often, the term 'ugliness' is used in a similar way to 'unattractiveness', however, ugly seems to be more extreme, and to evoke stronger emotions. Following the Online Etymology Dictionary, ugly derives from '*uglike* "frightful or horrible in appearance," from a Scandinavian source, such as Old Norse *uggligr* "dreadful, fearful," from *uggr* "fear, apprehension, dread"' (see also Henderson 2015, 1). Thus, the aspect of fear is stressed in the word. In German, my native language, ugly is translated as 'hässlich' and thus reveals its root from 'Hass = hatred'. These etymologies show two aspects of 'ugly' – it is feared and hated. However, there can be more feelings connected to the ugly, such as pity or hope as in the story of the ugly duckling, but also opposition and the strength of not surrendering to the beauty imperative (see Geiger 2008, 22). An interesting definition is offered by Stanley Diamond who uses the term 'disharmony' (Diamond 1987, 268) to characterise ugliness. Ugly is whatever is 'too much' of something, whereas studies have shown that the 'right amount,' the average is considered pleasing. This explains why the exaggeration of features, which actually are understood as being beautiful, feels odd and unpleasant: it is understood as being disharmonious. This conception of ugliness as disharmony echoes an observation in Theodor

Maja Tabea Jerrentrup is associate professor of media at Ajeenkya DY Patil University (India) and senior faculty member of the Indian Institute of Photography. Furthermore, she has lectured at various institutions such as the University of Trier (Germany), the Macromedia University (Germany), the Università della Basilicata (Italy) and the Universidad del Atlántico (Colombia). Her research interests include media representation, gender and media, and art therapy. Besides academia, she is brand ambassador for various companies in the field of photography and has cooperated with companies like Adobe, WhiteWall, Sony, and Nikon.

Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (see Adorno 1997, 45). However, Adorno refuses the idea that 'ugliness' can be defined as an aesthetical category at all. He argues that the content of the term 'ugliness' (as well as 'beauty') can only be conceived of as embedded in and constituted by sociological contingencies in the on-going history of arts. As Adorno concludes: 'That is how completely dynamic the category of the ugly is, and necessarily its counterimage, the category of the beautiful, is no less so. Both mock definitional fixation such as is imagined by that aesthetic whose norms are, however indirectly, oriented by these categories' (Adorno 1997, 46). Whether or not Adorno is right in claiming that 'ugliness' is an undefinable aesthetic term, his analysis points towards an idea that is relevant to our current study: ugliness is characterised in relation to societies. In Michel Foucault's line of thinking, this idea is disassociated from the topic of arts and connected to the ugliness (or beauty) of the human *body*. Foucault argues that the aesthetical categorisations of bodies as well as their sexual and erotic implications can only be understood in relation to their historical and societal contexts (see Foucault 1990, 199–200). These contexts are ultimately constituted by institutional power relations and by the social norms these power relations imply (see Foucault 2005, 74ff., see also McLaren 2002, 81; Hekman 1996, 1). Such contexts have also been shown in countless empirical studies (see Davis 1995 for the need for cosmetic surgery to attain social acceptability, see Kaw 2002 for norms of whiteness.)

Ugliness does not equal the evil, yet both are often seen as connected: one speaks about the 'ugly side of a character' and in fairytales, the ugly and the evil usually come in one person. Following Adorno, ugliness is a 'category of prohibitions' (Adorno 1997, 47). However, the forbidden and the evil also fascinate, as they seem to leave more options to the individual. This is reflected in the notion that many people think hell must be a more interesting place than heaven (see Frey and Gabrielle 2011, VII). The morally good, the just, the right are pictured as rather absolute and therefore offer less creativity, less freedom of choice, which is the subject of theodicy. In his *Lecture on the History of Ugliness*, Umberto Eco draws on the religious associations contained in these aesthetic categories too. However, Eco turns the relations upside down by claiming that – unlike beauty – ugliness is infinite and unpredictable; like God (see Eco 2007). The mere possibility to turn our everyday associations upside down and still present a coherent account of ugliness indicates that, in the end, Adorno may have been right in assuming that ugliness cannot be defined but rather characterised by its intriguing relation to beauty and the role these notions play in societal institutions – or as Gretchen Henderson puts it: 'Rather than mere binaries, ugliness and beauty seem to function more like binary stars, which fall into one another's gravity and orbit each other while being constellated with many other stars' (Henderson 2015, 11).

3. MEDIA AND UGLINESS

This intriguing relation between ugliness and beauty may debunk the idea that the good is beautiful and the evil is ugly as a superficial misconception of those notions. However, this superficial identification seems to be part of folk psychology: 'The more physically attractive an individual is, the more positive the person is perceived, the more favourably the person is responded to' (Patzer 1985, 1) which is explained by attribution theory, learning theory, and consistency theory. Hence, many fairytales make things easy by offering coherent characters, the evil character is often ugly, and the heroine or hero is often the most beautiful person in the story. If a good character is ugly, it is frequently due to some magic spell or to a development he/she* has to undergo to finally become beautiful from the inside and outside.

Mass media might have inherited this tendency from the old tales. For a long time, mass media used to focus strongly on the beautiful: 'Research shows that models, actors, actresses, and other in the media spotlight traditionally possess the same characteristics – tall, slim, radiant skin, youthful, etc.[…] These repeating images create beauty ideals which women often feel they must achieve' (Goldman and Waymer 2014, 5 f.). Among the mainstream actors and singers, there were few exceptions such as Renée Zellweger in 'Bridget Jones' being a bit overweight. Furthermore, comedians, minor characters, and artist apart from the mainstream have always been allowed to be ugly.

Looking at social media, there is a trend of what Nick Douglas calls 'the Internet Ugly', that especially runs through memetic content, celebrating a sloppy and amateurish aesthetic (see Douglas 2014) which relates to one of the latter defined categories of ugly.

Makeover shows on television, as analysed by Gallagher and Pecot-Hebert (2007), present the imperative to improve one's own body to attract partners – the

authors focus on women, but there are also some, albeit fewer, makeover shows for men. However, even after the 'metro' trend for men – young men that can be associated with men's participation in historically feminised practices (see Coad 2008, 22ff., see Hall et al. 2012) – social scientists claim that beauty is more feminine than masculine: 'Women face stricter beauty standards that are difficult to achieve, despite their continuous efforts, as female media images are more often one-dimensional and idealistic' (Goldman and Waymer 2014, 2). Elin Ryan puts it even more precisely: 'Women, in particular, learn that their bodies and appearance are important factors; what a woman observes in a mirror is a measure of her worth' (Ryan 2013, 2). Women who achieve beauty, be it by cosmetic surgery or discipline, might experience the feeling of control (see Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2006, 257) and power, but it is actually illusionary as it ultimately stands for a surrender to the oppressing cultural norms (see Bordo 2004): 'Fulfilling the beauty requirements gives women a sense of fitting in and signals status and success. These beauty rituals also lead to the homogenization, edification, as well as standard and definition of beauty for women to follow' (Goldman and Waymer 2014, 3). For most women, and to a lesser extent for men, the status quo is the beauty imperative.

Consequently, one assumption of this study is that people, in general, would like to be perceived as beautiful – thus it is surprising that they would post pictures that present them as looking ugly. My research question is therefore why people show pictures of themselves on the internet knowing that they probably will be perceived as ugly.

4. METHODOLOGY: RESEARCH ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media can be understood as 'highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content' (Kietzmann et al. 2011, 241). According to Kietzmann, social media serve various functions: they help to show presence, to share content, to build relationships, to communicate identity, to engage in conversations, to form groups, and to work on individual or group-related reputation (see Kietzmann et al. 2011, 243). Due to their ubiquity, social media are said to be 'an unmatched resource for research' (Miller 2014, 1), especially, as 'resources for those who study geographically disparate or hard to reach populations' (Darwin 2017, 321). To approach the research question, Facebook and Instagram were selected because they are well-known and widely used platforms and both stress pictures, but also because the interviewees (see below) used these platforms. However, when looking at social media, it is problematic to get an adequate picture: one needs a social media account and Facebook and Instagram present content depending on one's own interests, indicated by people or sites one follows already. Consequently, filter bubbles (see Pariser 2011) arise, and it is almost impossible to get a picture that is representative for wider parts of society.

Therefore, I have to discuss my own situation, where my impressions and data derive from. I am undertaking a long-term, immersive participant observation in the (amateur) model photography scene in the German-speaking context that comprises about 400,000 to 600,000 people who are fond of staged photography, usually both as a recipient and as a practitioner, among them models, photographers, designers, etc. Whereas some members make their living on photographing or being photographed, most consider it a hobby. Members also post their holiday snaps, backstage pictures, and pictures showing themselves in their everyday lives. A very obvious reason for showing non-model-pictures, revealed in numerous informal interviews, is the dynamic of social media: many feel obliged to post at a high frequency. A typical shoot takes hours of preparation, travel, taking photographs, and retouching, and results in few retouched pictures. Hence, most people simply do not have enough model pictures to effectively use social media. Besides, many observe that more personal posts or pictures of their 'real life' are quite successful when it comes to 'likes' (see Jerrentrup 2019). This does not implicate that real-life pictures would not be staged – in every case at least a conscious selection of the pictures to be presented takes place.

Thus, the filter bubble this article looks at refers to people who concentrate on their looks, and, as shown in an earlier study, probably also more or less consciously work on their identities. It is a relatively diverse group showing overlappings with other scenes, for example the scenes of cosplay, DIY, tattoos, dreadlocks, make-up artists, etc. Geographically, my social media are focused on Western Europe, mainly on the German-speaking context (ca. 70% on Facebook, ca. 60% on Instagram). As shown, this is a specific sample, however, due to the relatively high number – 10,000 on Facebook and 500 on Instagram[1] – and the diversity of accounts that I followed for three month from July to

September 2019, some representative insights should be possible.

As there were also reposts and shared posts, it is difficult to really talk about a limited scope of time. According to my estimation, 2–3% of the pictures people posted can be characterised as 'ugly' by their own standards, which means that the people themselves placed the image in the context of ugliness through the accompanying captions or hashtags. Looking at the profiles, there is no even distribution of such photographs – some never post anything of this sort, others relatively often.

My photographic sample comprises 112 pictures that their authors described as ugly or similar – either by the hashtags, in the accompanying text, or in a comment, taken in account the polysemy of the term (see Athanassoglou-Kallmyer 2018, 32): the exact wording varied, among them not just 'ugly' and its equivalent in other languages, but people also used expressions connected to weirdness, for example 'looking weird/awkward', or connected to not meeting social standards, for example 'I am different', formulated questions, for example 'too fat?', indicated the difference between social media and reality, for example '#instavsreality' or 'me. also me', or used emoticons, for example for sickness. Thus, the texts or emoticons offer some explanation.

It is obvious that due to the sampling method, my research can only be based on the overall impression I got. To compensate for this weakness, I added one more method by conducting ten semi-structured, in-depth interviews in informal settings, mostly after or during the break of a photoshoot. In selecting the interviewees, two aspects were important: they were part of the sample, thus occasionally used corresponding hashtags and captions, and their pictures described as 'ugly' looked quite diverse. The interviews took place between September 2019 and February 2020. For various reasons, Facebook or Instagram's chat facilities were not used to conduct the interviews: 'The very nature of IMR [internet mediated research] means that compared with traditional methods the researcher has less direct control over, and knowledge of, participant behaviour. For example, in a traditional interview, the researcher is present with the interviewee and can make observations of body language or tone of voice' (Hewson 2003, 292). Consequently, I chose 'real life'-interviews. Each took around 45 to 60 minutes during which I took notes. My interviewees were nine women between 19 and 42 years old, and one 25-year-old person who is transgender, all were of European descent.[2] However, it is possible that social desirability played a role during my interviews, as these people were part of the same scene as myself.

I experienced it as challenging to address the topic not wanting to offend anyone. Therefore, I avoided the word 'ugly' at first but paraphrased the phenomenon using expressions like 'different from the norm'.[3] Yet, I had to inform them about the objective of my research (see Thomson, Roberts, and Bittles 2013, 2) which made it inevitable to use the word 'ugly', which I decided to do once the conversation had started and the interviewee would developed some trust. However, most interviewees immediately used the word by themselves, others first named their particular features, among them scars/stretchmarks, overweight, or in one case a physical disability, or their particular actions, for example pulling faces, or taking pictures without being combed etc. and later simply used 'ugly.'

The questions referred to how the people felt about posting these pictures, if it was challenging for them to do so, how they hoped the pictures would be perceived, whether they wanted to set a statement with them and if yes, which. During the interviews, I gave the interview partners a lot of time to talk about their experiences, partly because new and unexpected insights can be gained in this way, but also because these are sensitive issues and I did not want to interrupt here. In addition, I tried with each of them to sort parts of my photo sample into categories (see below). These categories were pre-defined by myself, but were not presented as fixed, but rather put up for discussion.

I had the impression that it was beneficial for many to talk about their photos, some also emphasised this. The outcomes of my questions and the sorting were clustered to result in a) the categories of ugly and b) gave some hints for the underlying motivations. Furthermore, I hoped to obtain an ethical assessment of my work through the interviews. In fact, seeing that people felt that they were given a voice and were eager to talk about the topic confirms that it was not unethical from their point of view. Some even referred to awareness raising, so were particularly interested in talking about the issue.

5. CATEGORIES OF UGLY ON THE INTERNET

In this chapter, the focus is on various types of ugly photographs that were distinguished by the

interviewees and by me (see above). For the percentages, double entries were possible because not every subject can be assigned unambiguously. Initially, it is mentionable that hardly any 'completely ugly' pictures can be found on the accounts I followed. Even in 'ugly' pictures, some of the features shown frequently follow conventional rules of the 'beautiful' regarding the composition (golden ratio) or the colour choice – but also aspects inherent in the motif are beautiful, for example a grimace is combined with shiny long hair.

According to the interactionist model, one can only succeed at 'posting an ugly picture' if others recognise it as such (see Darwin 2017, 331). However, many comments on social media deny this, eventually because they really do not consider the picture (very) ugly or want to give some comfort. Therefore, it is reasonable not to choose the written recognition of others as a criterion in this case. Further, it should be mentioned that I do not distinguish self-portraits from usual portraits, due to the fact that the way a picture has been taken is hard to tell from looking at the result – one cannot tell for sure. However, be it a self-portrait or not, shot with a professional camera or a cell phone, the person shown has the control over the pictures, he/she* can select it, retouch it, post it or delete it, so for the research interest, it is not of fundamental importance whether it was taken as a self-portrait or not – staging and choosing it is anyway 'an act of self-creating just as much as self-representation' (Gorichanaz 2019a, 297).

A category I excluded from the analysis are the 'unwillingly ugly,' people posting pictures they hoped would please, but are perceived as weird, awkward, disadvantageous, etc., as these pictures were not *intended* to be perceived as ugly, but misunderstood.

The most comprehensive of all categories (for an overview of the categories see Figure 1) refers to temporality and consists of the 'occasionally ugly': people habitually posting beautiful and flattering images of themselves, but occasionally intersperse an awkward styling, a stupid face, a 'bad hair day'-picture, etc. (for grimaces and a referring challenge see Brad 2011). This refers to around 75% of the pictures.

The 'humorously ugly' (see Figure 2), overlapping with the initially mentioned 'occasionally ugly' is a category that shows people presenting themselves ugly in a funny way, for example by wearing weird clothes, funny make-up, and/or pulling faces, sometimes combined with messy hair or awkward make-up. It is made clear that the state of being ugly is transient and far from their normal appearance. Overall, about 20% are humorously ugly.

Another category can be labelled 'ugly versus beautiful' (see Figure 3). Occasionally, two pictures are posted as a pair, one of them showing the person beautifully made-up, the other one presenting him/her* apparently without make-up, eventually tired in the morning or sweaty after a workout. Often, the nature of social media is reflected in the text, for example 'Instagram versus reality.' Thus, it does not only refer to the way people present themselves, the way impression management works but specifically to social media: here, the moments shown are easy to control, one

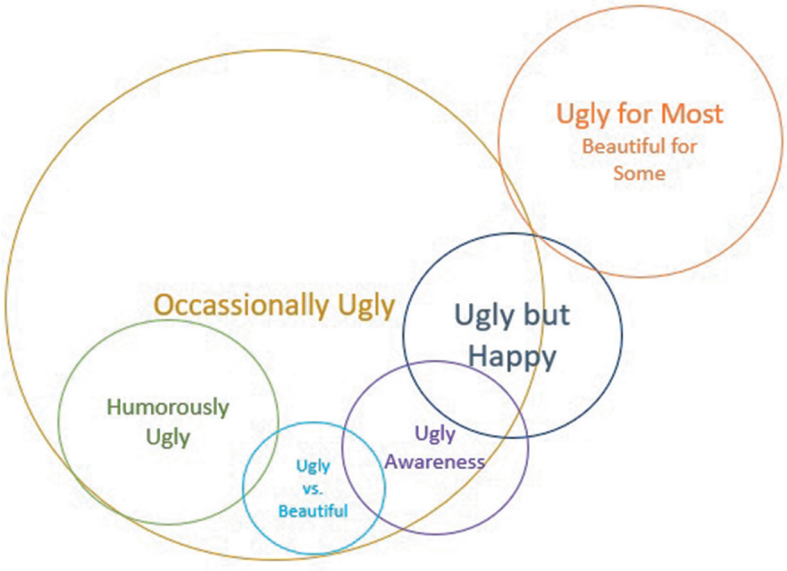

FIGURE 1. Distribution of the categories, pseudo-ugly can be found in all of these.

FIGURE 2. The Instagramer Medusa's Child shows a photograph of herself which can be interpreted as 'Humorously Ugly'. © Medusa's Child.

picks the right angle, the right situation, and can even retouch the image. The text that accompanies the picture offers further control, as it can help to fix the way the picture should be interpreted. About 5% are in this category.

The next category, 'ugly for most,' is at the same time 'beautiful/intriguing/interesting for some,' a category that shows very few overlaps with others. This category comprises people who are aware of the fact that some of their features are not approved or socially accepted in general but at the same time very much appreciated by certain groups. Besides extremely thin and obese people, some of the 'ugly for most'-features are results of the intense design of the body, for example face tattoos, widely stretched ear lobes, split tongues, etc. Another group worth mentioning in this context are the Hipsters, even though by far not every Hipster's picture belongs to my sample. ''Hipster' is a complicated and conflicted term, in part because the cultural experience of the group is difficult to pinpoint and often self-denying. Furthermore, the term's almost ubiquitous contemporary usage obfuscates its identification of a specific group' (Willenbrink 2015, 88), but one seems to agree on 'its pretext for existence outside of mainstream culture' (Willenbrink 2015, 90), thus on its tendency and self-perception to be avant-garde. As such, some Hipsters' stylings can be described as weird or very much out of fashion by the mainstream. Being

FIGURE 3. 'Me, also me'. Yoga coach Christine Raab shows a picture of 2014 'me' and another one of 2018 'also me,' after she underwent cancer treatment. Christine wants to encourage her followers. This photograph falls into the categories 'Ugly versus Beautiful' and 'Ugly Awareness'. © Timo Raab.

aware of this fact, they use descriptions or hashtags referring to this. The category 'ugly for most' stands out, as entire accounts can be purely devoted to the topic. About 25% in my sample were in this category – depending on the filter bubble, this percentage could be much higher or lower.

Another important category can be characterised as 'ugly but happy'. People being aware that they eventually do not meet the beauty standards show that they are still leading a fulfilling life and thus challenge 'the normalization of thin, toned bodies' (Sastre 2014, 929). Hashtags like #selflove and #bodypositivity or texts referring to their appearance usually accompany these pictures. Similar to the 'ugly for most,' there are also entire accounts devoted to this topic. Around 30% in my sample were in this category.

The 'ugly awareness'-category (see Figures 3 and 7) is frequently connected to the 'ugly but happy' and deals with features like stretch marks, scars, baldness, disabilities, gene defects causing particular looks, etc. However, a general notion of happiness is not necessarily the focus of the pictures, sometimes it is the opposite. Another 10% belong to this category.

The 'pseudo-ugly' photograph can also be found in most of the categories mentioned and appears quite frequently. It is a picture that is probably not unattractive by normal standards, but the writer

presents it as ugly by the hashtags and/or the text. Therefore, it communicates that the person shown cannot really be ugly. It is difficult to give a number, as this would depend on my personal perception and/or on the number of people commenting that the picture would not be ugly at all. Among my interviewees were three, of whom I suspected that they might occasionally post 'pseudo-ugly' pictures. When I confronted them, they admitted the pictures were not meant to be perceived as 'really ugly.'

6. MOTIVATIONS FOR UGLINESS

In the following, the motivations are in focus, derived from motivation psychology and confirmed in the interviews. A very obvious explanation for posting ugly pictures is a perfection fatigue (see Bennett 2014) and consequently the attention they are supposed to get. However, this explanation cannot be sufficient for various reasons. The number of 'ugly' photographs the recipient will see is not that low – not only because of people willingly posting ugly pictures of themselves but also as some ugly pictures are shared or are posted to raise awareness for a topic that is not visually related to the person posting. Just showing an ugly picture does not automatically lead to more attention, a fact that was confirmed by my interviewees as well. Besides, most people posting ugly pictures do not seem to have any masochist tendencies but rather strive for appreciation – none of my interviewees had a different opinion on this.

6.1 Photographic Authenticity

'The user is the content' (Pariser 2011, 47) titles a chapter in Eli Pariser's book 'The filter bubble'. If the user expects and wants to see other users 'as content,' authenticity becomes important in many ways: authentic pictures convey a feeling of realness and let us feel closer to the person, offer more 'feeling of knowing' (Giles 2010, 2), and give way to parasocial relationships. In an article from the popular press, Sam Stryker explains the ugly photograph as being 'about immediacy and accessibility' (Stryker 2013) – here, an aesthetic similar to Juergen Teller's work (see Li 2017) emphasises the features that distinguish photographs from digital graphics and are unique for the medium. Furthermore, only authentic pictures offer a suitable measure for social comparison (see Tajfel and Turner 1986) and human beings all share the natural tendency to compare ourselves. Therefore, satisfying the need for authenticity, one might gain more popularity.

Due to photography's indexicality, its causal relationship to the world, photography and authenticity are often considered to be intricately linked: the mere label 'photography' suggests in its literal meaning that whatever is shown, can be taken as reality. Perceiving photographs is relatively similar to seeing the world, which makes it so easy to trust photography the same way as we all trust in our senses – even though it is widely known that photographs 'can lie' (see Stiegler 2006, 135). This assumed relationship between photography and authenticity is increasingly relevant nowadays, as photography has become ubiquitous and at the same time less trustworthy. People long for more photographic truth, even if they might know that this is impossible (see Venohr 2010, 47). However, social media users themselves are often not willing to present more 'truth': it has become so common to stage and retouch that refusing to do so, makes one look much worse than everyone else. When Claire Bonney wrote that the 'interest in "perfect" form [...] no longer seems relevant. Instead, photographers are searching for variety in form and an expression of the uniqueness of each individual or thing' (Bonney 1985, 13), this might have been true in the 1980s or might be the case for few artistically motivated photographers. Today's scene of model photography has a different outlook on 'perfection': variety is desired and certain special, individual features such as freckles, tattoos, or albinism may be valued, but this is only possible within a framework, which focuses on perfection. Average or below-average looking faces and bodies are hardly ever shown – if the photographed persons actually look average, they are transformed by styling and retouching. Human beings long for authenticity and see perfection – what seems to be counterintuitive, has one of its roots in the already mentioned social comparison (see Tajfel and Turner 1986, for an application as theoretical framework in a study on body images see Ryan 2013, 2), now from the perspective of the person posting.

One example addressing the problem is the #instavsreality mode of presentation that detects the vast amount of posts on social media as (partial) fake. However, the people posting #instavsreality obviously keep using the platform even though they are critical of it. 'Social media [...] are fun and I would be lying if I said I am not happy about "likes"', one of the interviewees said, 'although I know a lot of what happens there is just fake.' An occasional #instavsreality indicates that the person has media literacy, which makes him/her* appear in a positive light. The ugly picture presented along with a beautiful photo suggests that behind every beautiful picture on

social media there might be a far less beautiful reality. Thus, the picture questions all the other images on social media, not only his/her* own photographs but everyone else's and establishes the person posting it as being more trustworthy than others not just by showing the 'reality' but also by giving others food for thought.

6.2 Corporeal Authenticity

Another aspect linked to authenticity is the wish for acceptance. 'I want to show how I really am, and I am happy that people appreciate it' – I heard statements like this from half of the interviewees. Some of them linked it to increased freedom, firstly, freedom from beautiful dresses, make-up, and retouching, and secondly freedom from the imperatives of the beauty industry. Yet, on social media, it is very unlikely that there is complete freedom from other people's opinions and 'likes'.

'People derive authenticity by having the final say in how they look and how they portray themselves to the world' (Hefferson and Boniwell 2011, 188). Understood in this broad sense, any decision about one's personal looks would be 'authentic'. However, not every decision about one's own body is a decision for something ugly. Here, the refusal of certain disciplines of the body that are considered desirable or normal is in focus or the decision towards something that stands against the beauty imperative. This could be understood to mean that the person in question presents his/her* body in an authentic way, in a way, that feels natural to him/her* even if it is socially sanctioned. Helana Darwin gives the example of body fat and body hair: 'Both of these traits threaten the Western cultural ideal of the contained female body, compromising cultural myths of women's naturalised hairlessness and hourglass figures' (Darwin 2017, 335). Further examples could be refusing the use of make-up or letting hair unkempt to end up with free-formed dreadlocks (see also Figure 4). However, it would be wrong to assume that such a look would be purely natural in the sense of not coined by culture: 'The human being is a creature of *nature*, insofar as she *is* her (biological) body, and she is a creature of *culture*, insofar she (by socialisation), *has* her body' (Gugutzer 2015, 15, see also McLaren 2002, 82) and therefore can design it like any other property.

An appearance that is not subject to certain cultural imperatives – shaving, combing, make-up, slimming, etc. – is often associated with a feminist attitude against which some people hold negative stereotypes (see Gundersen and Kunst 2019, 291). This can be interpreted as authenticity and openness: by communicating his/her* self-chosen identity, the person does not hide anything from his/her* environment, but at the same time also formulates a demand: 'take me as I am'.

6.3 Coolness, Counter-Culture and Subversion

Closely connected to the just mentioned aspect of 'freedom' is 'coolness.' What features make somebody be regarded as 'cool'? On aspect mentioned by Kristen Lauer is 'a lack of investment into coolness that did require effort embodied by the cool individual' (Lauer 2018, 57), she calls it 'apathy to cool.' Similarly, Nick Douglas talks about the 'Internet ugly aesthetic' referring to memetic content and states, that 'it telegraphs the practitioner's casualness, capacity for irony, and internet savvy' (Douglas 2014, 336). This can be mirrored in ugly pictures: whoever does not care is cool or smart – thus ugliness communicate something positive. Paradoxical as it may sound, it is pleasing if someone does not want to please (see Figure 6).

This can be exaggerated in pictures showing gestures that are actually understood as offensive, such as sticking out the tongue or showing the middle finger. By doing so, the person demonstrates that she does not intend to please: 'People can think whatever they want about me – I don't care' or 'My body, my choices, my life' are interview statements stressing this attitude. The recipient who on first sight is put into an inferior position by such an in a way ruthless motif actually gets elevated to an interesting in-group of connoisseurs that is able to understand and appreciate the motif and eventually share the same attitude. But to whom is the gesture directed? It can be an out-group, a certain opinion, or a cultural concept like the beauty imperative.

A similar logic seems to underly some subcultural phenomena. This can be seen for example in the 'hipster'-culture: its members playfully use elements of the mainstream as cultural quotes. This can be either regarded as sophistication or interpreted as a sign of emptiness, as ironic and cynical (see Luvaas 2012). Another example is the Gothic scene: 'Goth seemed to take the trappings of Gothic literature and film and convert them into a symbolic form of resistance to a suburban Britain (and subsequently America, Australia and elsewhere) perceived as stupefying dull and small-minded' (Spooner 2004, 159). As many subcultures, the Gothics use symbols of rebellion, intending to shock (Tricia Young 1999, 79). When looking at gothic aesthetics the style seems to invert the typical ideal of beauty: Instead of having tanned skin, colourful dresses, and blonde hair, the gothic girl is probably pale, wears a black dress and has her hair dyed black (see Figure 5). Her make-up partially does

FIGURE 4. Meant as expression of authenticity: Iris Nicole presents a photograph that in contrast to her usual photographs shows her in a stern, nerdy, and rather unretouched way.

not accentuate her beauty but again uses a counter-aesthetic. Joshua Gunn cites one fan of the subculture: 'It's almost as if women in the Goth scene make a conscious decision to subvert the "traditional" image of beauty. Maybe subvert isn't the right term. Parody, maybe? Anyway, they take the blonde, blue-eyed, tan image so prevalent on *Baywatch* and offer a dark, shadowy version. I get the feeling that women in the Goth scene are painfully aware of beauty norms in Western culture' (Gunn 2007, 52).

However, be it the Gothic or the Hipster scene or the group of body-modification enthusiasts, what might have initially started as a form of irony or rebellion, often develops into an individual culture that establishes its own beauty standards. Being ugly, shocking, or 'perverted' for some is beautiful or rather desirable for others, thus is just another form of beauty within a scene and a means for the communication of identity.

Furthermore, the pictures associated with humour can be linked to social desirability as well: humour orientation is a desirable feature, being associated with lower levels of loneliness (see Wanzer, Booth-Butterfield, and Booth-Butterfield 1996) – even more, people 'with a good sense of humor received significantly higher ratings of attractiveness and suitability than did those with an average or no sense of humor' (see McGee and Shevlin 2010). Even if a humorous picture makes the person look unattractive, she is perceived as attractive by posting it.

6.4 Empowerment and Acceptance

Some ugly pictures are posted with the expectation to receive comforting feedback or notes of social acceptance. This can be done with various persons in mind to benefit from it: either it is just the individual

FIGURE 5. Model Felix Silvestris stands for a counter-cultural aesthetic. The tattoo 'meat' on her cheek can be regarded as an ironical statement. © Frank Mirgel.

FIGURE 6. A strange action, a photograph that seems to be taken in a sloppy way and a weird hairstyle: Instagramer Medusa's Child gives insights into her life, which is obviously unusual, but seems to be fun in her own terms. She thus communicates a self-chosen lifestyle.

him/herself*, but often such posts include groups of people sharing 'ugly' features in order to raise awareness. Therefore, social media are seen as a tool for empowerment (for a critical reflection of the term see Sastre 2016, 125 f.) – on the one hand by making people and their struggles visible, on the other hand by helping them to connect. A woman suffering from lipedema said that through her photographs, other affected people could see that they are not alone. This can lead to a formation of groups of people with similar traits and experiences, a group that gives support. For example, Marcus (2016) found out that members of fat acceptance groups identified with their community through hashtags related to positivity, while pro-

FIGURE 7. Instagramer 'getthetriplets' shows her post-pregnancy body and states, that she wants to be seen as a role model – obviously not just for her children, but also for others to be more acceptant of their bodies and more self-confident. The picture can be seen under the category of 'ugly awareness', eventually also 'ugly but happy'.

anorexics identified with their community through posts related to 'thinspiration.' Communication on the internet helps to be found by fellow-sufferers and supports the formation of groups relevant and supportive to the individuals. In my sample, there were photographs related to obesity, lipedema, scars/stretch marks, skin impurities, a physical disability and the physical changes through cancer treatment. However, the psychological effectiveness for the recipients concerned would need to be further analysed. Among people sharing an ugly feature this support and sense of community seems to be far greater than among people focussing merely on beauty: 'Among the beautiful, everyone just wants to be better, there is no friendship. Among people sharing particular features, this is different, we all have the same agenda: acceptance, support, happiness', as one of the interviewees put it. Ugliness, or at least ugly features that the people concerned are aware of, seem to create more bonds and social cohesion than beauty (see Figures 7 and 8).

6.5 Self-Love and Body Positivity

'Self-love' is a buzzword – the hashtag #selflove can be found in close to 43.2 million posts on Instagram (6/2020). 'This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their ownselves … – Timothy 3:1–2' – 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself' (second commandment): looking at quotes from the bible, self-love has a long tradition. Yet, it appears to be a relatively modern topic: 'Today I hear a great deal about self-image, self-love, self-esteem, and positive mental attitude – all variations on a theme and all topics rarely mentioned fifty years ago and virtually never discussed one hundred years ago' (Faulconer 1993, 2), writes James Faulconer in the 1990s from the point of view of a missionary.

What is self-love? There is a 'self-interest necessary for survival, one that is easily prone to overindulgence' (Makujina 1997, 211) which makes self-love an essential

FIGURE 8. Model Luciferia did not cover her scars in order to empower others to be true to themselves. © C. Weiner.

feature, yet there are situations in which humans, as well as animals, sacrifice themselves for others. Self-love as a fundamental force is found in writings all over the world from various disciplines (see Maharaj and April 2013, 120) and is associated with survival, enlightenment, growth, elevation, etc., but selfishness, narcissism, and egoism seem to be closeby; sometimes these terms are even used interchangeably and create confusion. Looking for a way to grasp the meaning of self-love, Maharaj and April identify Erich Fromm's psychology as a foundation. Fromm offers the 'most holistic theory of love' (122) in which he sees self-love as the deepest of all the currents driving man onward, upward and forward. Along with Abraham Maslow, Fromm acknowledges that the ability to love and the ability for self-love are necessarily connected – a fact that is supported by various empirical studies (see Maharaj and April 2013, 122). Thus, self-love is not selfishness or narcissism, which are often seen as a result of insecurity or a lack of genuine self-love. Self-love, therefore, should be a feature of every psychological healthy person.

Self-love posts in social media usually present pictures that show physical flaws. Self-love becomes a trait admired when seen in connection with imperfections, because it stands for independence: the person is self-confident enough not to let his/her* psychological well-

being depend on other people's perception and thus is linked to the earlier mentioned aspect of coolness. Frequently, self-love is also seen in the context of spiritual aspects, often associated with yoga and the personal growth it offers. Self-love should help to transcend the body, whether it is beautiful or ugly. To find rest and peace, instead of struggling for impossible perfection, is a fundamental goal in various religions and spiritualities. 'Self-transcendence is discussed as comprising two main elements. Transcending the ego; and enjoying a sense of connectedness to others' (Maharaj and April 2013, 124). Surprisingly, Christian spirituality is not much mentioned in the posts. However, it might be a powerful force due to the 'Western' cultural imprint. Eventually, Christianity discourages from focussing on looks, which matches its traditional critical attitude towards the body, seeing its pure form as 'a sign of shame, a reminder of original sin' (Blanshard 2011, 18).

7. CONCLUSION: LOOKING BEYOND

Being perceived as authentic and cool, ironically reflecting today's mainstream culture, fighting for empowerment and acceptance, and finally finding self-love – ugly pictures in social media seem to fulfil various purposes.

One implication of this study is a new evaluation of photography as a medium, 'as a tool to creatively render the felt self' (Sastre 2014, 941). From this perspective, photography is understood as a symbol rather than an index. As the link to spirituality already suggests, ugliness is also a way of transcending the pictorial medium, a way of looking beyond the picture. This is achieved by letting the picture stand for a concept, rather than for an individual and his/her* particular looks (see Jerrentrup 2018, 119). When looking at the photograph, the person does not primarily think 'this is me and certain features I have are ugly', but considers it as a symbol for authenticity, empowerment or self-love. Thus, the ugly picture can communicate a withdrawal of the ego and its vanity in favour of something more important, more complex and noble, a message which is more than just the beauty of the user. Ultimately, this does not only refer to ugly photos – every picture that consciously stages an idea or concept shifts the focus from the photographed person to this very message. On the one hand, the model, viewed as an actress, becomes exchangeable; on the other hand, she cannot be replaced, because, viewed as a communicator, she stands for this very idea or concept. This actually links rather to research on art therapy: in art therapy, ugliness can be acknowledged and re-interpreted as well (see Von Spreti 2005, 66).

Nevertheless, it is questionable whether a medium like Facebook or Instagram, which is designed for the fast consumption of photographs, is particularly suitable for conveying more intricate messages than just 'I want a "like"'. Similarly, it is questionable whether photographs of the own person and his/her* visual weaknesses will ultimately help to work on self-care (see Gorichanaz 2019b).

NOTES

[1] During the course of the three months the number varied a little.

[2] This study was conducted in German speaking countries, where the percentage of people of colour is very low, for example, there are less than 500 000 people of African descent (http://blog.afroclub.org/statistik-afrikaner-in-deutschland.htm).

[3] In this context, studies on physical disability are reminiscent: it has been stressed that not all people considered as 'disabled' by usual standards and legal acts perceive their state as disabling, but eventually resist the label or rather see society as the disabling force (see Heavey 2013).

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