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Displaying the Self through Moving Images.

Functions and Consequences of ‘Pretty Or Ugly’ YouTube Videos on Peer-Perception and Self-Identification

This paper deals with the recent YouTube-phenomenon of so called ‘pretty or ugly’-videos that started around 2010. It basically refers to the vast number of videos in which teenage girls and younger women display themselves in short, self-created videos requesting the anonymous YouTube community, respectively the actual viewer, to judge and comment on their looks by asking “Am I pretty or ugly?”.

A simple search for the terms ‘pretty or ugly’ or ‘Am I pretty or ugly’ lists between 85.000 and 240.000 videos – when you access YouTube in Switzerland – and even more than 500.000 videos when you access YouTube in the United States (see Perle 2014). The most popular of the original ‘pretty or ugly’-videos held over 4 million views and over 100.000 often harsh and insulting comments. At first, ‘pretty or ugly’-videos seem to be an American phenomenon, but similar German speaking searches still list between 2.500 and 60.000 results (similar German terms would be, for example, “hübsch oder hässlich” or “bin ich schön oder hässlich”).

While all these results include other related videos, for example make-up tutorials, two major impressions occur: first, the originators – respectively the female protagonists – in ‘pretty or ugly’-videos are getting younger and younger – some of them might not even be in high school; second, a large part of the comments are negative to the point of being abusive and threatening.

These two aspects are of great importance because ‘pretty or ugly’-videos are produced during a period in a teenager’s life when there is increased social visibility, peer bullying and a higher use of social media (see Banet-Weiser 2014: 88). Therefore I will focus

on the modes of self-presentation in 'pretty or ugly'-videos regarding negative and anonymous comments which are linked to gaining of self-esteem in the age of social media and subsequent visual trends.

Concerning the visual and the verbal ways of presentation, 'pretty or ugly'-videos follow resembling styles and patterns. Most of the teenage girls film themselves with either their webcam or their smartphone camera, which therefore creates ordinary amateur styles of self-presentation around the crucial question "Am I pretty or ugly?". These can be classified as follows:

1. Short videos, with at most 30 seconds duration, in which only variations of the question are asked:

– The question is mainly presented as a standardized catch phrase with the short request to just leave a comment

(For example: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MaEB3cRucOc>);

– Remarkably there are also shorter videos in which the person does not speak at all but only poses for the camera or the viewer, so the request to judge the girl's appearance is only given in reference to the title of the video

(For example: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g37rwZwF50w>);

– also sometimes with musical background (For example:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JDVjJJs62rs>);

2. Secondly, longer videos, lasting up to or over 5 minutes, in which the person also explains the circumstances of the creation of her video

– The teenage girls mainly legitimize their decision due to feedback on their looks already received from peers in offline contexts; But they mostly doubt this feedback which is why they turn to the YouTube community in order to confirm or dismiss it (For example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=en3m227qaGg>);

– A lot of these longer videos include slide shows of selfies that the person chose as a visual basis for the judgment of the anonymous audience – sometimes combined with a musical background and personal statements or explanations, for example if the person is wearing make-up or not;

Considering the overall aspect of self-branding in the digital age (see Banet-Weiser 2012), the pictures of such a slide show are clearly benefitting the girls' physique and fashionably style to pursue a broader and more advantageous impression on which they want to be judged on as pretty. In contrast, in short 'pretty or ugly'-videos, the teenage girls mainly present themselves in a casual, perhaps disadvantageous style, especially when they film their face in a poorly exposed close-up from below with a shaky camera.

Within the "context of neoliberal post-feminism" (Banet-Weiser 2014: 86) and girl culture, the phenomenon of 'pretty or ugly'-videos can basically be seen as a new form of an old practice within the economic market of self-esteem. American white middle-class girls – the so-called 'can-do girls' (vs. the 'at-risk girls') (see Harris 2004) – are under continued surveillance and judgment by their peers and educators. Also self-esteem is "a hot commodity with a whole industry that has been built around it." (Banet-Weiser 2014: 86). White middle-class girls are constant targets for moral panics, negative body images, and low self-esteem. Therefore, their body is in ever "need of therapeutic intervention, especially in terms of self-esteem" (Banet-Weiser 2014: 87).

Regarding economies of visibility and the construction of identities, the 'visible self' is continuously evaluated by mechanisms of social media. In case of the 'pretty or ugly'-videos by the comments and video responses of the anonymous and dispersed YouTube community.

On the one hand, the empowerment discourse of post-feminism (see Banet-Weiser 2014: 89) encourages the construction of the 'visual self' in 'pretty or ugly'-videos as the girls' route to self-esteem. On the other hand, they in fact lead to contrary perceptions. Peer users mainly see them as failure, while experts see them as part of regular teenage anxiety; and the female producers themselves see them as a way of gaining healthy self-esteem.

Overall, the actual performance of the lack of self-esteem in 'pretty or ugly'-videos and explicitly asking for feedback on their physical appearance is indeed the currency that the teenage girls have to exchange for self-esteem. Subsequently, the votes of the anonymous viewers can be seen as a validation "in a larger context of self-empowerment in digital space, in which girls are said to achieve self-esteem" (Banet-Weiser 2014: 91). Thus, the act of empowerment turns from local peer judgment – for example in high school – to an anonymous judgment on YouTube as a global social media site. This way, the girls turn their

body into the subject of a web of participation focusing on the girls' body as an agency that can or needs to be discussed and judged (see Banet-Weiser 2014: 95).

Besides the quantity of 'likes' and 'dislikes', on YouTube particularly the content of the comments is the main evidence to determine peer perception regarding the presentation of the 'visual self'. Concerning 'pretty or ugly'-videos a lot of comments are harsh, insulting, or even an evil threat encouraged by the anonymity of the YouTube community (see Lange 2007). Haters, spammers, flaggers, trolls and so on are a general issue on YouTube (see Strangelove 2010: 118ff), and this kind of feedback is considered to be a serious harm to the development of teenage girls' self-esteem and their self-identification. Comments that are referring to the actual request of rating the person in the 'pretty or ugly'-video can be categorized as follows:

1. One word and short confirmative or dismissive comments on the girl's appearance – short comments already hold a lot of abusive language;
2. Full sentences and longer comments that provide an explanation or detailed statements on
 - a) The person being beautiful, and that she should be self-confident and proud of her looks;
 - b) The person being too young, and that she should not turn to others and especially not to strangers online to gain self-confidence;
 - c) The person being someone who is simply seeking for attention, and that she should stop being selfish and stop using YouTube as a forum to solicit compliments;
 - d) Racist, sexist and violently abusive comments about the girl's body and her looks to the point of rape and murder.

In turn, these types of comments can be differed from general comments on the 'pretty or ugly'-phenomenon, loose or nonsense comments and response comments on comments by users other than the originator of the video.

Although there are indeed positive and flattering comments on the looks, the body and the attitude of the originator – most likely written by female users who might be about the same age – in particular malicious and abusive comments stand out.

The most interesting aspect is, that especially in longer comments a lot of users rate or describe the person as ugly, not because of her looks but because they take the video as a call

for attention by the female originator without making any further contribution to the YouTube community. Therefore, the vast number of morally concerned, negative, hateful and abusive comments are primarily aimed at the fact that these girls misuse the social network character of YouTube to achieve a numerically high feedback on the egocentric question “Am I pretty or ugly”. So, the actual look and appearance of the girls are marginalized in these comments. The unwanted attention seeking is reversely magnified as the female body and its attributes are converted into the primary target for haters to compensate their aversion against this way of trying to gain self-esteem. Ironically, mainly these comments are keeping the ‘pretty or ugly’-phenomenon alive, instead of just ignoring and not commenting on it – which again refers to the general issue of haters and spammers on YouTube.

Last year YouTube shut down the feature to create direct video responses, but a lot of users simply create regular videos in reference to a ‘pretty or ugly’-video. These video responses can be categorized into

1. Personal video responses, mainly created by other teenage girls or younger women, that are encouraging but at the same time exhorting because of the age of the girls and their decision to turn to the anonymous YouTube community;
2. General statements that are criticizing the phenomenon regarding social and ethical issues;
3. Fake videos, parodies and rather humorous mocking of ‘pretty or ugly’-videos.

The main assumption was that teenage girls create ‘pretty or ugly’-videos on YouTube to gain healthy self-esteem by requesting anonymous judgment on their body in order to sharpen and reassure their self-identification. But the exemplary analysis of follow-up communication in comments and video responses shows that

1. Almost none of the female originators create neither several nor continuous ‘pretty or ugly’-videos;
2. They do not create any video responses as a result to the feedback they received;
3. They do not comment on any of the user’s feedback and do not participate in emerging discussions about their presentation of their own ‘visual self’ and the risks of obtaining false impressions regarding their self-identification.

Therefore, an identifiable return channel to find out whether the follow-up communication in ‘pretty or ugly’-videos is benefitting or harming teenage girls’ self-

identification is missing. However, ‘pretty or ugly’-videos resemble the character of a test of courage that these girls have to pass by actually creating the video and deliberately facing judgment of an anonymous and not well-disposed YouTube community.

This would explain the lack of follow-up communication by the female originators. They already display their self-confidence by uploading a ‘pretty or ugly’-video – which then might also be viewed by their offline peers – and by enduring the following torrents of hatred.

It is assumed that the originators themselves are active YouTube-users who have enough media literacy to estimate the social media mechanisms of YouTube. But ‘pretty or ugly’-videos are definitely illustrating a sad and dangerous aspect of relocating the deliberate act of impression management into online contexts of all kinds of social media-based peer-perception. On YouTube, this can also be found in the related phenomenon of so-called “My bullying story”-videos, or generally in amateur singing or dancing videos.

The essential difference of ‘pretty or ugly’-videos compared to picture-based obtained peer-perception is, that moving images allow for a more detailed request and feedback on one’s impression management due to language and the displayed habitus.

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