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*On the beneficial visibility of female ugliness on social media.*

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In the current patriarchal Western world, beauty is the most valuable currency a woman can have. With the rise of popular culture and social media, specifically with the rise of social media influencers, the focus on the portrayals of female beauty have immensely increased. Female beauty has seemingly never mattered more. It has been proven repeatedly that the exposure to outwardly perfect female appearances negatively influences the self-esteem of young girls (Cohen 2; Fardouly and Vartanian; Holland and Tiggemann; Rodgers and Melioli). Although the prominent categories of ‘beautiful’ influencers have been extensively researched and (rightfully) critiqued, I wish to delve into the influence of those women who do not seem to actively use their appearance to influence – see Jenna Marbles, and Brittany Broski. This thesis therefore will explore the question “how can the visibility of female ugliness on social media be beneficial to social media influencers?”.

For clarity: when using the term ugliness in this text, I do not adhere any intrinsic value to this term, nor do I suggest that this ugliness is an inherent or permanent state of being. In this context, I use the word ugliness to refer to various states of not adhering to current hegemonic Western patriarchal ideas on what female-identifying or female-identified<sup>1</sup> people should look like. In the common tongue, this state is often referred to as ugliness, and thus I will use this term in exploring the concept and discovering whether this state of ‘ugliness’ can be used to one’s benefit.

The term social media influencer (or simply influencer) in this text refers to someone who is able to influence the opinions, purchasing behaviour, and/or actions of other people by posting to social media, and who makes a significant amount of income by doing so. The latter is important in this text because the financial aspect is a significant motivating factor that creates a need for successful content-creation and reception.

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<sup>1</sup> Female-identified or female-passing in this case refers to people that may not personally identify with the female gender but are identified by others as being female, and thus held to the female beauty standard.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to explore and determine if, and if so how, the depiction of female ‘ugliness’ on social can be beneficial for female social media influencers, several sub questions must first be answered. Female ‘ugliness’ here means the way in which women and girls purposefully depict themselves on social media in ways that are unflattering according to the current predominant ideas on female beauty. This can be by purposefully posting ‘ugly’ content of themselves, or by not taking their appearance in account as a factor in their content at all. It must be determined what is meant with ‘ugliness’, then specifically ‘female ugliness’. The influencing power of social media influencers must also be discussed.

Several sources are used, first those that help create a clear picture of the terms that will be used in the thesis. Rosenkranz et al.’s “Aesthetic of Ugliness” and Umberto Eco’s *On Ugliness* will be two of the secondary sources used to determine the definition of ugliness. Henceforth, the definition of *female* ugliness must be defined. This term lies on the opposite end of the seemingly binary scale of female beauty. In Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth*, societal and cultural effects of women’s beauty are explored in depth. Wolf defines the history of female beauty, and how it came to be the way we are used to seeing it now, as well as explains the power -as well as vulnerability- that comes with being perceived as ‘a beautiful woman’. This is important to know, because these are qualities appear to not be present in the ‘ugly woman’. Additionally, feminist literature on the topic of femininity such as Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* provides insight on the female experience.

One article consulted to research the effect of social media is Miller et al.’s “Does Social Media Make People Happier?” Additionally, Tarvin’s “YOU LOOK DISGUSTING” provides an insight into the visibility and effects of female ‘ugliness’ on social media, specifically on YouTube. White’s “Beauty as a political warfare” in *Women’s Studies*



*Quarterly* gives insights on the representation of female beauty on social media, as well as provide many specific examples of case studies. In “Self-branding, Hotness, and Girlhood in the Video Blogs of Jenna Marbles” Emma Maguire sheds light on an interesting case study relating to YouTuber Jenna Marbles, and argues that she has found a way around the way girls and women on the internet are both expected to be ‘hot’ and ‘beautiful’ but simultaneously punishes them for this. This provides a great starting point for a case study. Influencer Brittany Broski provides additional ways to handle the depiction of the image online. The social media accounts of these two influencers will be used as primary sources.

## METHODOLOGY

In the case studies, content made by the aforementioned influencers will be analysed in relation to their adherence or divergence from hegemonic beauty standards. As will be elaborately described in the following chapters, hegemonic Western beauty standards cannot be grasped in an all-encompassing list of features that one must either possess or lack. However, it is possible to determine a select list of features which *at this moment* are *generally* considered to be divergent and thus considered to be “ugly”. This text will discuss hegemonic Western female beauty standards since the influencers that will be discussed are from Northern America and have international but predominantly Western followers (SocialBlade).

These are the features that will be analysed in the case studies:

“Beautiful” features	“Ugly” features
Slenderness, curvy in “the right places” (curvy breasts and buttocks but flat stomach)	Prominent and “unflattering” displaying of fatness (such as double chins, belly rolls, ...)
Unblemished skin	Blemished skin, (dark circles, pimples, wounds, wrinkles...)

Makeup which compliments the face but is not immediately noticeable as makeup	Obvious lack of make-up OR “too obvious” wearing of makeup
Healthy, well-styled, clean hair	Undone, messy, greasy, grown-out hair
Fashionably, flattering outfits	Unstylish, unclean, non-matching, ill-fitting clothing
Prominent “feminine” features (curvy breasts and buttocks, difference in waist-hip ratio, delicate features, absence of body hair, ...)	Prominent “masculine” features (flat chest, equal hip-waist ratio, large forehead, thick browbones, square jaw, “excess” of body hair ...)
Symmetric features	Deformities or noticeable asymmetry

Logically, this is not an all-encompassing list, and some features may incidentally be perceived the other way around in specific circumstances. In these analyses, however, the desirability of these features will be put into context in order to avoid subjectivity as much as possible.

The case studies will be a qualitative research analysing the content of these influencers, examining the way they negotiate hegemonic female beauty standards in the way they depict themselves online, and the way this can affect their online success.

## CH. 1 DEFINING FEMALE BEAUTY & UGLINESS

Before defining ugliness, we must define beauty, as these concepts appear to be situated on opposite ends of the same spectrum. Although specific judgements on beauty and ugliness vary across time and culture, it is generally accepted that beauty equals good, and ugliness equals bad. This is true for all beauty, relating to both inanimate object and human subject, and to all genders. Beauty fits in the list of positive characteristics, and the presence of beauty indicates the presence of *more* positive traits: a beautiful apple is more likely to be bought than an ugly looking one, because the customer believes it will also taste better.

As Umberto Eco states in his book *On Ugliness*, “attributions of beauty or ugliness are often due not to aesthetic but to socio-political criteria” (12). This will prove important later on in this chapter; whereas beauty may on the surface be easiest to describe by an aesthetic standard that one may or may not be able to adhere to, the underlying causes for these (visual) standards as well as their consequences are always intertwined with current politics, rather than with aesthetics. Additionally, definitions of manifestations of beauty and ugliness vary across cultures – for example, some European people may find African ritualistic artifacts scary or ugly, but these may simultaneously be perceived as beautiful and divine to an African person, and the other way around, non-Christian people may be frightened by the bloody image of Jesus nailed to a cross while Christians may see this as beautiful (Eco 10).

This text will primarily deal with hegemonic Eurocentric<sup>2</sup> beauty standards and how these are manifested in Western Europe and Northern America. Eurocentric beauty ideals have a strong hold on all Westernized cultures, even throughout Africa, South America and

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<sup>2</sup> “Eurocentrism is defined by a viewpoint where European culture is looked upon favorably and biased against non-western civilizations. Western beauty ideals include being thin and tall, having long hair, having light/tanned skin, having big breasts, large eyes, a small nose, and high cheekbones” (Chen et al 1; McKay et al 1)

Asia where the overall standard, fashion and cultural values may differ, Eurocentric features such as tall and thin bodies, light or lightly tanned skin, light coloured eyes, small noses, high cheekbones and large breasts are still favoured in women (Chen et al 2-10). Current Eurocentric beauty standards, as will be discussed in this text, are influenced tremendously by- and are in place in order to perpetuate patriarchal capitalism. Female beauty standards especially are upheld so anxiously because patriarchal capitalism is inherently dependent on the suppressing, making insecure, and consequent underpayment of women (Wolf 49). This will be discussed later on in this chapter.

The inherent value that is put on female beauty specifically is something that cannot be ignored: conventionally beautiful women are generally seen as kinder, more successful, and get better chances in life. In a way, the same is true for men, but the difference is that men are able to compensate for their lack of beauty with other feats – and that the *male premium* in most cases is still favoured over the *beauty premium* when women are concerned (Andreoni and Petrie 90). In an experiment into what they call the beauty- and gender premiums done by Andreoni and Petrie, people that were rated as attractive<sup>3</sup> earned twelve percent more than people that were deemed unattractive (89). In this experiment, 140 photos of female and male subjects were shown and rated on scales of 1-9 on both attractiveness and helpfulness by a group of economics and business students from the University of Wisconsin. These photos were then shown to different subjects, who in a linear public goods game got to attribute tokens representing money to the expected quality of work of the people that were shown (Andreoni and Petrie 76-77). The experiment revealed that attractive people were deemed kinder and more helpful. This was especially true for women: men benefitted more from their proven experiences than from their appearance, and in these cases, men were

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<sup>3</sup> The article that describes this experiment uses the terms *beauty* and *attractiveness* intermitted and makes no distinction between them. The term *attractiveness* can therefore be read as *beautiful* in this case.

always favoured over women. This experiment shows that unattractive women are the bottom of the barrel; they do not benefit from the beauty premium, nor from the male premium, and are not able to compensate their lack of physical attractiveness with their proven experiences (Andreoni and Petrie 89).

*The Beauty Myth.* In 1990, Naomi Wolf introduced the concept of the “beauty myth”, a myth that determines the value of women in a patriarchal society based on their beauty. Wolf uses Roland Barthes’ definition of cultural myths, namely that they give natural justifications to historical intentions, thereby making it appear as if contingency is universal (Barthes 129).

Wolf introduces the beauty myth as follows:

“The beauty myth tells a story: The quality called “beauty” objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it. This embodiment is an imperative for women and not for men, which situation is necessary and natural because it is biological, sexual, and evolutionary: Strong men battle for beautiful women, and beautiful women are more reproductively successful. Women’s beauty must correlate to their fertility, and since this system is based on sexual selection it is inevitable and changeless.

None of this is true.” (Wolf 12)

Wolf continues to explain that there is no factual or scientific evidence that backs up the ideas on which the beauty myth is built. Although predominant ideas on (female) beauty

reign the Western world as well as many other parts of it,<sup>4</sup> there simultaneously are non-Western cultures in which men are the ones that are expected to be beautiful or to perform beauty (Wolf 6).<sup>5</sup> Additionally, although some classically ‘beautiful’ qualities may have *some* relation with fertility, even Charles Darwin was not convinced of his own theory that beauty is a result of sexual selection (Wolf 12; Russett 84). Moreover, the generally predominant ideas on female beauty often have more to do with submissiveness than with fertility, as will be addressed later on in this chapter. Wolf thus says that it was the Industrial Revolution, with its accompanying new technologies of mechanised/rotary printing and photography allowing for wide distribution of images of how women “should look”, that gave one of the first pushes for creating the current Western beauty myth (14-15). Additionally, capitalism profits off women’s suppression through the beauty myth. Prior to this, physical beauty in the average woman was not a true indication of her value, not even in dating and marriage. This is not to say that physical attraction played no role in romantic relationships, but the average woman’s (cultural) value lay in her labour, economic status, physical strength, youthfulness, virginity, and fertility (Wolf 14). This lack of value in physical appearance can be explained by the absence of an image culture: before the Industrial Revolution the average woman was not exposed to many images of other people/women outside of the church, let alone to images that were edited to display a perfect or exemplified image of how a woman should look and images of women whose specific role it was to maintain a perfect appearance such as (fashion) models and (porn) stars (Wolf 14).

Although the Industrial Revolution sent off the *current* manifestation of the beauty myth, as long as there has been patriarchy, there has been *a* beauty myth for women. The

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<sup>4</sup> Eurocentric beauty ideals are to an extent also prevalent in primarily non-Western cultures. For example, in many Asian cultures Eurocentric features such as light skin, thin noses and tall slender bodies are seen as the beauty standard too.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., the Wodaabe tribe in Nigeria where women hold economic power and men are expected to dress up to be judged by the women, and until recently the matriarchal Mosuo society in China (Wolf 6).

myth itself changes along with the predominant ideas on female beauty (Wolf 14). Wolf argues that “the beauty myth is always actually prescribing behaviour, and not appearance” and that the competition amongst women has been encouraged by the myth in order to create division amongst women, which in turn aids in upholding the patriarchy as it makes women feel closer to their oppressors (men) than to women in other minority groups<sup>6</sup> (Wolf 14; Beauvoir 9). Female beauty, thus, is a myth turned into a political weapon which has little to nothing to do with physical attractiveness in its core – despite appearing to prescribe mostly physical standards - it is a concept that enables the superior position of the dominant group under patriarchal capitalism. For example, through racist beauty standards, it creates division amongst women of different ethnicities, thereby enabling the dominant group (white men<sup>7</sup>) to force different groups of women to contribute to, for instance, their wealth. This historically happens through several ways, such as plantation labour, but also through childbirth and the domestic care tasks that are generally attributed to women instead of men. Moreover, the beauty myth proclaims that women must choose between beauty or brains: intelligence is seen as a male trait, and a woman with male traits is seen as ugly. The beauty myth is not about women or beauty, but rather about patriarchal institutions and institutional power (Wolf 13).

As mentioned earlier, many features that are deemed desirable under the beauty myth are signifiers of female submissiveness rather than aesthetic preferences or signifiers of sexuality. This manifests itself in various ways, most notably in female diet culture. Wolf says that the beauty myth partially replaced the physical pain that historically<sup>8</sup> came with being female. She says that being female has historically always come with pain like

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<sup>6</sup> E.g., white women feel closer to white men, whom they usually live closely with, than they feel to black women, and rich women feel closer to rich men than to poor women, etcetera (Beauvoir 9).

<sup>7</sup> This is an example; the groups vary in different scenarios. Generally, whiteness and masculinity are the most dominant privileges under Western patriarchal capitalism.

<sup>8</sup> Historically meaning, the pain was unavoidable before the invention of medical sedatives or safer/less painful medical procedures (Wolf 218).

childbirth, abortion, and menstruation (Wolf 218). As medical science advanced, the pain that came with being female subsided, and disappeared even more so when women entered the workforce and gained more ownership over their bodies as they were less dependent on sex for survival. According to Susan Bordo, the time and effort women put into adjusting their bodies to fit the beauty standard turns them into “docile bodies” (166). Dieting, as an example, is not only about control, pain, and making oneself physically take up as little space as possible, but it also makes one physically weak(er). Calorie deficit consumes energy that could be spent experimenting, evolving, or doing disobedient things that are considered unfeminine (Wolf 216). Adhering to the beauty standard can thus make women as a group submissive and cooperative: they believe they have to be skinny, and thus spend energy on adjusting instead of breaking out of the beauty myth or defying other sexist myths.

This suppression through the beauty myth not only ensures men are able to keep the overall political, social, and economic power, but also ensures that the Western capitalist economy remains able to profit off billion-dollar industries concerning dieting, cosmetics, cosmetic surgery, and pornography (Wolf 11). The latter means that on a personal level, some women are profiting off of the suppression of their own gender – this explains why patriarchy is so strong, because even the suppressed can win some, therefore making the suppressed cooperate with the suppressors.

*Defining the female beauty standard.* So, what *exactly* is the current Western female beauty standard? “While defined as materially existing, the female standard itself has never been defined” (Wolf 33). One of the reasons that the female beauty standard has never been precisely defined is because the standard is continuously evolving and changing. Another reason is that the predominant standard applies differently to women of different ethnicities, races, classes, and ableness as expectations differ among races and cultures, and as some women hold inherent privilege over others. For example, whereas tan skin may presently be



viewed as a beautiful feature for white women, women of colour are still discriminated against precisely because of their darker skin. It is thus impossible to create a universal all-encompassing standard of beautiful traits. This fits with the visible narrative of beauty that we can see change and evolve in front of our very eyes: where the height of female beauty in the nineties appeared to be extremely thin and often blonde women with thinly epilated eyebrows, nowadays curvy figures with flat bellies, thick(er) eyebrows, and lightly tanned skin seem to be favoured.

The core of the standard, however, always entails the same three factors. First of all, the ideal female appearance has never represented the appearance of the majority of women. Secondly, all women who are able to adhere to the ideal standard can only do so through spending much time, money and effort on it. Thirdly, anyone who falls outside of the desired standard is scrutinized by both men and women and characterized in a negative way, concerning not only their physique but also their personality, abilities and qualities (Forbes et al 265). We can conclude from this that no women fit the beauty standard effortlessly. According to the beauty ideals, women must always be trying to fit within a shape that appears to be natural but is not. They must try extremely hard but never let the effort be visible, since beauty is only valuable if it appears natural and effortless. Consuming and submitting appear to be two core values of the female beauty standard – this proves that the beauty myth is not sexual but rather political: the beauty myth creates a low self-esteem in women, which -through a plethora of ways<sup>9</sup>- results in high economic profits (Wolf 49).

*Female ugliness.* Having defined female beauty and its expectations, it can be concluded that female ugliness is then either its opposite, or simply the absence of beautiful features. This is

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<sup>9</sup> E.g., by making women feel insecure and creating a false *need* for cosmetics, the capitalist system benefits from the cosmetics industry.

not an exact science: if blonde is the momentary ideal beauty standard, this does not mean that all brunettes are inherently perceived as ugly. Additionally, favoured features may vary amongst cultural and social groups, location and generation.

When googling the phrase ‘ugly female influencers’ the majority of articles that come up are highlighting very beautiful women who in one way or another divert from the beauty standard but adhere to it in the majority of their features. All of them appear to actively perform beauty by keeping up with fashion and make-up trends, too. One of the women pictured in the article “International Women's Day: 8 Female influencers who are defying Instagram's beauty standards” – which is the first article showing up when googling the phrase “ugly female influencers”- has a large wine stain covering her cheek but adheres to beauty standards in all other aspects of her physique: she is tall, slim, fashionable and has a symmetrical face.

The terms *displaying ugliness* and *performing ugliness* will be used to refer to the act of making oneself visible in a state of ugliness. In the case of this paper, the act of *performing ugliness* describes the purposeful publishing of unflattering images of oneself, such as selfies taken from an unconventional angle that shows one’s double chin, large forehead, or highlighting one’s undesirable features in an extreme, perhaps sometimes comical manner. The capturing of a moment that appears unflattering can be purposeful or accidental, but the posting and therefore presenting of ugliness is always purposeful (at least in the cases that are relevant here). The second way of showing ugliness, that I will refer to as *displaying ugliness*, refers to a less purposeful state of being, namely the displaying of oneself in an ‘ugly’ state that is not actively ugly but rather passive – it is the absence of beauty that is visible here, by for example not putting on makeup or covering up physical ‘flaws’ such as acne or greasy hair, that would be regarded as undesirable by the predominant beauty standard. This way of showing ugliness calls less attention to the ugliness itself.

## CH. 2 VISIBILITY OF FEMALE UGLINESS

*Female ugliness through time.* Whereas many -if not most- women attempt to adhere to the beauty standard to a certain extent (e.g., most or some moments they will make an active effort), there have also always been women who actively refuse to do this. This chapter will explore several ways in which female ugliness is and has been visible, both through stereotypes and active reclamation.

The “Ugly Feminist” is a well-known stereotype. The stereotype ranges from minor ‘ugly’ features (such as the stereotype that all feminists have long armpit hair) to exaggerated depictions of repulsively ugly women which aided the formation of negative stereotypes.

In the 1960’s, the media took to spreading the vital lie that was necessary to keep the beauty myth alive. This was achieved by spreading overly negative narratives, especially against the physical appearance of the female leaders of the women’s movement. Feminists were described as “a bunch . . . of ugly women screaming at each other on television” by *Commentary* and prominent female leaders of the feminist movement were criticized as being either really ugly or “looking better than expected” when met in real life, which still reinforced the idea that feminists/female leaders must be predominantly ugly, or in the least, that physical appearance is one way or another tied inherently to female power and influence. These negative descriptions of the feminist movement stole away attention from the actual message these feminists were trying to spread: by focussing instead on their physical features, these women could be judged and consequently dismissed as being either *too beautiful* or *too ugly* to achieve anything with their activism. If they were too pretty, they could not be taken seriously and/or posed a threat to other women, and if they were too ugly, other women would want to avoid identifying with the feminist cause because they may be seen as equally ugly for sharing the same agenda (Wolf 68). This negative public portrayal is interesting, because this media response once more proves the mythical quality of the beauty myth: as

said by Ann Oakley myths of origin “tends to be worked hardest in times of social strain, when the state of affairs portrayed in the myth are called into question” (Oakley 163). The feminist movement fighting for equal rights – especially financially and in the workforce – posed a threat to the patriarchal capitalist system, and thus, the tool of the beauty myth was reinforced in order to keep a tight rein on women (Wolf 69).

In the last few years, the ugly feminist stereotype seems to have died down in many circles - even to the point of feminism now being hip and saleable<sup>10</sup> - but even today, many feminists purposefully claim “ugly” features for activist reasons (e.g., brightly coloured hair, short hair or bald heads, not shaving their body hair, not wearing a bra, etc). Although they may not use the descriptor “ugly” for its negative connotation, these features that challenge the standard can be seen as “ugly” in that they diverge from hegemonic ideas on female beauty. The features may indeed be interpreted as attractive or beautiful, but stay vulnerable to the outside world, where they remain signifiers of the “ugly feminist” stereotype and may frequently be pointed out as negative<sup>11</sup>. Reappropriation of “ugly” features as “beautiful” is nonetheless visibility of the features we have predefined as “ugly” under hegemonic Western beauty standards. This reclamation of ugly features overlaps with the ideologies of the Body Positive Movement.

*Body Positivity.* Another fairly recent movement which gives platform to ‘ugly’ features is the Body Positive Movement. Founded by black women of colour, the Body Positive Movement’s initial aim was the acceptance of fat female bodies, but it’s aim is to challenge hegemonic beauty standards and create space for acceptance and respect for all bodies

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<sup>10</sup> Resulting in feminism as well as inclusivity and diversity becoming selling points for businesses, resulting in overloads of performative activism.

<sup>11</sup> This is especially visible on the internet, where women or non-binary people when speaking on subjects such as feminism will often be verbally attacked by opposers, with features such as unnatural hair colors or short hair often as the target of the attack.

(Cohen 2; Sastre). The movement originated and is most active on Instagram (Cohen 2).

Although not explicitly excluding males, the Body Positive Movement seems to be most alive amongst women, non-binary and (gender)queer people. The Body Positive Movement has also endured a fair bit of negative critique, however, because by claiming certain “ugly” and undesirable physical (female) traits and reappropriating them as positive and beautiful traits, some parts of the movement still motivate and perpetuate the idea that women must always be beautiful in order to feel empowered – thus perpetuating the (internalized) male gaze despite their own non-sexualized intents. Although the intentions of the movement reject the notion that they must fulfil the desires of the male gaze, in practice, the way they depict themselves and the way they assign value to ‘ugly’ features still fits within the male gaze (Mulvey). The Body Positive Movement thus attempts to create space for women to feel empowered about their appearance within the patriarchal capitalist system, yet it does not attempt to change the system in which the default setting for women is to be insecure so that profit can be made off their insecurity (Wolf 56; Cohen et al 3). Additionally, the Body Positive Movement has been critiqued to only be adding a new pressure on women, namely that they now have to actively love their body, which consequently only makes them feel worse about themselves if they do not manage to do so (Cohen et al 3). Content wise, the Body Positivity Movement has also been critiqued for the sexualized poses and imagery that is used in order to spread their message. In a content analysis of body-positive Instagram posts, done by Cohen et al in 2019, it was found that 32% of the visuals contained bodies depicted in no- or extremely revealing clothing, and that 34% of the images featured objectifying, sexually suggestive poses which favoured the body over personhood by leaving out the subjects’ faces (3).

*Body Neutrality.* All of the movements mentioned before, however, are very consciously involved with either changing, maintaining, or defending their physical appearance. The

concept of Body Neutrality handles this differently. Instead of attempting to change the definition of which features are deemed beautiful in society, as the body Positivity Movement does, Body Neutrality attempts to change the value which society places on (women's) physical appearances (Cohen et al 4).

However, it cannot be denied that even a person entirely changes their mindset on female beauty and truly regards it as a neutral factor, that the aforementioned consequences of (absence of) beauty still apply socially, even to them, as long as there is no immense systemic change to both the patriarchal as well as capitalist aspects of Western society. Body Neutrality may thus be effective on a personal level, but as is described in *The Beauty Myth*, no woman in society can truly escape the consequences of the beauty myth.

## CH. 3 SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCE(RS)

*How Influencers Influence.* Along with the rise of social media has risen the amount of critique on its effects on people, especially on those who are young and female. The birth of image culture has come with an overload of visuals and descriptors of “the perfect life” which, in many cases, includes the “perfect body”. Social media influencers are often blamed for portraying unrealistic standards of life and body and are criticized heavily for the one-sided and inaccurate portrayal of their lives.

Merriam Webster dictionaries defines the term influencer as “. . . a person who is able to generate interest in something (such as a consumer product) by posting about it on social media”. This text will define social media influencer (hereafter also simply ‘influencer’) as a person who posts content on one or multiple social media platforms and earns a significant amount of income by doing so, through partner programmes or corporate sponsorship that desire to gain access to this person’s audience. The monetary aspect is import in this research, because it is a significant motivating factor that creates a need to post content that will be well or widely<sup>12</sup> received.

In this text, the influencers that are discussed in depth are ones whose content can be described as automedial (Maguire 73; Kennedy and Maguire 2). Automedial texts are shaped by the networks of production and consumption in which they circulate and are texts which document, construct, and present the self. This means they contract meaning whilst contextualized among other texts presented by the self, as well as by -in the case of social media influencers- their reception and interaction with the audience. The self in automedial texts is formed through a process of mediation, rather than interpreted as one whole “pre-

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<sup>12</sup> Generally, the desire is for content to be received well, however in some instances content that is truly disliked can also be profitable, because it is widely shared.

existing subject” (Maguire 74). In this way, it differs from autobiographical work in classic forms such as literary texts or fine arts, since they are ever developing.

The content of the influencers that this text refers to is based on their life and personality, and whilst some of them may create fictional narratives such as sketches occasionally, these narratives exist within the text of their self-branding and automedial social media content, in which the main focus always remains on the “real” person behind the account. For example, although a certain amount of curating will always be involved in the creation of any online persona, Mourey appears to base Jenna Marbles on her own authentic personality. Mourey thus ‘writes’ her own automedial narrative by continuous posting and adding to the existing content relating to her persona.

*Success and Influence.* Success on social media is measured through likes, follows, views, and shares, which for the influencer usually translates into money – for example through advertising through the YouTube Partner program or through corporate sponsorship (Maguire 75). When an influencer posts content that can be read as automedia, this thus means the influencer needs to craft a personality that is saleable, which for women, as can be concluded from the information gathered in the previous chapters, means there is a need to adhere to hegemonic beauty standards.

Inherent to the position of social media influencer is the ability to guide the purchasing behaviour and lifestyle of their audience, usually by making the audience desire to be like the influencer. The influencer thus has an exemplary position and leads a life that the audience desires to emulate. In this way, the influencer can promote products or services to their (often large) audiences and boost sales. Their influence does not stop at advertising capitalist ventures. Especially in automedial texts, the influencer shows so much of their life that the promoted sales (if any) do not dominate the context, lest the influencer becomes



ingenuine. They may take daily pictures of their breakfast smoothie bowl and in that way promote a brand of coconut yoghurt, but at the same time, they can emanate the message that breakfast is important, and (consciously or not) influence their audience to eat breakfast. They may cut their fruit in a specific way and influence the audience to try that technique, or they may use a word or phrase often, and their audience may end up copying this.

This means, that purposefully or not, the influencer can also influence opinions, habits, and ideologies. In the context of gender and beauty, this means that the influencer's approach to hegemonic beauty standards can affect that of their audience.

Simultaneously, whilst divergence from beauty standards may seem like a disadvantage for the female influencer, in the next chapter the possibilities of empowerment that come with this divergence will be explored.

## CH. 4 CASE STUDIES

In order to examine the effect that the aforementioned ‘female ugliness’ can have, two successful American female influencers will be analysed. Both are prominent online figures: they have more than seven million followers and a diverse base of followers from all over the world. The platforms which will feature in this analysis are YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. These have been selected because they are currently the most commonly used image based public social media platforms in Northern America and Europe.

Both women are successful influencers that, as will be explained later, built their success on an authentic and relatable-appearing persona. Their content is comedic but genuine in nature. They differ, however, in their approach to comedy, their privileges, and their physical looks. Despite the difference in their own current age (23 & 34), their main audiences are female teens and young adults (SocialBlade).

The content of these influencers can be read as automedia; they post comedic content relating almost entirely to their personalities and personal lives and that their bodies are nearly always visible in their own content. Their content continually evolves as long as they keep adding to their internet oeuvre, and their texts exist within intertextual contexts and interact with their audience. They both negotiate hegemonic female beauty standards in their content, either on or below the surface.

Number of followers as collected on 27 May 2021:

	@jennamarbles	@brittany_broski @lostmymarblesagain
TikTok followers	876.700*	6.200.000 1.700.000
Instagram followers	6.200.000	807.000
YouTube subscribers	20.100.000**	897.000
Years active	2010 - 2020	2019 - present

\*Jenna Marbles has never posted any content to TikTok but has an account which she uses to follow other accounts. Her content analysis will thus apply only on her Instagram and YouTube content.

\*\*This number is as measured on 27 May 2021, almost a year after she had publicly declared quitting the Internet professionally and not posting for 11 months.

*Case Study 1 – Jenna Marbles.* Jenna Mourey, professionally known as Jenna Marbles, started creating YouTube videos in 2010. She is currently the 160<sup>th</sup> most popular YouTube creator with well over 20 million subscribers (data collected 27 May 2021), despite having been inactive for eleven months, which usually leads to a significant decrease in subscribers (SocialBlade). Rating 160<sup>th</sup> may not sound exceptionally high, but Mourey once was the 4<sup>th</sup> most subscribed to YouTuber, the number one female YouTuber, and she is considered a key figure in the YouTube landscape (SocialBlade). In the last few years, many new channels have been created, causing her ratings to drop, but she has never lost a significant number of subscribers (Socialblade). Mourey mostly created comedy videos and sketches, many of which negotiated the topics of (female) beauty, gender, and ugliness to varying degrees.

Mourey's first success was "How to Trick People into Thinking You're Good Looking", a parody beauty video. It received 5,3 million views within the first week (O'Leary). In the video, Jenna gradually turns herself from a "nerdy" "sporty" girl into a heavily made up "sexy" girl whilst giving satiric commentary on the process of 'becoming good looking'. Maguire proposes that Mourey has developed a way to get around the contradictory hegemonic system of beauty standards that requires women to perform beauty

in order to be accepted, yet also punishes them for it (73).<sup>13</sup> In other words, Maguire claims that Mourey has found a way to benefit off “beauty” *and* “ugliness” simultaneously, without becoming stuck in either category.

In her videos, Mourey shows both an interest and a disregard for beauty. For example, she has often proclaimed admiration for beauty YouTubers. Additionally, Mourey uploaded many videos in which she undertook projects regarding her own appearance: trying out styled makeup looks in “Giving Myself an E-Girl Makeover” and cutting her own hair in “Trimming My Own Hair”. Simultaneously, many of these videos are chaotic and prove Mourey is usually unskilled at the cosmetic makeovers she attempts. Moreover, many of the beauty-related projects she takes on are unconventional and risk making her divert from the hegemonic beauty standard, like when she shaves off her eyebrows in “Shaving My Eyebrows”. The absence of eyebrows can be read as a (temporary) deformity of her face, thus an “ugly” feature.

Yet, it is imperative to mention that Mourey has several significant privileges. She is white, middle-class, college educated and from the USA. Additionally, she is thin, able-bodied, and repeatedly described as conventionally attractive (Maguire 75-76). She fits the Eurocentric beauty standard with features such as slenderness, lightly tanned skin, blue eyes, a small nose and high cheekbones (Chen et al 2-10). Although she may appear on camera looking pale, non-made up or strangely dresses at times, when she puts in the effort, she represents Western hegemonic beauty (Tarvin 56). Mourey has a master’s degree in psychology and has previously worked as a go-go dancer – the latter putting her in a position in which she is heavily confronted with the necessity of adhering to the female beauty

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<sup>13</sup> Maguire uses the term “hotness” to mean “fuckable and/or saleable”, which comes down to adhering to hegemonic patriarchal beauty standards as has been explained previously.

standard. It is this privilege, that Maguire argues puts Mourey in the position to successfully move in and out of the position of the ‘hot girl’.

By being able to pass as a conventionally attractive young women by most standards, Mourey is able to attract new viewers through -for example- her YouTube thumbnails, and by portraying that she *is* at times precisely as beautiful as society expects her to be (for instance on her Instagram<sup>14</sup>), her moments of ugliness are judged less definitively. Jenna appears as the beautiful girl playing ugly: although she portrays herself as possessing “ugly” features occasionally, she compensates by adhering to hegemonic beauty standards at other times. By moving in and out of beauty and ugliness, Mourey is able to reap the benefits of both sides of the coin, without being permanently affected by their disadvantages.

Her negotiation between beauty and ugliness is not limited to the videos which directly deal with beauty or gender. In the videos in which she vlogs her daily life, the viewer is confronted with the duality of Jenna at one time looking ‘beautiful’ (clean, straightened hair, make-up, fashionable clothing), and in the next ‘ugly’ (undone hair, no makeup, unfashionable outfits and glasses). This for example happens in the video “Meet Bunny Our Rescue Greyhound”, where she at 0:50 appears adhering to the beauty standard by wearing make-up (figure 3) yet in the next scene at 13:10 looks tired, not made-up and is filmed from an unflattering angle (figure 4). In “What Happened To My Fishies Video” Mourey appears non-made-up, with messy hair and relatively unfashionable glasses and clothing throughout the whole video – in the video she apologizes for unknowingly mistreating her pet fish, and her divergence from beauty in this case can help her appear more genuine (figure 5).

Mourey seems able to profit from her ‘ugliness’: by depicting herself as being able to move in and out of beauty and ugliness, she shows her audience several things. First, she

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<sup>14</sup> In her last 100 Instagram posts, Mourey is not depicted 30 times, depicted in active or passive “ugly” states ten times, and depicted looking “beautiful” 60 times. This was measured alongside the characteristics defined in the table under the “methodology” section. Data collected 10 June 2021. See figures 1-2.

shows her (young female) audience that appearing ‘ugly’ one moment does not mean you cannot be (perceived as) beautiful the next. This can be reassuring to her female audience. Secondly, this ephemeral aspect of beauty and ugliness gives viewers an insight into Mourey’s life that seems more authentic than most, because most influencers depict themselves only when looking ‘beautiful’. This increased authenticity likely helps viewers to feel close to Jenna Marbles, and binds them to her as a loyal audience. Third, the depiction of ‘ugliness’ without any emphasis or judgement may carry with it some essence of Body Neutrality, that can feel reassuring to the viewers. Mourey or her friends never make any negative remarks about her appearance, even when she looks ‘ugly’. This neutral attitude towards her appearance also helps create a body neutral atmosphere that adds to the likable energy around Mourey’s persona.

Mourey appears to depict herself as “beautiful” most of the time on Instagram, and whenever she does depict any ugliness, it usually falls under the passive *displaying* of ugliness. Her displays of ugliness appear to most of the time be a by-product of her comedy (but not the main element of comedy) or the way she wants to depict herself. Mourey’s ability to move in and out of beauty and ugliness is rooted in her natural adherence to the Eurocentric beauty standard: her most permanent features fit the standard (e.g., being thin, having a conventionally attractive face structure, etc), from where she can diverge into momentary ugliness. Interestingly, almost all of her YouTube video’s start with an intro containing her name and a picture of her dressed scarcely, despite her *never* depicting herself in that manner in her videos in a non-parodic manner (figure 6). The inclusion of this depiction of herself suggests Mourey may be acutely aware of her privilege of being able to move in and out of ugliness and beauty. Even when appearing “ugly” throughout a whole video, she is depicted as adhering to hegemonic beauty standards at the start of it, putting her position in perspective.

From her negotiations across YouTube and Instagram, it seems that Mourey has indeed found a beneficial balance in between beauty and ugliness that aids her in her Internet success, although she most likely still suffers the negative consequences of both as well.



*Figure 1 Jenna performing beauty, adhering to beauty standards by displaying herself with make-up on, in a flattering well-lit pose.*

Marbles, Jenna [@jennamarbles]. "Today I stole . . ." Instagram post, 6 December 2016.  
<https://www.instagram.com/p/BNqLuqCA1zw/>  
 Accessed 10 June 2021.



*Figure 2 Jenna displaying ugliness by showing herself without make-up, undone hair, displaying herself from an unflattering (but not necessarily obviously comedic) angle and displaying blemished skin.*

Marbles, Jenna [@jennamarbles]. "Sorry for never posting . . ." Instagram post, 9 February 2019.  
<https://www.instagram.com/p/Btpbisglxzc/>  
 Accessed 10 June 2021.



Figure 1 Marbles, Jenna. "Meet Bunny Our Rescue Greyhound" Youtube, 25 April 2019.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nA1QKpKuSd4&t=281s> (0:50)



Figure 2 Marbles, Jenna. "Meet Bunny Our Rescue Greyhound" YouTube, 25 April 2019.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nA1QKpKuSd4&t=281s> (13:10)





Figure 3 Marbles, Jenna. "What Happened To My Fishies Video" YouTube, 17 November 2017. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFwMTG6T\\_PI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFwMTG6T_PI) (0:01)



Figure 4 Screenshot of Intro of Jenna Marbles' YouTube Videos – Extreme adherence to hegemonic female beauty standard.

## CASE STUDY 2 – BRITTANY BROSKI

Brittany Tomlinson, known as Brittany Broski, acquired a following after a clip of her trying kombucha went viral and became a popular meme (figure 7). Brittany posts frequently and candidly on Instagram and TikTok; her videos are quickly filmed and sparsely edited<sup>15</sup>. Having risen to fame as a meme herself, Tomlinson shows an understanding of viral- and meme content. She plays into current trends and memes and frequently publicly shows her (extreme) fanaticism for celebrities. It can be said that her way of posting resembles that of a non-famous person – most of her content appears to be candid, unedited and uncured<sup>16</sup>. This aids her in creating the bond she wishes to create with the audience, whom she greets as “friends”. She appears to be on the same level as her followers, who she frequently interacts with (Burnet).

Unlike Jenna Marbles, Brittany has less effortless aesthetic privilege. Although commentors frequently say to perceive her as beautiful, she is also perceived as a fat woman with a naturally less conventionally attractive appearance. Nonetheless, Brittany has affinity for make-up and fashion, and shows both sides of herself publicly with no difference in value.

On her private TikTok account (@lostmymarblesagain) she shares candid and intimate content, which is often comedic but also often genuine and thoughtful. Brittany often depicts herself extremely casually, for example lying in bed, wearing pyjamas and no makeup, or fresh out of the shower with a towel wrapped around her hair. In these videos she frequently films herself from below, with her face filling the vertically oriented screen in a fashion that is generally considered unflattering due to emphasis on its roundness, double

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<sup>15</sup> Her YouTube content is heavier edited, but still encompasses the intimate and genuine atmosphere of the rest of her content.

<sup>16</sup> In her latest 100 Instagram posts, Brittany is not depicted 35 times (these posts are nearly all memes), depicted looking “beautiful” 35 times, and depicted as “ugly” 25 times. This was measured alongside the characteristics defined in the table under the “methodology” section. Data collected on 10 June 2021. Also see figure 7-8-9.

chin and large forehead (figure 8 & 11). In this way, she frequently actively performs ugliness for comedic effect or to make herself appear relatable and more approachable – as to not be a threat to other women like the beauty myth naturally prescribes. At other times (although considerably less often) she posts herself adhering to the beauty standard. The division between depicting herself as “beautiful” or “ugly” is about the same on all three of the platforms she uses.

Like Jenna Marbles, Brittany seems to employ ugliness as a way of appearing approachable, relatable and authentic, but less like Jenna, Brittany seems to purposefully employ meme-like imagery in the way she depicts herself. This achieves comic intent, which also aids in making her persona more likable. Moreover, Tomlinson addresses the topic of beauty in a more activist way: she has said to want to be an example for others in regard to impossible social media beauty standards. “If I can be that voice: ‘You’re fine the way you look, the way you are. Like what you want to like. You’ll find your friends.’ That’s what I needed. It’s very full circle” (Igoe). The sincere way she speaks on this topic helps her come across as more authentic (Burnet).

Despite depicting herself actively diverging from the beauty standard, Brittany also candidly shares her desires to fit within the standard: she asks for beauty tips, that she wants to get extensions and lose weight, and admits that she desires male validation for her appearance despite being aware of the beauty myth. This public struggle negotiating between beauty and ugliness is relatable to her female audience and makes her appear authentic.

To conclude, Tomlinson shows the negotiation between beauty and ugliness more purposefully than Mourey does, by frequently performing ugliness and actively speaking on the subject. She seems to be able to enjoy the same benefits as Mourey, apart from the way Mourey was able to use her aesthetic privilege to attract viewers through the thumbnails of her first videos. Tomlinson, however, used the meme-like quality that her momentary

ugliness can serve to attract followers, which proves that ephemeral ugliness can also serve as a way to gain genuine followers.

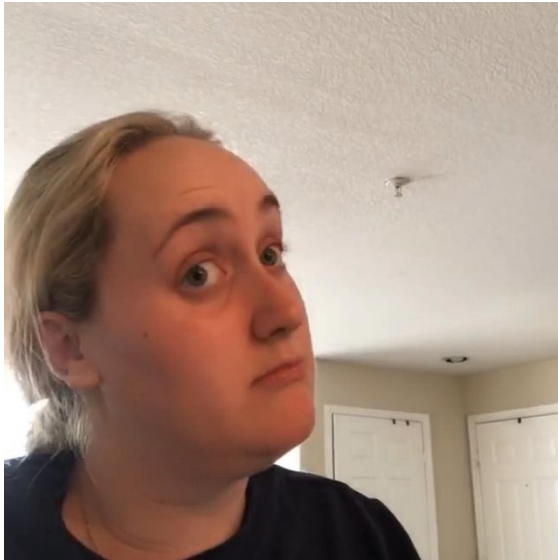


Figure 7 Broski, Brittany  
[[@brittany\\_broski](#)]. "Me Trying Kombucha for the First Time." TikTok, 8 July 2019, [https://www.tiktok.com/@brittany\\_broski/video/6722234609188310277?is\\_copy\\_url=1&is\\_from\\_webapp=v1](https://www.tiktok.com/@brittany_broski/video/6722234609188310277?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1). Accessed 27 May 2021.



Figure 8 Broski, Brittany  
[[@brittany\\_broski](#)]. "just checking in" Instagram post, 4 March 2021. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CMAmwo5lMzC/> Accessed 10 June 2021.



Figure 9 Broski, Brittany  
[[@brittany\\_broski](#)]. "Twiggy" Instagram post, 25 October 2019. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B4CDkS9lXgJ/> Accessed 10 June 2021.

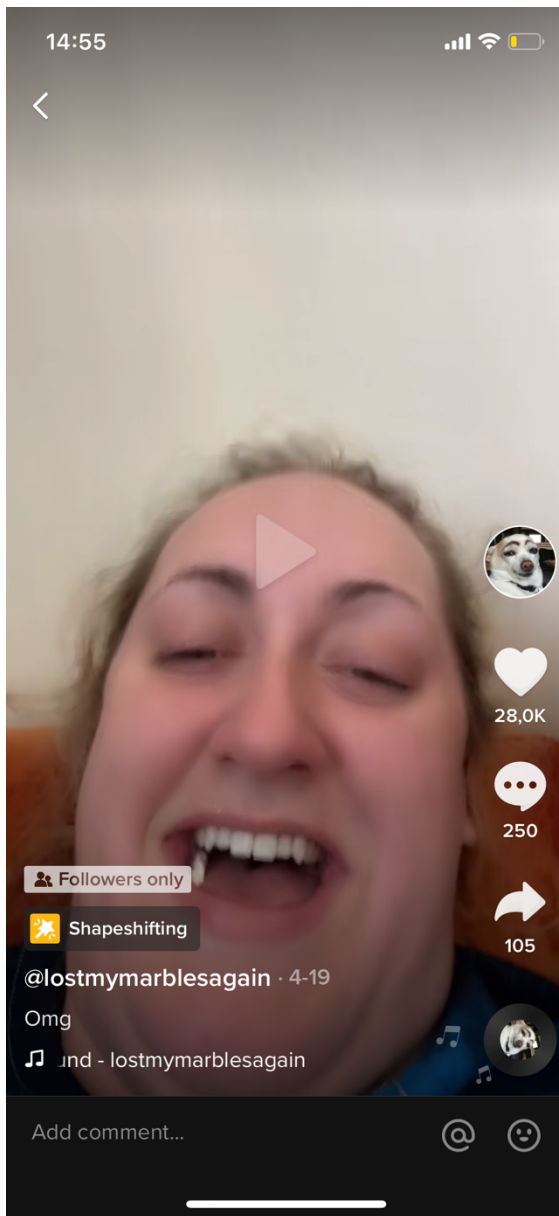


Figure 10 Broski, Brittany  
[@lostmymarblesagain]. "omg" TikTok  
post, 19 April 2021.

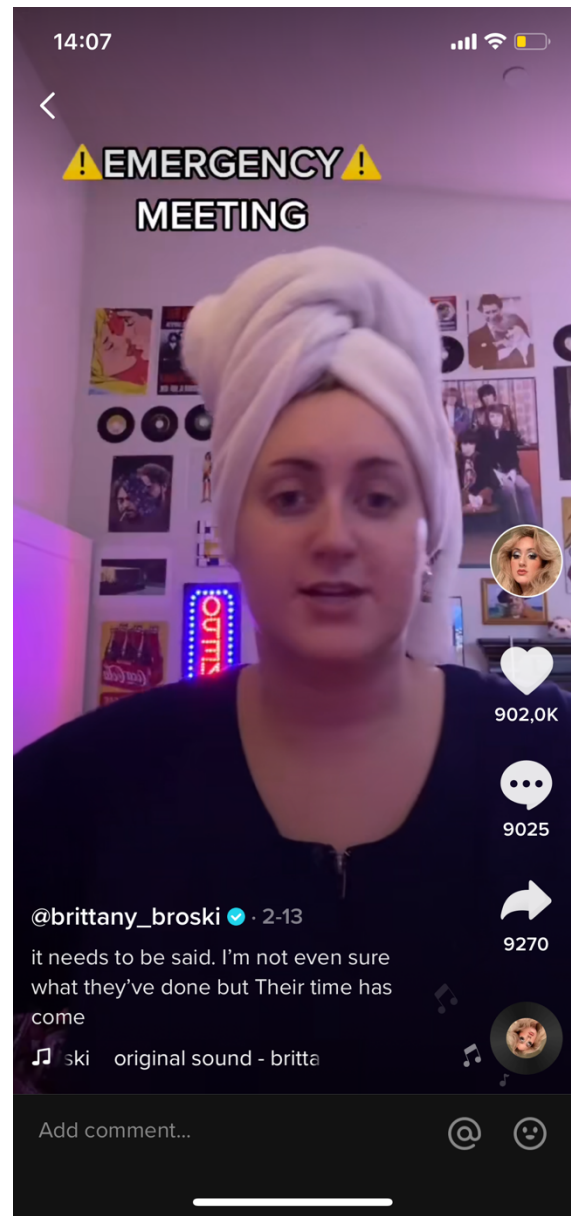


Figure 11 Broski, Brittany  
[@brittany\_broski]. "it needs to be said"  
TikTok post, 13 February 2021.



## CONCLUSION

In summary, female ugliness can be defined as the state of not adhering to hegemonic beauty standards. The presence of these hegemonic beauty standards can be attributed to capitalist and patriarchal hegemony: both can thrive due to the oppression of women. Hegemonic Eurocentric beauty standards benefit “beautiful” women and significantly disadvantage those who cannot or will not live up to the standards. The absence of female beauty cannot be compensated and remains a lack even when the person in question has significant other talents, as opposed to the lack of male beauty which in most cases can be compensated by intelligence, wit, or other positive traits.

From the information collected in this paper, it can indeed be concluded that the displaying and performing of female ugliness in certain cases benefits the female influencer – it can make them appear less intimidating thus more approachable and relatable to other women, allowing for the building of a loyal female fanbase. Additionally, moving in and out of the states of adherence and divergence from hegemonic beauty standards allows the influencer to benefit from the privileges that come with female beauty, yet avoid some of the disadvantages such as being taken less seriously, or being perceived as competition or intimidating.

Yet, the performing and displaying of ugliness must still be compensated – in these texts the ugliness is always temporary and compensated by adherence to hegemonic female beauty standards in other moments. Jenna Marbles and Brittany Broski compensate these ephemeral displays of ugliness either with humour or by posting content that conforms to the beauty standard.

From the case studies of Brittany Broski and Jenna Marbles, we can conclude that the deliberate depicting of female ugliness, controlled by the creator herself, helps to make the

influencer appear more approachable, authentic, and relatable, therefore aiding in building a tighter bond between female creator and female audience.

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