

Bye, Bye Norms, Hello Empowerment!

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Norms and stereotypes play a delimiting role yet can be found everywhere. Even in the realm of digital self-presentation. When people who break the norms gain visibility, what effect does this have? An insightful look at the discussion on self-enactment and empowerment.



Selfies can be regarded as an act of empowerment. Hengameh Yaghoobifarah sees them as a possible way of bolstering self-confidence and showing that bodies are only turned into a problem from the outside. Image: Hengameh Yaghoobifarah (@habibitus), selfie in the restaurant corridor, Instagram post, 11 January 2019 © Hengameh Yaghoobifarah

‘See and be seen’ is a motto that has become increasingly important in the digital age. Countless images circulate on the internet day in day out and it is almost impossible to imagine everyday life without social media like Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat. Some 94 per cent of teenagers in Switzerland are registered on at least one social networking service: Instagram is the frontrunner here with 81 per cent of twelve- to nineteen-year-olds having created a profile.[1] The platform’s billion users make it one of the world’s most popular social media sites.[2] We use images to help create our digital presence. At the same time, other people’s pictures have a conscious or unconscious influence on us. How can rigid ideas be challenged and questioned? Do social norms and our digital self-presentation have a reciprocal effect on each another?

WHAT ABOUT ONLINE NORMS?

Norms act as unwritten laws and rules, conditioning individual behaviour and determining what is generally understood to be customary and accepted. They thus establish the social frame that is used to create a narrow definition of the idea of ‘normality’. In this way, norms manufacture hierarchies by producing ratings along a scale of value from ‘good’ to ‘bad’ and from ‘beautiful’ to ‘ugly’.[3] They stipulate what bodies are considered worth emulating, what dress style is considered beautiful and what behaviours are perceived as ‘typical’. Norms can help people find orientation, while at the same time imposing constraints. They influence stereotypes and produce generalised images of certain (groups of) people, which take on a social valuation as clichés.

Our digital enactment on social platforms is also an expression of our ideas of gender. One scientific study has shown that young people present themselves on social media in a way

that is extremely conformist in gender terms: young women, for example, tend to adopt a 'model pose', while young men tend to go for a 'thinker pose'.^[4] The study, however, proceeds on the basis of a 'natural' two-gender system, i.e. it does not take into account other gender identities, such as trans or non-binary – people who cannot locate themselves in a system reduced to just two genders, male and female. As a result, it is only a partial analysis of society. It is evident that binary gender stereotypes – notions, that is, of what is 'typically male' or 'typically female' – are still very influential in society. The images reflect an established idea of gender in which these are the only two options that exist. However, this assumption does not line up with the scientific findings or with the many people's reality, which is far more multifaceted.



Society's sense of the ideal in terms of nose shape, body hair and skin colour has evolved over time. In her work, artist Moshtari Hilal addresses the colonial and racist legacy informing today's beauty norms and develops positive self-images, here working together with Yumna al-Arashi. Image: Moshtari Hilal, from the series *A Tribute to Black Hair*, 2019.

Our upbringing in society and the external influences that act on us lead us to internalise norms. We learn that our fellow human beings react negatively to any violations of the norm, as do institutions and people in positions of power. These disruptions call existing ideas into question, scramble our expectations and destabilise our sense of self. Unconventional clothing can provoke indignant or pejorative looks. Bodies that veer away from current ideals of beauty may encounter negative responses in the form of hate posts or threats. These kinds of dismissive and disapproving reactions are meant to safeguard existing norms by regulating people's behaviour. They can be seen as violent attempts at social control.

The media promotes idealised images that we are perpetually trying to emulate at an (un)conscious level. In a society obsessed with being slimmer, sportier, healthier, sexier and more beautiful, these ideals are constantly moving further away from us. The process of striving to achieve them can never reach a conclusion. The goal is seemingly unattainable, and we go round and round in a vicious circle. The economy profits from this, because the norms in our minds that remain forever out of reach are commercialised as bestselling products. Take beauty, for example, and the norms and standards we apply to it: more and more parts of the body are obliged to submit to new ideals that encroach on increasingly intimate areas: from labial reduction^[5] to optimisation of the thigh gap.^[6] These norms are often linked with racist, sexist and ableist (involving the disadvantaging of people with disabilities) ideas.^[7] Accordingly, Black people's hair must measure up to a white norm that defines 'beautiful' hair texture.^[8] By the same token, harmful skin-lightening creams are marketed with the promise of 'better' skin, while underarm and leg hair is only socially accepted for some bodies and some body parts, and en-abled bodies are declared the norm.



In her photo series *The Refutation of "Good" Hair*, artist Nakeya Brown shows how beauty codes rooted in white norms have shaped the public perception of Black women's hair texture. European ideals of straight hair are debunked as an unpleasant constraint by the disconcerting gesture of eating. At the same time, the women's different hairstyles evince empowering images of Black femininity. Image: Nakeya Brown, *Hair Portrait #3*, from the series *The Refutation of "Good" Hair*, Archival Inject Print, 19 x 19 inch, 2012 © Nakeya Brown

Many people share pictures of themselves on social media on an almost daily basis as a form of communication or self-enactment. Here, selfies and other photographs are typically geared to what is considered customary – that is, towards established norms. Familiar ideas or ideals are visually emulated. The sharing of images gives greater visibility to these ideas so that clichés and stereotypes are routinely reproduced and anchored. Seeing these images of supposedly 'perfect' lives and measuring ourselves against them puts us under pressure. Scientists conjecture that there is a connection between the growing use of social media and the increasing incidence of psychological suffering and suicidal thoughts among young people.[9]

Digital self-presentation may boost self-confidence and provide social acknowledgement, but it also makes us vulnerable. We cannot always control how people react to the pictures we post. Online insults and attempts at intimidation are an increasing problem. Digital forms of violence like cyberbullying and hate speech can have grave consequences.

DISTORTED REALITY – THE PEOPLE MADE INVISIBLE BY NORMS

Many people do not feel represented by idealised mainstream images. The overwhelming majority of advertising models, film and television actors and online influencers are *white*, en-abled (i.e. physically and mentally 'healthy' in social normative terms), heterosexual and cisgender (i.e. their gender identity corresponds with their assigned birth sex). Same-sex couples are an absolute rarity in advertising. And in Switzerland's cultural and educational institutions the representation of almost half the country's population – those with a migrant background[10] – is all but non-existent.[11] One-sided, stereotypical and exclusionary depictions of people are carried forward from an early age, in the pages of children's books and classroom texts.[12]

When people can only see themselves through the eyes of those who reject them, the effect of this is far-reaching. A lack of role models and meagre options for positive identification

contribute to the perpetuation of negative stereotypes and stop people from recognising themselves in the images propagated by society.[13] It is obvious why pictures that contravene the norm are so important. For now, images reflecting the diversity of society are few and far between. As a result, individuals and movements use digital means to stand up for the visibility of bodies and lives whose existence has hitherto been marginalised.



Double standards? Julian Gavino's (right) Instagram post points out that as a trans man, he is met with massive resistance for wearing femme clothes – in stark contrast to Harry Styles (left), a cis male *white* singer, who received plaudits for doing the same thing. Nonetheless, it was queer people, especially Black trans and trans People of Colour, who flouted gendered fashion norms, paving the way for images like these. Image: Julian Gavino (@thedisabledhippie), Instagram post, 21 November 2020. Photo Harry Styles: Tyler Mitchell, December 2020, *Vogue*, <https://www.vogue.com/article/harry-styles-cover-december-2020>

BODY POSITIVITY: AN END TO SELF-OPTIMISATION

The Instagram account and associated hashtag *#effyourbeautystandards* exemplify an online movement that calls on people to post pictures of themselves in which they feel beautiful, even if their bodies don't conform to conventional ideas of beauty. These include almost five million posts that speak of self-love and empowerment. You can see images of bodies, nudity, tight clothing, scars and stretch marks. The model Tess Holiday created the hashtag because she was fed up with being dictated to and told what kinds of clothes were and were not 'appropriate' for her body.

The body positivity movement is critical of the narrow boundaries limiting which bodies are described as beautiful. The movement is set on breaking through these boundaries and giving positive recognition to bodies of all kinds. Author Lydia Meyer sees this as more than a trend or a 'feel-good movement', because 'in a society that is set up to make you hate your body, [it is] almost a revolutionary act to like yourself the way you are.' [14] The hashtag *#bodyneutrality* is not so much about having an entirely positive attitude towards your own body as about accepting it per se in the first place. The idea of 'body neutrality' is a counterweight to the pressure people feel to be constantly positive about their own body image.[15]

Recently, it has been pointed out in various quarters that diet culture and fatphobia have their roots in racism – something that these movements have not yet put sufficient focus on. Since the Renaissance, *white* Europeans have developed ideals of beauty that upvalue slim *white* women and devalue fat Black women, who are benchmarked against them. The trade with enslaved people gave rise to racist scientific approaches that associated being fat with negative ideas like 'laziness and ease'. [16] In this way, *white* people made the pursuit of a slender figure a means to secure a superior social position. Instagram users like Alok Vaid-

Menon show that an awareness of history is required if we are to have any understanding of the origins of the norms and ideals that have a bearing on different aspects of our personality.[17]



Brandy Butler is, among other things, a musician, performer and activist. In her solo performance *Avoirdupois* she examines the extent to which people feel themselves to be socially categorised on the basis of their weight.[18] This Instagram post, with its comment 'Space is the place. I am over Earth', evokes Afrofuturist, diasporic science fiction with its new presentations of Black people. Using hashtags like *#blackutopia*, *#bigbeautifulblackgirls*, *#fatfemme*, *#effyourbeautystandards*, *#honormycurves*, *#blackvisibility* and *#blackgirlmagic*, Butler connects these perspectives with her own. Image: Brandy Butler, Instagram post, 15 July 2020 © Brandy Butler

SELFIES AND EMPOWERMENT – DO THEY GO TOGETHER?

Can images serve as an antithesis to established ideals and stand as a gesture of self-empowerment? What happens when new pictures start circulating that show people who are a long way away from unattainable ideals? Political theorist Jodi Dean assumes that selfies have nothing to do with narcissism or selfishness but are rather a collective form of imitative image production. What does this mean for alternative images? Does it imply that they can change dominant ideas within society?

Selfies and other photographs make it possible for a range of different bodies and expressive forms to be shown in an autonomous context and given visibility as role models via social media. Here, journalist Hengameh Yaghoobifarah speaks of 'selfie empowerment'[19], because this form of self-presentation creates visibility and can be a means of expressing personal resistance to norms. Empowerment can be regarded as a process that enables disadvantaged or socially excluded people to (re)gain individual autonomy and the self-authority to pursue their interests.[20] The idea is to bring to awareness a sense of one's own abilities and strengths.[21] A selfie can also boost one's own feeling of self-worth and bring it home to others: 'The days of being obliterated and kept out of sight are...over. And we won't let them return...We are here to stay and we're unapologetic.'[22] A selfie can be a form of protest and contain a political message. Pictures are an important factor in personal development, because they help you to set yourself apart and live out your own personal mode of expression. Filters are a popular ingredient in online self-enactment: their various functions enable people to play with clichés or break with norms.



"Who says you need boys to make a BOYBAND?!", says Jovana Hitz, who is part of Switzerland's queer *Ballroom Community*. Appearing under the name Jo DyKing, she* performs queer drag at events and challenges the binary social norms used to depict gender. Image: Dejana Gfeller, model: Drag Performer Jo DyKing, 2020 © Jovana Hitz / Jo DyKing

Self-presentation that questions gender norms and rejects any unambiguous ascription expands our repertoire of images reflecting society. Hashtags like *#nonbinary* or *#queer* are attached to millions of posts – selfies, memes, infographics – for and by people who do not allow themselves to be narrowed and contained by the binary gender system. At the same time, the outspokenness of online self-presentation carries certain risks with it. Selfies offer a target for digital violence to latch on to: this can lead to exclusion and a withdrawal from the public space online. Hate comments, cyberbullying and hate crimes are directed, in particular, against women, Women of Colour, Black women and the LGBTQIA community. [23] This is a clear indication that subversive images have not yet been accepted by society as a whole. This means that it is that much more important for people to act responsibly on the internet. For in spite of the hate, social media has some important potentials: self-portraits that buck the norm represent an effective gesture that critiques established ideals of beauty and gender stereotypes. Social platforms offer a space where you can connect with a community that you may not have available to you in everyday life. The contact with others and their encouragement and feedback can help you to reclassify the things you experience and question your own habitual ways of seeing.

Given the effectiveness of norms and the potential they contain for social sanctions, this autonomous form of (semi-)public self-presentation can be an out-and-out resistant practice. Posting on social media allows personal expression to receive positive reinforcement and negative experiences to be shared with other people's support and solidarity. Posting a selfie communicates the right to an autonomous existence and allows an individual to take control of their own narrative.[24]

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