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"INSTAGRAM FACE": DECONSTRUCTING THE SEEMINGLY UTOPIAN AND IDEALIZED IMAGE OF WOMEN PROMOTED BY SOCIAL MEDIA

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to significant changes in society's daily functioning, transforming the way we work, study and participate in social events. Amongst its many consequences and repercussions, there is one that is seemingly harmless and described as a mere distraction—our constantly growing use of smartphones and social media. According to an article in *The New York Times*, Facebook saw a nearly 30% increase in daily use time amidst the pandemic, while for Instagram the figure has grown by 14% (Koeze and Popper). This means that, on average, users of these apps spend about 30 more minutes a day browsing social media. During these difficult times, social media have proven to be both a tool for social interaction and building a community in times of crisis, as well as, according to the latest research data, a useful source of healthcare information, providing a space for medical experts to upload publications on the virus and create guidelines. It has also given healthcare professionals an opportunity to practice crowdsource peer reviews of the latest discoveries about the virus (Wong et al.). However, these events have brought to the general public's attention not only the advantages, but also disadvantages of long hours spent on social networking sites. In this paper, I focus on the problems arising from prolonged use of social media, specifically on how exposure to various content affects the daily lives and behaviors of its users. Furthermore, I analyze social media's influence on women and, using the example of the Instagram app, demonstrate that it not only negatively

influences women's perception of themselves, but also creates the norm of femininity, outlining what is accepted and admired within a society and what is rejected, thrown outside the frames of normativity. This article sets out to deconstruct the model of perfect womanhood proposed by social media and analyze the effects of the popularity of this utopian image.

Commodification and Consumer Culture in Social Media

Before proceeding to the analysis of social media's ideal model of womanhood, it is necessary to first propose a theoretical framework that would let one describe the mechanisms behind social media's immense role in creating the existing norms. For the sake of this paper, it should be clearly stated that social media relies on encouraging the public to participate in the reproduction of consumer culture and underlines the role of the beauty cult in contemporary culture.

Social media plays a significant role in creating desire, thereby making its users particularly susceptible to struggling for a unified, specific appearance that rejects any differences and does not leave any space for diversity. Mike Featherstone describes the creation of desire as one of the most important aspects of consumer culture in his "The body in consumer culture" (1991). Featherstone presents obsession with beauty, youth and bodily preservation as one of the key features of capitalist society. The scholar distinguishes between the outer and inner body and argues that "the outer body refers to appearance as well as the movement and control of the body within social space" (171). In the case of feminist studies, it is a statement that is strongly linked to the issue of women's public appearance—its constant judgment and comparison against the existing set of norms.

Following that trope, the body in late capitalist society is treated as a commodity and becomes a product itself. Featherstone mentions the exchange-value of a body: the closer it is to the ideal—the younger, healthier and more conventionally beautiful it is—the higher its value on the market as it is more

desirable and more suitable to be an object to be consumed by the voyeur (177). Accordingly, people in late capitalist society either contribute or wish to contribute to the duplication of a certain image—a body that does not age, does not show any signs of tiredness and is always ready and eager to be an object of desire.

Social media is closely linked with consumerist culture. In *Consuming Life* (2007), Zygmunt Bauman states that "in a society of consumers, [...] human bonds tend to lead through and be mediated by the markets for consumer goods" (82). This is clearly visible in the relationship between social media users and creators of its content. Users form a specific type of bond with creators, treating them as leaders who can show them the most important and interesting "trends," following which allows them to be seen as up to date. The creators, therefore, can use this specific bond in order to promote products, increasing their sales. The choice of these products is often dictated by personal interests, such as creator's "market bond" with a company or their relationship with its owners. Bauman also describes a *consumerist syndrome* which consists in valuing novelty over longevity—this aspect is visible on many social media profiles as every day customers are encouraged to make new purchases (86). Clothes, home goods and electronic devices are not supposed to last long; rather, they are supposed to be quickly disposed of and exchanged for a new product, propelling the capitalist market for which the number of produced goods and the profit from selling them is more significant than their quality and usefulness.

In addition to creating a demand for goods and inciting its users to spend more money through establishing a bond between them and content creators, social media uses one more significant tool, enabling its normative and controlling function in society: the beauty cult. In the introduction to *Consuming Life*, Bauman describes the process through which consumers start to become similar to products themselves, trying to be as attractive to others as possible; accordingly, capitalism not only teaches consumers that they need to buy

certain products in order to be placed within certain social norms, but it also turns the consumers themselves into a product—one that ought to be attractive to their relatives, employers and, finally, to other members of the society (12). Social media's objective is to promote a vision of an individual who does not age and who is flawless and always ready to consume in order to become an improved, better version of themselves. Instagram is one of the apps that put perfect appearance in the centre of users' attention and present a huge amount of content focused on women's bodies and the ways of perfecting them in order to fit into the Western canon of beauty.

The Definition of Instagram Face

"Instagram face" is a phrase coined by Jia Tolentino in "The Age of Instagram Face," published in *The New Yorker* on December 12, 2019. The author describes the "cyborgian face" with high cheekbones, flawless skin and catlike eyes as a phenomenon that is spread across the Instagram app and that is supposed to present the image of a perfect woman promoted by social media. She mentions that the human face has become an object of constant improvements and corrections and is being continuously manipulated by the use of, for example, social media filters. Tolentino pays attention to how social media and reality TV have created endless possibilities to "regard one's personal identity as a potential source of profit" and highlights how this mode of thinking is being applied especially to women as they are encouraged to treat their bodies in a similar manner.

The phrase coined by the author can be used to discuss a wider phenomenon visible on social media: circulation of a single type of face, behaviour and identity that is regarded as acceptable and desirable. However, it is necessary to mention that the desire to possess an "Instagram face" comes to life through the app continuously presenting particular images to its users, manipulating them with numbers of likes and views. In order to better

understand this process, it is crucial to introduce the most important principles according to which Instagram chooses its content for users.

The first principle is user's interests: depending on the content that is searched for by the user, Instagram will suggest more similar accounts. The next one is recency: the app's goal is to make the user check Instagram as often as possible: if a user does not pay sufficient attention to the app, it will send them notifications and reminders about new posts from the people they follow. Then, Instagram remembers the user's interactions with other accounts and on the basis of their activity, it constantly suggests new people to follow, trying to fit into the user's interests. The app's algorithm always tries to make the user stay on it longer; therefore, it keeps constantly moderating its content (DiMico).

All these factors have to be kept in mind when discussing the fact that content is not only adjusted to users' interests, but also their age, gender and personal relationships. Thus, an average woman in her 20s will have a different Instagram feed than a man her age, the content being adjusted on the basis of what her friends and relatives may be viewing. The more often a specific kind of content appears on the app, the more frequently it will appear on an individual's feed simply because of the many links between accounts and the content that is shared on them. This, therefore, explains why the phenomenon of "Instagram face" received so much attention and spread unbearably fast—first promoted by accounts with millions of followers, it was then picked up by thousands of other users. Step by step, this led to the emergence of a particular, seemingly utopian image of womanhood promoted by the app whose description will be the focus of the next section.

Deconstructing the Ideal—How Does Social Media Impact Reality?

The perfect woman of Instagram is one that is able to remain perfect, regardless of the situation that she finds herself in. Every posted image is supposed to capture their effortless, yet perfectly exercised attractiveness and, most importantly, happiness. The woman is often accompanied by a man, in

order to underline her ability to not only reach personal success, but also find the perfect partner, proving that she is widely appreciated and her womanhood is conventionally accepted. Examples of celebrities promoting this specific kind of image of a successful woman accompanied by "her man" are the American singer and songwriter Beyoncé, frequently posting pictures of herself and her husband in expensive clothes and exclusive interiors, or the British fashion designer and singer Victoria Beckham.

What is important is that the perfect woman of Instagram is obviously a heterosexual one: her value and desirability are shown through her attractiveness for men as well as through functioning in roles traditionally assigned to women in society—the role of the mother and wife. The perfect mother on Instagram is pictured during various activities connected to daily life, be it a walk with their children or feeding or preparing children's birthday parties, but the most significant requirements are always the same: to look attractive and happy. The previously mentioned Victoria Beckham is known for posting pictures of her whole family together on various occasions—Christmas, birthdays, family reunions. In each of the photos, all members of the family must be smiling, dressed elegantly and in a state of seemingly complete happiness.

Figure 1. A post from @beyonce on Instagram

Another example of a "celebrity mum," presenting the picture of a "perfect life" on Instagram, is an Italian blogger Chiara Ferragni who, with almost 26 million followers on Instagram, describes herself as "Leo and Vitto's mama and digital entrepreneur Boss baby." Ferragni posts pictures from almost every event, from family trips to intimate moments spent at home with her husband and children. Motherhood and marriage are frequently on display on Instagram, meant to present a neoliberal, postfeminist fantasy of a woman who is able to be not only a perfect wife and mother—she is also able to make money on it, be it from her own fashion brand or from makeup products. The perfect mothers of Instagram propel the beauty business by advertising certain items, giving the users an image of perfection that is supposedly within their reach thanks to the use of special products.

Figure 2. A post from @chiaraferragni on Instagram

Another aspect of the "ideal" Instagram woman that should be mentioned and that is strongly visible across the platform is the question of body fitness and its accordance with the current canon promoted by the app's most followed users such as Kim Kardashian (276 million followers) or Kylie Jenner (292 million followers). The famous body image promoted by both of them, characterized by a small waist and disproportionately wide hips, has led to the emergence of a

new standard, that contrasts with the previous "skinny" ideal. Both sisters are known for their pictures in tight costumes to emphasize the shape of their bodies.

Instagram's "perfect body type" is actually more than one. Apart from the Kardashian-Jenner family, there is an endless amount of "fitness influencers" who convince their followers that all one has to do to have a conventionally attractive body is to follow a certain fitness regime and buy products promoted on their accounts. An example would be Pamela Reif, a German fitness trainer, who puts her videos on YouTube for free. On her account, there are series of images presenting the perfectly exercised body in different clothes and situations; whether in a famous world tourist destination or at home, near her Christmas tree, the influencer presents her followers with a body shape that is perfect according to the Western canon, achieved through posing in a certain way or wearing special clothes meant to highlight and moderate the body shape.

The aspects of perfect womanhood promoted on Instagram all fall under the category of the perfect woman as created by the patriarchal society—one whose biggest interest and obligation is to be desired and accepted, fully immersed in the role of a wife and mother, but simultaneously successful, making a lot of money (one of the most important goals of late capitalist society that supposedly makes one a worthy, fulfilled person) and keeping her body and appearance in a flawless, non-aging condition. However, most importantly, the woman of Instagram must present an image of being unbelievably happy, living in a state of "utopian motherhood" where she does not become tired and is always ready to be looked at and judged, whether it is at work or in her private life.

The perfect image of womanhood promoted by apps such as Instagram has, in fact, worrisome consequences in reality. According to a study published by *The Guardian* in 2019, there is a strong link between girls' use of social media and the frequency of depressive episodes. In addition, more than 60% of girls

with depression are unhappy with their appearance, compared to more than 20% of boys the same age (Campbell). In 2018, the same newspaper published an article titled "Girls and social media: 'You are expected to live up to an impossible standard'" in which they cited opinions from girls aged 15 to 22 on how social media affects their mental health. Amongst them could be found expressions such as "There is always an unspoken feeling that you need to be better than other people and that creates a negative environment" or "It feels like you're sold a life and are expected to live up to a standard that is impossible to achieve." One can also find a mention of parents' lack of knowledge about what is actually going on in their children's lives and what kind of content they are browsing through (Marsh).

In addition to the polls and opinions, there is also a growing amount of data concerning teen's access to plastic surgery. According to data presented by the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, between the years 2000 and 2006, there was a 48% rise in the number of plastic surgeries performed in the United States, while between the years 2005 and 2018, there was a sharp increase of about 7.5 million of such procedures (American Society of Plastic Surgeons). What is more, women perform 92% of all cosmetic procedures, while women aged 40-54 undergo 49% of all procedures. What is disturbing is the number of plastic surgeries carried out on people aged 13-19. In 2018, the total number of such procedures in the United States amounted to 64.994 and almost half of them were connected to nose reshaping (rhinoplasty). Another most frequently carried out surgery was breast augmentation, amounting to almost 9,000 procedures (American Society of Plastic Surgeons).

It might be crucial to understand the postfeminist[1] dimension of apps such as Instagram in order to understand how social media use women's insecurities to sell products and advertise them as "necessary" for being a desirable woman. Women's bodies are one of the main foci of new media which put them under strict control and allow their constant judgment by society (Gill 149). Postfeminist media culture led to the change of representation from women as

silent, sexualized objects to women who are actively seeking to seem sexualized on their own accord (Goldman 1992 in Gill 151). Instagram is the perfect place for self-promotion and profiting from being desired; however, all this is concealed under the commonly used notions of "pleasing oneself" or "becoming the best version of oneself." Fashion and fitness bloggers as well as celebrity mums commonly use phrases such as "self-branding" and "creative autonomy." Both notions have been widely used in spreading "gendered social media production" that is aimed at women and promoted as a way of self-liberation (Duffy and Hund 3). Widespread new media have an impact on women's self-perception and are used to constantly persuade them to buy new products, engage in fitness routines and perfectly fulfill the roles of wives, mothers and entrepreneurs, all that while staying effortlessly young and attractive.

As Gill explains in her article "Postfeminist media culture," "The notion that all our practices are freely chosen is central to postfeminist discourses, which present women as autonomous agents no longer constrained by any inequalities or power imbalances whatsoever" (153). The steady rise in the number of plastic surgeries across years might be one of the indications that the discourse on "free will and choice to change oneself" has reached a vast number of women. Never before has there been a faster and more available way to change one's features. Instagram and other forms of postfeminist media show women the ways in which they are expected to look, while cosmetic brands, beauty salons and clinics take this opportunity to make more money.

Another phenomenon that is connected to the use of social networking sites and exposure to numerous advertising campaigns is the continuously expanding market of beauty products—for example, the estimated sales of L'Oreal, the most profitable beauty brand, amounted to 19.5 billion euros in 2010 while in 2019 they reached as much as 29.87 billion euros (L'Oréal Annual Report). The needs of consumers are growing alongside the costs of advertising campaigns aimed at ramping up the sales records. According to the study by Ann Marie Britton on "The Beauty Industry's Influence on Women in

Society," 54.3% of women reported that their choice of beauty brands depends on their loyalty towards it, proving how crucial advertising campaigns are to a brand's success (15). What is more, according to the study, 97.8% of responding women reported checking social media daily, while a significant amount of them confirmed obtaining their information about makeup and beauty products from social media apps, such as Pinterest, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram (Britton 20).

The link between social media and women's self-perception is undeniable—constant supervision and self-examination proves to be one of the root causes of a growing amount of mental health problems amongst women of all ages, significantly impacting even the youngest ones. What is more, women are spending more financial resources on beauty brands each year, contributing to the already monstrous profits of the biggest corporations around the world as social media influences women's consumer choices. Through creating a vision of a utopian possibility that is within the reach of everyone following the latest trends, it not only imposes unrealistic standards on women, but also lowers the quality of their lives to a significant degree.

Conclusion

The rise of social media is linked to the emergence of an idealized, dehumanized image of women. Apps such as Instagram use data profiling in order to gain new users and promote content that gives the greatest financial gain. It seems that there is a growing need to emphasize the exploitative side of social media that is deeply rooted in consumer culture of late capitalist society as well as the beauty and youth cult that is perpetuated by endless ways for self-improvement. For today's feminist movements, it is crucial to study the impact of social media on how women perceive themselves and how they interact with their environment when it promotes a single, strict normative look that is enhanced by tools such as face filters and plastic surgeries. What is being sold as a utopia can, in fact, be described as a tool for the subjugation of

women, taking control of not only their self-perception, but also the way in which they spend their financial resources. In addition to having a negative effect on one's private life, social media also plays a huge role in expanding the late capitalist market of beauty brands, contributing to ageism, exclusion and discrimination of those women who fail to fit into the perfect image of flawless, endlessly polished Instagram pictures.

Endnotes

1. In her work *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* Susan Faludi describes postfeminism as an "antifeminist backlash" that arose in the 1990s in reaction to women's progress. It can be characterized by dividing women into, for example, single and married, middle- versus working-class. As Faludi writes, postfeminism "manipulates a system of rewards and punishments, elevating women who follow its rules, isolating those who don't" (11–14).

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Abstract

The article examines how social media changed our perception of beauty and how the socio-cultural phenomenon of "Instagram face" led to the creation of a new idealized image of women. It focuses on the description of mechanisms that play an important role in creating standards for app's users and attempts to describe the relationship between subjugation of women's bodies through manipulation techniques used by social media and the drastic rise in the popularity of plastic surgery and cosmetic brands' income in recent years. The author aims to show how the seemingly utopian image of perfectly happy women presented on Instagram is a tool for control and how this phenomenon affects women in contemporary times.