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Synching and Performing: Body (Re)-Presentation in the Short Video App TikTok

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The performance of the body via new media seems centered on negotiating stereotypes of the body image, mainly gendered images of masculinity and femininity, and perceived notions of beauty as an indicator of sexual appeal. This study seeks to analyze the role of social networks in shaping stereotypes that rely on body visibility. The article chooses the short video app TikTok as one of the recent social networking apps (SNAs) offering users the ability to upload, edit, and share short form videos. The research methodology offers a content analysis of sample videos focusing on self-representation. Such analysis examines the impact SNAs have on the formation and expression of users' notions of beauty and gender through their digital representations of the body.

The body has long been viewed at the heart of contention between public and private spheres. Due to such tension between the natural individuality of the body and its societal public visibility, ownership of the body and its visibility intersect, leading to issues of self-representation. Sexuality and gender, already linked in more ways than one to the body and how it is performed, have also become linked to social media networks and new digital platforms that accelerate and accentuate the performativity of the body. With the potential of sharing images and videos of a given user's body, each user falls under the pressure of performing their body knowing it is watched by other users, as well as in comparison to other performances seen in other shared images and videos. As a result of all these elements, the body is constantly a key player in an individual's self-representation.

If the visibility of the body shapes its public significance, then the performance of the body, in that sense, can be ultimately seen as a presentation of a body image. With the potential for modification via social network sites (SNSs), the performance of the body is locked into constant presentation and representation. This shaping and reshaping of the body image seem centered on negotiating stereotypes of the body, mainly gendered images of masculinity and femininity, and perceived notions of beauty as an indicator and perpetuator of sexiness and sexual appeal.

Sexuality and gender can be viewed as social constructs. SNSs play a role in shaping stereotypes that rely on body image to construct gender-related notions. One effective method of projecting sexuality is body visibility. SNSs work to extract and summarize the self, valuing "characteristics" that are important for garnering attention (Cirucci 2018, 42). The foregrounding of attention in social media underlines the increased importance of the visibility of the body. As mediation of sexuality creates an infrastructure of sexual life based on representations of body images, digital media, in its user-oriented potential, offers many ways of self-representation, thus democratizing sexual presentation. Such presentation rests largely on performing a body image. Psychological studies of social norms and sexual behavior found strong correlations between social media images and peer perceptions of sexual behavior (Young and Jordan 2013).

The short video app TikTok is an example of recent social network applications, which are referred to in this article as SNAs, following the use of SNSs to refer to social network sites. TikTok is among the recent SNAs that offers users the ability to upload, edit, and share short videos. TikTok achieved impressive popularity, particularly among adolescents, teens and individuals in their early twenties, commonly referred to as tweens, thus targeting Millennials, and Generation Z.

Scope of Research

The current research analyzes videos posted on TikTok in order to examine its role in performing aspects of gender and beauty. Through this analysis, the study focuses, based on the nature of the app, on the age groups normally impacted by the app. The videos are categorized to cover various aspects of gender and beauty that can be addressed by the functionality of the features of the app, thus highlighting the significance of the short video app specifically for issues of gender and sexualized beauty for the generation it attracts.

The study is motivated by observations of the rapidly rising potential of social media in not only reflecting, but also shaping sexualized notions such as beauty and gender. Since social media itself is evolving with new apps and new uses, the potential only deepens and broadens. More notions can be impacted by new social media. The significance of this study is that it can help draw attention to the versatility of new digital social media and its growing impact on performativity and self-representation.

This research problematizes digital platforms' societal impact by inquiring whether digital representations of the body in short video apps can be visibly impacted by sexualized notions of gender and beauty. The paper tries to answer the research question; how does TikTok as an example of new digital media illustrate the normalization of stereotyped body images of beauty and gender?

Short Video Apps

A new video-related feature developed that impacted new media: video editing. The ability to create videos and edit them profoundly personalized the video experience in the world of social networking and turned it from a sharing function into a creative one. In the newly minted short form video apps such as TikTok, and before that Musical.ly, unprecedented editing features, mainly lip synching, filters, and speed control, have set the new apps apart with editing capabilities that personalize each video, thus bringing the individualization and creativity of video sharing to a new level (Sensor Tower, n.d.).

The popularity of TikTok was preceded only by its predecessor Musical.ly before their merger. Developed by Alex Zhu and Luyu Yang in 2014 (Baig 2018), Musical.ly almost instantly witnessed 500 people downloading the app every day, and by 2016, Musical.ly reached a total of 70 million users at 10 million users daily, already at times overtaking Snapchat and Instagram (Carson 2016). Musical.ly was bought by Chinese AI company ByteDance in 2017 and joined a similar platform under the name TikTok in 2018 (Dave 2018). The new merged app TikTok, known as Douyin in China, has reached a phenomenal status as the number one short video sharing app worldwide (Jing 2018).

From its launch in 2016 until 2018, TikTok has tripled its revenue and has been downloaded a total of 800 million times worldwide, with 80 million in the United States alone (Yurieff 2018). As of the first quarter of 2018, TikTok ranked first in downloads at 45.8 million, ahead of giants such as YouTube, Instagram and Facebook (Tung and Zhang 2018). By September 2018 it was the most downloaded app of any type in the United States (Jenke 2018).

TikTok videos are available to users who sign up for accounts and also to anyone who has a direct link to the video without being a user of the app. The platform allows users to record videos lasting typically from 15 to 60 seconds using lip synchronization to popular tracks, then share their videos with other users, who, in turn, are allowed to follow each other, react or comment on each other's videos as well as duet together. In many cases, a hashtagged challenge is launched inviting users to share their short videos that address the topic of the challenge, thus linking them thematically.

TikTok hooked its shareability to major social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, gaining even more access. This has led to some real financial gains for the top users of the app. The success of Musical.ly users, called Musers to imply the creative drive of the app, has clearly migrated to the success of TikTok influencers as well (Influencer Marketing Hub, n.d.a). The top Musical.ly influencers earned up to \$300,000 per sponsored post (Influencer Marketing Hub, n.d.b).

The short video platform's widespread outreach has a noticeable societal impact. Such impact, however, did not go smoothly as it faced some criticism and even legal battles over its content. For instance, on July 3rd, 2018, court orders in Indonesia blocked TikTok due to what they deemed sexually explicit content (Saker 2018). Soon after, the ban was lifted when a team from TikTok met with the Indonesian Ministry of Communication and promised to censor specific content deemed sexually explicit (Mohan 2018). In China, authorities criticized insufficient privacy settings in the app as well as what was deemed as "vulgar" content (Jing 2018).

TikTok has raised some parental concerns due to a perceived focus on sexualized topics in comments as well as the popularity of songs that have sensual themes, a concern intensified with that the fact that the age limit was initially only 12 and then was raised to 13 (Chtayti 2018; Goovaerts 2018; TikTok 2019). In the US, parents took to websites such as Common Sense and Reddit to criticize TikTok's low age limit while mature content is permissible (Common Sense Media, n.d.; Reddit, n.d.). The app even caused an uproar in France as evident in interviews by the French News Agency (AFP) with concerned parents of young users of the app (NDTV 2018).

Key Concepts

Playfulness and sexuality are focal concepts to this article. Paasonen (2018) defines playfulness as a mode, thus placing it as intentional behavior, a choice, and, perhaps just as important, a performance (537). This mode, Paasonen argues, pushes sexual identities in its bodily focus (538). In later stages of the evolution of the terms play and playfulness, she points out, both have come to denote exploration and even adult role playing (Ibid). This article uses the term play and its variations of playful and playfulness to denote practices that highlight the body, its image, and features, in an attempt to project, explore, and define sexual and sensual notions. Sexuality in this article is used to refer broadly to all elements pertaining to sensuality, sexual identity, and sexual behavior.

This study links playfulness to sexualization and argues that playfulness is more than pleasurable but is also cognitive. This article utilizes Paasonen's feminist reference to sexuality. She sees it as a cognitive element. As a result, the role SNSs has in playfulness acquires a broader significance (538). As Paasonen goes on to say that playfulness is a form of openness, this article attempts to see SNSs as a new vehicle for such openness. Paasonen discusses instrumentality as crucial for sexuality and playfulness. It is possible to explore SNSs and social media at large as a digital form of instrumentality (541).

Central to this study as well is the notion of performativity of the body. In SNSs, the presentation of gender is linked to visual display of the body, especially among tweens. Such self-representation often reflects a stereotype of gender heavily underlining hypermasculinity and hyperfemininity (van Oosten, Vandenbosch and Peter 2017, 147). Self-representation intersects with playfulness when it is deemed sexy, a description achieved by suggestive posing for videos and photos posted on SNSs, which may include seductive performances such as sexy gazing, scantily dressed poses, all constituting sexualized appearance (Ibid). Posting on SNSs is specifically linked to adolescents as a source of gratification (Perloff 2014, 368), which is evident in the high frequency of SNSs usage among that age group (Lenhart et al. 2010, 22).

The terms performativity, representation and performance are interconnected in this article. Performativity includes performance as a form of self-representation that presents the body. Self-representation in this article, therefore, refers to how gendered and sexualized notions of the self are projected visually in social media. Studies reinforce the role such visuality plays in incorporating and resisting notions of gender and sexuality (De Ridder 2017, 2). This leads to an "ever-present worry of

needing to perform oneself appropriately” (Clark 2005, 217). Webb and Temple (2015) argue that online videos offer a gender performance platform (648). Interestingly, they argue that women are even under more pressure to perform their gender on social network spaces without deviating from pre-existing gender expectations (649). Perhaps one of the reasons of the pervasiveness of digital performativity is the multiple roles play by individuals as digital access becomes increasingly individualized. It is stipulated that the roles of producer, consumer and distributor in digital media are often played by the same individual (Rutledge 2013, 48).

Linked to self-representation of the body in this article is the notion of beauty. Standards of beauty are narrowly defined and harshly applied by mainstream media and mostly adopted by social media (Caldeira and De Ridder 2017, 323). Such standards apply to both women and men, and while they focus more on women, perfectionist stereotypical images of beauty still strictly impose standards of masculinity on the appearance of men as well (Iovannone 2016; Siibak 2010, 419). Also connected to the notion of beauty is the use of the term body image in the article. It refers to the image formed by the presentation of the body as a visible element of the videos. The implications of the body image as a social construct of body worth are still there but are not the primary meaning of the term as it is used in this article.

Methodology

In order to address the research question, the article engages with this relatively new territory of SNAs by analyzing TikTok sample videos, underlining features relevant to the study. Due to research ethical reasons, the sample videos have been included in the peer reviewed version of the article during the review process but have been removed from the public version. In order to adhere to ethical regulations that protect users’ privacy, this article adopts what I refer to as interpretative video content analysis. This method does not supply screenshots of the videos. Instead, it replaces them with descriptions of the content of each video within the context of self-representation as relevant to the study. This is followed by interpretations of the content. This methodology directly addresses the research question as it highlights how the features of the videos represent the notions of beauty and gender through the performance of the individuals in the videos.

The strategy used to employ content analysis of the videos relies on three elements. First, each video is divided into frames, based on the change of movement, facial expression, and/or attire of the individual in the video. Second, the analysis links such changes to aspects of representations, as each change signals a new category, such as attractiveness or unattractiveness. Third, the analysis draws attention to details that are recurrent in many videos as well as details that appear in few videos only, such as having more than one person in the video, which is less common than a single individual.

The analysis is user focused as it sheds light on the users’ perspective of the representations of the body and notions of gender and sexuality. The research examines videos from three popular TikTok challenges, #DontJudgeMeChallenge, #KarmaIsaBitch, and #TheBoyChallenge, in order to contextualize the research question. The videos are selected randomly from the three challenges to offer a randomized sample. The names of the users of the sample videos are removed. Moreover, no screenshots of the videos are used in order to protect the users’ identities. Extensive descriptions depict in detail the relevant features of each video. The identities of the users are not significant to the research in themselves since the analysis focuses only on the relevance of the content to the research question.

I have started using Musical.ly in 2015, followed hundreds of Musers and witnessed the app icon change to TikTok after the merger of both apps. As a researcher and user, I was specifically interested in new challenges. As I watched thousands of videos with the intent of finding links among them, I noted common elements in each challenge. For this article, I chose sample videos that best represent the main features and commonalities I observed among the challenges.

Since the article deals with normative concepts derived from cultural and social understandings such as, “attractiveness”, “beauty” and “sexual appeal”, I am aware of the fact that this might have been affected by my personal and cultural stance, as is common to such concepts. However, for the purpose of this

study, and in order to achieve a degree of impartiality, I aligned my understanding of these terms within the app content with the feedback the app received worldwide (detailed in the section titled “Short Video Apps”).

The Challenges

TikTok offers challenges. These are hashtagged trending videos that start a series of video responses from users. Among their most popular challenges is #DontJudgeMeChallenge, which was initiated in 2015 as a campaign based on a makeup tutorial YouTube video by Chicago-based makeup artist Em Ford titled “You Look Disgusting” (Ford 2015; Brad 2015). The campaign spread on social media networking sites such as Twitter and Instagram and gained wide attention as an attempt to combat body shaming, reaching 170,000 video submissions on Twitter. The campaign consisted of videos made by users that highlighted facial imperfections such as acne or scars, clearly and rather farcically added by makeup, only to be removed on camera to show a cleaner complexion. The campaign was sometimes criticized as self-defeating and propagating the very element of body shaming it purportedly targeted (Linshi 2015).

Another major challenge launched by TikTok is #KarmaisaBitch. This challenge builds on the comedic sense propagated by the now-extinct website Vine (Tiffany 2018). The name of the challenge is derived from *Riverdale* (Aguirre-Sacasa 2017), an American television soap opera, popular among teenagers. In one scene, Veronica Lodge, one of the characters played by American actress Camila Mendes, hears that her rivals have just had a car accident and would take months to recover. Her response is to smile mischievously as she slowly says, “Oh, well. Karma is a bitch.” In the TikTok challenge that adopted this phrase, videos rely on TikTok’s unique editing feature to personalize each user’s video. All videos circle around the theme of transformation where a character begins looking unattractive, says the phrase “Oh, well. Karma is a bitch,” then transforms into an attractive person, usually wearing makeup and/or wearing more stylish hair and clothes (Feldman 2018).

The third challenge, #TheBoyChallenge, features mainly female users who change their appearance to look like males. The videos negotiate a gendered binary of girl/boy transformation.

It is worth mentioning that the challenges are sometimes hashtagged under slightly different names. Some videos are cross-tagged, using more than one hashtag from the same category. For the first challenge, #DontJudgeMeChallenge is the original challenge hashtag and it garnered 430 million users by the 31st of January 2019. Other alternatives are #DontJudgeMe, with 95 million users, and #DontJudge with 75 million, all the way to alternatives such as #DontJudgeOthers (51 thousand), #DontJudgeByCover (217 thousand) or changed spellings such as #DontJudgeChallage [sic] which has 10 million. Similarly, #KarmaisaBitch is the largest challenge in its motif, with 145 million followers, and other alternatives such as #KarmaisaBitchChallenge which has 4 million followers and #OhWellKarmaisaBitch which has 86 thousand, among several other alternatives. #TheBoyChallenge is the original challenge in the third motif with 351 million followers. Some alternatives include #BoyofMyDreams or added nationality such as #GermanBoy or #PolishBoy, or simply #Boy, but all have a significantly smaller number of users.

The videos in the analysis are divided into two binaries. The first is an attractive/unattractive binary that includes video samples from #DontJudgeMeChallenge and #KarmaisaBitch challenges. The second is a gender binary that includes videos from #TheBoyChallenge.

1 The Attractive/Unattractive Binary

The #DontJudgeMeChallenge is a straightforward reference to value judgement based entirely on the body image. The challenge begins with the user projecting herself/himself as unattractive, then attempting to cover the camera in order to transform to a different attractive body image. The title of this challenge is more like a plea asking the public sphere to hold off judgement. It is interesting that the videos do not live up fully to the title. The very structure of the videos accepts and even seeks

judgement. It only requests viewers to postpone their judgement until the users change their appearance to become more acceptable within normalized concepts of beauty. In asking for no judgement, however, the videos elicit judgement.

The #KarmaisaBitch is another reinforcement of value judgement based on the body image. This is evident as the makeover motif is central to the challenge. The original scene from the TV show is an expression of gloating over an unfortunate event that happens to one's rival. The scene went viral on YouTube then became a popular meme before it became a TikTok challenge. In the challenge, a user initially looks at the screen, either plain looking or with unfavorable makeup like the #DontJudgeMeChallenge. The user then throws a bedsheet over, covering herself/himself. The video then cuts to a new scene where the same user has a makeover and fits the same criteria of beauty used in the #DontJudgeMeChallenge. What is added to the #KarmaisaBitch challenge is that the users lip sync the sentence, "Oh, well. Karma is a bitch," from *Riverdale* (Aguirre-Sacasa 2017), followed by the transformation scene to the tune of Kreayshawn's (2011) song "Gucci Gucci," in a blunt socioeconomic reference.

It is worth mentioning that all the videos take place in what seem to be the users' bedrooms. This adds an element of intimacy, enhancing playfulness. It is interesting that the videos' background reveals an intersectionality of the private, as seen in the bedrooms, and the public, as the videos are posted publicly. For the purpose of the analysis, the video samples from both challenges are divided into the following categories: (1) Exaggerated features in the unattractive scene; (2) Body shaming; (3) Ableism; (4) Ageism; (5) Integrating gender; (6) Rejection; (7) Variation.

1.1 Exaggerated features in the unattractive scene

In the first scene from one standard #DontJudgeMeChallenge video, a close up of the face of a male user in what appears to be a bedroom shows that the user clearly uses a filter to exaggerate his features by making his nose and lips seem bigger, adds cream to his face, distorting his complexion, lets his hair hang down, and looks subdued. In the scene following the transformation, the filter is gone, revealing the user's regular features. What is more, there is no cream or any other material distorting his complexion. His hair is styled with a bandana. Perhaps more importantly, his posture changes dramatically. The subdued look is replaced by a sexy, forward poise where he bends his head sideways, winks, and sticks his tongue out. The absence of the filter that distorts the facial features is replaced by another filter that releases pink hearts around the user's face, thus creating a sexualized image that sharply contrasts to the initial one. The pink hearts can also serve as typical feminine representation of the male user.

The concept of exaggerated features reflects an interesting defense mechanism that pre-emptively distorts facial features beyond realistic measures, thus the real features of the user seem more attractive in comparison. The facial distortion is aided by performing a look, as the user not only presents what is deemed as unattractive features, but also performs unattractiveness with intentional gestures such as subdued looks, including closed eyes and pouting mouth. These are clearly contrasted in the attractive scene with the user, not only removing exaggerated features induced by technological aids such as filters, and by makeup, but also by performing sexiness. Such sexiness maybe evident here in the flirtatious attitude displayed by the user in front of the camera. The exaggerated unattractiveness, therefore, is a performance that creates distance between the user and the unattractive filter, thus acting as a self-asserting performance of sexual attractiveness.

1.2 Body shaming

In this example, a female user does not use a filter to distort her features. Instead, in order to strike an unattractive pose, she does not wear makeup, wears oversized clothes, pulls her hair back, wears eyeglasses. She stands in what seems to be a bedroom with flailed arms and stares blankly. In the transformation scene, the user wears makeup, a short t-shirt revealing midriff, and poses with her hair flowing and arms widespread, again in a traditionally sexy pose. The two scenes focus on the user's

belly, as she clearly stuffs her shirt in the first scene to seem as if she has a large waistline, then bares it in the second to show a small waistline, with an elaborate focus on an overweight version in the initial scene. The t-shirts in both scenes are also interesting. The first one has a kitten only, symbolizing innocence and infantilizing the desexualization of the first scene, but also laughing, almost as if it is laughing at the unexpecting audience. The second t-shirt has the word *Queens* written on it, emphasizing the power that accompanies the sexualized transformation.

Another user offers a male version of the body weight motif. He poses bare chested in a bedroom in both scenes. In the first one, he has a protruding belly that he is rubbing, drawing attention to it. In the second scene, he sucks in his belly, showing off a muscular stomach, flaunting the stereotypical six pack abs that are often associated with male sexual appeal. He shifts his pose and smiles confidently as well. It is interesting that this video is among the few videos by male users that focuses on a complete body image, as most videos seem to follow what Siibak (2010) terms as faceism, a focus on the face of male models in advertising trends (408).

Both videos equate body shape and specifically body weight with sexual attractiveness. There is a focus on belly size in both videos, a stereotypical simplification of negative body images. The bare-chested male video corresponds to the female bare midriff video, using the same focal point to reflect hypermasculinity and hyperfemininity at the same time. The users both perform gestures that accentuate their midsection, whether in the female user's case by flailing her arms or in the male user's case by directly holding his belly. Facial expressions also change with the body transformation, showing a smile in the second scene, thus correlating pleasure and joy with a sexualized stereotypical body image.

1.3 Ageism

Another variation on the binary of ugly and beautiful is age. In one video, the first scene shows a young man and a child, who both panic as, via filter, they notice that their hair is grey and their faces have wrinkles, indicating old age. Their terrified reaction mimics clearly fear of aging. In the transformation scene, both users are young. Their image is complimented with other features. In the first image, the young man in his older version is wearing a sleeveless shirt, with grey hair and wrinkled face. In the second, he is a young man, wearing a dark shirt on top, implying a more professional look as opposed, perhaps, to a stereotype of retired men in a sleeveless flannel. What is more, in the second image, both users not only have dark hair, but they have their hair styled and coiffed. As a result, a sexualized look reinforced by a wink and a smirk, distinguishes the second image.

The exaggerated facial expression of panic at the aged version reflects the negative space occupied by old age. The video stabilizes the same pose for both individuals, thus focusing attention on the two main changes in the second scene: signs of aging and expressions of panic, therefore linking them together.

On a similar note, another video employs an interesting twist using age as well. The first scene features an older man, with no makeup or filters, who is standing in a rather subdued manner. The transformation scene, instead of using the same user with makeup or filters, features a different user altogether. This second user is a young individual who stands with the stereotypical confidence seen in the other videos. He has a noticeable resemblance to the first man, implying he might be his son. The resemblance in the facial features of the older and young users is countered by the contrast in their poses, which elaborates a more energetic and more attractive pose struck by the younger user. The value judging here is perhaps evident in implying that old age is unattractive.

Physical movement is significant in this video. The hand gestures given by the younger user are parallel to his smile. This indicates an empowered stance, clearly opposed to the older user's pose which is almost expressionless. The physical movement, then, reinforces the perspective of youth being lively, or even alive, while old age is equated with lack of movement, and, in that sense, lifelessness.

1.4 Ableism

The sample video for this category follows the same steps but adds a slight variation that is quite interesting. In the unattractive version, the hair, complexion, and posture of the user are compromised in a closeup as always. In addition, however, the user is seen holding a respiratory inhaler. The reference to ill health in the video adds health as an attribute to sexual appeal. In the transformation version, the stereotypical elements of hair, complexion, and poise are altered to reveal not only a self-confident user with the usual bold gaze facing the viewer, but also emphasize health as the user is no longer hunched forward and is not holding an inhaler.

In the health-related video, other attributes to sexual attractiveness are emphasized. In the first unattractive scene, the user is wearing eyeglasses, which he removes in the second scene. This underlines the stereotypical image of nerdiness as desexualized, as eyeglasses have a long-standing association with bookishness. The role of health in sexiness is interestingly restricted to physical health, highlighting the visibility of health, and foregrounding it as a primarily societal body image that overshadows its understanding as a personal condition.

1.5 Integrating gender

An interesting and less common play on gender in the #DontJudgeMeChallenge is introduced in a video that has an interesting twist. In the unattractive version, we see the expected face in closeup covered with pimples, a painted unibrow, exaggerated facial expressions, and a mop of hair. The user's unattractive character wears eyeglasses, which is in line with the negative portrayal of physical weaknesses as weaker eyesight here is portrayed as a sign of ugliness. A new feature is added here, as a moustache and beard are also painted on the user's face. The gender twist occurs as the transformed user in the second scene is revealed as a woman. Not only do the stereotypical features of complexion, facial expressions, hair, or even eyeglasses change, but also the user's gender changes. The first masculine image is replaced by a female image. The transformed image is clearly sexualized, with a hazy hue added and the user rolling out her tongue and posing in a traditional sexy poise. It is worth noting that this video selected the stereotypical use of makeup to emphasize a notion of attractiveness as visible, manufactured, and sexualized.

The user intentionally displays mock behavioral change. In the initial masculinized unattractive scene, aggressiveness is emphasized as opposed to the subdued and seductive feminized pose in the second scene paired with a cynical smile. Sexiness, therefore, is associated with beauty. In addition to behavior, facial features are exaggerated in the negative body image, using makeup to add pimples. A medical condition, in this case acne is branded as unattractive. A hint of ableism is, therefore, inherent to some degrees in the process.

1.6 Rejection

One video shows two users performing a short skit. This is the only video that takes place in what seems to be a living room rather than the bedrooms we have in all the other videos. A man and a woman play a couple. The man is sitting on a couch, pretending to be too busy with his mobile phone to pay attention to the woman, sitting at his feet and begging with a hand gesture for his attention. In the second scene, the woman gets a makeover, and is now the one sitting in an aloof pose on the sofa while the man is the one on his knees on the floor raising his arms in the pleading gesture. It is worth noting how, despite seemingly empowering the female partner, the video still reinforces heterosexual norms of gender roles, as the woman only manages to earn the man's attention when she achieves sexualized appearance.

In the couple's video sample, the center of power is attention, which is also sexualized. The video feminizes the source of attention by focusing on stereotypical hyperfemininity, as the female partner wears a dress and long hair in the attractive scene. An interesting detail here is the sunglasses. The person sitting on the couch and ignoring the attention-seeking partner is wearing fashionable sunglasses in both scenes, whether it is the male in the first scene or the female in the second. This is a clear reference to the significance of visibility and communal approval which rests on body image. The visual

aspect is emphasized by hiding the eyes of the partner whose attention is sought, thus underlining that it is the sexualized body image that is sought. The video asserts that the body needs to be seen in order to be acknowledged.

1.7 Variation

Variation in one video is worth examining where the focus is not on a person but on a drawing. The background here is not a room but a piece of paper. The initial scene shows only a hand drawing an unimpressive stick figure face. In the second scene, a fully drawn portrait in Japanese manga style fills the screen. Interestingly, it is the character in the drawing who has the stereotypical sexy pose, complete with dangling earrings and stylish hair. Replacing a human body with two variations of drawing styles, an unattractive stick figure and the other an attractive well-executed drawing, reduces body image to a created project, thus emphasizing its performativity and projectability.

It is possible to see this video as a reflection on the process behind the challenge. It epitomizes the performativity of the visual body image and highlights the desexualized oversimplified aspect of the first scene as opposed to the second scene. It is interesting to see in this video how the artist is reproducing what Abidin (2016) refers to in her study of pastiching Asian cuteness as a blend of performative cuteness with sensuality (38).

2 The Gender Binary

#TheBoyChallenge is a seemingly simple gender transformation. A typical video in this challenge begins with a teenage female user who puts her head down or looks away then comes back with her hair covered, usually by a hooded sweater, and looks like a teenage male. Variations on this theme all tackle the intersectionality of the body image and gender as a performance. Moreover, users still attempt a sexy pose, while impersonating a male, thus performing sexiness in a different gender, which highlights the role of the body in presenting not only gender but sexual appeal as well. The video samples are analyzed under the following categories: (1) Clothed transformation; (2) Non-clothed transformation; (3) Witness.

2.1 Clothed transformation

In one typical video in #TheBoyChallenge, the user stands in a bedroom and shows the viewers a hairband, then turns around, hides her head, and when she turns back, she looks like a teenage male in a hooded sweater. She then performs a stereotypical teenage male seductive pose, making a fist with the three middle fingers while sticking out the thumb and little finger of her hand, perhaps alluding to the shaka hand gesture, normally viewed as “chill” or “cool” gesture that indicates a non-committal laid back attitude.

The key to the clothed transformation video is to reinforce the superficiality of the visibility of gender binaries. If transforming from the male to female image relies on rolling up a user’s hair and pulling up a sweater’s hood, then the entire visual aspect of gender is reduced to a performed body image. An interesting component of the clothed transformation video is the emphatic gestures performed by the female user to mock stereotypical masculine sexiness, only adding to the visual level of gender performance.

2.2 Non-clothed transformation

One of the interesting variations of the challenge does not use clothing and hair but uses facial makeup to change the user’s gender. In this video, there is a closeup on the user’s face lying on a pillow on a bed. The user hides half their face, revealing a female’s face, only to turn around and cover the female face, revealing the other side of the face as a male’s face. The side meant to indicate a male has a moustache and a stubble beard painted on the face, whereas the side meant to represent a female has long eyelashes and lipstick. The user is bare-shouldered, and no clothes are shown. A birthmark on the

shoulder is shown in both the female and male scenes, indicating that the male and female faces belong to the same person. The video puts emphasis on the body image that relies on natural facial features and the absence of clothes intensifies such focus.

Going beyond the clothed version of the challenge, this video argues that the binaries are, almost literally, skin deep, but also emphasize the focus on the performance of the body image as central to the communicated perception of gender.

2.3 Witness

In the duo videos in #TheBoyChallenge, the user has an audience witnessing the transformation and showing disbelief. In one video, the screen is split. Both parts of the split screen seem to be taken in a bedroom. A male user eagerly watches a female user with long hair in the first scene. In the transformation scene, the female user turns around, simply covers her hair with her sweater's hood, then turns to face the camera looking like a male. The male user covers his mouth, wide-eyed with a dropping jaw as if in shock as he watches her transformation.

The duo challenge shifts attention to the viewer as much as to the user. By splitting the screen between the transforming user and the watching viewer, the videos underline the performativity of the gender binary. The transformation is done for an audience, not for its own sake. While the structure of all videos assumes a viewer, as the users are facing the camera, the duo videos create a second layer where we, the actual viewers, get a full opportunity to view how other viewers like us react to the transformation. The duo video structure is a commentary on the communal role we as viewers play in the performativity of the body image to construct a gender binary.

Discussion

The video samples discussed in the attractive/unattractive binary section show a knowledge of the stereotypes of beauty and hence present some recurrent features; first, the user intentionally displays mock behavioral change, from subdued and meek in the first scene to confident and sexy in the second scene. Sexiness, therefore, is associated with beauty and openness. Second, facial features are exaggerated in the negative body image, using makeup or app filters. Third, medical conditions, from acne to more serious diseases implied, are branded as unattractive. A hint of ableism is, therefore, inherent to some degrees in the process. Fourth, old age is also seen as detrimental to beauty which can be seen as a form of ableism as well. Fifth, body shaming was hinted at more than once as users, both females and males, pretended to be overweight in the initial scene in some video samples. Sixth, there was a clearer emphasis on relationships in bringing two individuals in the videos.

Videos presented to discuss the gender binary share several features that characterize the users' perspectives on the role of the body image in gender presentation. First, for most of the videos, a simple clothing item and a hairstyle are enough to perform a gender visual appearance. This is a clear statement from the users that they perceive the visual attributes of gender as no more than a performance of the body that carries little weight. Their videos, therefore, point out that they view the visibility of gender as a pure construct of representing a body image. Even the videos relying on makeup deliver a similar message, however more potent, that removable and changeable facial makeup can influence the visual characteristics attributed to gender. Second, in the duo videos, the use of witnesses, almost in a voyeuristic sense, can be seen as a reference to societal monitoring of gender binaries. By showing a mock-surprised audience, the duo videos reflect the users' critique of the lack of depth, and even shallowness, of the communal perspective of gender binaries and boundaries that can be easily changed by the users.

An important aspect relevant to the discussion in the current paper is value judgement. The images presented in the videos of the three challenges consistently posit essentialist norms of beauty and gender that are either accepted or challenged but are held as constant and fixed criteria. Such value judgement is formed by binary presentations of bad and good, ugly and beautiful, thus constructing a binary

hierarchy (De Ridder 2017, 1). For instance, a video is divided into two major scenes. The first scene presents the user in one state, followed by another scene that offers a drastic change to the user's gendered and/or sexualized body image. In #DontJudgeMeChallenge and #KarmaisaBitch, the initial scene shows the user with makeup that renders her or him presumably unattractive. An intercepting scene usually shows how the user fails to transform from unattractive to beautiful, pretending to briefly panic, then, after trying again, the final scene shows how the user transforms successfully into an attractive female or male, accentuating the new image with sexiness. The transitional scene, which can be a repeated mock-attempt at transforming before the final successful attempt echoes the need for approval that characterizes online self-representation, as "different 'performances' need to be modified according to the received feedback." (Clark 2005, 217).

The digitally mediated value judgements associated with these videos ascribe to a normative heterosexualised performances of feminine and masculine desirability (Ringrose et al. 2013, 305). Such heterosexualised context resulted in normalizing the sexualization of the female body (Evans, Riley and Shankar 2010, 123). Similarly, men present their body image as sexualized and romantic objects, influenced by stereotypical visual representation of masculinity on social media (Siibak 2010, 405). In his study of constructing masculinity in social networks, Siibak (2010) argues that posing techniques by users in social networks are influenced by advertising trends (419). This is evident in the videos in the TikTok challenges discussed here for both men and women. In all videos, sexy poses and seductive looks involve looking at the camera as opposed to subdued looks or even closed eyes.

Stereotypical visual constructs of the body, therefore, contribute significantly to the hierarchical binary value judgement system of bad and good body image. Traditional beauty ideals are mediatized to specifically favor flawless facial features, complexion, hair, and figure (Engeln-Maddox 2006, 259). In a relatively early study by Groesz, Levine and Murnen (2002), the findings confirm the crucial role that representations of thin body images on media had on body satisfaction (13). The impact of the mediatized body image has persisted into the digital media. The thin body image evolved into an obsession with the athletically fit body image. This has been emphasized, for instance, in a study of the hashtag #fitspiration, a portmanteau of the words 'fit' and 'inspiration' (Tiggmann and Zaccardo 2018). Furthermore, in another study of self-objectification of women's body image in Instagram, Fardouly, Willburger and Vartanian (2018) discuss the role fitspiration plays in defining the hard-to-attain body image (1382). Such fixation results in marginalizing ageing and disabled individuals (Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz. 2015, 79).

A Glimpse into User Perspective

The three TikTok challenges, #DontJudgeMeChallenge, #KarmaisaBitch, and #TheBoyChallenge offer a glimpse into the perspective that users of TikTok, the prime short video sharing app and a major SNA platform, may adopt about the role of the body image and issues of gender and sexuality. Both are viewed as products of the performance of the body, a self-representation that can be altered and shaped to conform to stereotypical notions of beauty, masculinity and femininity. Even while challenging such norms, the users clearly acknowledge their existence, showing an awareness of the imposed normative images of sexiness that define beauty and a gender binary that still shapes visual gender switching.

The variations of the videos range between changing the order of gender, introducing witnesses, and replacing human participants with drawings for example. A recurrent motif that favors youth, health, and a fit body runs through several videos, subscribing to traditional, usually heterosexual norms of beauty. Similarly, a recurrent motif of short hair for males and makeup and long hair for females reflects the stereotypes of a binary gender body image that accentuates hypermasculinity and hyperfemininity.

This study points out that, as SNA offers opportunities of sharing individualized short videos, it is a potent platform for understanding the role of the body image on shaping notions of beauty and gender. What is more, it has the potential to change those roles as it is shared and as the variations introduced may be reinforced.

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