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Faces in Snapchat: Selfies and social media aesthetics

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Abstract

In this paper, we investigate how a face may take on a variety of forms, focusing on the ways that new media creates new venues for the molding of faces. We suggest that faces should be viewed in the plural to account for the many different facial displays a single person may make use of, and we examine how this 'pool of faces' carries sociocultural meaning. While past decades of swift technological development may seem to have diminished the role of face-to-face contact, new forms of media have, on the contrary, established multiple innovative arenas for the face to be put into action. Based on an ethnographic study of Danish teenagers' use of Snapchat, we demonstrate how the face is used as a central medium for interaction with peers. We analyze visual Snapchat messages to investigate how Snapchat encourages senders to put an 'ugly' face forward; teenage girls, for instance, often engage in manipulating their faces into hideous expressions. However, these types of facial displays are not random but follow what we describe as an 'aesthetics of ugliness'. Primarily performed by girls who have already secured their popular status in the school's heterosexual marketplace, the aesthetics involve specific ways of looking ugly. Snapchat thus functions both as a challenge to beauty norms of 'flawless faces' and as a re-inscription of these same norms by further manifesting the exclusive status of the popular girl.

Introduction: Faces in the plural

In 2015 the first author of this paper started fieldwork among Danish teenagers, on which this paper is based. When stepping into a classroom on the first day she was met with 30 different faces composed of a broad variety of facial traits - some adorned with piercings, some with makeup and some less polished. However, it soon proved that getting to know each of these persons did not simply require to memorize each of their specific facial composition in concordance with their names, interests, friends and families, but also to know the many different faces that each single person were capable of molding and chose to put forward via social media selfies.

The face has a multiplicity of meanings across different fields and contexts. It has been viewed as a neutral identifier for a person in identification papers, as a screen for expressions of inner emotions, and as a symbolic value denoting social psychological dynamics and positions. In identification documents such as passports and driver's licenses, one neutral face represents the identity of the subject. Identification using these documents relies on the picture of subject's 'neutral-looking' face. Thus, a single, emotionless face is presented to the public as a method of distinguishing the individual from all other humans.

In the field of psychology, facial expressions are closely linked to emotions. The face is taken to be able to display six different universal expressions corresponding to the most basic emotions: anger, happiness, surprise, disgust, sadness, fear and thus other individuals can recognize a subject's emotion based on these expressions (Ekman and Friesen 1978; Ekman 2003).

Within the field of linguistics it has been suggested that facial expressions may be considered as linguistic items, structured and conveying meaning (Birdwhistell 1970). In sociological and culturally oriented studies facial displays have been considered within the context of intercultural communication arguing that interpretations of expressions communicated through facial mimicry differ across cultural contexts (Ekman 1977; Izard 1971). The concept of the face has also been applied in its symbolic sense within sociology, specifically in Goffman's (1955) symbolic interactionism and his influential idea of "facework" as an explanatory model for human interaction. However, Goffman has also worked with facial expressions in studies of commercials, in particular gaze directions, demonstrating that the organization of faces and the gazes they project can be used to communicate power and intersubjective relations (Goffman 1979). Such multimodal analysis of faces has similarly been analyzed in spontaneous face-to-face interaction by attending to the meaningful and varying facets of facial displays in turn-by-turn conversational analysis (Bavelas and Chovil 1997; Chovil 1991, 1997; Peräkylä and Ruusuvuori 2012; cf. Goodwin 2007 for analysis of gaze).

In line with this we view 'the face' as an ever-changing embodied unit that can be put into action in a variety of ways. In this paper, we investigate how a face is not a singular, invariable object, but may take on a variety of forms, and how new media has especially created new venues for the manipulations and moldings of faces. In this paper, we argue that the face is not a singular, invariable object but one that may take on a variety of forms; we examine in particular how new media has created new venues for the manipulation of faces.

In understanding the role of faces in mundane contemporary communication, it is necessary to analyze facial displays in their immediate contexts, and in particular in online discourse in which vibrant new practices of facial (inter)action are emerging. In order to understand the multiplicity of a social actor's facial representations, we investigate a collection of approximately 1,000 Danish photo messages from the digital communication app Snapchat in which facial semiotics is put into play in a number of ways.

Technologized faces

While the past decades of swift technological development may seem to have diminished the role of face-to-face contact, the many new mediated modes of communication has, on the contrary, established multiple innovative arenas for the face to be put into action whether by acts of deliberate self-concealment camouflaging the face with masks or entire deletion as in some Japanese virtual cultures (Nozawa 2012) or by zooming in on the face as in the circulation of individual or group selfies (Page 2018). In particular, the genre of the selfie presents a new and pervasive way of communicating through and with faces.

A selfie is a picture taken of the self, typically focused on the face. Selfies are ubiquitous throughout various forms of social media and have become a salient piece of pop culture in the last decade (Jerslev & Mortensen 2016), from Kim Kardashian West's coffee-table book *Selfish* (2015) to guides on how to take the best selfie (Figure 1).

Selfies require no special equipment or even another person to take the picture: most smartphones are equipped with a front-facing camera specifically designed for selfie-taking. Selfies can be taken by anyone, anywhere. This type of photography has been described as representing a unique subgenre of photography due to its cultural significance (Zappavigna 2016). Social media users often post pictures of themselves and their friends as curated self-presentations conveying information about users' appearance, social status, interests, socioeconomic class, and so on (Van Djick 2008: 66). From the "duck face" to the "fish gape" – specific ways of modulating the mouth – there are many different types of facial

poses that selfie takers are instructed to adopt by various online guides. Social media platforms have further capitalized on this practice, integrating features within their websites and applications that allow users to edit their selfies.

Figure 1: Selfie guides from the English-language women's magazine *Allure* (left; https://www.allure.com/story/how-to-take-good-selfies) and the Danish women's magazine *Vie Unge* (right; http://www.viunge.dk/mit-liv/guides/tag-det-perfekte-selfie).
The text on the right reads, 'Take the perfect selfie. It has gotten really popular to take selfies and upload them, especially to Instagram – but how do you take the exact perfect selfie? Find out here!'

In popular culture, selfie-taking is often negatively described as a feminine activity, undertaken by vain and vapid young women (Burns 2015). The norm is for women to be more concerned with their appearance on social media and thus to more tightly control the quality of their selfies (McLaughlin & Vitak 2011, also see Veum & Undrum 2018). At the same time, they are under pressure to appear flawless due to societal forces such as sexism, ageism, and heteronormativity (Tiidenberg & Gomez 2015).

Snapchat presents one such platform on which selfies are used for communication of various kinds. Playing on the term *snapshot*, Snapchat is a free multimodal smartphone app through which users can send photos overlaid with text, emojis, and doodles (Piwek & Joinson 2016). Importantly, at the time of the study these messages were time-limited, with a maximum viewing time of ten seconds, and were automatically deleted afterward. (The data for this study were collected in 2015; Snapchat now allows for untimed messages.) Snapchat messages, or *snaps*, as they are termed by users, can either be sent individually and privately to other users within the sender's contact list (one-to-one communication) or uploaded to the user's "story", which allows for all members of the sender's contact list to view the message for twenty-four hours (one-to-many communication). According to Snapchat's own statistics[1], the medium has 188 million daily active users globally. In Denmark, Snapchat is overwhelmingly used by teenagers; 91% of those aged 15 to 18 have a Snapchat account (Statistics Denmark 2016: 72). The Danish teenagers discussed in this paper reported that they used Snapchat for daily peer communication together with other media (Facebook Messenger and Skype).

Along with photos of food, pets, friends, and consumer goods, a dominant subject of the Snapchat messages sent by the participants was selfies, a pattern that reflects practices found in other studies (Katz & Crocker 2015; Larsen & Kofoed 2016). The data were collected as part of an ethnographic study of two classes of 15-to-16-year-old teenagers in a school in

[1] https://investor.snap.com/~/media/Files/S/Snap-IR/press-release/q2-18-earnings-release.pdf

rural Denmark. During a period of six months of fieldwork, Kristine signed up for a Snapchat profile and asked the students if they would voluntarily add her to their Snapchat contacts with the purpose of collecting their messages as data. Twenty-five students agreed to connect (twelve girls and thirteen boys). Each student's online activity was screen-shot and archived. A Snapchat user is automatically notified by the application when her or his visual message is screen-shot by another user, so participants were continually made aware of the data collection process. The data collection resulted in a total of 1,080 visual messages. Out of the observed group of twenty-five students, only six (five girls and one boy) made daily updates to their "story." However, the frequency of private one-to-one exchanges was dramatically higher, with some correspondences involving up to 112 snaps within a period of twenty-four hours. These exchanges were collected by engaging students as data collectors and requesting them to save their one-on-one correspondences by screen-shooting their interactions.

The communicative multiplicity of a face

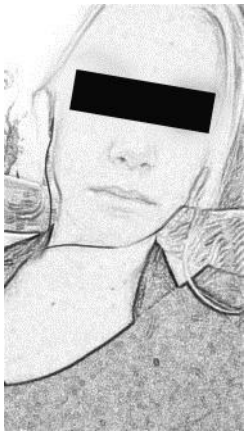
In the corpus examined here, the majority of selfies appear in one-to-one exchanges in which individual faces can make up an entire turn. In Figure 2, taken from a correspondence between the best friends Andrea and Stine (the names are pseudonyms), five sequential turns consist exclusively of selfies with more or less indistinct facial expressions. In fact, very little variation is apparent in this exchange of selfies. (Eyes are obscured and some images are altered with filters to preserve participant anonymity).

Figure 2: A sequence of indistinct selfies between Stine and Andrea.

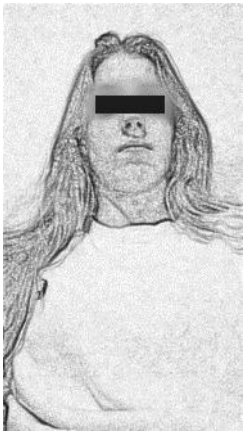
Stine 01

Andrea 02

Stine 03



Andrea 04



Stine 05

Whereas in language-related fields faces have been studied in conjunction with verbal messages as an additional mode of expression (e.g., Chovil 1991), in these Snapchat correspondences faces are the sole mode through which messages are communicated and interpreted. Such sequences consisting exclusively of selfies have been termed "selfie conversations" (Katz & Crocker 2015: 1867).

In the selfie sequence between Stine and Andrea in Figure 2, the face may be understood as equivalent to the neutral face in identification papers: a sign of existence and subjectivity. Yet these faces are not neutral in the sense that they are unengaged. On the contrary, the visual messages seem to communicate deep engagement, as both participants direct their gazes at the viewer (i.e., each other). In the framework of visual grammar, a gaze directed to the camera is termed a "demand" since it draws the viewer in and "demands some kind of imaginary relation with him or her" (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2006: 118). By sending photos of their faces with neutral or indistinct expressions, Stine and Andrea seem to construct an ongoing togetherness through the photographic presence of their faces. This shared moment is stretched out temporally by the continuous back-and-forth, and thus the multiplicity of photographically depicted faces comes to enact a sense of co-presence over time.

In contrast to the ways in which the selfie on social media is often characterized – putting one's best face forward – Andrea and Stine choose to depict their faces without any attempt to polish the representation, apart from tilted heads, which may index femininity (Goffman 1979). The lighting appears coincidental, their clothing and hair are casual, and there are no clear signs of makeup on their faces.

This less polished way of presenting one's face on Snapchat corresponds with the media ideologies (Gershon 2010) expressed by the teenagers in interviews. When asked how one should act and appear on the various social media that they used, the participants were very articulate in expressing different requirements for different media. The fact that they appeared less polished and more relaxed in their Snapchat selfies did not mean that they did not orient to popular culture's taste for "the flawless face" shown in girls' magazines and blogs. A number of the participants revealed that they did not have an image of themselves on their Facebook profiles because they did not think they had a photo that was pretty enough for this more public platform. A number of the girls who were frequent Instagram users made a clear distinction between Snapchat and Instagram, explaining that Instagram, unlike Snapchat, required beautiful photos. In fact, sending an extremely polished selfie on Snapchat would be awkward, according to the participants.

Kristine was able to explore this ideology further at a party she attended with some of the students. As she was sitting next to a boy, Anton, who was taking a Snapchat selfie on his smartphone, she noticed that he was adjusting his hair and asked him why, since she had gotten the impression that appearance did not matter on Snapchat. Another boy, David, offered an elaborate explanation of how the level of ugliness in a photo had to be adjusted to how well the sender knew the receiver. Only a little ugliness could be revealed to new contacts, whereas full-blown ugliness could be sent exclusively to close friends. David even went so far as to say that one could measure the closeness of a friendship based on the level of ugliness one was comfortable showing in a Snapchat photo.

Doing ugliness

In line with David's description, we found that ugliness was mostly displayed between close friends in their one-to-one Snapchat interactions. Thus, faces were not only depicted in the less polished, indistinct displays apparent in the correspondence between Stine and Andrea in

Figure 2 above, but these ranged on a continuum from conventional expressions (smiling, blinking, etc.) to hyper-exaggerated displays in which the face was manipulated into extreme expressions that often seemed to be deliberately drawing on ugliness, and to some extent also grossness and obscenity. In the material eyes and eyebrows are anonymized and therefore not visible to the reader. Most often these features were also engaged in manipulating the face by raising or wrinkling the eyebrows. A few poses were repeatedly used in these ugly displays, suggesting the existence of more or less generic ways of "doing being ugly." The most extensively used feature was that of tucking one's chin down and positioning the camera in a close-up worm's-eye view to produce a double chin, as seen in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Double chins in Snapchat photos.

2.1

2.2

2.3

2.4

Text: Ja virkelig, skal være lækker den dag!!
Translation: Yeah really, need to be hot on that day!!

2.5

The double chin seems to play on the feature of obesity, which is stereotypically disassociated with ideal feminine beauty. Figure 3d in particular demonstrates how the deliberate ugliness of these photos contrasts with the girls' carefully polished appearance in other contexts such as school or Instagram photos. Katrine here constructs a contrast between photo and text as she writes about being 'hot' or sexually desirable (*lækker*) while visually producing a double chin. The message derives from a one-to-one exchange between Katrine

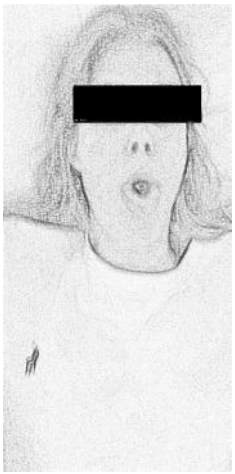
and her close friend, Maria, in which they discuss a planned visit to a restaurant where Katrine's crush works. The text is thus embedded in a sequence about desire and potential romance. Katrine here announces that she needs to be 'hot' on the day she goes to visit the restaurant and see the boy she has a crush on. Rather than accompanying this message with a photo of a beautiful face, she produces designed ugliness. The display of ugliness may function as an ironic metacomment on the more serious message and thus position Katrine as less invested in the potential romantic relationship. Alternatively, it may be a way of balancing serious talk about boys while maintaining intimacy in her homosocial relationship with Maria, or it may be a counterintuitive way of emphasizing her own high status on the heterosexual market by momentarily playing with unattractiveness and obesity, only to reveal a beautiful face beneath. We will return to this last point – whether ugly faces can reinforce beauty – in the next section.

In the examples above, the chin is not the only manipulated feature. Mouths, eyes, and eyebrows are engaged in various ways to distort these faces, in contrast to the feminine flawless face. Other common acts of modulating one's facial appearance into ugliness consisted in playing around with bodily orifices, mainly by producing facial close-ups with the camera pointing up one's nostrils or by opening one's mouth and exposing one's tongue or half-eaten food. The examples below illustrate instances of such varieties of ugliness.

Figure 4: Manipulating bodily orifices in Snapchat photos.

3.1

3.2

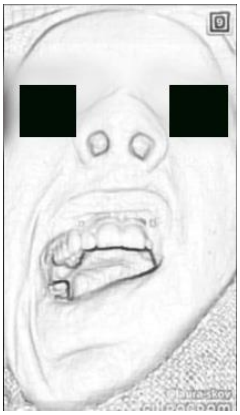


3.3

Text: Ved ik hvad jeg skrev
Translation: Don't know what I wrote

3.5

3.6



3.7

Text: Omg nederen!!!!!!
Translation: Omg downer!!!!!!

Similarly, displaying bodily fluids such as blood, mucus, vomit, pus, and so on recurred again and again not only online on Snapchat but also offline in school. The purpose seemed to be to prompt a grossed-out response from the receiver. This practice is similar to a more general gross-out discourse seen in men's magazines such as For Him Magazine. Based on a study of a group conversation among men reading the gross-out sections of men's magazines, Bethan Benwell (2011) points out three motivations for consuming such images: fascination, entertainment or humor (laughing at the expense of someone else), and demonstrating a measure of courage and thus hegemonic masculinity. However, among the Danish teenagers in our study engagement with grossness is apparent across gender boundaries. Another difference is that in the Snapchat data the humor and entertainment does not function through othering but instead works by exposing oneself as ugly or gross. The third motivation listed by Benwell, displaying courage, seems more relevant for understanding the social meaning of the ugliness practices among these teenagers on Snapchat. Daring to be ugly and gross may very well be a way of performing coolness. Having the courage to appear less attractive in a contemporary world of flawless social media images may work to position oneself as relaxed, humorous, and thus cool.

As illustrated in the examples above, performed ugliness follows recurrent patterns which indicate a shared set of norms among the participants for how this practice is enacted. Among these teenagers, "legitimate" ugly faces do not necessarily violate the social order when enacted in the right way. Knowing how to create the correct ugly face may be a skill that marks the user as socially competent. What may appear as a subversive act on the surface is performed within commonly shared boundaries that constitute an accepted ugliness. These shared norms constitute an "aesthetics of ugliness" (cf. Rosenkranz [1853] 2015): a system of particular recurrent and recognizable versions of ugliness that do not conform with the beauty ideal.

In support of this claim is the fact that the most frequent users of Snapchat at the time of data collection were the most popular girls within the school, who were often classically attractive and involved in romantic relationships with boys. In contrast, the unpopular girls were less active on Snapchat and much less likely to post ugly selfies. In fact, only one of the less popular girls made frequent uploads to her Snapchat, and these photos mainly catalogued food and her daily activities with her family (watching TV, drinking coffee, and so on).

Social functions of ugly faces

Since these data were collected in 2015, Snapchat has introduced ways of altering facial images. The application now offers filters that alter facial traits in various ways (e.g., enlarging the mouth or the forehead, minimizing the eyes, adding accessories such as hats or glasses). This feature may be viewed as a digital development of the traditional entertainment of funhouse mirrors in which visitors get a laugh by viewing distorted versions of themselves. The practice of making ugly faces and sending the photos to close friends may likewise function as entertainment and play, thereby strengthening solidarity (Coates 2007). Sharing and posting ugly selfies can thus be understood as a way of signifying and building intimacy between friends. By sending a friend an ugly selfie, the user removes her idealized social media mask and manipulates her face into a grotesque and humorous image, which allows the receiver both to view the sender in a potentially risky moment and to get a good laugh.

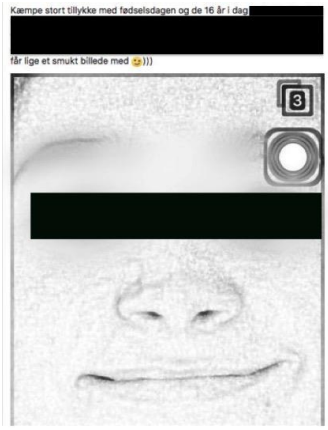
The fact that this practice of ugliness is carried out in the ephemeral context of Snapchat may be explained by the affordances of the medium. The automatic deletion of messages after a maximum of ten seconds, as well as the app's notification of the sender if the receiver chooses to take a screen shot of the message, makes the sender's ugliness transient and to

some extent controllable. Sharing ugly faces indicates a level of trust between the interlocutors that the receiver will not share the unflattering selfie and abuse the closeness of the interaction.

However, these intimate moments of putting one's ugly face forward are not limited to the ephemeral context of Snapchat, but are in fact shared on the much larger and more public platform of Facebook as part of ritual birthday greetings (Figures 5 and 6).

Figure 5: Ugly face in a Facebook birthday greeting sent by Nadia
The text reads, 'A big happy birthday Simone <3 Hope you've had a nice day so far and that'll of course continue that way! ;D I love and miss you a lot <3 – Here are a couple of photos for you?'.

Figure 6: Ugly face in a Facebook birthday greeting sent by Mia.
The text reads, 'A great happy birthday with your sixteen years today sweet Simone. I hope you've had a fantastic day with your nearest and dearest. You're really a world-class friend who puts others before yourself and who'll always do anything for your friend. I love you and really care for you and I hope you know that <3 – here's a beautiful picture for you ;))))



Importantly, photographs of ugly faces are not shared randomly on Facebook walls but are carefully crafted into ritual greetings that only appear once a year on the receiver's birthday. The ugly faces are embedded in video collages that are usually crafted with the help of the smartphone app Flipagram, which allow users to build audiovisual collages of still photos and short videos and to add background music. These birthday collages do not exclusively contain ugly faces but are mixed with other photos depicting the person more favorably and, importantly, are accompanied with heavily affectionate textual messages stressing the caring and loving relationship between sender and receiver. In contrast to the negative consequences that one might expect from the public disclosure of privately shared ugly faces, the public demonstration of such moments appears to carry a strong positive social value. Sharing ugly faces of close friends within the Facebook network functions as a reenactment and social display of closeness.

Within our study, popular girls received the vast majority of these birthday greetings on their Facebook walls. Receiving large numbers of such carefully designed greetings attested to how many close friends the receiver had and thus became evidence of the level of exclusive intimacy she shared with others. By posting ugly selfies of one another, popular girls marketed themselves as skilled in this social practice as well as so confident and desirable that that they could afford for their ugly faces to appear publicly. A possible further interpretation is that these girls are empowering themselves by breaking traditional feminine beauty norms of the flawless face (Lee 2005; Tiidenberg & Gomez 2015). However, the fact that this practice was overwhelmingly carried out by girls considered to be good-looking indicates that the ugliness is artificial and transient in character. Displaying an ugly face can be a way to emphasize one's attractive status by demonstrating that one can afford to look ugly. The ugly faces on Snapchat thus function both as a challenge to beauty norms and as a reinscription of these same norms by further manifesting the exclusive status of the popular girl.

Conclusion: Faces in action

In this investigation of the faces enacted and circulated among Danish teenagers in their quotidian digital media practices, we have argued that faces should be analyzed in the plural rather than the singular. Such an approach allows us to see the many faces that a single social actor puts forward in different contexts. The face one chooses to display on Instagram is not the same as the face one displays in a private one-to-one Snapchat exchange with a close friend. This study makes evident that faces are not simply important interactional resources for one-to-one communication, but that they also carry large-scale social meaning: They place the owner and the viewer or receiver in larger networks and thus constitute a powerful symbol of social capital. Variation in the presentation of the face needs to be studied in close relation to the social structures in which it is embedded, since such structures may determine who can vary their faces in which ways.

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