

An Analysis of New Media's Appreciation of Ugliness

— Anti-Performance and Anti-Authority in Postmodern Contexts

Jun Zhai^{1,a,*}

¹College of Digital Communication and Humanities, Hunan University of Technology and Business,
Changsha, Hunan Province, 410000, China

a.15754088421@163.com

*corresponding author

Abstract: In the era of information virtualization, entertainment expression has become the ideological tendency of public discourse. Under the dual drive of technical support and market interests, the appreciation of ugliness has been transformed into individual alienation and emotional behaviour, rebelling against the traditional concept of beauty in cognition and forming a popular and spreading trend of network with grotesqueness, ugliness, and specialisation as symbols. This paper will combine psychological and sociological theories, take the popularity of Nikocado Avocado on YouTube as an example, explore the root causes of the proliferation of ugliness appreciation in today's new media, and further propose ways to purify the social aesthetic environment. Through this study, it was found that the essential reasons are as follows: First, the anti-authority and anti-elite cultural atmosphere formed in the post-modern context makes people more willing to deconstruct beautiful things and oppose traditional mainstream aesthetics; Second, personal jealousy produces subconscious confrontation against beautiful things; third, in order to attract the flow brought by new media and satisfy economic interests, ugliness is performed. To solve this problem, the government needs to play an important role in the media and strengthen the auditing of Internet content. At the same time, relevant departments should disseminate correct aesthetic concepts in society and strengthen the aesthetic education of teenagers.

Keywords: new media, aesthetic alienation, postmodernism, dramaturgical theory

1. Introduction

Western scholars' research in the field of the concept of aesthetic ugliness is limited, mainly focusing on the aesthetic aspects of new media and ignoring the phenomenon of ugliness, among which Douglas, N. explored Internet Ugly in meme culture, but only limited to the level of meme culture and two-dimensional art, such as cartoons and pictures [1]. Chinese scholars have more related research in this field, mostly from the perspective of consumerism and psychology, but seldom combine multiple theories with communication and lack of summarizing and generalizing the specific causes of the phenomenon of ugliness, but they all propose solutions to improve the Internet environment. For example, Yuan Liyuan explores the aesthetic characteristics of the news phenomenon of ugliness and believes that the appreciation of ugliness as an emotional activity is

just a distorted experience of aesthetic pleasure, and the audience's psychological drivers cause the popularity of clowning [2]; Yan Zhuo believes that the era of self-media has completely subverted the monopoly of the discourse of the traditional media and has greatly stimulated the youth's willingness to express themselves [3]. The network ugly culture causes aesthetic aberration and value erosion among young people, and it is necessary for education, technology and legislation to make concerted efforts to get rid of the humanistic crisis; Zhu Yixin and Cong Hongyan explored the ugly psychology of short video audience based on the theory of use and satisfaction, and came to the conclusion that the ugly is originated from the consumer supremacy and the popular culture of "entertainment to the death", and believed that the aesthetic viewpoints and values in the traditional sense have been deconstructed, which caused the audience to lose and disorganize the aesthetic value and aesthetic standard, and the aesthetic standard has been lost and disorganized [4]. It is believed that traditional aesthetics and values have been deconstructed, causing the audience's aesthetic value and aesthetic standard to be lost and disordered, and presenting a collective unconscious state. The differences between Chinese and Western cultures and aesthetic habits have led to differences in their study of this topic. First of all, the popular trend of aesthetic ugliness has caused certain negative social impacts in China, and then the Chinese government realized that excessive aesthetic ugliness has become an undesirable trend and made policy guidance and adjustments before a research hotspot was formed. Chinese scholars have already matured their research in this area, but foreign academics have not done much research on the subject of ugliness, and the definition of beauty is also more complicated and broad. Therefore, this paper will continue the research of the Chinese side in the context of new media, take some Western communication and psychological theories not covered by the Chinese side as the basis, and analyse the advantages of the research of both sides, so as to find out the deep-rooted reasons for the emergence of the ugly phenomenon and its wide dissemination. The research methods used in this paper are the case analysis method and the literature method. Combining various theories, we will study the root causes of the popularity of the ugly phenomenon from the macro and micro, social and personal perspectives, and then propose solutions to correct the ugly trend so as to provide a good future cyberspace for the youth and a correct aesthetic atmosphere of the new media in society.

2. New Media Context

2.1. New Media

The term new media was coined by P. Goldenmark, director of the CES Institute of Technology in the United States, in a commodity development programme. In the era of traditional media, McLuhan, H. M. argued that electronic media enable us to free ourselves from the perceptual slavery of media. The concept of new media today is expressed in many ways [5]. For example, Xiong Chengyu believes that new media, or digital media or network media, is the sum of media built on the basis of computer information processing technology and the Internet, which performs the function of dissemination [6]; Gong Chengbo believes that web portals, search engines, virtual communities, e-mail, online literature, and online games belong to new media [7].

The digitalisation of technology and the interactivity of communication are the essential characteristics of new media communication, and the concept of the word "new" is changing with the development of the times, and it has already been heading towards infinite integration, developing to the stage of "media 3.0", i.e. "we media". The widespread participation of the general public and the popularity of civilian discourse have allowed new media to be integrated into people's daily lives, and people are using new media to create and disseminate content all the time. The rapid transmission of information gives people more opportunities to get in touch with new things, influences the construction of people's thinking and the updating of their concepts, and

further promotes the development of communication theories, but it also creates some negative impacts, such as people becoming more dependent on or even addicted to the new media and the Internet, the process of communication becoming more disordered, and the quality of the content of communication becoming lower.

2.2. Definition of Aesthetics/Objectification

Aesthetics is people's experience, judgement, ability to perceive beautiful things and tendency to pursue beauty. Aesthetic activities include aesthetic consciousness, aesthetic judgement, aesthetic emotion and aesthetic appreciation. Welsch, W. argues that once upon a time people's aesthetics was a matter of high needs needing to be fulfilled, whereas today a low level of demand is sufficient, and pleasing the senses is the embodiment of aesthetics [8]. Aesthetic needs have approached the realm of instinct, but the dichotomy of elegance and vulgarity is still largely associated with the term 'aesthetic'. With regard to ugliness, Guo Furong argues that ugliness is, in a sense, a kind of human complement to "aesthetics" [9]. The post-modern aesthetics of brokenness, mutilation and ugliness bring visual pleasure, highlighting and affirming the aesthetic value of "aesthetic ugliness". However, the appreciation of ugliness on the Internet is the behaviour of paying attention to, scrutinizing, and pursuing the things and people who vulgarly and viciously show their ugliness in the hot events on the network. Its formation is the result of organic promotion by a number of interest subjects, including the object of scandal, netizens, media and businesses.

3. Introduction to Nikocado Avocado and How It Exploded in Popularity

Nikocado Avocado is a YouTube food blogger with an extremely exaggerated style of videos featuring binge eating and emotional outbursts. He currently has over 6 million subscribers to all of his YouTube channels. He was abandoned by his parents when he was a child, and family reasons led him to take antidepressants from the age of seven, as well as being diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. This experience led Nick to develop a personality that craved attention and recognition, saying, "I wanted the spotlight to be on me; I wanted people to pay attention to me."

In 2014 he started updating YouTube videos and officially became an eating blogger. At that time, he was still a vegetarian with no more than 100,000 followers, and almost all the food he ate in his videos was avocado, pasta, and vegetables. However, he soon realized that netizens were not satisfied with just watching him eat healthy meals, and that the higher the calorie count and the larger the portion size, the more likely he would be able to win viewers' hearts, which was also the unanimously recognized "traffic code" in the food blogging world at the time. He began uploading videos of his overeating almost daily, and the excessive amounts of food he ate not only caused him to become physically obese, but also appeared to cause problems with his mental health. He showed more and more extreme emotions and bad mental states in his videos, often breaking down and crying while eating. Nick acknowledged the audience's tendency towards ugliness in his interviews, and many of the videos that showed his agitated emotions and bizarre eating got very high airtime. His second most played video, which has been played 15.94 million times, 'EXTREME BLUE TAKIS FIRE NOODLES WITH HUNGRY FAT CHICK — Mukbang & Recipe', features him eating a super-sized portion with an obese woman eating an over-sized portion of blue noodles, and the 8.48 million times played video 'DAEBAK GHOST PEPPER NOODLE CHALLENGE-THE WORLD'S SPICIEST RAMEN — Mukbang & Recipe' is a showcase of eating extra spicy noodles and extremely distorted facial expressions with sometimes cranky and sometimes frustrated emotions. This has become the reason why he continues to damage his body and exaggerate his

performances.” They like it when I’m upset; they like it when I’m crying; they like it when I’m hyper.”

4. The Impact of Postmodernism on New Media Aesthetics

Postmodern culture proposes a marginality that subverts traditional centrality, replaces profundity with flatness, and replaces monolithic narratives with multiple narratives. Sontag, S. put forward the slogan “Against Interpretation” to criticize the modern mode of interpretation, which seeks depth [10]. This also shows the basic characteristics of postmodern culture, including flatness, popular interest, and anti-elitism. People are against deliberate performance, against mainstream authoritative aesthetics, and question everything. This has caused the original aesthetic system to be deconstructed into fragmented masses of interest, creating a trend of disorder. New media provide a platform and catalyst for accelerated deconstruction. Since the essence of postmodernism is intellectual anti-rationalism, moral cynicism, and sensual pleasureism”, the process of deconstruction has become hedonistic and sensual, following only the most primitive emotional instincts, thus confusing the boundaries between beauty and ugliness.

5. Personal Reasons for the Tendency Towards Ugliness under Freud Psychology

According to Freud, the “subconscious” is the part of the human spirit that occupies the largest and most primitive part of the human mind [11]; the “subconscious” is pressed in the deepest and lowest layers but is the most active and always manages to surface on the surface of consciousness. Under the new media, the deep emotional needs of the communicators and receivers, as well as the drive of the subconscious mind, become the key reasons for triggering the “ugly” behaviour. In aesthetics, people pursue the expression and presentation of the real side of things, while in the field of communication, the subconscious power within the audience also plays a role in promoting information dissemination activities.

A great deal of attention is paid to those characters and things that are considered “ugly”, which, on the one hand, enables the audience to vent and release the negative “subconscious” emotions hidden in the deepest and lowest layers of their hearts; on the other hand, in the psychological traits of preserving self-esteem and seeking recognition for differences, the audience also obtains a certain degree of compensation emotionally. On the other hand, under the psychological characteristics of maintaining self-esteem and seeking different recognition, the audience also obtains a certain degree of emotional compensation. The act of clowning maps out what Freud called the “subconscious” emotions of the individual, which are either repressed, full of jealousy, full of indignation, or feeling despondent. Nikocado Avocado’s action satisfies the curiosity of a large number of viewers, whose overweight body shape and broken emotions make them feel a sense of their own status quo. His overweight body shape and broken emotions gave these viewers a sense of satisfaction with their current situation and a monstrous sense of self-esteem in comparison to him. Some overweight people even gave up losing weight after watching his videos, thinking that “there is always someone worse off than me”.

6. An Analysis from the Perspective of Goffman’s Dramaturgy

American sociologist Goffman, E. introduced the idea of theatre into sociological research and formed the theory of Dramaturgy [12]. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman systematically explained the concept of “persona”. He believes that the mutual behaviour of people in social life is in a way a kind of performance, and each person is like an actor who performs on stage for the audience according to the requirements of certain roles in a specific scene. In social activities, people tend to hide their defects and show their better side, which is in line with the ideal

of social values, and this is the “persona”. Entertainment stars are more than happy to maintain consistency between front and backstage, or perhaps it is a necessity to ensure that their persona meets the approval of their fan base. Bernie Hogan argues that self-presentation on the internet has gone from a stage performance to an exhibition of “self”. Hogan, B. argues that self-presentation on the Internet has changed from a stage performance to an exhibition of “self”, and that this presentation of beauty is not real enough, and is presented for the sake of being presented [13]. People begin to feel disgusted and alienated by this beauty, and want to break away from the conventional persona and favour something ugly but more real and close to themselves. At the same time, this tendency generates waves on social media for its novelty, further sustained by the added commercial attributes, and with it, a plethora of characters chasing commercial gain for the output and dissemination of the ugly. These characters, no doubt emotionally or rationally aware of the importance of the art of impression management, are simply doing the opposite of what is expected of them, tearing down the expectations of society, deliberately ‘crashing’ the performance in front of the public, and intentionally bringing to the foreground behaviors that should be kept in the background to make a big splash in order to reach the public eye. They are what Goffman calls “incongruous characters”, and Nikocado Avocado’s videos are a kind of anti-mainstream performance, fighting against the mainstream netizens’ concepts of healthy eating and slimming, and creating his own negative persona, which is close to the real over-obese people and their sub-healthy state of mind. The negative emotions he displays in his videos are a manifestation of his “brokenness”, and it is this broken self-presentation that has brought him far more traffic than any other normal food blogger, thus earning him more video revenue and advertisement sponsorship.

7. Measures to Address the Prevalence of Ugly Trends

First, to improve the quality of new media workers and self-media creators, endeavour to improve the quality of content and encourage the creation of valuable and positive content in order to direct viewers’ attention to more useful information. Provide in-depth analyses and thought-provoking content, and reduce shallow, vulgar, and scandalous content; for example, for food bloggers, they can create more content about healthy diets, teaching viewers how to make reasonable nutritional combinations as well as spreading the right concept of caring for one’s body; and secondly, strengthen media regulation and the management of social media platforms. The government and industry associations can set stricter norms to curb unhealthy trends of aesthetic ugliness. Social media platforms can strengthen their censorship and management of harmful and vulgar content and take measures to limit the spread of undesirable content. At the same time, the media themselves should exercise self-discipline and follow professional ethics to avoid overly catering to the demand for clowning. Thirdly, media audience literacy education should be strengthened to cultivate critical thinking and aesthetic ability so that viewers can choose and consume content more rationally. These measures can complement each other to address the prevalence of ugly trends and create a healthier and more beneficial new media environment.

8. Conclusion

The essential reason for the emergence and popularity of the phenomenon of clowning is that, from a macroscopic point of view, in the post-modern context, an anti-authoritarian and anti-elite cultural atmosphere has been formed, and people are more willing to deconstruct things of beauty and oppose the traditional mainstream aesthetics. From a micropoint of view, the “ugly” is a purely subconscious confrontation, while the “ugly” is a complex demand mixed with commercialization. “Ugliness” is a subconscious catharsis of personal jealousy and resentment towards beauty and a confrontation with the false or real beauty created by others. But “pretending to be ugly” is the

reverse of thinking, rebelling against the general social persona moulding in order to satisfy the psychology of the audience of ugly people. This kind of anti-performance and showmanship is also a kind of performance, aiming at attracting traffic to satisfy economic interests. The solution to the proliferation of ugly phenomena should be based on the three perspectives of new media content creators, government and media platforms, and the audience of the communication content, and policy guidance and educational norms should be used to improve the media literacy and aesthetic ability of individuals, enterprises, and society as a whole so as to form a correct and positive aesthetic atmosphere. This paper only discusses the root causes of the formation of the ugly trend and the measures to solve it in the theoretical scope combined with the case study, but it lacks the practical research method. Therefore, in future research, this paper will use interviews and questionnaires to further understand the public's views on the ugly phenomenon and compare the aesthetic differences between different classes.

References

- [1] Douglas, N. (2014). *It's supposed to look like shit: The Internet ugly aesthetic*. *Journal of visual culture*, 13(3), 314-339.
- [2] Yuan, Li-Yuan. (2016). *Discussion on the aesthetic characteristics of "ugly" news phenomenon in new media environment*. *Western radio and television* (24), 28+36.
- [3] Yan Zhuo. (2021). *The logic of generation and the path of getting rid of adolescents' online ugly culture in the field of self-media*. *Basic Education Research* (04), 3-5.
- [4] Yi-Xin Zhu & Hong-Yan Cong. (2022). *Exploration of short video audience's ugly psychology based on use and satisfaction theory*. *Science and Technology Communication* (19), 128-131. doi:10.16607/j.cnki.1674-6708.2022.19.030.
- [5] McLuhan, H. M. (2010). *Understanding me: Lectures and interviews*. McClelland & Stewart.
- [6] Xiong, C. Y., Liao, Y. W. (2003). *New Media - The Sword of Damocles in the Iraq War*. *Chinese Journalist* (05).
- [7] Gong Chengbo. 2017. *Introduction to new media*. China Radio, Film and Television Press.
- [8] Welsch, W. (1997). *Undoing aesthetics*. Sage Publications Ltd.
- [9] Guo, Furong. (2012). *On the Rise of Online Scandalism and Its Ethical Misconceptions and Correction*. *China Youth Research*(10), 78-81. doi:10.19633/j.cnki.11-2579/d.2012.10.015.
- [10] Sontag, S. (2001). *Against interpretation: And other essays* (Vol. 52). Macmillan.
- [11] Freud, S. (1961). *The ego and the id*. *Academic Medicine*, 36(7), 846.
- [12] Goffman, E. (2016). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. In *Social Theory Re-Wired* (pp. 482-493). Routledge.
- [13] Hogan, B. (2010). *The presentation of self in the age of social media: Distinguishing performances and exhibitions online*. *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, 30(6), 377-386.