EXCELLENCES & PERFECTIONS
A paper about social identity and self-promotion

People behave differently alone than they do in social contexts. This fact is the point of origin of this paper, which examines a project named Excellences & Perfections, a social media performance concerning social identity and self-promotion on social media. Based on this project, this paper will give an account for the ascending self-promotion that takes place on modern-day social media. The project will be analyzed and discussed in a broader cultural context through the use of Roland Barthes’ trichotomy of the practice of photography and the terms noeme, studium, and punctum. Furthermore, Jill Walker’s theory about modes of self-representation on digital media and her description of technological, cultural, and cognitive filters will be included in the analysis and discussion.

The project ‘Excellences & Perfections’ was a social media performance that took place on Instagram and Facebook in 2014. It was created by the Spanish artist and blogger Amalia Ulman and had a duration of nearly five months. April 19th was the beginning of the project when Ulman posted the words ‘Part I’ on her Instagram account with the caption ‘Excellences & Perfections’. In the following months she uploaded images of her everyday life including dreams, expensive clothing and interior, a breast augmentation, boyfriends, and depression, which documented her personal development through time. Ulman’s Instagram account gained a myriad of followers of whom some supported her for being a role model, some criticized her for promoting wrong body ideals, and some harassed her with flirting and abusive comments.¹

What the followers did not detect was that it was all untrue and a part of a social experiment. Amalia Ulman created the project to show what social media have become and to demonstrate how easy it is to manipulate with the use of mainstream archetypes. Thus she created a fake online persona who matched all the things that social media wanted her to be. In this way, the followers followed an online persona’s everyday life, which was semifictitious and manipulated with the use of for example Photoshop and various technical means. The development of the character was divided into three sections where she went

¹ Connor (2014)
from being a newcomer in Los Angeles with big dreams to posting crazy and unscrupulous images and lastly to become a fashion and style blogger. This division was meant to partly show the development of content on social media and partly to reflect different typical archetypes on social media. On September 14 Ulman uploaded an image of a rose with the caption ‘THE END - EXCELLENCES AND PERFECTIONS’ and the project was at its end.²

In the project Ulman seeks to replicate the so-called mainstream archetypes of social media, the ones selling their lifestyle online, and she is successful with it because the persona seems trustworthy, seeing that it is an archetype that people know and have seen plenty of times before. Furthermore, the images of Ulman’s Instagram account seem believable because they reflect the specific actions at the specific moment when the photographs were taken, which can be designated as the *noeme* of photography. This is a term used by Roland Barthes, French philosopher and literature- and social theorist, who uses the term for the essence of a photography, the *that-has-been*, which assumes that photographs never lie. Barthes describes: “... every photograph is somehow co-natural with its referent, I was rediscovering, overwhelmed by the truth of the image... in Photography I can never deny that the thing has been there”.³ In the case of Amalia Ulman and the Excellences &

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² Connor (2014)  
³ Barthes (1981), p. 76
Perfections project the followers are fooled because they believe in the truth of the images, but the that-has-been idea is now inadequate and challenged because of modern technology which allows manipulation of the existing and therefore the truth. This result in no possible way of knowing whether the observed object is genuine or not, irrespective of whether it is on social media, in magazines or the like.

At the same time, the development of technology has also led to a redefinition of the role of the photographer. The photographer is now more than just the person taking the picture. Roland Barthes outlines a trichotomy of the practice of photography which consists of: an operator, the photographer, spectrum, the object being photographed, and the spectator, the person observing the photograph. Through time the role of the operator has expanded and the operator is now often also the spectrum and the spectator at the same time. This is particularly true on social media such as Instagram where self-promotion has led to a large amount of selfies where the photographer is both the operator and the spectrum. Amalia Ulman mirrors the tendency on Instagram by being the photographer but also often the one being photographed. Furthermore, she is also a spectator. She is aware of people’s self-consciousness on social media and the fact that we as people know that we are being observed by other people and judged on the basis of the images we upload. As Barthes describes it: “In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art”. In this manner, social media is also used as a way of reflecting upon one’s identity by being a spectator as well as the photographer. In this way, self-representation through digital technologies can be seen as self-documentation and a way to reflect upon self-improvement and self-knowledge. With modern technology it has become easier to both create and share our self-representations and remove or alter certain aspects of them, which is exactly what Amalia Ulman tries to shed light on with her project.

This alteration of self-representations can take place in both the choice of images and manipulation of them but also in the selection of the appertaining text. This is something Jill Walker Rettberg, professor in digital culture, has been researching. Walker lines up

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5 Oxforddictionaries.com
7 Walker (2014), p. 11
three distinct modes of self-representation which can be used as a reflection upon one’s social identity: written-, visual, and quantitative self-representations. The written self-representation can take the form of for example autobiographies, personal diaries, novels, and blogs which came into existence the moment people learned how to read and write. The visual self-representation constitutes the majority of the content on today’s social media with for example photographs, selfies, and performance- and video-art. However, this mode of self-representation has existed for a long period of time, seeing that people have always portrayed themselves through sketches, paintings, and later photographs. The third and final mode is the quantitative self-representation which involves data of all sorts; lists, maps, graphs, to-do-lists, activity trackers, and so on. Through time the three modes have been interwoven because of the digital culture of the modern age and on Amalia Ulman’s Instagram account, she uses all three modes, which is often the case on social media such as Instagram. In Ulman’s case, the visual- and written self-representation is expressed through the many images she has uploaded and the quotes, hashtags, and descriptive captions she has chosen, which set the scene and categorizes the content so it is possible for her to fit into the typical and coveted archetype. Additionally, she spent a lot of time researching the conventions of the people living the lives of these archetypes which resulted in a carefully planned schedule of the pace, timing, and number of uploaded images, which can be described as the third mode, quantitative self-representation. By using the three modes of self-representation correctly she appeared authentic and real. Through this manipulative practice, people try to turn everyday life into an aesthetic experience for the spectators and you could argue whether social media has become a work of art instead of simply just communication as it was firstly intended.

Self-representation through filters

As users of social media we choose the things we want to see and the things we want to show. Filters have become metaphors for technology’s ability to alter texts, photos, and other online data, but these filters are not only technical effects, as the ones available on Instagram or Amalia Ulman’s use of Photoshop editing to look thinner. Filters can also be

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9 Walker (2014), p. 4 - 5
11 Connor (2014)
cultural or cognitive or even a combination of both.\textsuperscript{12} However, social media’s technological filters are constrained; meaning that the user has multiple, but still limited, choices to express oneself which have an influence on one’s online behavior.\textsuperscript{13} Furthermore, the cultural filters constrain our use of social media as well. Cultural filters include the norms and expectations connected to the use and understanding of social media. These often instinctive rules and conventions take part in guiding us as users to fit into the multitude and look better. Filters have become such a big part of our reality that it is impossible to avoid it from having an impact on the culture and the way we experience the world and each other.\textsuperscript{14} As seen with the Excellences & Perfections project, the uploaded data have an impact on the spectators whether this is admiration or criticism. In general, people inspire other people and mainstream archetypes emerge. Other spectators then pursue the lives of these archetypes, which seem like the unattainable, who perhaps are also filtered, manipulated, and therefore fictional, as in the case with Amalia Ulman.

The fact that the project had an impact on a large amount of people can be described with the terms \textit{studium} and \textit{punctum}, which were created by Roland Barthes. The term ‘studium’ refers to the general interest one has in studying a photo. The photo does not necessarily have to evoke emotional associations but the interest is present. Punctum, however, can evoke emotions as, for instance, desire, happiness, or melancholy because the photograph has an emotional connection to one’s culture; knowledge, memories, and previous experiences. One does not seek this emotional connection, it occurs unknowingly when observing the photograph depending on one’s previous experiences.\textsuperscript{15} By actively choosing to look at the images on Amalia Ulman’s Instagram account, a certain form of interest is apparent. Still, this is not tantamount to spectators having an emotional connection to the images and to Amalia Ulman. However, Ulman’s large number of followers indicates that multiple spectators feel an emotional connection to the things she uploads, which is also reflected in the reactions the account received. No matter the reason for the many people following her on her social media, they follow her and react as they do because the images, and captions, correspond to their culture and their memories and previous experiences.

\textsuperscript{12} Walker (2014), p. 20  
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid (2014), p. 23  
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid (2014), p. 24  
\textsuperscript{15} Barthes (1981), p. 25 + 26
Conclusion

People behave differently alone than they do in social contexts. This fact is apparent on social media as Facebook and Instagram, where the users are aware of the way they appear online and how their photos, status updates, etc. are interpreted. The development of technology has made it easier to manipulate this self-representation, meaning that filters and the like are largely used to polish one’s social identity to appear as desired. In this way, it is about selling one’s lifestyle, which questions the validity of the content of modern-day social media and whether it has become a platform of manipulated art instead of diary-like documentation as first intended. Even though Amalia Ulman’s project, Excellences & Perfections, is a piece of performance art, it is also a critique of using the media in the same way she pretends to do. With the project, Ulman analyses the mainstream archetype on social media, replicates it, and thereby achieves recognition on a fraudulent foundation by ‘fooling’ the followers and by doing so, highlighting that sometimes it is not the truth that you see.
Literature


