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VISUAL TRUST ON SOCIAL MEDIA – MEANING, MONEY AND MOTIVATION

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The 2020s have been characterized by a deep crisis of trust and legitimacy (Bennett and Livingstone 2020), which is linked in a myriad of complex ways to digital technologies and modes of communication. Whereas existing work predominantly discusses trust in human-to-human relationships, or as something to be measured and evoked-in-design in human-technology interactions, we are interested in human experiences of trust when human relationships are mediated by screens. A trusting relation emerges when motivations, commitments and at times the character of the agent to be trusted are inferred; a person can be trusted to fulfil specific commitments, although they might later break this trust. Trust is hence future oriented, and associated with risk (Ess 2020) and uncertainty (Tsfati and Cappella 2003). It is used as a heuristic to decide whom to trust particular tasks, bits of information, or social or economic capital to.

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Our project focuses specifically on the role of the visual in building trustworthy relations. Because of the human efficiency in processing visual information, visuality tends to be experienced as more trustworthy than other communicative modes (Sundar 2008), yet we are rather poor at evaluating the reliability of images (Lehmuskallio, Häkkinen, Seppänen 2018). Images are routinely used to grab attention, generate engagement, mobilize affect and signal reliability. Yet, with each shift in visualizing technologies, images are also viewed with more and more doubt. Today, thus, all visuals, particularly digital visuals, exist in a tension between trustworthiness and suspicion (Mirzoeff 2015).

As visual trust is a broad topic to explore with research participants, we have focused our inquiry on the topic of everyday health and wellbeing. While popular on visual social media, it introduces complexities of its own. On platforms like Instagram or TikTok, users' feeds are populated by very different actors, content, formats and positions on health and wellbeing: the vegan food blogger's recipe video can be followed by a post from a public media outlet about the lack of psychotherapy support, an infographic about endometriosis will come after a video about the morning routine of a steroid-agnostic weightlifting influencer. How do users orient themselves in this complex field, which visual content and actors are seen as credible, trustworthy and/or authentic and why? What role do communities, technical structures, institutional authorities, etc. play in this?

This panel brings together five papers that explore how visual digital trust is experienced and made sense of. Based on (auto)ethnographic, interview, document and social media data generated as part of a multi-national research project, we analyze how people (18 – 30 YO social media users who routinely engage with everyday health and wellbeing content on social media and content creators who routinely create such content) experience and articulate what makes it trustworthy and what does not. We are finding that trust is often too abstract for social media users to address directly, rather it is experienced and articulated via norms and practices of (in)authenticity, relatability, coherence, credibility, authority.

Our first paper explores how social media users experience and make sense of content creator (in)authenticity as an important component of trust. Having established that authenticity is critical to visual digital trust, we then move to our second paper, which explores social media users' comparative practices (determining what is and is not authentic) as fundamental to how users see images on social media. It describes a way of looking the author terms 'distributed seeing,' which focuses both - on specific details in an image and evaluates an image or set of images in relation to other images elsewhere. Seeing an image as trustworthy emerges from relations between images over time and across platforms. Our third paper focuses specifically on social media users' perceptions of content creators' commercial motivation. It explores how research participants distinguished between branding, influencing and advertising, and how they identified commercial motivations and trustworthiness through visual signifiers. Our fourth paper discusses the role of workout and training content. It analyzes the relevance of how bodies are represented and how the different ways of relating to these

images translate into embodiments of trust. Finally, our fifth paper investigates negotiations of health expertise and authority as building blocks of trust, by exploring the public controversy surrounding the admission of German YouTube channel *Liebscher & Bracht* into the designated "Health"-program of the platform.

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“WHEN A PERSON APPEARS HUMAN, NOT IN SOME IDEALIZED WAY,” PERCEPTIONS OF CONTENT CREATOR AUTHENTICITY AMONG THEIR AUDIENCES

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Social media authenticity takes a myriad of often contradictory forms. What is perceived as authentic for a celebrity, or an influencer differs from what is perceived as authentic for an ordinary person (Marwick 2015). Norms of authenticity vary also based on gender, class and race (Duffy and Hund 2019; Potts and Stebleton 2023); specific criteria of authenticity have been noted to apply to different topics like fashion or fitness (Reade 2021; Duffy 2019). Apps and platforms have different perceived authenticity affordances (Maddox 2023, Duguay 2017). All the while, and despite authenticity being conceptualized as performative, contextual and situational across literature, it is still experienced and enacted on social media as something that has real social, cultural, political and economic value (Hund 2023; Serazio 2023).

An important and ever-growing body of work analyzes the authenticity practices and performances of social media influencers and content-creators (cf. Abidin 2022). This presentation builds on that literature but takes a slightly different empirical angle. We look at how content creator and influencer authenticity is made sense of by their audiences. Based on social media wayfaring interviews (n=47) with young-adult social media users in Estonia and UK, we analyze how they define and operationalize the authenticity of social media creators who produce content broadly within the thematic realm of everyday health and wellbeing (fitness, beauty, mental health, etc.).

Authentic in an inauthentic space

Our participants were broadly skeptical about the possibility of authenticity on social media. However, they still relied on a variety of authenticity-related criteria in their articulations of why they follow and unfollow specific creators, engage with specific content or maintain judgements on ideas put forth in it. Further, our participants seemed very much aware of how complicated it is to appear authentic in platformed attention economies.

> *“Nobody’s showing anything that’s normal or realistic on social media. It’s either, you know, very fake and dishonest or it’s, you know, very like, “I’m just like you”, but also doesn’t feel very honest or relatable” (UK, female, 27).*

Our participants operated with a nuanced system of perceived authenticity markers, where the same content creators' monetized content was assessed differently compared to their non-monetized content. Further, in the case of monetized content, our interviewees deemed authentic those creators who were not only transparent about sponsorship but indicated they only recommended something - even for a fee - when they favor the product. Different content creators were also assessed differently for authenticity – thus a male fitness influencer was deemed authentic for what reads as genuineness and perhaps vulnerability only in the context of hegemonic masculinity. Product recommendations from affluent influencers tended to be perceived as more authentic and trustworthy, as well-off creators were seen as not reliant on monetary incentives for their posts. Finally, specific social media formats (video over still images) and genres ("what I did in a day," or unposed "physique checks" as opposed to "really posed gym posts") were more likely to be associated with authenticity and a certain visual "messiness" was elevated over a very polished, professional look of images and videos.

Realistic, attainable, coherent

Broadly, our participants articulated authenticity as strongly related to a perceived sense of realism. It could mean realistic as attainable in terms of financial or time resources one can commit to a diet, a fitness routine, a skincare regiment; as achievable in terms of body size and appearance; as "ordinary," or just as something that reflects how one feels and how one's friends feel.

> *"Like a what I eat in a day when someone goes, oh I've just got these sort of leftovers, and so I'm going to have them, because that's what I've got in the fridge… Rather than someone who's got like a brand new packet of fish or they've gone to the shop and bought all these different ingredients that they'd never normally have in their house, which is just like financially a bit unrealistic, and also like time-wise you're not going to do that every day" (UK, CIS gendered woman, 18).*

Finally, alignment across a content creator's posts over time, across platforms or their behavior on social media and in other venues was an important authenticity evaluation criterion. Thus, sharing a cocktail hour promotional code one day and a health supplement the next day was seen as incoherent and inauthentic, as was being a wild partyer and portrayed as such in tabloid media and then trying to give health and wellness advice on social media.

Human, flawed, vulnerable

In 1973, when describing social tourism into institutional backstages (e.g. factory, prison, restaurant kitchen) Dean MacCannell (1973: 596) wrote of "staged authenticity," where outsiders "are permitted to view details of the inner operation of a commercial, domestic, industrial or public institution," and as a result feel they have an authentic

enough experience. In 2017, Crystal Abidin extended MacCannell's conceptual framework to discuss "calibrated amateurism," and the related social media influencer practice of "contrived authenticity" to aesthetically present as an amateur to come across as relatable and authentic.

An important theme in our participants experiences was the content creators showing that they are "human too" - which was often operationalized through showing "both the good and the bad." In our case the emphasis of authenticity lay less with influencers appearing amateurish and more with them delivering emotionally persuasive presentations of their humanity via its inherent vulnerability. Showing bad days, even personal tragedy, as well as all that which is often considered "too private" could be trusted as evidence of authenticity, presumably, because of its stigmatizable status.

> *"Well, and then I like not at all success stories, but people who have had something big happen to them health-wise, or like something bad has happened to them, and then how they have come through this and how they have built communities with the help of social media, for example I have this one foreign girl, this girl from Spain, my god what happened to her" (Estonia, female, 24).*

We interpret this as our participants accepting as real-enough those staged authenticities (MacCannell 1973) that allow access not so much to the institutional backstage, but to the private life, or even step beyond that, to the insides of the influencer's head. The latter is linked to the prevalence of therapy culture discourses (Furedi 2004; Illouz 2008) that fetishize suffering and tend to see it as a source of growth, resilience and gratitude (Rimke 2020).

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DISTRIBUTED SEEING: LOOKING AT TRUSTWORTHY IMAGES ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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As demonstrated both by our findings and other scholarship (e.g. Enli and Rosenberg 2018; Hund 2023; Reade 2021), the 'authenticity' of social media content is critical to gaining the trust of users. Authenticity is often defined by users in contrast to the inauthentic: that is, social media users often find authenticity difficult to define in and of itself, but its qualities can be clarified by comparing it to what is not authentic. This paper elaborates these comparative dynamics and suggests that they are also fundamental to how users see images on social media, and, more specifically, to whether specific images (and their creators) are seen as trustworthy or not.

The young adults interviewed for this project did have a number of criteria for evaluating whether the visual content of a social media image concerning everyday health and wellbeing was authentic and therefore potentially trustworthy. Some tended to trust data visualisation graphics; some felt video was more trustworthy. In relation to photographic images, trust criteria overwhelmingly focus on images of people and places considered authentic because they are 'relatable'. What the online image shows must not too glossy, not too perfect, not showing someone with endless amounts of time or money. This is a way of seeing that looks at the image as "a sight which has been recreated or reproduced. It is an appearance, or a set of appearances, which has been detached from the place and time in which it first made its appearance and preserved – for a few moments or a few centuries" (Berger 1972: 9-10). As Manghani (2013: xxv) remarks, this is a definition of an image influenced by decades of Benjaminian debate about photography and mechanical means of image reproduction.

However, social media images are not photographs as Berger – or Benjamin – understood them. Not only are photographs heavily edited but they are joined by – or hybridised with – many kinds of other imagery, from videos to graphics. Moreover, they are constituted by software and hardware (Hoelzl and Marie 2015), they are networked, and they circulate (Dewdney and Sluis 2022). While the circulation of images as digital files has been paid significant attention in recent materialist accounts of computer vision, platform seeing and invisuality (e.g. Amaro 2023; Mackenzie and Munster 2019), this paper proposes that social media users' ways of seeing have also shifted to respond to the networked nature of digital imagery.

Drawing on social media wayfaring interviews (n=47) with young-adult social media users in Estonia and UK, the paper describes a way of seeing social media imagery which it will term 'distributed seeing'. Distributed seeing has two aspects. The first is a focus on comparing specific aspects of an image in terms of its difference to others, and

the second evaluates an image or set of images in terms of its consistency to other images elsewhere.

On occasion, these interviewees compared quite specific elements of an image rather than its overall content in order to establish its reliability. For example, here is a UK interviewee talking about the importance of colour to her sense of the realism of different images:

> *“So this one (...) is very neutral kind of colour palette, quite plain, people showing off their figures in sort of like gyms and that kind of thing, showing – (...) Like this kind of one where it’s more like colourful, and I don’t know, I think it kind of seems more fun, in a way, rather than kind of being about like – (...) I guess when you have like a lot of colours it kind of looks messier in a way, or more realistic, whereas like the other one is trying to project sort of like a cleancut sort of image with a very like matchy matchy colours and sort of more neutral sort of – I think it kind of appeals to a certain aesthetic in a way” (UK, female).*

Interviewees also frequently described a number of ways of establishing the trustworthiness of images using comparative tactics. That is, how they see one image is shaped by how they see others: their viewing is distributed. There are three main modes of comparison. The first is across time: a content creator who posts consistent kinds of imagery over time is potentially more trustworthy than one whose image content varies wildly. This is particularly important for 'before' and after' type images, which must visualise gradual change over time to be credible. The second is comparing content from the same creator on different platforms, or between their paid and free content, or between different media entirely. Many interviewees described how still images (usually on Instagram) or short videos (usually on TikTok) would often "hook" them into other content by the same creator on YouTube (most often). Again, consistency between the creator's various kind of online visuals made them more trustworthy; so too did them looking the same when they appeared on other media, for example on a tv programme. Finally, some users also cross-checked a content creator using other platforms like Google or Google Image Search, again looking for consistent 'relatability'.

These tactics are unsurprising given both the material infrastructure of networked imagery, and the way that our interviewees acknowledged and understood the circulation of images across social media platforms. For example, the social media users interviewed for this project share a very widespread understanding that 'the algorithm' has a powerful effect in showing users specific content (with many remarking that it often feels as if their phone is listening to their conversations and then generating content from what it hears). They therefore have a clear understanding that social media is a network in which interpretations of particular elements must be calibrated in relation to what can be seen in the wider network. That is, seeing must be distributed. Similar to Hayles's (2012) discussion of hyper reading, distributed seeing engages with the materiality of networked social media imagery by seeing relationally across different images.

These findings should be placed in the context of the project participants' overall engagement with social media, which was very often casual, and relatively rarely involved self-consciously investigative searching. The networked infrastructure of social media and its use is not therefore the only dynamic in the complex process of establishing visual trust online. However, this paper suggests that it is one key dynamic in understanding how the visual content of contemporary social media is seen by its users.

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“I’M A GYM-GOER, SO YOU CAN TRUST ME”: VISUAL TRUST AND THE GYM

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The research project this presentation is based on has shown how social media users’ trust in visual content is closely tied to the perceived motivations of social media content creators, and especially whether these motivations are seen to have commercial underpinnings. In this paper, I will present an analysis of 40 interviews with social media users and content creators in the UK. I explore how research participants distinguished between branding, influencing and advertising, and how they identified commercial motivations through visual signifiers. In interviews, encountering commercial content was seen as an unavoidable and expected part of being on social media (Burgess et al. 2022), and being able to recognise commercial content was described as a dynamic practice that responded to a changing technological landscape.

Gym content offers a prime case for critically examining the relationships between commercial content, digital visual trust and health promotion. As others have shown with fit inspiration or “fitspo” content, the enactment of authenticity and curation of “raw” fitness content – usually in the form of “realistic” photographs – is seen as inspiring trusting relationships between content creators and audiences (Reade 2021). To appear authentic, the subjects of fitness content have to carefully manage the visibility of their personal or affiliated brand(s) and their commercial intents (De Veirman and Hudders 2020; Kubler 2023).

Yet differently from fitness content, which tends to emphasise the social media display of fit bodies (Reade, 2020), my attention to gym content locates these fit bodies within socio-spatial imaginaries of the gym. The physical facilities of the gym are inseparable from their social dimensions, whereby the gym brings together “individual body projects and collective body culture” (Andrews, Sudwell and Sparkes 2005: 877). The gym is a place that has “particular norms, etiquette, and systems of informal surveillance” (Coen, Rosenberg and Davidson 2018: 30). Based on the experiences of social media users and content creators, this paper explores the role of social media in continuously reproducing the gym within shifting cultures of health and fitness.

Research Design

Interviews in the UK were conducted with 30 social media users aged 18-30 who had encountered everyday health-related content on social media and 10 creators of health-related content. Notably, there was significant overlap between these groups of participants, where several social media users also had extensive experience of content creation. For the purpose of these interviews, what constituted everyday health-related content was open and led by the experiences of participants. As a consequence of this openness, there was a significant slippage in interview conversations between health,

beauty and wellness, and participants often reflected on the challenges of defining "health" in the context of social media.

Where possible, interviews with social media users involved viewing the participant's social media accounts and (the interviewer and participant) looking at content together during the interview. In some cases, participants brought examples of health-related content to use as visual prompts during the interview. Engaging with social media platforms and content during interviews was an explicit attempt to focus attention on the role of visuals within the broader social media environment of health advice and information.

Interviews with social media content creators explored the planning, making and posting of health-related content, again attending to the role of visuals in creating "good" content. While most of the content creator participants hesitated at describing themselves as "influencers" and they generally did not produce sponsored content, they still reflected on their personal brands and motivations to influence their audience(s) through sharing and raising awareness about particular areas of health (Kubler 2023).

Visual Trust and The Gym

Gym content constitutes a genre that has gained a ubiquitous presence on social media. Almost all participants spoke about how they encountered gym content on social media, regardless of their interest in attending a gym or actually engaging in this kind of exercise. Gym content refers to any social media posting – text, still images and videos – that concerns both the gym as a site or going to the gym as an activity. Within this, the "gym goer" represents a type of content creator or subject of content, where participants would often comment on how gym goers engage in "bodywork" on social media (Toffoletti and Thorpe 2018) and use their "body as evidence" of the effects of exercise regimes (Reade 2020). The following participant signalled the relationships between presenting a persuasive performance of the gym and his trust in the content creator:

> *And the gym people I mean they tend to kind of – the stills [still images] they sort of have sort of signifiers that of being kind of gym people, you know, they'll be wearing their gym gear to cook a recipe, which is clearly not when you're usual cooking but it's to be like, "I'm a gym-goer, so you can trust me with – that this is going to be healthy for you," sort of thing. (UK, male, 25)*

In gym content, the spaces and objects of the gym, along with gym goers and signifiers like gym clothing, all come together to create a visual aesthetic of the gym that is performed on and for social media.

Branding and Influencing

Following a set-back during the COVID-19 pandemic where many gyms were forced to close, the fitness industry is reportedly experiencing a boom in the UK (Statista 2023). In interviews, gym content was frequently talked about in relation to the commercial motivations of content creators and participants were critically aware – but generally accepting – of social media as a platform for the advertising industry. There was a particular pattern and rhythm to social media content, where certain brands would dominate across social media accounts over certain periods of time.

Participants described social media advertising for gym memberships, nutritional supplements, gym clothing and exercise equipment. In interviews they reflected on the visual tactics of commercial content in the form of influencer pages and placed these tactics along a spectrum from "subtle" to "in your face" advertising:

> *[Influencer pages] are more subtle, it's like "oh come along with me while I live my day as a fitness influencer, I start off at the gym, Equinox is such a nice gym, look they have a nice shower." You know what I mean? So it's like you get tempted to get an Equinox membership but it's not an ad. (UK, female, 23)*

Participants adopted a variety of strategies for evaluating content creators' commercial motivations. Explicit advertising was sometimes seen as the content creator being transparent about their commercial ties, whereas subtle advertising might be more influential but could be a reason for distrusting the creator. The stories that participants told about being influenced by advertising on social media were illustrative of how they made sense of their place in everyday data cultures (Burgess et al. 2022). This paper focuses on a convergence between the gym industry, the influencer industry and the digital advertising industry, and examines the social media practices that formed around this convergence.

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“I’M NOT GONNA TAKE ADVICE FROM YOU” – EMBODIED (DIS)TRUST IN HEALTH AND WELLBEING CONTENT

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Introduction

Photos and videos of bodies are abundant on visual social media platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. The “practical ontological realism of photos” (Hand 2012: 28) still leads us to believe that what is documented by cameras is real or at least has been real at some point. While synthetic images and deepfakes generated by artificial intelligence engines could be challenging these truth claims, in everyday use of fitness and lifestyle content, young users rarely question the veracity or accuracy of the body images they encounter. Yet if they are deemed trustworthy is another story - this paper will discuss the role of embodied (dis)trust in the context of health and wellbeing content on social media.

While the impact of body images on individual wellbeing and social norms is one of the classic topics in media and communication research, the entanglement of these images with different platform infrastructures and trust has not yet been under much scrutiny. To overcome the subject/object duality implied in many studies of media effects of media images on the audience, Coleman (2008: 168) proposes to focus on “the ways in which relations constitute bodies and images and the ways in which it is through relations that bodies and images become”. In our study, we therefore ask in which ways body images are perceived and trusted or not and how media technologies co-constitute these practices (Walker-Rettberg 2014; Schneider 2000). By reconstructing the relations between users and images, we show how visual trust is often embodied trust and how embodied trust can also be betrayed.

Research design

Building on the context of a broader research project, this contribution will discuss different notions of how pictures of bodies become relevant in trust practices. We focus on the audience perspective, specifically how students (18-25 years old) use health-related content (e.g. wellbeing, workout, training, and lifestyle) on social media. We are specifically interested in the notion of ‘embodied trust’ in these contexts, in the sense of how users relate to body images.

To reconstruct their practices and imaginaries, we build on aggregated autoethnographies. This approach is an innovative method designed by Annette Markham (2012) and developed in collaboration with Katrin Tiidenberg (Tiidenberg et al. 2017) wherein students are taught to become the autoethnographers of their own social

media experience and they (voluntarily and with consent) share the materials they generate with the researchers.

Based on the analysis of autoethnographic accounts and interviews of 40 students collected in Austria in summer 2023, we reconstruct their use of health content on social media, the relevance of representations of bodies in this context, and different ways of relating to these images and notions of how trust can be embodied.

Preliminary results

We found that body images serve as visual and embodied pieces of evidence and trust generators for healthy diets, efficient fitness routines or general wellbeing. Users find those content creators that seem to embody what they promise particularly trustworthy, while “if there was someone who was sort of overweight [...] making posts about eating healthily and how to feel better about yourself, people would go, well, I’m not gonna take advice from you” (Ana, age 18). Various genres offer specific forms of proof, for example juxtapositions of photos that show the body before and after some kind of intervention, long-term transformations through diets or trainings, or just posing in a different way in the same moment. Video footage is also perceived as particularly trustworthy as it can document exact bodily movements, like yoga poses or the execution of weight lifts and is considered more difficult to edit or manipulate than still images.

However, young users clearly differentiate which kinds of bodies they find trustworthy in which contexts. We found three registers in which bodies become relevant in the participants’ lives: When it comes to fitness and workout content, lean and muscular bodies serve as ideal images that users aspire to. Many participants engage with the fitness bodies in an affirmative way: “Paul Unterleitner shows his strong body, which is motivating and fascinating for me. I am focused on going to the gym more often, to also have a body like that” (male, 23). They may feel bad about not looking like the creators they follow, but they still see their content as aspirational and motivating.

Another mode of relating to fitness bodies is rather functional and practical. Popular genres like “follow along” videos instruct the viewer to do the exercises along with the bodies on the screen. The participants appreciate the convenience of not having to make their own exercise plan, thinking about timing etc. Not every platform affords the same kind of practical use. Users might get motivated through short videos on Instagram or TikTok but will actually do the workout with YouTube.

Both aspirational and practical ways of relating to body images usually refer to bodies that are shaped, styled, and staged to correspond to normative standards of beauty and desirability. Many users are annoyed with these stereotypical body images, yet they feel they cannot escape them. They are perceived to be preferred and pushed by the

algorithm, for example when searching for workout videos on YouTube: “I also have not seen one workout video in my timeline displaying a person with an average body. I think this is sad because it pushes unrealistic beauty ideals and the notion that only beautiful and ripped people are allowed to post fitness-related content” (male, 23).

However, users also engage with non-normatively beautiful bodies, which are used to feel good about one’s body as it is. Users are inspired by the content creators’ relations towards their bodies, their acceptance, and self-love. Yet, forms of embodied trust are betrayed when normatively beautiful content creators also bandwagon on body positivity, for example by taking pictures in unfavourable poses or posting “Instagram vs. reality" pictures that actually do not show any differences.

Conclusion: Ambivalent love/hate relationship

Overall, body images on social media contribute heavily to what is deemed normal and desirable. Following Coleman (2008: 168), we reconstructed the relations between the users’ bodies and platformed body images and the “knowledges, understandings and experiences of bodies [that] are produced through images”. We found that ways of relating to bodies in fitness and health content are manifold and can be quite ambivalent or even contradictory. Users are inspired and motivated by lean and muscular bodies and they are perceived as embodied evidence of trustworthy workouts, diets, lifestyle choices, etc. At the same time, they are annoyed about their algorithmically pushed abundance and they lose trust if accounts do not show consistent body images or change their brand.

Body images on social media can be motivating, stressful or relieving – or even all of the above at the same time: “I feel happy when I watch his videos. […] I also feel a little sad because I don’t look like that and probably never will” (male, 23).

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YOUTUBE HEALTH AND CONTESTED CONTENT: ANALYZING THE "LIEBSCHER & BRACHT"-CONTROVERSY

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Introduction

According to YouTube, its designated "Health"-program was launched in an effort to counteract misinformation and improve users access to "health-related" contents from reliable resources. Since its implementation, channels providing videos on such health-related subjects can apply for admission into the program. If successful, the channel's videos not only gain preferential algorithmic treatment within search results but are also flagged with a visible YouTube Health seal stating the channel's reliability. In the user data collected during our project, this seal was mentioned as a deciding factor for trusting the contents of attached videos, making their consumption "easier", to quote one participant.

When the program and its functionalities were launched in the German-speaking market in February 2023, the self-described "pain-specialists" of *Liebscher & Bracht* were among the first batch of channels announced as part of it. As one of the largest health-related channels in the region, they were are already famous for their instructional videos displaying exercises and stretches promised to relief all kinds of symptoms. Soon after the announcement, however, major legacy media outlets published reports stating the channel would spread medically unsound advice with exaggerated therapeutic promises and raising concerns about YouTube's standards when selecting partaking channels (Feldwisch-Drentrup 2023).

Predictably, the controversy also spread to YouTube itself, where the newly launched program *Quarks Science Cops* of public broadcaster WDR released an elaborately produced video, thoroughly scrutinizing claims by *Liebscher & Bracht*', e.g. that exercises and supplements of theirs would be able to cure arthritis and even help to better eyesight. It has gained almost 257,000 views and over 2,200 comments to date. While it re-ignited the discussion about *Liebscher & Bracht* in the YouTube-sphere, it was hardly the first video taking a skeptical look at their often-unsubstantiated promises. Over the years several independent content creators have engaged critically with the output of the almost 2 million subscriber-channel.

Considering the aforementioned importance the visual display of YouTube Healths seal of approval has on users' trusting practices, this contribution investigates on what basis YouTube assumes its role as arbiter of reliable health information and how it executes this role by looking closer at the specific case of *Liebscher & Bracht*'s admission into YouTube Health. This leads to broader considerations of how health expertise and

authority is generally constructed and contested within this platformed and highly visual social media environment.

Research design

This research takes the outlined public controversy surrounding the admission of *Liebscher & Bracht* into YouTube Health as the starting point to examine the various actors invested in it and investigate their negotiations of health expertise and authority in the context of social media. The contribution is interested in how the different actors involved in the controversy – content creators, audiences, the platform, legacy media and more – construct expert knowledge and status as well as challenge the expert authority of others.

Using a digital ethnography approach (Pink et al. 2016), this research explores the many tension-filled relations between entities like expert health organizations and YouTube, legacy media and social media, science journalists and content creators, as well as those between content creators on different levels of status. For this, the contribution analyses a wide variety of data types from newspaper articles to YouTube's official presentational slides, from WHO meeting protocols to YouTube videos. By employing an integrated mix of interpretative and digital methods, this contribution analyzes the differing positions taken in this controversy as well as the claims for expertise and authority the involved actors engage in. By also analyzing and mapping the discussions in the comment sections of YouTube videos and news articles, where audiences weigh the presented critique and its claims of scientific evidence against their often very positive personal experiences with *Liebscher & Bracht*'s content, this research also takes the user perspective into account. However, in accordance with AoIR's 2024 conference theme of "Industry", the following section of preliminary findings will focus on the platform's role in the controversy and its constructions of expertise and authority.

Preliminary findings

Depending on the nature of the channel, the displayed YouTube Health seal in the German context reads either "From a state approved healthcare provider of Germany" (for hospitals or similar institutions), "From a doctor licensed in Germany" (for medical doctors or psychotherapists) or "From a channel with a health professional licensed in Germany", like in the case of *Liebscher & Bracht.* This last disclaimer signifies, that a medical doctor or physiotherapist has applied on behalf of the organization running the channel, self-attesting to also have editorial oversight and review of the content the organization is posting on YouTube.

Just beneath any of the aforementioned texts, the seal displays a clickable link offering to "learn how health sources are defined by the World Health Organization". If one follows the link, YouTube provides more information on the process behind the selection

of their "trustworthy sources". While state accredited institutions like hospitals are admitted automatically, channels run or represented by individual health professionals are supposed to adhere to a set of principles defined by the National Academy of Medicine (NAM) in the US and later ratified by the World Health Organization (WHO). According to the peer-reviewed paper authored by NAM's project team, reliable social media health sources should be "science-based", "objective", "transparent and accountable" (Kington et al. 2021).

If these are the platform's standards for channels to be considered "authoritative health sources", it begs the question why *Liebscher & Bracht* was admitted into YouTube Health? Watchdog organizations and customer protection agencies have long warned against *Liebscher & Bracht* for their unsubstantiated claims. YouTube must have been aware of these problematic tendencies, but instead of launching YouTube Health without one of the largest health-related channels in the German-speaking market, the platform opted for a different approach. As *Liebscher & Bracht* conceded, they had to delete more than one hundred of their videos and edit over 300 more to be admitted. According to the channel owners, the deletion of videos might have cost them in ad-revenue, but the surplus of trustworthiness gained through YouTube's stamp of approval made the trade-off worth it (Kreienbrink 2023). In December 2023, regional public broadcaster HR reported about still finding contestable content on the channel, and a mere month after its admission, Frankfurt am Main Regional Court imposed a contractual penalty on the pain therapy provider due to repetition of inadmissible advertising statements (Brockschmidt et al. 2023).

Conclusion

The admission of *Liebscher & Bracht* into YouTube Health raises serious questions over the platform's commitment to its own quality standards. Official documents from the company suggest that during the application process, channels are only asked to self-attest to following the principles laid out above. However, it remains unclear whether they are additionally vetted and by whom, and whether a channel's output is monitored following their admission. Further questions remain regarding the role of the reputable health organizations, whose names YouTube features prominently, but do not seem to play any active part in assessing a channel's trustworthiness.

Overall, this controversy provides a suitable case study to showcase the often-messy situations audiences engage in when looking for health information online, trying to make informed trust-decisions while being confronted with a multiplicity of claims for expertise in these multi-faceted and highly ambivalent environments.

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