

Nora Wunderwald and Lea Sophie Grünzinger
ON & OFF
– For Mindfully Using Social Media

Sample Translation by Rachel Farmer



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Foreword [pp.13–18]

My phone screen lights up again to let me know you're thinking of me. You've got me under your spell, sinking into your depths. At the same time, I've been feeling for a while now that our relationship isn't good for me, that you're toxic. On nights like tonight, you promise me a mood boost but you leave me sad and alone in my bed. You manipulate me, you're erratic and unpredictable, and you often make me feel like I'm not good enough. Because of you, I ignore my chores and let my to-do list grow ever-longer. My friends' messages go unanswered. You isolate me from the outside world and take up all my energy. But whenever I'm about to give you up for good, you scoop me tirelessly back into your fold, assure me that I'm a part of you, and offer me comfort and inspiration. You motivate me. You can read me like no one else can. That's why it's hard to let you go – even though I know you're not good for me. I give and give until I feel like there's nothing left of me. And that's why I need a break for the time being. I think I need to figure out who I am again. Without you, social media.

We're the people they call 'digital natives'. Not only did we grow up with the internet, but the internet also grew up in parallel to us. We're the last generation that still remembers a time when we weren't constantly reachable, but at the same time, we saw the birth of social media firsthand. When Steve Jobs presented the first iPhone, we – Nora and Lea – were both nine years old. Soon we were captivated by the bright, shining colours, the endless possibilities. Suddenly, we could connect with the people around us and all over the world, twenty-four seven. Our phones were intuitive to use and they gave us access to riveting apps and content. But, really, we knew nothing at all.

We naively tried to surf the tumultuous waves of the internet but were pulled underwater time and again by volatile currents. Neither our parents nor our teachers understood this new world that was fast becoming our second home. Yet so much has changed. Physical touch became an online poke, gestures and facial expressions became emojis, spoken language became written words, and

compliments simply morphed into a like button. We created, shared and consumed content non-stop. Sometimes three, five or eleven hours every day of the week. Social media fulfilled our every desire – be it entertainment, knowledge, inspiration, sex education, belonging or love.

But there was also a dark side to the internet that secretly and silently damaged our mental health, encroached on our privacy, and affected our behaviour in the real world. Studies have shown that increasing social media use has brought with it an increased risk of depression. We compare ourselves to one another, receive hate comments and unwanted dick pics, and become addicted to the pleasure rush social media produces.

We experienced all this firsthand. Now, looking back on our formative years torn between edited selfies and personalised ads, we are only just coming to realise the extent of social media's influence on both our lives. This kickstarted our shared desire to help current and future generations have a better time with and without social media. Our approach: conscious consumption. This means using social media consciously and deliberately, in a way that is informed, targeted and – in the best case scenario – enhances our lives.

The two of us are the best example of how the Internet and social media can be a tool that connects people. We met on YouTube in 2020 – Nora was making videos about her idea of developing a 'social media driving licence'. Lea, who at the time was intensively examining her own social media usage, discovered the video and contacted Nora directly. We went on to brainstorm some ideas together, then started getting other people excited by our vision, before finally founding our association: BewusstSchein e.V. (roughly: 'awareness licence').

Together with our team, we developed the concept of a 'driving licence' which would help us introduce children and young people to social media – the kind of thing we would have loved to have when we were younger. This is another way that digital media continues to help us, allowing us to connect with our association members all across Germany and Austria. The two of us work together almost exclusively online, which frees us from time and space limitations, and we wouldn't have it any other way. We always keep our vision in the backs of our minds: we want to fundamentally change how we interact with social media. Our workshops in schools and other educational institutions help raise awareness among children and young people of the risks they may encounter online, but at the same time ensure they know about the opportunities too. Like so many things, social media is both a blessing and a curse.

We're focusing on the younger generation to start with, but we won't stop there. We want to reach younger and older people alike – particularly those with

no connection to educational settings. Because we can all benefit from being more conscious in our interactions with social media. That's why this book is dedicated to all of you.

Let's get one thing out of the way: despite doing some intensive research and grappling with the topic, we haven't come up with *one* formula or *one* solution for all the problems presented by social media. Social media usage is unique to each individual, so the process of conscious social media consumption needs to be individually tailored too. But we hope this book will provide an incentive to engage with this topic and reflect on your own behaviour. Many of you will be able to identify with our stories and anecdotes, with our approaches and our suggestions for change. As you read, some sections will probably make you realise just how absurd some of our habits to do with social media actually are – you might wonder whether to laugh or feel ashamed. This book is the sum of the experience and knowledge we have gained from over 15 years of social media usage, a variety of studies, and our 'BewusstSchein' workshops.

The unique thing about us as an author duo is that our own experiences and opinions relating to social media are, in some ways, quite different. Lea takes a more critical stance when it comes to the effects of social media sites on society, democracy and personal development, shining a light on their pitfalls and built-in traps. Nora, as a content creator and relatively happy social media user, knows that she owes much of her happiness to those very social media sites and strives to ensure she is using these digital resources in the best way possible.

But there's one point that we do agree on: social media isn't inherently good or bad – it's a technological tool and so is, in itself, neutral. Whether it ultimately brings pain or joy to your life all depends on how you as an individual use it and what is important to you.

By the end of this book, we hope to have brought some order to the chaos and given an overview of the most important topics relating to social media: self-expression, being alone, mental health, addiction, friendship, love, sex, hate and the future of social media. We will be examining all this and more from a very (!) personal point of view and helping you keep your head above water despite complicated privacy statements, manipulative algorithms and airbrushed ads. With the help of prompts for you to think about, reflection exercises and concrete recommendations, we want to make you more aware of things you can do, both online and offline, without endangering your well-being and your mental and physical health.

Body image: Why can't I look like the women on Instagram? | Lea [pp.162–171]

It's Saturday afternoon and I'm at the shopping centre – or as I like to call it, the place my self-confidence goes to die surrounded by screaming kids and rampant consumerism. I'm standing in my underwear in a stuffy changing room that's far too small and inspect myself in the harsh white light. A mixture of revulsion and despair flashes from the eyes of the person looking back at me from the mirror. She casts a suspicious eye at the stretchmarks threaded across her thighs and backside and the rolls in her stomach. There are red pinch marks from the just discarded clothes on her pale skin, which looks almost transparent in the bluish light. Her proportions seem misshapen, her chapped lips pressed tightly together, as if refusing to reveal the disappointment she feels. I try to resist drowning in my negative thoughts, and instead my cold fingers fish my smart phone out of my jacket pocket.

On the screen, I see a nymph-like young woman lounging in linen sheets wearing coral-coloured lingerie. Her skin is smooth and sunkissed, her feminine curves perfectly balancing the masculine firmness of her clearly defined muscles. The orange light of the evening sun bathes her hair in shining gold, which falls in wavy strands around her perfectly shaped face, her full red lips and her sea blue eyes. *Why can't I look like the women on Instagram?* I think, as I'm engulfed in a wave of self-doubt.

Whenever I open my camera on a social media app, I am confronted by hundreds of filters I can use to change my outward appearance. All blemishes on my skin disappear, my face is artificially contoured, my nose grows thinner, my eyes and lips larger – I look like a Kardashian. As these technologies continue to advance, the filters grow more and more realistic, blurring the boundary between what is real and what is edited. While I previously used to compare myself to celebrities such as Selena Gomez or Miley Cyrus, now it is my distorted self who sets the

supposedly achievable beauty standards. When those around me react positively to an edited photo, my brain takes note. It creates an even stronger desire to embody this adulterated version of myself, so I find myself increasingly reaching for those tantalising filters.

My feed presents me not just with these filtered photos, but also with ones that have been edited in Facetune, Photoshop, Lightroom or VSCO. Teeth a bit whiter here, a bit more volume in the hair there. *Social media is fake*. It's the reason the number of cosmetic procedures rises year-on-year, and it's why many people look more and more like the filters they have diligently applied on social media. The result: our idea of beauty is changing. And now, there is even a disorder that bears the name of the social media app responsible for its existence. Snapchat dysmorphia causes sufferers to have an abnormal perception of their own body. This is triggered by the filters and fake versions of themselves on social media. And the algorithms of these sites facilitate this development: content from people who meet our prevailing ideal of beauty is promoted and shown to us more often.

When I use a filter to appear 'more beautiful', I automatically get more interaction in the form of likes and comments. A warm feeling courses through me and my brain is flooded with dopamine, giving me a rush of ecstasy. 'See! If you're more beautiful, you're more loved,' my inner critic whispers into my ear. What it really means is: 'you're not good enough the way you are'.

Tip

To really internalise just how much these photo editing apps can change your outward appearance, try them yourself using a test picture. That way, in the future, you will be better able to recognise when a photo has been enhanced or left unedited.

Although social media sites are often demonised because of their effect on our perception of beauty, these platforms are not where it all began – but rather, they just exacerbate an existing phenomenon. If you watch TV ads from 40 years ago, you'll see that they were showing housewives with slim waists and shining hair back then too. It seems we've been obsessed with outdoing each other in the beauty department for a while now.

But why? What makes beauty so special, and is it really in the eye of the beholder? Why do we think beautiful is better anyway?

You know those days when you wake up and feel really great in your skin? Your hair is perfect, your skin is radiant and your clothes fit your body perfectly? Sadly, I was *not* having one of those days when I found myself pushing my way

through the crowd to find a free seat on the tram. And then I saw *him*. I could have sworn that, in that moment, time stood still, allowing me to register and drink in every detail of *his* presence. First, I noticed his full lips, which formed a friendly smile. His face was tanned and symmetrical and was enhanced by his striking cheekbones. His dark brown hair shone in the beams of light that were cast through the window of the tram, and his eyes sparkled a deep shade of amber. I could see his muscular arms under his linen shirt, suggesting a sporty physique. I had never seen anyone so beautiful. Even the first sunbeams in spring were no match for the glow that surrounded him. I was blinded by the beauty of this person. *Beauty has incredible power.*

Studies show that attractive people actually do benefit from advantages as a result of their appearance. The so-called ‘pretty privilege’ phenomenon describes how beautiful people often get better grades, are loved more by their parents, see more success in their chosen career, earn more money and even receive more lenient sentences in court. But whether we find a person beautiful or not is the result of a complex interplay of various different influences, which researchers still haven’t completely figured out. But they do agree on one thing: who we are attracted to depends primarily on three factors.

Let’s look back at the moment in the tram when I caught sight of *him*. My biological self focused in particular on the features that reflected his reproductive capabilities and genetic quality. A symmetrical face, clear skin, shiny hair and full lips suggest that he – from a purely genetic perspective – would be the perfect father to my children. The fact that we find youth, health and symmetry attractive is an evolutionary thing and is very deep-seated.

But my societal self, whose perception of beauty is shaped by the culture and people around me, has a more changeable point of view. Because I grew up in Germany in the 21st century, I pay particular attention to *his* muscular arms, his slightly tanned skin and his put-together appearance, which correspond to Western beauty standards. His sporty physique symbolises the life plans and values that we consider aspirational in our affluent, achievement-driven society: discipline, persistence and resilience are – for most people – the key to a happy and fulfilled life complete with wealth, possessions and success. Are those the things you want for your lives too? I, for one, am not so sure.

Tip

If you want to stop yourself judging people so much by their appearance, try closing your eyes and just focusing on what they say.

Finally, we've got my experience self, which is influenced by my own memories and emotions when perceiving beauty. So it's probably not a coincidence that, with his dark hair, deep brown eyes and friendly aura, he strikes me as a perfect cross between the characters I loved so much in the movies and TV shows of my youth. He reminded me so strongly of these people who were my first loves as a teenager and whose appearance evokes strong emotions in me as a result.

Our perception of beauty is very subjective – we all see beauty differently, and rightly so. When I started digging deeper into this topic, I stumbled upon an attempt to create a mathematical calculation for beauty. The result surprised and moved me. I often feel as though the most beautiful people have been blessed with something special, that they are the winners of the genetic lottery and are somehow better than the rest of us. But research shows something quite different: our idea of what is beautiful is based on the average of what is familiar to us. In other words, beautiful people are the average of the sum total of everyone. The parts of us that do *not* meet the established ideal of beauty are the things that are unusual, the things that set us apart from the masses. That means they're something special that not everyone has. Isn't that a lovely thought?

TIPS FOR MORE SELF-LOVE & BODY ACCEPTANCE

- **Body meditation:** Our bodies are an absolute miracle. It's thanks to them that we're able to move, read and see, and that we're aware of all the beautiful things around us. You should take a moment to reflect on all the things your body can do whenever you are feeling unhappy with your body – for example by using the following body meditation:

Find somewhere comfortable to sit and close your eyes. Now let your thoughts wander gradually through your body and observe each part of your body from the outside. You can use your hands to help explore how your body feels. First, focus on your feet. Where have your feet walked in the past? Can you remember how wet grass feels beneath the bare soles of your feet and how far your feet have carried you? Now move up to your legs and remember your most recent holiday. Where did your legs help you to explore, and which places did you discover? Do you remember how it felt the last time you stood in the sea, the salty water lapping about your calves? Next, direct your attention to your stomach. When did you last feel butterflies in your stomach from excitement and infatuation? Now focus on your arms and think about what they have carried. Did they support you last time you moved house or

help you carry your grocery shopping back home? Lastly, bring your focus to your face. What has caused your lips to smile? What has your mouth eaten and tasted? Which scents has your nose smelled? What unique spectacles of nature have your eyes gazed upon? What a miracle your body is!

- **See your body as part of nature:** Would you ever catch sight of a flower by the side of the road and think: that's so ugly! Have you ever looked at a sunset and thought: I've seen much prettier ones than that! In her art, photographer Alicja Brodowicz draws parallels between the human body and nature. In doing so, she shows the similarities between the folds of a person's back and the bark of a tree, for example. These photographs give me a completely new relationship with my stretch marks, stomach rolls and the visible veins on my arms. These works of art might inspire you too and enable you to (re)discover both the beauty of nature and the beauty of your own body.
- **Shift in perspective:** There used to be days when I didn't go to school because I was embarrassed about having a spot. I was convinced that everyone around me would stare at it and judge me for it. At some point, one of my classmates had a pimple too, and I looked at her and thought: 'that doesn't make you any less pretty.' Since then, I've looked at my insecurities in a different light. My skin is not my personality. My weight is not my soul. The other things are what really matter. And those around you don't notice nearly so much as you notice and criticise about yourself.
- **Give your body attention & love:** of course, it would be fairer if the things we don't get to choose, like beauty, meant absolutely nothing – but that's not the case. To help you celebrate the beauty of your own body, make sure you pay attention to it, both inside and out. Always keep in mind: your body is your companion for life, so treat it with thoughtfulness and care.

Social media doesn't just show us unrealistic and negative ideals of beauty. It also allows us to discover movements that are making an effort to include a variety of body types in their posts. Depicting people that 'don't meet traditional beauty standards' aims to promote more openness and help people feel better in their own skin. But these body positivity movements do sometimes spark criticism for continuing to focus on outward appearance. As a result, some movements are turning to a body neutrality approach, which involves shifting the focus away from your appearance and towards the functionality of your body and

accepting it the way it is. Their goal is to make beauty practically irrelevant in interpersonal relationships. That's the way it should be, right?

[END OF SAMPLE]