

Medium ugly as a Negotiation of Digital Beauty Standards: A Critical Discourse Analysis of TikTok Content by @Cut Febrina S

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the discourse of medium ugly in TikTok content created by Cut Febrina Sabatini as a form of identity negotiation and criticism of digital beauty standards. Using a qualitative approach, the research applies Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis through three dimensions: text, discourse practice, and sociocultural practice. Data were collected through observation of two TikTok videos uploaded on June 25 and 27, 2025, analysis of audience comments, documentation, and an in-depth interview with the content creator. The findings show that medium ugly is constructed through informal, humorous, and reflective language that creates emotional closeness with viewers and encourages self-acceptance. At the textual level, the discourse presents beauty as relative and negotiable rather than fixed. At the level of discourse practice, the content is produced from personal experience and interpreted by audiences as both validation and labeling. At the sociocultural level, the discourse challenges narrow digital beauty standards reinforced by filters, algorithms, influencer culture, and visual comparison. However, the discourse does not entirely eliminate social pressure because it shifts value from physical appearance toward intelligence, communication skills, and personal development. The study concludes that medium ugly functions as a counter-discourse that broadens the meaning of beauty, strengthens emotional solidarity, and offers a more inclusive form of self-representation in digital spaces while still reproducing new expectations of individual self-improvement. This finding highlights the ambivalent nature of resistance within platform culture.

Keyword: Medium Ugly, Tiktok, Digital Beauty Standards, Self-Representation



INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital communication technology has transformed social media from a supplementary communication channel into a central arena for social interaction, cultural production, and identity formation. Visual platforms enable users not only to receive information and entertainment but also to construct, modify, and circulate particular representations of themselves before diverse audiences. TikTok has acquired a prominent position within this transformation because its short-video format, participatory features, creator culture, and algorithmic distribution mechanisms

facilitate the rapid circulation of language, symbols, trends, and identity categories. Rather than functioning as a neutral technological space, TikTok operates as a cultural environment in which creators negotiate authenticity, visibility, audience recognition, and social acceptance through carefully organised forms of self-presentation. These conditions indicate that identities displayed on social media emerge from interactions among personal experiences, platform structures, anticipated audience responses, and dominant cultural expectations (Wunderlich & Zillich, 2025; Sujon & Ntalla, 2025; Raaper et al., 2024; Şurariu et al., 2025).

One of the most influential cultural constructions reproduced through visually oriented social media is the standardisation of beauty. Images and videos circulating on digital platforms continuously display particular facial features, body proportions, skin tones, fashion styles, and lifestyle practices as socially desirable forms of appearance. Beauty filters, photo-editing applications, makeup content, and influencer practices further obscure the distinction between natural appearance and digitally modified representation.

Repeated exposure to these representations may encourage users to perceive platform-generated beauty ideals as ordinary, objective, and universally applicable, even though such ideals are socially and technologically constructed. Digital beauty standards can therefore reduce the visibility of physical diversity by directing users toward increasingly homogeneous representations of facial attractiveness and bodily perfection. In this environment, individual self-presentation is shaped not only by personal preferences but also by aesthetic templates embedded in platform technologies and reinforced through audience engagement (Mwangi & Buvár, 2024; Javornik et al., 2022; Miller, 2025; Anani et al., 2024).

The continuous circulation of idealised appearances carries important psychological and social implications, particularly for adolescents and young adults who use social media as a primary space for interaction and self-evaluation. The visibility of attractive creators, edited images, and seemingly perfect lifestyles encourages users to compare their physical appearance with representations that may be selectively produced or technologically altered. Upward appearance comparison can generate negative self-evaluation, body dissatisfaction, diminished self-esteem, and pressure to modify one's appearance.

The accumulation of likes, comments, views, and followers may further transform audience responses into perceived indicators of attractiveness and social worth. Consequently, users may internalise the assumption that recognition in digital spaces depends upon their ability to conform to dominant aesthetic expectations. These dynamics demonstrate that beauty standards on social media do not merely describe desirable appearances but also organise hierarchies of visibility, acceptance, and personal value (McComb et al., 2023; Mazzeo et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2025; Maftai et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, social media also provides opportunities for users to question, reinterpret, and resist restrictive standards of appearance. Within this context, the term *medium ugly* has emerged as a popular expression used to describe individuals who are perceived as neither conventionally beautiful nor entirely unattractive. Although the term may initially appear to reproduce appearance-based categorisation, its use can also represent an attempt to negotiate dominant beauty hierarchies through humour, informality, and self-reflection.

By identifying themselves as *medium ugly*, users may acknowledge their distance from conventional beauty ideals while simultaneously affirming attractiveness derived

from personality, confidence, knowledge, communication skills, or other personal qualities. The discourse is therefore ambivalent: it can create a more realistic space for self-acceptance while continuing to classify individuals according to socially produced standards. Similar digital practices demonstrate how young women use humour, alternative femininities, body-positive narratives, and everyday self-representation to contest idealised identities without necessarily escaping all forms of social discipline (Patouras & Sharp, 2025; Petrovic, 2025; Vernes et al., 2025; Chowdhury et al., 2025).

The growing visibility of *medium ugly* became particularly evident through TikTok creators who transformed the expression into a topic of public discussion. One prominent example is Cut Febrina Sabatini, who discusses beauty, lifestyle, fashion, self-development, and self-acceptance through the account @Cut Febrina S. In two videos uploaded on June 25 and June 27, 2025, she presented *medium ugly* through casual and humorous language while positioning herself as part of the audience experiencing similar beauty-related pressures. Her content does not simply define the term but associates it with self-acceptance, intellectual development, communication ability, and the construction of personal standards beyond conventional physical attractiveness.

The extensive audience responses to these videos demonstrate how creator discourse can become collectively interpreted, validated, contested, and reformulated through comments and other forms of engagement. This interaction reflects the wider influence of creator credibility, relatability, emotional affinity, peer identification, and platform visibility in shaping contemporary conversations about beauty and identity (Rajput et al., 2024; de Brabandere et al., 2025; Nuhn et al., 2025; Scott et al., 2025).

Previous scholarship has extensively examined social media beauty standards, body dissatisfaction, beauty filters, influencer culture, self-presentation, and the psychological consequences of appearance comparison. Other studies have analysed how TikTok reproduces femininity, wellness expectations, body ideals, and lifestyle norms through visually attractive and algorithmically promoted content. However, research focusing specifically on *medium ugly* as a socially constructed discourse remains limited. Existing studies commonly approach digital beauty through measurable effects on body image or examine visual representations without fully exploring how emerging labels are linguistically constructed, circulated, interpreted, and connected to wider relations of power.

This article addresses that gap by examining *medium ugly* not merely as internet slang or an appearance category but as a discursive practice through which beauty, identity, acceptance, and personal value are negotiated. Its originality lies in analysing the linguistic construction of this emerging term together with its production, audience interpretation, and relationship to the sociocultural conditions of digital beauty (Li et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2023; Ergül, 2025; Avdeeff, 2026).

To examine these interconnected dimensions, this study employs Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis, which understands discourse as both a form of language use and a social practice shaped by ideology and power relations. The textual dimension is used to examine vocabulary, pronouns, metaphors, humour, modality, and narrative structures employed in the selected TikTok videos. The discourse-practice dimension investigates how the content was produced from the creator's personal experiences and how its meanings were subsequently interpreted and negotiated by audiences.

The sociocultural-practice dimension situates the discourse within broader digital conditions, including idealised beauty culture, influencer visibility, algorithmic

circulation, audience validation, and the growing demand for authentic self-representation. This multidimensional approach is necessary because the meaning of *medium ugly* cannot be determined solely from its literal wording; it emerges through interactions among textual choices, creator intentions, platform mechanisms, audience participation, and dominant cultural assumptions about appearance (Uti et al., 2025; Bautista Alcaine et al., 2025; Jaya et al., 2025; Cemiloglu et al., 2025).

Accordingly, this study aims to analyse how the discourse of *medium ugly* is constructed and represented in TikTok content produced by @Cut Febrina S. It specifically investigates the linguistic strategies used to communicate the term, the processes through which its meanings are produced and consumed, and the sociocultural conditions that influence its emergence as a digital identity category. The study also examines whether *medium ugly* functions as a counter-discourse that broadens the meaning of beauty or whether it reproduces new expectations by requiring individuals to compensate for ordinary physical appearance through intelligence, communication skills, and continuous self-development. Through this analysis, the article contributes to digital-media and critical-discourse scholarship by demonstrating that resistance to beauty standards may simultaneously challenge and reproduce existing systems of social evaluation. It further highlights TikTok as an important space in which young people negotiate authenticity, bodily diversity, self-acceptance, and social recognition within contemporary platform culture.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis method to examine the construction of the *medium ugly* discourse on the social media platform TikTok. This approach was selected because it enables researchers to understand the relationship between language, social practices, and power relations underlying the emergence of a discourse (Jannah, 2020). The unit of analysis in this study focuses on two video posts concerning *medium ugly* published through the TikTok account @Cut Febrina S on June 25, 2025, and June 27, 2025.

The account was selected purposively because it is one of the accounts that actively discusses the *medium ugly* phenomenon and has received a high level of response from TikTok users. The research data consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through observations of the video content and user comments, as well as an in-depth interview with Cut Febrina Sabatini as the content creator to understand the background of the content-production process and the interpretation of the discourse conveyed. Meanwhile, secondary data were obtained through a literature review covering scientific journals, books, articles, and previous studies relevant to social media, beauty standards, and the *medium ugly* phenomenon (Sugiyono, 2013).

Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. Observation was used to identify the use of language, narratives, visual elements, and user interactions in the comment sections of the content under study. The interview was conducted online through Google Meet on November 11, 2025, to obtain information concerning the content-production process, the interpretation of *medium ugly*, and the communication objectives intended by the creator.

Documentation was used to supplement the data in the form of screenshots of the video posts and user comments. Data analysis was conducted in stages through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Haryoko et al., 2020). The collected data were subsequently interpreted using Fairclough's Critical Discourse

Analysis model, which comprises three dimensions of analysis: the textual dimension, used to examine word choices, language styles, and narrative structures; the discourse-practice dimension, used to analyse the processes of content production and consumption; and the sociocultural-practice dimension, used to understand the relationship between the *medium ugly* discourse and the beauty standards and digital culture developing within society.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Construction of the *Medium Ugly* Discourse in TikTok Content by @Cut Febrina S

The development of social media has significantly transformed how society perceives and evaluates beauty. Beauty is no longer understood as something entirely natural but as a social construction influenced by the culture, norms, and social systems prevailing within society. In this context, social media plays an important role in constructing and reinforcing concepts of beauty through visual representations that are continuously displayed. The presence of images, videos, and messages concerning ideal bodies indirectly shapes public perceptions of appropriate and desirable beauty standards (Rasyid et al., 2024).

In the contemporary digital era, social media has become a principal space for shaping women's perceptions of beauty standards. Social media users are frequently influenced by comments, judgments, and responses from other users concerning their physical appearance. This situation makes beauty standards increasingly homogeneous because social media continually presents images of ideal faces and bodies. Consequently, many individuals begin comparing themselves with beauty standards circulating in digital spaces. Every individual possesses a different perception and measurement of beauty; nevertheless, the dominance of social media makes particular standards appear to constitute universal measurements of what is considered beautiful and attractive (Purwaningtyas et al., 2025).

TikTok is one social media platform that exerts considerable influence over the construction of beauty. It provides a digital space in which users can develop their self-image through short videos that are widely consumed by the public. The platform enables users to display their visual identities, lifestyles, and particular forms of beauty representation. TikTok also facilitates the emergence of trends and popular expressions that rapidly spread among social media users, particularly younger generations (Rosida et al., 2024).

In practice, the beauty standards developing on TikTok generally emphasise specific physical characteristics, including fair skin, symmetrical facial features, slim bodies, and visually attractive appearances. These representations are frequently displayed by influencers, celebrities, and beauty content creators through content concerning beauty, skincare, makeup, and facial transformations. The presence of beauty influencers and beauty-related content indirectly constructs a subjective reality of beauty among social media users. Women consequently tend to use such content as a reference when understanding and evaluating their own beauty (Basir et al., 2022).

This condition is reinforced by a digital culture that positions physical appearance as an important component of social existence on social media. Many users attempt to present an attractive self-image by using filters, makeup techniques, and facial-editing applications. However, as particular beauty standards become increasingly dominant on social media, more individuals feel that they do not belong to the category of "beautiful" represented within digital media. This situation produces social pressure, insecurity,

social anxiety, and a tendency to compare oneself with other people (Alifah Rose Wiana et al., 2025).

Amid the dominance of these beauty standards, a new term has become widely discussed on TikTok: *medium ugly*. The term is used to describe someone who is considered not to fully satisfy ideal beauty standards but who also cannot be categorised as unattractive. *Medium ugly* is understood as a position between the categories of “beautiful” and “unattractive,” in which an individual retains a particular appeal despite not conforming to the dominant beauty standards circulating on social media. Over time, *medium ugly* has become a popular expression used by social media users to describe their experiences of physical evaluation and social acceptance within digital spaces (Mahiruni, 2024).

The *medium ugly* phenomenon indicates a transformation in how individuals represent themselves and understand beauty on social media. Within a digital culture historically dominated by the aesthetics of perfection, *medium ugly* has emerged as an alternative aesthetic that presents imperfection as part of an individual’s visual identity. This discourse develops through users’ personal experiences, public comments, and a digital culture that continually shapes how individuals represent themselves in virtual spaces. In this context, *medium ugly* is not merely a popular expression but has developed into a social discourse concerning beauty, identity, and self-acceptance.

The phenomenon also illustrates how younger generations have begun responding to the pressure created by dominant beauty standards on social media. Standards involving clear skin, ideal bodies, symmetrical faces, and feminine appearances are continually reproduced through cultures of commenting and comparison among social media users. Under these conditions, *medium ugly* emerges as an alternative space that enables individuals to present aspects of themselves that were previously considered inconsistent with ideal beauty standards. It consequently becomes a form of identity negotiation that allows individuals to accept imperfection as part of themselves (Chinta et al., 2023).

Furthermore, *medium ugly* influences social relationships within digital media. Social media users do not merely consume content but also participate in constructing meaning through their comments, responses, and shared experiences. This indicates that *medium ugly* contributes to creating a new space for discussing authenticity, bodily representation, and women’s social experiences within digital culture. The term is therefore understood not only as a label attached to physical appearance but also as a form of criticism directed toward excessively narrow beauty standards on social media. From Norman Fairclough’s perspective, discourse is understood not merely as language use but also as a social practice that both shapes and is shaped by power relations within society.

Accordingly, *medium ugly* can be understood as a discourse emerging from the dynamics of digital culture and developing through communication practices on social media. It not only represents individuals’ personal experiences but also indicates social transformations in how society understands beauty and self-acceptance in the digital era. This construction can be observed in content produced by TikTok creators, including the @Cut Febrina S account. Through her content, Cut Febrina discusses *medium ugly* as a social experience closely connected to the lives of younger generations on social media. Her content not only defines *medium ugly* but also demonstrates how the term is constructed through language, communication style, and interaction with audiences (Fairclough, 2025).

2. Representation of the *Medium Ugly* Discourse in TikTok Content by @Cut Febrina S

The TikTok account @Cut Febrina S is managed by a content creator who actively discusses beauty, lifestyle, fashion, and self-acceptance on social media. Based on data displayed on the account, it has approximately 404,500 followers and has received more than 21.2 million likes across all uploaded content. These figures indicate that @Cut Febrina S reaches a relatively broad audience and possesses influence in shaping digital conversations, particularly those concerning beauty and women's identities on social media. Most of the account's followers are young women who actively use TikTok as a form of entertainment and as a source of information regarding beauty standards and lifestyles.

Content produced by Cut Febrina Sabatini does not only discuss makeup tutorials, skincare, and clothing styles but also addresses self-acceptance and more realistic ways of understanding beauty. In several posts, she uses a casual and humorous communication style closely associated with her audience's everyday experiences. This approach makes the content appear more personal and accessible to social media audiences, particularly members of Generation Z who tend to appreciate informal and authentic communication styles (Marwan, 2021).

One topic that attracted considerable audience attention was her content concerning *medium ugly*. The term became widely used on social media toward the end of 2024 and subsequently developed into part of digital popular culture. Within the social media context, *medium ugly* describes someone who is considered not to fully satisfy ideal beauty standards but who also cannot be categorised as unattractive. The phenomenon became widespread on TikTok because many social media users had grown tired of excessively perfect and unattainable standards of beauty (Mahiruni, 2024).

The first piece of content concerning *medium ugly* was uploaded by @Cut Febrina S on June 25, 2025. In the post, Cut Febrina discussed the characteristics of individuals who feel that they occupy an "in-between" position, meaning that they are not considered exceptionally beautiful but are also not perceived as entirely unattractive. In one part of the video, she stated: "This video is for people who feel that they are *medium ugly*. We are in the same situation: people would not say that we are extremely ugly, but they would not say that we are extremely beautiful either. We are somewhere in the middle; it is relative and depends on who is looking."

At the textual level, words such as *kite* ("we"), *gak* ("not"), and *enggga* ("no/not") demonstrate the use of informal Indonesian language commonly associated with the communication style of younger social media users. From Fairclough's perspective, these linguistic choices do not merely constitute casual communication but function as a strategy for developing emotional closeness with the audience. By using the pronoun *kite*, the creator positions herself as a member of a group whose experiences are similar to those of the audience, thereby avoiding the creation of a judgmental relationship.

The narrative also demonstrates that beauty is understood as relative and dependent on social perspectives. The expression "it depends on who is looking" indicates that beauty standards are not absolute but constitute social constructions that may change according to context and social evaluation. The *medium ugly* discourse consequently becomes a form of identity negotiation in relation to the beauty standards that have long dominated social media. In the first post, Cut Febrina also attempted to shift the discussion from physical appearance toward intellectual qualities through the following statement: "Which do you think is more troublesome: an ugly person or a stupid

person? In my opinion, it is a stupid person. Someone who does not understand anything can be extremely troublesome.”

This narrative reflects a discursive strategy intended to deconstruct the importance attached to physical appearance. The focus is no longer directed toward whether someone is beautiful or unattractive but toward knowledge and the ability to think. Critically, however, the statement also indicates the formation of a new standard in which intelligence is positioned as a more important value than physical appearance. The *medium ugly* discourse therefore does not entirely eliminate practices of social evaluation but instead shifts the basis of evaluation from physical appearance to intellectual capacity.

At the level of discourse practice, the content was produced using a spontaneous and natural communication style consistent with the characteristics of the TikTok platform. It was presented in a conversational manner, making it appear more authentic and accessible to the audience. The use of humour and relaxed expressions also prevented the term *medium ugly* from appearing exclusively insulting and instead presented it as a social reflection of experiences shared by many social media users in relation to beauty standards.

During the consumption of the discourse, viewers provided diverse responses to the content. Most regarded it as a form of motivation and encouragement for self-acceptance. Many TikTok users commented that they had experienced similar pressures concerning beauty standards on social media. However, other viewers continued to interpret *medium ugly* as a label attached to physical appearance. This demonstrates that the meaning of social media discourse is not entirely determined by its creator but is also shaped through audience interpretation and interaction. The substantial audience response to the first post encouraged Cut Febrina to create a follow-up video on June 27, 2025. In the second post, the discussion shifted toward privilege and self-development among individuals who considered themselves members of the *medium ugly* category.

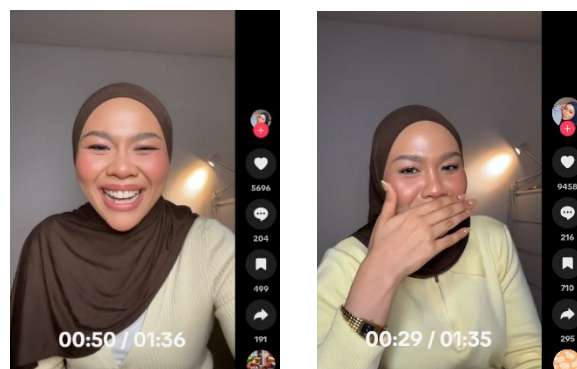


Figure 1. screenshot of the second TikTok video in this position
Source: Author, 2026

In one part of the video, she stated: “We realise that we do not fit the beauty standard, but that is okay because we have our own standard, right? That creates an incentive for us to enrich our knowledge.” The statement represents an effort toward self-affirmation by emphasising that individuals may possess their own standards even when they do not satisfy dominant standards of beauty. The informal expression *gapapa* (“it is okay”) reinforces the message that a particular physical condition should not be

regretted. At the same time, however, the narrative encourages individuals to improve their personal qualities by acquiring knowledge and developing their capacities.

This position becomes more apparent in the following statement: “If your face is just average—let us say it has a B accreditation—then your brain has to be brilliant and your communication skills have to be good.” At the textual level, the expression “B accreditation” constitutes a humorous metaphor used to categorise physical appearance. Although it is communicated casually, the expression continues to demonstrate a process of socially categorising bodies and appearances. The use of the word “must” also communicates a strong modality of obligation. Individuals who consider themselves *medium ugly* are positioned as having an obligation to compensate for their physical condition through intelligence and communication skills. From a critical discourse-analysis perspective, this condition indicates that the *medium ugly* discourse does not entirely release individuals from social pressure but instead establishes a new standard through which personal value is assessed.

At the level of sociocultural practice, the *medium ugly* discourse emerges within a digital culture strongly influenced by social media beauty standards. Beauty has commonly been represented through particular physical characteristics, including fair skin, slim bodies, and symmetrical facial features. Consequently, many individuals experience pressure because they are unable to satisfy these standards. Within this context, Cut Febrina’s content attempts to create space for accepting more realistic and diverse physical conditions (Wilmanda & Hariyanti, 2025).

Nevertheless, the discourse also demonstrates that digital culture continues to demand constant self-development from individuals. Although physical appearance is no longer presented as the only measurement of personal value, individuals are still encouraged to become more intelligent, communicative, and capable of developing a positive self-image. The representation of *medium ugly* in TikTok content by @Cut Febrina S therefore reveals a process of negotiation involving self-acceptance, resistance to dominant beauty standards, and the establishment of new social standards within contemporary digital culture.

3. *Medium Ugly* as a Discourse of Self-Acceptance and the Negotiation of Beauty

The interview findings indicate that the *medium ugly* discourse constructed by Cut Febrina Sabatini originated from a personal experience that subsequently developed into a public discussion on social media. Cut Febrina explained that the term was not initially intended to constitute a serious beauty category but emerged from everyday interactions within her family. She stated: “Actually, the context of *medium ugly* began as an inside joke within my family. That is why the content inevitably generates both supportive and opposing responses. Nevertheless, everyone has the right to express an opinion” (Cut Febrina, interview, November 11, 2025).

This statement indicates that the term *medium ugly* originally appeared as an internal joke rather than as an insult directed toward herself or other people. However, when the term was reproduced through TikTok content and consumed by a broader audience, its meaning was transformed into part of a discourse concerning beauty, identity, and self-acceptance. From Fairclough’s perspective, this transformation demonstrates how language can move from a personal domain to a public space and subsequently create new social practices through the production and consumption of discourse.

The emergence of *medium ugly* also cannot be separated from a digital culture that continually reproduces particular beauty standards. Social media consistently displays images of women possessing physical characteristics regarded as ideal, including fair skin, slim bodies, and symmetrical facial features. This condition produces social pressure among individuals who perceive that they do not conform to dominant beauty standards. Within this context, Cut Febrina interprets *medium ugly* as a response to beauty standards that are considered excessively narrow and incapable of representing the diversity of women's experiences. These findings correspond with research demonstrating that younger generations are beginning to develop alternative identities in response to the dominance of digital beauty standards (Nazihah, 2022).

The interview findings demonstrate that one of the principal objectives behind the production of the *medium ugly* content was to encourage self-acceptance. Cut Febrina explained that the content was created to encourage individuals who believed that they did not conform to existing Indonesian beauty standards. She stated: "The content is a form of acceptance, but it is also intended to encourage people outside there. Even when our beauty does not conform to the standards existing in Indonesia, it is okay. Not fitting those standards is not going to kill us, to put it bluntly" (Cut Febrina, interview, November 11, 2025).

The statement demonstrates that *medium ugly* is constructed as a form of self-acceptance and as an effort to normalise physical diversity amid the dominance of particular beauty standards. In this context, it functions as a counter-discourse that seeks to broaden the definition of beauty beyond physical appearance. Self-acceptance is therefore constructed not by rejecting beauty but by redefining the meaning of beauty itself. In addition to functioning as a discourse of self-acceptance, *medium ugly* is constructed as a criticism of prevailing Indonesian beauty standards. According to Cut Febrina, dominant beauty standards remain directed toward particular physical characteristics. She explained: "You already know the beauty standards in Indonesia: a sharp nose, fair skin, a tall body, a small upper body, and a larger lower body. However, beauty is actually extremely broad. Someone may be beautiful with darker skin, beautiful because she is skilled in public speaking, or beautiful because of her knowledge. The context of beauty is very broad" (Cut Febrina, interview, November 11, 2025).

At the same time, she emphasised that beauty does not relate exclusively to visual appearance but may also emerge through speaking ability, knowledge, confidence, and personal character. This perspective indicates an effort to deconstruct a definition of beauty historically centred on physical attributes. From Fairclough's perspective, this process can be understood as a form of meaning negotiation in which a new discourse simultaneously challenges and shifts definitions of beauty that have long been considered dominant within society.

The research findings also demonstrate that *medium ugly* functions as a form of social validation for individuals who perceive themselves as existing outside prevailing beauty standards. Cut Febrina explained that one reason for producing the content was to support individuals who frequently experienced insecurity regarding their appearance. She stated: "One reason I created that kind of content was to validate people who feel that they do not meet the beauty standard, meaning that some part of their physical appearance does not fit it. Sometimes people lose confidence before anything even happens. I wanted to be there to tell them: there are many people in this world just like you. I am here as well, and I am okay. I am living my life, and my life is perfectly fine" (Cut Febrina, interview, November 11, 2025).

The statement demonstrates that *medium ugly* does not function merely as a popular social media expression but also as a means of establishing emotional solidarity among individuals who share similar experiences. Through the narrative, Cut Febrina positions herself as part of the same group as her audience, thereby creating a closer and more equal relationship. These findings indicate that social media can function as a space for constructing narratives of self-acceptance and social support for women existing outside dominant beauty standards (Mufidah et al., 2025).

Cut Febrina's perspective on *medium ugly* also demonstrates that the term's meaning depends considerably upon how it is interpreted. She explained that everything is fundamentally neutral, although society frequently attaches particular labels to phenomena according to prevailing social constructions. She stated: "It depends on who is looking. I regard it as positive, but its meaning depends on the person interpreting it. Everything in this world is essentially neutral, including black and white. Why do people interpret black as negative when both are merely colours? There is no fundamental difference between black and white, but black is often given a negative label. In the past, racism in the United States caused Black people to be viewed negatively. That is why I believe everything depends on what people believe and how they interpret it" (Cut Febrina, interview, November 11, 2025).

The statement indicates that *medium ugly* is understood as a social construction whose meaning may change according to individual and societal interpretations. Cut Febrina consequently rejects understanding *medium ugly* exclusively as an insult and instead regards it as a concept that may be interpreted positively as a form of self-acceptance. This perspective also demonstrates that social media constitutes a space for negotiating meaning, in which younger generations begin constructing more open and plural definitions of beauty. Platforms such as TikTok enable the emergence of more diverse beauty representations than those accommodated by historically dominant conventional standards (Wilmanda & Hariyanti, 2025).

Overall, the interview findings demonstrate that Cut Febrina constructs *medium ugly* as a discourse of self-acceptance originating from personal experience but subsequently developing into a symbolic critique of dominant beauty standards. The discourse seeks to broaden the definition of beauty, provide social validation for individuals who perceive themselves as existing outside ideal standards, and create space for more diverse meanings of beauty. From Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis perspective, *medium ugly* does not merely represent individual experience but also demonstrates how language is used to negotiate the power relations that shape society's understanding of bodies, beauty, and personal value in the digital era.

4. Transformation of the Meaning of Beauty through the *Medium Ugly* Identity

The normalisation of the *medium ugly* identity on social media indicates a transformation in how individuals represent themselves amid the pressures created by digital beauty standards. Whereas social media was previously dominated by attempts to present bodies and faces that conformed to ideal beauty standards, the emergence of *medium ugly* demonstrates a form of self-representation that is more flexible, realistic, and closely connected to everyday experience. Within this context, the *medium ugly* identity is no longer understood merely as a form of self-insult but as a strategy for developing self-acceptance and demonstrating that personal value is not determined exclusively by physical appearance. The development of social media has transformed how individuals construct their identities within digital public spaces. Self-

representation is not understood solely as the manner in which individuals display themselves but also as a symbolic practice deliberately constructed through language, communication style, visual appearance, and social interaction within digital media. Self-representation constitutes a form of identity construction through which individuals seek to influence how other people perceive them. Within TikTok, self-representation strategies are implemented through content displaying personal experiences, daily activities, and the ways individuals negotiate their positions in relation to particular social standards (Rifayani & Harahap, 2025).

The *medium ugly* phenomenon demonstrates an effort to shift self-evaluation from physical appearance toward personal qualities such as communication skills, knowledge, and personality. This identity is produced through casual, reflective, and humorous communication, making it accessible to audiences, particularly younger social media users. Humour constitutes an important element of the strategy because it reduces potentially degrading impressions and creates a safer space in which physical imperfection can be discussed without shame. In practice, the term *medium ugly* is employed as a form of negotiation in response to the pressures of beauty standards that have long dominated social media.

Within digital culture, this form of self-representation strategy is related to the concept of impression management, which concerns how individuals manage their self-image before the public. Social media encourages users to construct visually attractive appearances to obtain social validation through views, comments, and likes. Within influencer culture, physical appearance is frequently positioned as a form of social capital that determines the extent of public attention. Nevertheless, the normalisation of the *medium ugly* identity indicates a new tendency among social media users to display more natural self-images that do not fully conform to perfected digital aesthetics (Mufidah et al., 2025).

The phenomenon also demonstrates a transformation in how society interprets beauty. Whereas beauty was previously understood as an exclusive quality associated with particular physical characteristics, the *medium ugly* identity presents a more inclusive and plural understanding. Indonesian beauty standards continue to be dominated by characteristics such as fair skin, slim bodies, sharp noses, and symmetrical faces. The adoption of the *medium ugly* identity may therefore be understood as a form of resistance against the dominance of these standards. Individuals no longer attempt exclusively to conform to existing standards but begin constructing their own definitions of beauty based on personal experiences and comfort with themselves (Nazihah, 2022).

The normalisation of the *medium ugly* identity also cannot be separated from the visual pressures present on social media. Platforms such as TikTok consistently display faces and bodies perceived as satisfying the category of “ideal beauty” through algorithms, digital filters, and visual cultures continuously reproduced within digital spaces. Filters that whiten skin, sharpen noses, smooth facial features, and modify proportions create a perception that ideal beauty must appear visually perfect. This situation causes many users to believe that their natural appearance is insufficiently attractive compared with the digital representations they encounter every day (Millenia & Hidayat, 2025).

These pressures subsequently generate visual intimidation, a condition in which individuals experience distress because of continuous exposure to particular standards of beauty. Visual intimidation does not emerge solely through negative comments but also through social-validation mechanisms, including the number of likes, comments, and

views received. Within social media culture, public responses are frequently treated as measurements of an individual's social value. Limited attention toward particular posts may consequently generate an assumption that the individual's appearance does not conform to visual standards regarded as attractive (Kartika, 2025).

Within this context, the *medium ugly* identity constitutes a response to the visual pressures developing on social media. The term creates an alternative representational space for individuals who believe that they do not conform to digital beauty standards. Through humorous and open use of the expression, *medium ugly* assists individuals in understanding physical imperfection as something ordinary and human. The identity consequently functions not only as a form of self-acceptance but also as a means of rejecting excessively perfected digital aesthetics.

Furthermore, the *medium ugly* identity creates a space for solidarity on social media. Many users feel represented because they do not perceive themselves as belonging to the category of "ideal beauty" that has historically dominated digital spaces. In this context, *medium ugly* becomes a collective identity connecting similar experiences of insecurity, visual pressure, and the inability to satisfy digital aesthetic standards. The phenomenon demonstrates that social media is not merely a space for reproducing beauty standards but also an arena in which the meaning of beauty can be renegotiated in a more open and inclusive manner.

From Norman Fairclough's perspective, the normalisation of the *medium ugly* identity demonstrates that discourse not only represents social reality but also contributes to constructing new perspectives regarding bodies and identity. An identity previously perceived negatively is renegotiated into a form of self-acceptance and an alternative strategy of representation on social media. The normalisation of *medium ugly* can therefore be understood as a transformation of beauty discourse from an exclusive construction toward an understanding that is more inclusive, realistic, and humane.

CONCLUSION

The *medium ugly* phenomenon developing on social media, particularly TikTok, demonstrates a transformation in how younger generations interpret beauty and self-identity within digital spaces. Through content produced by Cut Febrina Sabatini on the @Cut Febrina S account, the term *medium ugly* is used not merely as a label for physical appearance but also as a form of identity negotiation and a strategy of self-acceptance amid the dominance of narrow and homogeneous digital beauty standards. This study shows that the *medium ugly* discourse is constructed through casual, humorous, and reflective language, enabling the creator to establish emotional closeness with viewers while presenting beauty as relative and not determined exclusively by physical appearance.

At the level of discourse practice, *medium ugly* content is produced from personal experiences and communicated through spontaneous strategies characteristic of social media, making it accessible to younger audiences. Viewers interpret the content as a form of validation for experiences of insecurity, particularly among individuals who feel that they do not conform to dominant beauty standards on social media. However, this study also finds that *medium ugly* does not completely free individuals from social expectations because the discourse continues to introduce new standards, particularly the expectation that individuals should improve themselves through knowledge, communication skills, and personal development.

At the level of sociocultural practice, *medium ugly* can be understood as a subtle criticism of digital beauty standards reinforced by filters, algorithms, and the visual culture of social media. The discourse normalises imperfection and opens a more inclusive representational space for diverse faces and bodies within digital environments. Therefore, *medium ugly* functions not only as a form of self-expression but also as a social practice that seeks to transform society's understanding of beauty into one that is more humane, flexible, and no longer entirely dependent on idealised physical standards.

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