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## **Beyond Skin-Deep: The Relationship between Beauty Ideals and Identity Crisis in Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies***

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### **Abstract**

*Uglies* (2005) is the first in Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* series of novels. It is a literary work with a futuristic scenario that depicts a dystopian world in which people are preoccupied with unnatural standards of beauty. In a realm where science and fiction intertwine, the themes of beauty, identity, and the insidious influence of brainwashing take center stage, inviting readers to delve into the complexities of these interconnected concepts. The tapestry of the novel also involves a speculative discourse surrounding the deleterious implications of cosmetic surgery, thereby engendering an intellectual milieu wherein the ramifications of such practices are rigorously examined and debated. Drawing upon Erik Erikson's identity development theory (1950) and Henri Tajfel and John Turner's social identity theory (1979) as theoretical frameworks, this research paper aims to present an analysis of how the pursuit of beauty ideals contributes to the formation of an externally appealing but inwardly conflicted self-image.

**Keywords:** Beauty, brainwashing, cosmetic surgery, identity, love

## Introduction

*Uglies* opens with Tally Youngblood eagerly anticipating her sixteenth birthday so that she can undergo a cosmetic surgery to enhance her physical appearance. She is labeled as ugly and settles in a dorm in Uglyville. She mourns the departure of her ex-best friend Peris from Uglyville to New Pretty Town where the pretties live. In the meantime, she meets Shay, befriends her and learns about the Smoke. The Smoke is a secret location founded by anti-cosmetic surgery activists where uglies avoid being turned into pretties by force. Tally has a great admiration for cosmetic surgery, while Shay is not a big fan. Shay encourages Tally to flee before their operations. After her rejection, Shay leaves her some guiding notes to the Smoke. The Special Circumstances, forces with special super powers to ironically protect the city, take Tally by force to Dr. Cable. Dr. Cable, a cruel pretty surgeon empowered by government, threatens Tally to reveal the location of the Smoke. Consequently, Tally goes through multiple fluctuations that transform her into a villain.

Prior to delving deeply into the realm of *Uglies*, it is important to highlight the fact that children have a natural tendency to absorb information from their surroundings. In his book *Mind-Rain*, Westerfeld (2013, p. 1) states, "Children are hungry little sponges who are shaped by everything around them." They often do this unconsciously, meaning they are not necessarily aware that they are learning or being influenced. As they grow up, this absorption of information plays a crucial role in the development of their personal and social identities. A child's surroundings can greatly impact the formation of their personal identities, which refers to their sense of self, their personality traits, and their beliefs and values. Personal identity is defined as a "phenomenological sense of oneself as a separate individual being with a distinctive personality and a 'true self' persisting over time" (Chandler & Munday, 2011, p. 316). Personal identity means having a unique personality that has its distinctive traits and qualities and enjoys its own individuality that cannot be shaken easily over time.

Similarly, child's surroundings can also have a significant impact on the formation of their social identities, which refers to their sense of belonging to various social groups and communities. Henri Tajfel (1919-1982), a Polish social psychologist, defines social identity as the "individual's knowledge that

he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership" (1972, p. 292). A person's knowledge of a specific group in society is derived from family, school, peers, or the media and the significance assigned to it influences how emotionally positive it is to a person. Therefore, people's identities are formed by their knowledge and emotional significance of their belonging to a specific group. The characters in this novel experience identity crises at the personal and social levels by categorization, brainwashing and restrictions.

### **Beauty Ideals and Identity Crisis in *Uglies***

The society in *Uglies* revolves around an idealized concept of physical attractiveness. The community embracing this culture is divided into three main categories: littlies, uglies and pretties. Littlies are the children under the age of twelve, while uglies are those between the age of twelve and sixteen. Pretties are the persons who have undergone cosmetic surgery after turning sixteen. These groups' self-esteem is heavily influenced by how many features they possess in terms of promoted beauty ideals. The society's emphasis on idealized physical beauty is used as a mechanism of control by the government. The government employs beauty ideals to deceive the populace into believing that they are unattractive and in need of cosmetic surgery. This manipulation plays a significant role in the novel, affecting both the characters' identities and the broader society's beliefs. The government utilizes cosmetic surgery as a powerful tool for propaganda, allowing them to shape the citizens' perceptions without their knowledge. By implanting brain lesions during the surgery, the government can control the citizens' thoughts and actions, ensuring that they remain compliant with the regime's wishes. The implementation of these lesions represents a gross violation of individual autonomy and personal freedom.

To answer the potential question of why the society of *Uglies* is submitted to beauty ideals, it is necessary to go back in time to its history. On the one hand, pre-rusties are the people who lived before the flourishing of industrialization and did not harm earth with science. Rusties, on the other hand, are the reason behind how the society of uglies looks like is in the novel. They are the previous generation that destroyed the earth due to industrial and scientific progress. They abused nature, causing the earth to deteriorate into

Rusty Ruins. In their guide book *Bubbly to Bogus*, Westerfeld and Philips (2008, p. 30) state:

To manufacture..., the Rusties gouged the earth and poisoned the sky. Their hunger wreaked havoc in the climate and in the codes of life itself. Under this constant assault, the wild began to die. At the Rusties' height, a hundred species became extinct everyday. They did a pretty good job on themselves too. Their political leaders were always looking for ways to kill one another, and their economic systems were built on poverty and debt. And so finally, one day, they got too good at destroying themselves.

Rusties' materialism and limit-breaking greed wreaked havoc on the environment, animals and humans. Few people survived such a disaster, so some survivors created a means of limiting human brains in order to restrict extreme scientific progress. They decided to implant brain lesions in uglies' brains. Once the "seed of transformation was implanted," the government could transform people into idiots (Ismael, 2022, p. 424). The goal of the government is to restrict them and the most cunning way to do so was through cosmetic surgery. Muzafer Sherif (1966), a Turkish-American social psychologist, suggests that competition occurs when two groups have a mutual goal that only one group can fulfill at the cost of the other (e.g., dominance). This is usually followed by harmful intergroup conduct and negative intergroup attitudes, which lay the groundwork for prejudice, discrimination and dehumanization. To implement the leaders' strategy of brains limitation, people must go through a process that includes brainwashing, psychologically damaging exposure to prejudice and discrimination and submission to cosmetic surgery that guarantees their dumbness.

Erik Erikson (1902-1994), a German-American theorist, is best known for his theory of psychosocial development. He theorizes that one's character goes through eight stages of development, each of which must be successfully completed in order to be healthy. He theorizes that the fifth stage is identity versus role confusion, which a person goes through between the ages of twelve and eighteen. Adolescents in this stage seek their personal identities by investigating societal values and beliefs. Failure to develop a strong personal identity results in role confusion (Erikson, 1993). *Uglies*, as a literary piece of Young Adult Literature, addresses youth's inability to form their own personal

identities for being victimized by a continuous process of brainwashing. They do not choose their own personal identity in Uglyville. They are unconsciously turning into something they believe they want. They are not growing in a safe environment that allows them to make choices and develop a healthy personal identity. They are not permitted to be unique individuals as they are only permitted to be beautiful and brainless.

On a daily basis, the littlies are indoctrinated to idealize certain beauty standards. They are taught to believe that they do not measure up to these ideals. To develop a proper personal identity, it is important that the process is not constrained by specific rules, and instead is allowed to form freely based on a child's environment. Imposing limitations on ideals and frameworks can prevent a child from naturally acquiring their own personal identity. Beauty ideals also set the stage for their future social identity as uglies. The way people perceive themselves is more important than their actual appearance, so even if they are physically attractive, they can still feel ugly if they do not meet society's ideals of beauty. In *Uglies*, people are conditioned to accept the dominant beauty ideals from a young age, leading to a lack of diversity in their perceptions of beauty (Wolf, 2002). Due to their upbringing in a non-liberal milieu, most of uglies undergo personal identity crisis. They are deprived of the opportunity to form their identities in a natural manner within their surroundings. The government utilized schools and media to influence individuals to focus on their negative social identities and disregard their personal identities.

Social identity theory proposed by Tajfel states that people perceive themselves as members of a group. They do not consider themselves unique individuals. They are influenced by the mere categorizing effect, which is the act of classifying people into groups (1986). Self-categorization theory (1987), a theory developed by John Turner (1947-2011), also demonstrates that "people come to see themselves more as the interchangeable exemplars of a social category than as unique personalities defined by their differences from others" (Turner et al., 1987, p. 50). He emphasizes that depersonalization is "the change from the personal to the social level of identity, a change in the nature and content of the self-concept corresponding to the functioning of self-perception at a more inclusive level of abstraction" (p. 51). Thus, people start to think of the society as "us" and "them." They also treat ingroup and

outgroup members in a biased way based on their different activities. In her book *Discourse and Identity*, the British linguist Bethan Benwell explains:

Social identity theory explores the phenomenon of the 'ingroup' and 'outgroup', and is based on the view that identities are constituted through a process of difference defined in a relative or flexible way depends on the activities in which one engages. (2006, p. 25)

There are two major social groups in the world of *Uglies*. The group of uglies and the group of pretties. An ugly is an ingroup member to another ugly and an outgroup member to pretties and vice versa. Society determines the worth of each group's characteristics. Some features are prestigious due to some social beliefs, while others are not. The society in this novel is taught and brainwashed to value beauty ideals. Being attractive raises one's social standing. Therefore, uglies aspire to join the group of pretties to improve their social rank. They believe they are less worthy and respected because society labels them as the degraded group.

When littlies turn twelve, they are categorized as uglies and placed in an Uglyville dorm with other uglies. They spend their time there aspiring to become pretty as soon as possible. "Twelve was definitely the turning point, when you changed from a cute little into an oversize, undereducated ugly" (Westerfeld, 2011, p. 74). Tally, like any other ugly, faces an identity issue when she reaches this age. She is supposed to look, think and act the way she wants to, not the way society requires her to. Tally must undergo cosmetic surgery to transform her social identity as an ugly into that of a pretty. Uglies face the psychological dilemma of low self-esteem and self-hatred from the age of twelve to sixteen, which is the age of cosmetic surgery. "There is some indication that being in a minority group poses a threat to a person's self-esteem" (Simon & Brown, 1987, p. 704). To feel more accepted by society, they must develop a social identity that conforms to the community's ideals rather than a personal one. Uglies shall go in a process of depersonalization to be accepted. Depersonalization is the process by which a person sees himself as an interchangeable example of a social category rather than as an individual with unique traits of his own (Turner, p. 1987).

Categorization is a tool of pressure and brainwashing that has a psychological effect on categorized beings, particularly those from low-status groups. Going through depersonalization is one of the psychological effects. People define themselves based on their social identities rather than their personal ones. When classified, they are seen in terms of the characteristics under which they are classified instead of the personal characteristics that distinguish them as individuals. They experience an "inner wasteland" (Azeez, 2022, p. 2) as they begin to lose touch with who they truly are. They only see themselves as ugly since society forms this social identity for them. They become victims of mental abuse which leads them blindly to the surgery.

Another method used to brainwash uglies is to make them feel bitter in their own skins, that is, to isolate them from pretties. They are not permitted to leave Uglyville and enter New Pretty Town, where those who have been morphed by cosmetic surgery are relocated. They are only permitted to observe it from a remote distance until they reach the age sixteen and undergo their own cosmetic surgery. The promotion of New Pretty Town as a wonderland is an indirect strategy of brainwashing. In the first chapter, a description of the way an ugly perceives New Pretty Town is provided:

She [Tally] could see New Pretty Town through her open window. The party towers were already lit up, and snakes of burning torches marked flickering pathways through the pleasure gardens. A few hot-air balloons pulled at their tethers against the darkening pink sky, their passengers shooting safety fireworks at other balloons and passing parasailers. Laughter and music skipped across the water like rocks thrown with just the right spin, their edges just as sharp against Tally's nerves. (Westerfeld, 2011, p. 4)

The image of New Pretty Town is expertly imprinted in uglies' minds and it becomes a city of their dreams, complete with parties and fireworks. Everyone in Uglyville sees this view from their windows every day. They notice the difference between the illuminated towers of New Pretty Town and the darkness of their dorms. They believe that, only by turning pretty, they will be able to enjoy the pleasure given by New Pretty Town gardens. Pretties' laughter and music are "as sharp against Tally's nerves" (p. 4) as the razors of cosmetic surgery, except that the latter promises happiness and satisfaction.

Westerfeld uses the words "sharp" and "nerves" to reflect on the physical and psychological torture the uglies experience.

Human groups are mental prototypes, fuzzy sets of interconnected qualities (attitudes, actions, customs, clothing and so on) that reflect both group similarities and group differences. Prototypes are features that maximize entitativity, the degree to which a group appears to be a unique and well-defined entity (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). Entering New Pretty Town is forbidden, some naughty uglies used to sneak there. By sneaking to New Pretty Town, Tally sees "magic in their [pretties'] large and perfect eyes" (Westerfeld, 2011, p. 7) and "perfect legs and arms" (p. 8); these are the characteristics of her outgroup that make them attractive and superior. Successively, she realizes the characteristics of her ingroup, "She put her fingers up to her face, felt the wide nose and thin lips, the too-high forehead and tangled mass of frizzy hair" (p. 8). She is taught that having a wide nose and thin lips, as well as other features that do not conform to ideals, is what makes her ugly.

Tally disguises herself with a mask when she sneaks around. She hides her face for her features are not accepted there. She always goes "wearing the face of a pig" (p. 10). She leaves New Pretty Town, feeling too ugly and freaky as if she were a real pig. Tally lacks the sense of belonging to the superior group as she "felt uglier every second she spent there. Being laughed at by everyone she met wasn't helping much. But it was better than what they'd do if they saw her real face" (p. 13). Being surrounded by people who have idealized beauty intensifies one's feelings of shame of their real features and makes them feel even uglier.

The reason behind Tally's sneaking was Peris. Peris her older friend who already turned pretty. She sneaks to see him as they are separated by force. Back then when they were both uglies, they created ugly nicknames for themselves. He used to call her "Squint" (p. 17) and she called him "Nose" (p. 17). By calling each other's with nicknames of their features as flaws, they emphasize their ugly social identity. They also share a scar together as a mark of their strong friendship but the "scar that they had made together was gone" (p. 18). The surgeons changed Peris's skin and removed the scar. The scar is a symbolic representation of the emotional and physical loss caused by cosmetic surgery. Without the scar, Peris's skin becomes flawless. However, the physical



change has taken the chemistry shared between him and Tally; the harmony they have shared in conversations has vanished with the scar. She finds it strange to call him "Nose" (p. 17) again for he has had his ugly nose ideally customized by the surgery. She is left alone with the ugliness that her current identity carries.

Tally and Peris used an ordinary knife to make their friendship scars, their scars had no "surgical complications" (Mohamed & Mecheser, 2012, p. 40). Their scars were simple and meaningfully beautiful. In a cosmetic surgery, "the doctors used much sharper and bigger knives in the operation. They rubbed you raw, and you grew all new skin, perfect and clear. The old marks of accidents and bad food and childhood illnesses all washed away. A clean start" (p. 24). The surgeons have used knives that are sharper than their own as they cause psychological wounds, too. They make a clean start to the teenagers by depersonalizing them, changing them physically and dumbing them. They acquire a new shallow identity stripped of its previous distinctiveness.

Tally becomes aware of the differences between herself and Peris. Peris states that he is "so different now" (p. 17). He has changed because he joined another group. For uglies, he is promoted from his inferior group to the superior one. They might have looked different before his cosmetic surgery in terms of appearance. But now, they are completely different and categorized as an ugly and a pretty. People who witness their friends or peers turning pretty feel emotionally lost: "Nothing had been beautiful since Peris turned Pretty" (p. 3). Tally's world has turned gloomy as her best friend turns pretty and settles in New Pretty Town. They are isolated until Tally turns pretty and moves there, too.

A belief structure for social mobility is based on the belief that intergroup boundaries are easily crossed. Tajfel & Turner states, "Individuals strive to achieve or to maintain positive social identity" (1979, p. 40). Members of lesser status groups are forced to disassociate from their ingroup in order to join and be accepted by the higher status outgroup (Hogg, 2016). Most uglies cannot wait to have the surgery to improve their social standing in their community because it is the only way to be a member of the privileged outgroup. "A main premise of social identity theory is that ingroup members will favour their own group over other groups" (Stangor et al., 1997, p. 346).

Ingroup members are prone to becoming biased toward their group; however, this is not the case with uglies. They are tormented psychologically in the form of low self-esteem. Higher self-esteem is associated with emotions of belonging and being accepted, whereas lower self-esteem is associated with rejection, self-destructive attempts to please others and self-devaluation (MacDonald & Leary, 2013). Most ugly people do not think about why they need surgery since the government forces it on them.

Within socio-psychology, Tally's insistence on looking pretty can be viewed as a means of achieving individual mobility. Individuals "disassociate from the group and pursue individual goals designed to improve their personal lot rather than that of their ingroup" (Haslam, 2001, p. 38). Individual mobility is a strategy used by an individual who wishes to escape his devalued group. One does not want to belong to a lower social group but rather to a higher one. Members of the unprivileged group attempt to gain acceptance into the prestigious group (Tajfel, 1975).

Tally becomes obsessed with obtaining the image that will make her socially acceptable and equal to Paris. Because of years of constant and intense brainwashing, it is hard to comprehend the significance of being a unique individual. Tally is too concerned with how society perceives her to recognize that she might enjoy her own personal identity. However, she is not the only character who struggles with his/her identity. She meets Shay, who is "taller than pretty standard" (Westerfeld, 2011, p. 22) and befriends her.

Shay "had long dark hair in pigtails, and her eyes were too wide apart. Her lips were full enough but she was even skinnier than a new pretty" (p. 27). She belongs to Tally's ingroup since she lacks the beauty ideals of the pretties, beginning with her height. Instead of viewing a person as a distinct individual, s/he is viewed through the lens of the category prototype to which they have been assigned. In terms of the prototype's traits, they become depersonalized (Hogg, 2016). Tally's first impression of Shay is that she is ugly too. People in a society like the uglies' are used to recognize people according to beauty ideals, so she sees Shay ugly just like the way she sees herself since she says "too" (Westerfeld, 2011, p. 27). Tally is so drawn in the concept of ugliness for she is raised to fully believe in that. Feeling inferior and unlikable causes

psychological torment to a teenager who is desperate to be recognized and valued.

Tally has to wait for her sixteenth birthday to join Peris. But when she meets Shay, she discovers that they share the same birthday. She wouldn't need to be separated from another friend because they will turn pretty on the same day and move to New Pretty Town together. She says, "I do not think I could stand to lose another friend" (p. 36). The act of categorization and separation shatters people psychologically. It destroys their self-esteem and motivates them to do unnecessary dangerous things, like cosmetic surgeries. It also ruins their strongest and deepest relationships as they are being separated into two different groups.

The power controllers of uglies used technology to implant comparison. They use screens to make people compare their current selves to the futuristic ones after the surgery. Their futuristic selves are supposed to be much prettier in their eyes because they look at themselves through the eyes of others who impose beauty ideals as standards to their self-worth. Tally as a dystopian heroine, represents a random ugly whose ultimate goal is to turn pretty. She enjoys discovering the future of her next pretty self after operation. Via the wall screens, Tally tries to imagine herself having "almond-shaped brown eyes, straight black hair with long bangs, the dark lips set to maximum fullness" (p. 39). She tries to apply beauty ideals to herself using technology.

Dystopias help individuals comprehend the past and the present. It contributes to a different destiny for mankind than the ones described, and even if these conditions exist in the future, humanity will always survive. Despite their horror, they serve as a warning and force people to contemplate on their lives and future. "Shall we be monsters, humans, or machines? Shall we be enslaved or free? Can we be 'free' or only conditioned in varying degrees? Shall we preserve our individuality or be swallowed by the collective?" (Claeys, 2017, p. 498). Changing her current ugly features increases Tally's excitement to be "much more standard morphological model" (Westerfeld, 2011, p. 39). A model that enjoys a greater social identity but she is unaware that she is turning her identity from a potential unique one to only a standard one while she thinks she is becoming like Cleopatra.

Making a "morpho" (p. 41) is very common in Uglyville where everyone creates their own imaginable pretty self, using the technology of wall-screens. A "morpho" (p. 41) is the self-customized physical image of uglies after the cosmetic surgery. They use wall screens to customize this image and edit their features in a way that comply to the promoted beauty ideals. As a dystopian novel, it exposes how "everyone made morphos, even littlies" (p. 39). Littlies are trained to use technology for beauty persuasion purposes. Although they are too young to comprehend the fanciful privileges of looking pretty, they create morphos for themselves anyway. This psychological obsession with prettiness haunts even littlies who are not considered as ugly yet by society because they are too innocent and cute. The disease of idealized beauty is spread in society to prepare even kids for their futuristic cosmetic surgeries.

The comparison of uglies does not end with one's self only as they will unconsciously try to impose their thoughts and ideals on their peers. They compare the natural beauty of their peers to beauty ideals. They will also be interested in seeing their peers after the surgery. It devolves into a series of comparisons, of oneself, others and the entire group to the valued and prevalent ones in society. The classification of society into groups is an indication of social decay. One group is brainless and so is the other. In the novel, there are two concepts of dumbness. The pretties are brainless due to brain lesions but the uglies are brainless due to brainwashing. In both cases, they are deprived of and controlled by power. The leaders were able to turn off everyone's brains and turn them into blind followers.

The Smoke is a heaven for uglies like Shay, whereas the New Pretty Town is a utopia for uglies like Tally. Tally describes turning into pretty as a "happy ending" (p. 65). Despite being only fifteen years old, the protagonist is preoccupied with the idea of her own demise. She feels emotionally drained and unfulfilled due to her perceived unattractiveness and desires cosmetic surgery as a solution. Although she should be enjoying her youth without such concerns, she has grown up disliking her natural appearance and envying the lifestyle of those considered pretty in contrast to the restrictions placed on uglies.

In classes, students are taught that cosmetic surgery is a harmless and unthreatening operation. However, the curriculum also reinforces society's beauty ideals, which are presented as necessary for becoming a beautiful person. Tally expresses her dissatisfaction with her physical appearance to Shay, specifically her belief that her eyes are too close together and her overall lack of symmetry, which she has learned from "Biology" (p. 78).

Tally unconsciously exposes her psychological agony caused by society by telling Shay that she wants "to be happy" (p. 80). She admits that not belonging to the society's valued group depresses her. She does not see herself as a worthy person for she is undervalued by society by belonging to the low status group. She needs to acquire her value from society's approval of her appearance which is, according to her, the first step towards being finally happy. Details of the preparation of Tally's surgery are stated:

Yesterday they'd taken Tally's final measurements, rolling her all the way through an imaging tube. Should she tell this new ugly that sometime this afternoon, her body was going to be opened up, the bones ground down to the right shape, some of them stretched or padded, her nose cartilage and cheekbones stripped out and replaced with programmable plastic, skin sanded off and reseeded like a soccer field in spring? That her eyes would be laser-cut for a lifetime of perfect vision, reflective implants inserted under the iris to add sparkling gold flecks to their indifferent brown? Her muscles all trimmed up with a night of electrocize and all her baby fat sucked out for good? Teeth replaced with ceramics as strong as a suborbital aircraft wing, and as white as the dorm's good china? (p. 94)

The description of the whole process is supposed to be enough for a teenager to run away. However, Tally states that it is "worth a lifetime of being gorgeous" (p. 95). This reflects the overpromising life of pretties she is overwhelmed with. She was also brainwashed by the false ideals of gorgeousness and their relation to self-worth so she cannot wait to feel worthy again even if it takes so much pain. In addition to the pain of the surgery, the patients may face "surgical site infections" (Salih & Kadhim, 2016, p. 40). Infection is one of the risks associated with this operation that could ultimately prove fatal. Moreover, uglies expect to encounter "medical errors" (Alhamdani,

2011, p. 103). Yet, they are still quite interested in getting cosmetic surgery to change how they look.

Tally meets a member of the Special Circumstances who introduces her to a whole new type of beauty. After the meeting with Dr. Cable, the surgeon and leader of Special Circumstances, she describes her as "a cruel pretty" (p. 101). She has eyes like "wolf's" (p. 103) and the "edge in her voice was,... sharp as a razor blade" (p. 103). She has the idealized beauty of pretties but she is uncomfortably different as she is the one who keeps control of city, surgeries and Special Circumstances.

Dr. Cable is well aware of the uglies' vulnerability resulted from beauty pressure. She asks Tally to act as an infiltrator for her in order to find the Smoke, which leads to betraying her best friend Shay. Dr. Cable shows her true self hidden behind the mask of beauty to Tally: "The woman became nothing but a monster, vengeful and inhuman" (p. 106). Westerfeld uses a mixture of gothic elements and science fiction to convey the image of Dr. Cable as a dictator that cannot stand a teen who refuses to obey her orders. She proceeds in threatening Tally, "I'll make you a promise too, Tally Youngblood. Until you do help us, to the very best of your ability, you will never be pretty" (p. 106). She threatens Tally that she will be denied from undergoing the cosmetic surgery if she does not cooperate. She threatens her with the thing that elevates her from her ingroup to the outgroup. She is aware that if Tally refuses, she will be forever stuck with the features and life of uglies.

Returning to the dorm puts Tally under another form of pressure, as she is perceived by the uglies there "a walking disease" (p. 116). She is treated as a disease because her operation is suspended until she assists Dr. Cable. This reflects the moral decay that the society embraces, beginning with the so-called innocent children. Their innocence is haunted by pre-conceived beauty ideals. The stress of being imprisoned in a devalued classification weakens a person's soul like Tally. It also shakes her moral compass as she betrays Shay in two ways. She had intended to lead Dr. Cable and her Special Circumstances to the Smoke at first. The Smoke is a hidden location outside the town on which Shay trusted Tally to remain secret. Tally valued her beauty over the safety of her best friend as Dr. Cable intends to invade the Smoke once she discovers it. Tally has also betrayed Shay by stealing her boyfriend David. The triumph of

society's beauty ideals highlights the failure of humanitarian emotions embodied in friendship and love, leaving one full of their improved social identity at the expense of their morality and individuality.

Shay stands out amidst the formidable influence of mass media and beauty ideals. She rejects the common practice within her social group of using ugly nicknames to refer to one another. She does not want to be called names like "Stick Insect" or "Pig-eyes" (p. 75), recognizing the harm that such labels can cause. Shay's views on beauty ideals are unconventional. She does not subscribe to the narrow beauty ideals that are often perpetuated by the media. Instead, she believes that everyone should be valued regardless of how well they conform to these ideals. For Shay, being taller than the ideal height or having different eye shapes is not a reason for ridicule or comparison to animals.

Group behavior is in connection with the group's psychological representation or social identity. Social identity theory focuses on how people act within social groupings rather than how social groupings operate inside people's minds (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Shay and Tally have the exact date of birth, yet they are completely different. Shay manages to form her own unique identity without being brainwashed. She has the tendency to resist the pressure imposed on her by education, media, and press. She says, "I do not want to be pretty" (Westerfeld, 2011, p. 80). She states her own will confidently although Tally keeps feeding her toxic thoughts about their appearance.

The process of social identification is the result of grouping people in society into their respective categories. An individual comes to the realization, as part of the procedure of social identification, that h/she is a member of one group and is excluded from others (Tajfel, 1974). Tally is a great example to reflect this process as She declares, "I'm an ugly, you're an ugly" (Westerfeld, 2011, p. 77). She makes it perfectly clear that she is aware of her position and the group she belongs to. In addition to this, she involves her best friend and makes her feel terrible about herself as well; however, Shay is capable of resisting.

Shay is under far more intense pressure than Tally is. Shay is being bullied by Tally in almost all their conversations directly and indirectly as

friends might also be foes or potential opponents. Although Shay tries to dissuade Tally from thinking negatively, Tally is susceptible to falling victim to her own erroneous assumptions. She asks Tally, "You do not believe all that crap, do you — that there's only one way to look, and everyone's programmed to agree on it?" (Westerfeld, 2011, p. 78). She does her best to raise Tally's awareness that she is programmed like anyone else to see people in one way only. People are programmed to submit to the only way they are allowed to look which is idealized beauty.

Self-categorization forces one to adhere to the ingroup prototype. Conformity is a deeper process which people internalize and embody the group's prototypes; it is more than simply superficial behavioral conformity (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). Despite belonging to the same devalued group of uglies in society, Shay's and Tally's conception of beauty ideals is revealed to be very different. Tally's beauty ideals are the same as those imposed on society. Shay's ideas, on the other hand, tell a different story. Her concept clearly demonstrates a different way of viewing Cleopatra. She says, "I read that the real Cleopatra wasn't even that great-looking. She seduced everyone with how clever she was" (Westerfeld, 2011, p. 39). She admires Cleopatra for her intelligence, unlike every other naive ugly. She believes that her attractiveness stems from her intelligence rather than her idealized beauty.

Shay also reveals that she reads books that differ from the ones given to them in school. Her idealized beauty is to be intelligent and seek the truth. Knowledge gives her the courage to stand up for the identity she wants to create for herself. She is not deceived by the social identity that everyone is attempting to acquire. She does not need to change her face or body to be considered beautiful. She believes that intelligence is more important than the boring beauty ideals she is forced to conform to in order to avoid being perceived as ugly. She says, "That's not me. It is some committee's idea of me" (p. 44). She is aware that she is seen in a devalued way in society only because she belongs to a low-status group.

However, Shay makes it obvious that she has a different mindset concerning community. She illustrates that being seen as ugly is the social identity formed to her by "some committee's" (p. 44). Unlike simple minded uglies in her ingroup, she does not see the outgroup as a representation of the



whole society and her ingroup as nothing. She gives her devalued group value by considering it a real part of community which would participate to benefit society by thinking differently. She is seen as talking "in a mysterious way, like she was quoting the lyrics of some band no one else listened to" (p. 58). She is regarded as a mysterious person because she expresses new ideas to her ingroup members. Nobody in her ingroup dares to think differently. She cultivates her mind away from schools and media that everyone are programmed by.

Social creativity occurs when members of a low-valued group redefine their group's uniqueness. They go through a process of displaying their intergroup positivity. They demonstrate to society the positive characteristics that their ingroup possesses. This strategy assists members in coping with their situation as members of a low-status group. It helps them to be psychologically healthier and accept their lower social status. Shay's approach to guiding Tally exemplifies social creativity. She aims to convince Tally to listen to her inward voice of truth for her own benefit. She wants her to appreciate the beauty of having a choice rather than being silenced. She says, "We do not have to look like everyone else, Tally, and act like everyone else. We've got a choice. We can grow up any way we want" (p. 86). She tries to affect Tally positively by telling her the privileges of having a choice and keeping their own identities and individuality.

Shay adopts the outgroup homogeneity effect, which is, the perception of outgroup members as more similar to one another than are in-group members. They think that the outgroup is alike; while they are diverse (Quattrone & Jones, 1980). Shay tells Tally, "I don't want you to look like everyone else" (Westerfeld, 2011, p. 265). As beauty ideals promote for sameness, she tells Tally that she wants her to be free from being a copy of everyone's features. "The features that we take from our parents are the things that make us different. A big nose, thin lips, high forehead—all the things that the operation takes away" (p. 243). Mass media propagandizes that the natural features taken from one's parents are wrong and shameful. They make teenagers despise them to undergo the operation.

Shay declares emphatically that she seeks to relish her individuality. She says, "It is about becoming what I want to become. Not what some

surgical committee thinks I should" (p. 90). She longs to be liberated from any committee's rules. She wants to have a choice which is a "very significant part of her identity" (Abdullah & Fayadh, 2020, p. 25). She further wants to become whoever she wants to become away from the frames of imposed beauty ideals. Her ideals of beauty are freedom, smartness and individuality.

Shay further expresses her psychological suffering within the place she lives in. She declares, "I'm sick of this city," and she continues, "I'm sick of the rules and boundaries. The last thing I want is to become some empty-headed new pretty, having one big party all day" (p. 80). She suffers from the devastating rules of her society. She is bound by many rules, including how she loves things and behaves. She is also constrained by the boundaries established to limit her freedom as an ugly as she is not permitted to travel to New Pretty Town or outside the city. She is also forced to undergo cosmetic surgery at the age sixteen in order to be brainless and bored at parties.

Shay decides to escape to the Smoke on her sixteenth birthday. She does not want to turn pretty as Dr. Cable describes, "Just another ugly escaping the tyranny of beauty" (p. 129). Dr. Cable is aware that she is using cosmetic surgery in a way that makes beauty tyrannical and that she is a tyrant. She uses Tally's obsession with beauty ideals as a blackmail tool by pressuring her to reveal Shay's whereabouts. In addition to Shay's mental and psychological support provided to Tally, she confided in her as a real best friend. However, Tally betrays her twice by exposing the secret location of the Smoke and by stealing her boyfriend.

Disclosing the location of the Smoke resulted in "disastrous events" (Alhamdani & Alhamdani, 2008, p. 41). The location of the Smoke was revealed, leading to "disastrous events" (Alhamdani & Alhamdani, 2008, p. 41). For instance, Shay falls prey to Dr. Cable and her army. Against her will, she suddenly turns into a pretty. Even though she is one of the few teens in *Uglies* who have developed her own distinct identity, she has it snatched from her. Tally, in her role as a "spy" (p. 175) for Dr. Cable, causes the downfall of Shay's endeavors.

Maddy, a Smokey surgeon and David's mother, invented pills to cure the brain lesions put in the cosmetic surgery in uglies' brains. She invents them,

yet she cannot test them on anybody except with their consent. Maddy states, "That's the difference between us and them [Dr. Cable and government]" (p. 393). Performing cosmetic surgery on individuals without their informed consent, particularly with the intention of altering their brain function, is considered a form of "human rights violations" (Hussein, 2022, p. 577). Being a morally righteous doctor, Maddy made an oath to never do any operation on a patient's brain without first obtaining their consent. Although Shay is the only pretty the uglies have with them, Maddy refuses to test the invented pills on her without her approval. Shay refuses to take the pills, maybe because she "feel[s] bubbly. It is nice not being all raging with hormones" (p. 390). She prefers the sense of lightness and lack of emotional turbulence. She does not want does not want to experience the same feelings of disappointment and heartbreak again, especially in regards to her friendship with Tally and her love for David.

When Shay was still ugly, she has told Tally that David is "different," (p. 69) she believed in him and loved him despite the influence of the beauty ideals she has continuously been exposed to. Her love for him was bigger than any beauty ideal; her love for him was really ideal. She sees loyalty and power of love are what make people beautiful, not their appearance. She tells Tally, "Your ugly little secret is safe with me" (p. 367). Tally's secret is that she does not tell David that she is a spy. Here, Shay describes Tally's secret as ugly, referring to her inner ugliness and ability to deceive and betray.

Intergroup boundaries are rarely crossed successfully, leaving those who try with uncertain social identities; rejected by both groups (Hogg, 2016). After betraying the Smoke, Tally's fragile identity is shattered. "What was she now? No longer a spy, and she couldn't call herself a Smokey anymore. Hardly a pretty, but she didn't feel like an ugly, either. She was nothing in particular. But at least she had a purpose" (Westerfeld, 2011, p. 335). She could not keep her identity as an ugly nor smokey and she does not manage to continue being a spy. Tally tries to search for her "lost self which is divided between the social 'self' and her inner 'self'" (Jabbar & Dakheel, 2018, p. 57). She faces the psychological struggle of being unable to know who she is personally and socially. Tally's actions and hidden desires have caused her to experience an identity crisis, whereas Shay's identity has been taken from her against her will.

A marginal member who deviates from the group norm in a way that favors the outgroup is called pro-norm deviance. The pro-norm deviance highlights intergroup uniqueness and is thus less normatively threatening than the anti-norm deviance. The anti-norm deviance is the one who tends to lean in the opposite direction and blurs intergroup boundaries (Abrams et al., 2000). Shay has been used to represent pro-norm deviance membership for her loyalty to her ingroup's case. In contrast, Tally represents the anti-norm deviance membership for her former inner desire to belong to the outgroup. Regardless of these facts, Tally manages to appear as the heroine instead of Shay.

Each culture has its own set of values and "the characteristics of the hero usually reflect the cultural values of his time" (Taha, 2006, p. 1). Leaders deliberately shape *Uglies'* culture to deflect attention away from what is truly important. Such a society needs a hero who is not afraid to stir up trouble and make a change. Someone with a unique perspective and spirit, like Shay. *Uglies* ends ironically as Shay's heroism is credited to Tally. In his essay "Best Friends for Never," Robin Wasserman describes Shay as "a hero with the misfortune to be trapped in someone else's story" (2009, p. 20). Shay is the real heroine but Tally's betrayal remarks her fall down. "It was all Tally's fault,... leaving Shay an empty-headed pretty" (Westerfeld, 2011, p. 395). Leaders who are prototypical are more significant and competent than non-prototypical leaders. Their efficacy is strengthened since they are regarded to be deeply associated with the group and hence trusted to be acting in its best interests and unlikely to destroy it (Hogg, 2016). Shay could have been a great example of prototypical leaders as she has been smart, loyal and unique.

Individual mobility and social competition are clearly different, according to social identity theory. Social competition is intended to bring about social change. It addresses the situation of the entire group and strives to improve it. Members who believe in social change will find ways to make significant changes that may affect legislation or the regime. Individual mobility refers to an individual's desire to advance socially by finding ways to join the superior group in his/her society. Tally's quest for self-discovery has turned Shay into a victim while Tally, who embraced individual mobility, is viewed as a heroine for willingly turning to pretty and becoming a willing

subject. "You've got a willing subject," she tells Maddy (Westerfeld, 2011, p. 395). Those who think they are marginal members of a group that is important to their identities may become impassioned agents for the organization in an attempt to be regarded as devoted central members by the group (Hogg & Wagoner, 2017). Tally, as a marginal member, tries to fix the damage she caused. This is the reason why she agrees to turn pretty and test the pills.

Tally has the chance to be an example for both individual mobility and social competition. She can be both a beautiful figure and a heroine. Experimenting the pills does not promise healing and may cause dangerous health issues. Also, undergoing cosmetic surgery does not always end up ideally. Both options are risky but she is desperate for acquiring a positive social identity. Psychologically speaking, turning pretty has always been a repressed desire in Tally's mind. The only way to test the pills is to turn pretty. Through turning pretty, Tally achieves both satisfaction to her hidden desire and her status as a central member in her ingroup. Her ingroup members consider her turning to pretty as a noble effort and a heroic action that save humanity from ultimate dumbness. Being part of Shay's tragedy, she becomes able to achieve her personal goal and earn the respect of her group. *Uglies* portrays dystopia in the superficial societal concept of heroism and beauty, and how real heroism is usurped by a false one.

## **Conclusion**

As has been demonstrated in this paper, beauty ideals have the potential to create personal and social identity crises, as individuals feel pressured to conform to a certain standard of beauty that is perpetuated by media and societal expectations. Such pressures can lead to a sense of inadequacy, low self-esteem, and a negative body image. Individuals who do not fit into these narrow standards may feel ostracized or excluded, which can lead to a sense of alienation and disconnection from their identities. Furthermore, these beauty ideals can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and discrimination based on appearance, which can create a sense of insecurity and uncertainty about one's place in society. As such, it is important to recognize the impact of beauty ideals on personal and social identities and work towards promoting diverse and inclusive societies that celebrate all types of beauty.

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## ما وراء السطحية: العلاقة بين مُثُل الجمال وازمة الهوية في رواية القبيحون لسكوت ويسترفيلد

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### المستخلص

ان رواية القبيحون (2005) هي الأولى في سلسلة روايات القبيحون لسكوت ويسترفيلد. تعد عملاً ادبياً ذو سيناريو مستقبلي يصور عالماً بانساً ينهمك فيه الناس بمعايير غير طبيعية للجمال. في عالم يتشابك فيه العلم و الخيال. تحتل موضوعات الجمال والهوية والتأثير الخبيث لغسيل الادمغة مركز الصدارة. وتدعو القراء الى الخوض في تعقيدات هذه المفاهيم المترابطة ويتضمن نسيج الرواية ايضاً خطاباً تأملياً حول الآثار الضارة للجراحة التجميلية وبالتالي خلق بيئة فكرية يتم فيها تناول ومناقشة تداعيات مثل هذه الممارسات بدقة اعتماداً على نظرية تنمية الهوية (1950) لإريك إريكسون ونظرية الهوية الاجتماعية (1979) لهنري تاجفيل وجون تيرنر كأطر نظرية، تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية الى تقديم تحليلاً لكيفية مساهمة السعي وراء مُثُل الجمال في تكوين صورة ذاتية جذابة من الخارج ولكنها متضاربة داخلياً.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الجمال، غسيل الادمغة، الجراحة التجميلية، الهوية، الحب