The Journal of Social Media in Society
Spring 2018, Vol. 7, No. 1, Pages 15-36
thejsms.org

Posting Selfies and Body Image in Young Adult Women: The Selfie Paradox

Sarah Grogan[1*], Leonie Rothery[1], Jennifer Cole[1], and Matthew Hall[2]
[1]Department of Psychology, Manchester Metropolitan University, 53 Bonsall Street, Manchester, UK, M15 6GX.
[2]Faculty of Life & Health Sciences, Ulster University, Cromore Road, Coleraine, BT52 1SA; College of Business, Law & Social Sciences, University of Derby, Kedleston Rd, Derby DE22 1GB.
*Corresponding Author: s.grogan@mmu.ac.uk, (044)1612472504.

This exploratory study was designed to investigate how young women make sense of their decision to post selfies, and perceived links between selfie posting and body image. Eighteen 19-22 year old British women were interviewed about their experiences of taking and posting selfies, and interviews were analysed using inductive thematic analysis. Women linked selfie posting to the "ideal" body, identity management, and body exposure; objectifying their own and others' selfies, and trying to portray an image that was as close to "ideal" as possible. Women differentiated between their "unreal," digitally manipulated online selfie identity and their "real" identity outside of *Facebook* and *Instagram*. Bodies were expected to be covered, and sexualised selfies were to be avoided. Results challenge conceptualisations of women as empowered and self-determined selfie posters; although women sought to control their image online, posting was constrained by postfeminist notions of what was considered socially appropriate to post.

Keywords: selfies, young women, objectification, body image, interviews

---

Almost all young adults aged 16 to 24 years in the UK (98%) access the internet on their mobile phones or smartphones (Office of National Statistics (ONS), 2018), and 91% of 16-24 year olds in the UK used social media in 2016 (ONS, 2017). In this context, it is important to understand how young women use social media to represent themselves in social spaces such as *Facebook* and *Instagram* which enable women to choose how and when to present images of their bodies and faces to others online. This study considers women's accounts of selfie posting from perspectives informed by social and feminist psychology, and adds to the existing research base in this area.

Selfies are photographs of the self, typically taken with a smartphone or webcam, and either at arm's length or on a reflective surface such as mirror, and the word 'selfie' has recently entered the mainstream sufficiently to be added to dictionaries (e.g. Oxford

Dictionaries Online, 2015). Indeed, "selfie" was named the 2013 word of the year by Oxford Dictionaries. Some scholars (e.g. Lasén & García, 2015; Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2011) have focused on the performative use of selfies and the role this plays in perceptions of self-presentation. Others (e.g. Lasén, 2015) have examined how selfie posting entails three functions necessary for public display: presentation, representation, and embodiment. This, Lasén (2015, p. 64) suggests, is because selfies are "forms of online presentation in front of a mixed audience of strangers, acquaintances and friends. They are gendered personal and public representations and performances of the self for oneself and for the others." Miguel's (2016) study of selfies and intimacy on *Badoo* and *Facebook* found that participants only chose to display their bodies intimately to reveal their sexual orientation or relationship status. Many participants reported self-censoring of their body in selfies because of concerns over the use of their images by unintended audiences (e.g. revenge pornography – see Hall & Hearn, 2017).

The roles of selfies in relation to adult women's body image are unclear, with some authors arguing that they encourage body objectification, distorting women's body image and encouraging unhealthy eating (Briggs, 2014; Mabe, Forney, & Keel, 2014), and others that selfies can boost self-esteem and empower women through enabling control over the body aesthetic and through showcasing variations in beauty and celebrating uniqueness (Tiidenberg, 2014). Very little published research has asked adult women who post selfies on social media to talk about their reasons for doing this and the impact on their body image. This study was designed to understand young women's experiences of posting selfies on social media through in-depth interviews with self-professed "selfie posters."

LITERATURE REVIEW

The body is a medium of culture. It is shaped by the daily rituals through which it is subjected (e.g. diet, fitness regimes). It represents elements of culture on its surface (e.g. dress sense, hairstyle; Askegaard, Gertsen, & Langer, 2002; Bordo, 2003; Grogan, 2016); and its comportment, posture and movement are structured through the sensory body (Inoue, 2006). These three aspects of the body interact synergistically to produce embodied experiences from interactions in the lived everyday. Embodiment encompasses multifaceted psychological experiences, which involve body-related self-perceptions and attitudes, including thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours (Cash, 2004). Our definition

of body image here incorporates thoughts/evaluations, feelings and perceptions of the body. The primary focus is on thoughts/evaluations of the body, as in the majority of psychological work on body image (Grogan, 2016). Images of one's own body can to some degree be controlled. This can involve dieting and exercising to lose or gain weight, wearing figure hugging, baggy, or shape-enhancing clothes, consuming dieting or muscle enhancing substances, and editing the photographic images others see such as selfies posted to social media sites like *Facebook* and *Instagram.*

Some previous research from the humanities has suggested that selfie posting can be positive and empowering (e.g. Tiidenberg, 2014). For instance, Tiidenberg and Cruz (2015) have focused on women in the Not Safe For Work self-shooters community on *Tumblr,* and suggest that posting sexualised selfies may be an empowering practice for women. However, psychology studies focusing on social media use and body image tend to find more negative impacts, and social media use has been correlated with disordered eating and body concerns in adult women and adolescent girls. Tiggemann and Slater (2013; 2014) found that girls aged 10-12 and 13-15 who used social networking sites such as *Facebook* scored significantly higher on body concern than non-users, suggesting that internalisation of the thin ideal mediates the relationship between social media exposure and body concerns. Other recent work has also correlated posting and viewing selfies with body dissatisfaction and dietary restraint in adolescent girls (McLean, Paxton, Wertheim, & Masters, 2015), and has suggested that selective presentation of images can be used to try to seek positive peer evaluation in teenaged women who are critical of their bodies (Chua & Chang, 2016).

Existing evidence would seem to suggest that selfie posting could increase the emphasis young women place on their appearance. Selfie posting could therefore be associated with higher levels of self-objectification, which has been correlated with body shame, body dissatisfaction and eating disorder symptomology (Lindner, Tantleff-Dunn, & Jentsch, 2012). There is evidence, for example, that selfie posting is associated with an increase in self-objectification for men (Fox & Rooney, 2015). An increase in self-objectification has also been associated with an increase in the extent to which one objectifies *others* (Strelan & Hargreaves, 2005), which has been correlated with the dehumanisation of these objectified others (Puvia & Vaes, 2013).

Social media tools like the selfie may also act as a site for the influence of wider systems which seek to regulate women's bodies, and further reinforce appearance cultures already prevalent in young women (Carey, Donaghue, & Broderick, 2011). Jones, Vigfusdottir, and Lee (2004) argue that appearance cultures consist of conversations about appearance, evaluation of appearance by peers, and exposure to media focused on appearance. The practice of posting pictures of oneself to wide audiences on social media encourages and rewards all three elements of appearance culture; comments received on selfies are important sources of positive feedback (Shah & Tewari, 2016) and represent appearance-based conversations where peer evaluation takes place. Arguably, the proliferation of selfies represents an increased exposure to appearance-focused media. This appearance culture may then encourage women to police the bodies of other women through selfie posting and viewing, in line with cultural norms for how women's bodies should be (Jeffreys, 2014), acting as a means of self-regulation to ensure that dominant body ideals are maintained.

Feeling in control of one's image is important here; if women feel as though they are in control of their own images, they are able draw on neo-liberal discourses of free choice and self-determination to justify objectification of themselves and other women (Stuart & Donaghue, 2011). Despite the potential of controlling one's image to be empowering, posters of selfies may feel that they must adhere to societal expectations about how women should present themselves in order to be "recognized" by other women (Skeggs, 2001) in social media settings. Skeggs argues that appearance represents the primary method via which women are "categorised, known and placed by others" (p. 297). Selfie posters may therefore be constrained in their selfie posting practices if they wish to "do femininity" correctly and be acknowledged as young women online. If women "choose" not to present their bodies in an appropriate way, they risk being judged by other women as unfeminine or pathological (Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013).

The Current Study

Clearly the construction of the practice of selfie taking/viewing by young women may be more nuanced than has been previously suggested, and the relationship between body satisfaction and selfie-taking is complex. Most selfie research based in psychology

has tended to be quantitative, and studies are beginning to emerge which focus specifically on the relationship between selfies and adult women's body image, though they have produced conflicting findings. For example, Wagner, Aguirre and Sumner (2016) sampled 130 female college students ranging from 18–32 years of age who took selfies on *Instagram*. They found that body dissatisfaction predicted number of selfies taken but not number posted (body dissatisfaction was not related to the number of selfies uploaded to *Instagram* per month). Other work has found significant relationships between body satisfaction and selfie posting in adults; for instance, Ridgeway and Clayton (2016) found that increased selfie posting was associated with *increased* body satisfaction in their group of 16-62 year old *Instagram* users.

Existing studies do not ask young adult women to account for their selfie-posting from their own perspectives. Given the complexities in this area, it is important to understand selfie taking and posting from the perspectives of those doing the posting, in their own words. This small-scale qualitative study asked young United Kingdom adult women to discuss their experiences of taking and posting selfies, and perceived relationships with embodiment and body image, with the aim of exploring adult women's accounts of decisions to post selfies and related consequences, incorporating some of the strengths of social psychological and feminist research within psychology, to add a new perspective to the study of selfies.

METHODS

The Research Team

Interviews were conducted by a 22-year-old psychology student who classes herself as a semi-frequent selfie taker and daily social media user (second author). As well as acting as interviewer, she designed the study, and carried out the initial analysis. The second author was supervised by a psychologist in her 50s who does not use selfies or social media, but has an interest in women's body image (first author). She assisted the second author with design and initial analysis, and took a lead role in writing this paper. The third author is a woman in her 30s who is aware of, and interested in, selfies as a social activity but is also not a selfie poster. She supported interpretation and write up of this report. The fourth author is a social psychologist in his 40s who does post selfies but

does not consider himself to be a regular selfie poster. He carried out a re-analysis of the data following analysis by the other authors, redrafted the results section of this paper, and contributed to all sections of the report.

Participants

Eighteen women aged 19-22 years, invited via a UK University recruitment pool offering psychology students research points which could be used to "pay" other students for taking part in their own studies. All were psychology students and self-reported selfie users and had signed up for a study on selfie use. Recruitment ceased when saturation of themes was reached, evidenced through no new themes arising in interviews 17 and 18, following Willig (2013).

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the second author. Open ended questions included: "Would you rather take a selfie or have someone take a picture of you and why?" and "Do you think that selfies have had an impact on your body image?" and questions were non-directive and fairly general to enable space for women to talk about issues that were important to them but were not predicted prior to interview. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. After an initial "warm-up" discussion, interviews covered the topic list flexibly to enable participants to express their views and to ensure that issues that were unexpected though relevant to the topic area were investigated fully. Interviews were conducted in the interview rooms at a UK University and audio-recorded.

Ethics

We were mindful of the need to ensure that women felt comfortable in sharing their experiences with us, and that they felt free to decline to answer questions that made them uncomfortable. We also wanted to ensure that they had a full explanation of the research prior to starting the interviews themselves, and that they understood how quotes from their interview would be used anonymously in the report. We obtained University ethical clearance prior to the interviews and there were several ethical issues to which we paid particular attention. Following British Psychological Society guidelines (2014) we: 1)

provided the interviewees with clear and concise written and verbal explanations of our research, the interview process and what we intended to do with their data; 2) assured the interviewees of data anonymity when using their data in publications; 3) pointed out that the interviewee could terminate the interview at any time without providing a reason; 4) provided a point of contact should the interviewee wish to discuss the research and/or issues arising from the interview and; 5) offered to provide the interviewees with a summary of our research findings.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis, to identify themes and codes within interview transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The six stages identified by Braun and Clarke were followed: familiarising ourselves with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. First, the first and second authors read through the interviews and identified words and concepts that that seemed to be related to our research question that appeared frequently. These were highlighted and the second author produced a set of themes which were then discussed and agreed with the first author, along with a list of illustrative quotes. Following Braun and Clarke (2006) themes were chosen that seem to follow some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set. The most prominent themes were selected based on how frequently they appeared across the participant group. A complete set of coded transcripts with records of codes at each time point was used to inform and evidence the analytic process as suggested by Yardley (2008). Initial coding by the first and second authors was followed up by some recoding by the third author and then further recoding and reanalysis by the fourth author. All themes and associated quotes were agreed between the authors through face-to-face and e-mail discussions as to ensure that analysis was coherent, sensitive to context, and consistent (Willig, 2008). The final set of themes, and their interpretation, was agreed by all authors.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Women's appraisals of their bodies changed as a result of online interactions with other women on social media. Women objectified their own and other women's bodies in

selfies, and social comparisons with hypothetical "ideal" bodies influenced how they evaluated their own bodies. Our thematic analysis of their interview transcripts revealed three prevalent themes which related specifically to body image issues – the "ideal" body, identity management, and body exposure. We also identified several sub-themes that can usefully be viewed as the parameters or rules in selfie taking: 1) whilst selfies were acceptable, posting too many (as determined by perceived social norms on selfie taking) was viewed as vanity, though how many selfies were too many was not made clear; 2) selfies with others (also colloquially known as a 'wefie'; see the Urban Dictionary 2013) were preferred to individual selfies because there was less risk of being charged with vanity; 3) facial shots were preferred to body shots because of lower self-confidence of one's own body; this was in part due to social comparisons with idealised celebrity images and with one's peer group; 4) if the body was included in the selfie it should be covered; 5) selfies should show people at their best; therefore, selfies where one looked unkempt should be avoided, and; 6) sexualised selfies were deemed unacceptable. We discuss these in the following thematic analysis.

The Ideal Body - Look Good, Feel Good

Social comparison is a key element of selfie posting (Briggs, 2014), and the number of "likes" gained on social media sites was seen as a reflection of perceived physical attractiveness. This opening of an appearance conversation, along with peer evaluation is suggestive of the development of an appearance culture (Jones et al., 2004) in which appearance should be scrutinised. Thus, our interviewees reported being critical of their bodies in the selfies they took:

> Um yeah I'd say last year you know there was like this massive fitness craze and like these amazing bodies like all over Instagram and all the thinspirations and I thought oh my god I want to be like that, like last year I did like tried to be more athletic and stuff and tried to get washboard abs and stuff but just died off I'm not athletic now, I'd still like washboard abs but you know I used to follow all the fitness pages like all these six packs and stuff but I don't now.

Talking about the "amazing bodies" and wanting "to be like that" suggests social comparison, and resulting feelings of body inadequacy. Body ideals were normally slender,

athletic, able-bodied ideals, supporting a mass of body image research suggesting the homogeneity of these ideals across cultures (e.g. Jeffreys, 2014). However, the fact that what this woman (quote above) wanted was not a more traditionally feminine body shape (such as more hourglass-shaped figure or larger breasts), but a flat stomach ("washboard abs") was interesting. This links with the work of Gill (2008) who notes the apparent change from primarily passive media representations of women's bodies to those that are stronger, more active, independent, and sexually powerful; she argues that these strong and active media representations of women's bodies can be read as yet another form of regulation that leads to women's feelings of being under constant scrutiny in relation to their bodies.

Our interviewees all reported comparing their bodies to selfies of their peers and selfies of celebrities:

> The ideal body, ideal face perfect hair and stuff like that and I think at some stage in your life you obviously compare yourself to those people and you wanna be like them so much so you pretty much do everything just to look like them.

But unlike Tiidenberg and Cruz (2015) whose participants using *Tumblr* overwhelmingly felt empowered, body-positive and not affected negatively by media images of celebrities, some of our interviewees who used *Instagram* and *Facebook* reported a loss of confidence in their own bodies, suggesting that different platforms may permit different expressions of the self, supporting Duguay (2016):

> I feel they look stunning with their bodies and they're really confident about it and I see myself and I'm not really confident in my body.

Those interviewees who said they were less influenced by selfies of celebrities and expressed a more positive body image said they were aware of how celebrities manipulated their selfies to present an "ideal look":

> Yeah because I know that they have like really good makeup artists and I don't know what they use on their phones but it makes them look ten times better.
>
> Because I watch the Kardashians a lot and then, when I see them and when they are actually talking in the program they don't look as good as they do in their pictures, so they are doing something there.

Some interviewees reported that putting selfies on *Instagram* and *Facebook* boosted their confidence about their appearance, so long as others posted positive and supportive comments:

> It can boost your confidence if you get positive comments, then they'll boost your confidence and make you proud of what you look like.

Selfies were presented in controlled and selective ways that enabled women to ensure that they emphasised what they perceived to be their "best" features, and avoided presenting those they perceived to be less attractive. Women were often more negative about their bodies than their faces, so sometimes avoided showing their bodies through taking a close-up that showed only the face:

> If I do take a selfie it's mostly like close up selfie rather than a full selfie of myself because I do feel like sometimes quite insecure.

Body concerns have been widely reported in women in this age-group (Grogan, 2016), so it is not surprising that women were reticent about presenting what they perceived to be flawed bodies in their selfies. There is a large body of literature on the psychology of body image showing that women tend to make upward social comparisons to the bodies of celebrities and other women shown in the print and other media, leaving them less happy with their own bodies and lower in self-esteem (Bessenoff, 2006; Cattarin, Thompson, Thomas, & Williams, 2000; Grogan, 2016; Halliwell, 2013). One of the dangers of selfie posting on platforms such as *Instagram* is that it may give women an additional resource to encourage social comparison as well as self-objectification and unhelpful body critique, and women spoke in highly objectifying terms about their bodies in terms of "best" features, and clearly used viewing their own selfies as an opportunity to check for perceived flaws, as might be suggested by Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). It is interesting that women felt more comfortable presenting their faces than their bodies. This may link to Wellner's (2015) suggestion that mobile technology encourages a focus on the face. It is also possible that faces are seen as more subject to manipulation to hide perceived imperfections, such as through using cosmetics, though further research would clarify this issue.

Some participants felt that using selfies as a way to seek reassurance from others was not healthy, and that underlying self-esteem should be addressed directly rather than relying on comments from others to boost body confidence:

> I don't think they have enough confidence probably so they want to get feedback from people so they can be told they look nice, so they should probably work on that [confidence] first rather than posting a selfie.

One implication of being constantly presented with, and attempting to get, the "ideal look" in selfies, and the visual media in general, is that some women may be made to feel uncertain about their appearance and body image, where there is a constant need to monitor for imperfections (e.g. weight, shape, tone, contours; Featherstone, 2010). People are encouraged to deal with any perceived "made", "textual", or "schema" imperfections with regular body maintenance (e.g. dieting, exercise). The pay-off for such maintenance work is self-confidence and positive social recognition as some of our interviewees reported. Research (Hall, 2014) shows that a positive body image helps in employment success, social popularity, cultural acceptance, gender identification and sexual attention. The more attractive people believe they are, the more socially acceptable they believe they are — "look good, feel good" (D'Alessandro & Chitty, 2011; Featherstone, 2010; Grogan, 2016). Further research could explore further the direct effects of the social comparison processes involved in posting and viewing selfies on women's mood, body image and self-esteem.

Identity Management – I Am Not My Selfie

Body insecurities and comparisons with peers and celebrities meant our interviewees had well-developed strategies for taking and sharing selfies to avoid inviting critical comments, and thus invite positive responses, about their bodies (Coleman, 2008, 2009). Supporting Goffman's (1959) concept of self-presentation as a performance where we control the impressions we create in our social world, manipulating online 'identity' through altering the appearance of selfies was seen as a legitimate, and even necessary, way to enhance perceived attractiveness; selfies were chosen carefully to ensure that the poster's personal online brand identity (Rutledge, 2013) remained positive. This supports work from authors who have noted the importance of identity performance in social media

(Abidin, 2016; Schwartz & Halegoua, 2014). One of the most commonly reported strategies was to control who took the selfie and when:

> Definitely, I don't like my photo being taken, and when you're taking a selfie it's like before the night out, and when you're having your picture taken by people when you're on a night out that's usually when your make-up's all over the place, your hair is stuck to your head, and in the picture you look disgusting.

Interviewees moderated which selfies were posted on social media sites by using editing tools such as "contrasts and exposures and stuff", and "lighting", and the most common editing strategies discussed by our interviewees was to present the body at its best was the angle at which they took the selfie:

> I know where my, what my angle looks good, like I know if I take it from this way it wouldn't look good, I would take it from the top and then a different angle.

Indeed, some interviewees reported being very good at presenting themselves such that they looked better in selfies than in real life:

> I wouldn't say I'm photogenic anyway but if it is selfies, you need to be an expert to take a good selfie, there's a difference between sticking a camera in front of your face and taking a picture, and choosing the angle, the um (.) whatever you need to be an expert to take a really good selfie but I'd say I look better in pictures I think everyone looks better in pictures than in real life because the flash, it just changes everything, so yeah I'd say I look better in pictures, more in pictures I take than pictures other people take of me, if that makes sense?

This suggests there are disconnects between women's identity as portrayed in selfies and their "real" offline identities. Mascheroni, Vincent, and Jimenez (2015) argue that such practices represent an integral part of managing one's identity and social relations in selfies through control of the face and body image. Similar to offline contexts, in these online contexts self-presentation is a social process and not simply an individual accomplishment. There were clearly social rules for posting selfies, in line with what we know about most kinds of social behaviours where people's behaviour tends to be governed by what they feel are appropriate social norms in that particular context (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Morris, Hong, Chiu & Liu, 2015). By editing and manipulating their selfies to present a more "ideal" look, our interviewees conformed to socially-shared rules

of self-presentation; trying to ensure that their behaviour was in line with perceived social expectations for posting selfies. In this, they demonstrated the so-called relational self (Peter, Valkenburg, & Fluckiger, 2009) and as such were complicit in the co-construction of the "ideal" female body.

As we have shown, our interviewees discussed many aspects of their identity management in selfies, in particular aligning their 'selfie' identity to conform with perceived social and cultural norms about female appearance (Jeffreys, 2014). This shows the power of perceived social norms on selfie-posting, as might be expected from discussions of social norms (e.g. Morris et al., 2015), and from those who have argued for the importance of social norms in determining body image (e.g. Grogan, 2016; Jeffreys, 2014). However, one area of contention was the posting of sexually explicit selfies.

Body Exposure - Sex in the Selfie

Participants reported that one of the ways that social media "likes" could be accrued was by the use of a sexually explicit selfie. Eleven participants speculated in their interviews that it was mainly young women who did this rather than young men, and that the key motivator was to gain attention:

> Guys just mess around, they're not revealing, whereas most girls' ones [selfies] are to get the attention.

Sexually suggestive pictures posted by women were generally disliked with judgmental words such as "slut" being used to describe the women who do this:

> If you didn't know someone and you saw like really what you thought are slutty pictures you'd probably be like oh she's a slut.

This was the case even when the poster was a younger family member:

> Like my little cousin, she's fourteen, fifteen and they're all like, you know the pictures in the mirror? With the horrible little pout and barely any clothes on and you're just like, oh, no stop.

Ringrose et al. (2013) have focused on younger girls in their teenage years and have identified sexual double standards in digital image exchange, where girls are expected to present as "sexy" self-display, yet face "slut shaming" when they do so (see also Miguel, 2016). Albury (2015) also found that her 16-17 years old male and female interviewees

were equally likely to make and share naked or semi-naked selfies, though boys had more freedom to display their bodies without risking negative judgments from peers. Accounts from the young adult women interviewed here highlight different kinds of discourse used by women as they progress into adulthood. Although they speculated on the motivations of other women for doing this, the young adult women who were interviewed here were all negative about posting sexualised images and none reported doing this themselves.

Although there is existing research (e.g. Calvert, 2014) dedicated to the exploration of revenge pornography, and sexting, (e.g. Gabriel, 2014; Shariff, 2015) there is relatively little research on adults who voluntarily put their nude, or underwear, selfies online. Tiidenberg and Cruz (2015) focus on sexualised selfies and argue that self-shooting can be a self-affirmative and awareness-raising activity, and that women may be empowered by the process, framing sexual selfies as a "practice of freedom." Tiidenberg and Cruz's (2015) participants were women in the Not Safe For Work self-shooters community on *Tumblr,* and clearly women's accounts may vary between groups, and between social networking platforms. In the present study none of the participants, who were all selected through a UK university, reported that they chose to present sexual selfies online. More research is required in this area, possibly focusing on women in more specialised online communities, to understand more fully women's motivations for, and experiences of, posting these kinds of selfies. Our research suggests that it may be difficult to find adult participants who are willing to admit that they engage in this behaviour that is often judged harshly, as our participants have demonstrated.

Our interviewees' speculations on possible motives of other women need to be treated with caution, but evidence can be seen here of the objectification of other women, linking to research that women who self-objectify are more likely to objectify other women (Strelan & Hargreaves, 2005) and dehumanise those women as a result (Puvia & Vaes, 2013). Through the de-humanisation of other women who post selfies, women engaged in this practice help to maintain a strict regulation of how women can and should look by othering women who are perceived as "slutty" and fail to show the proper decorum online.

The Selfie Paradox

While women seemed to suggest that selfie taking, editing and sharing are processes that are under their control (as they can decide what and when to post), they were, paradoxically, not completely free to post any selfie they chose. This is because how they presented themselves in their selfies was inextricably associated with notions of the 'ideal' self and body (Gill, 2008) and prescriptive norms about feminine appearance (Jeffreys, 2014); that is, notions of the ideal self as slender, tanned, flaw-free etc., as presented by celebrities and sometimes by their own peers.

Whilst taking and posting selfies might be viewed as enjoyable normative social activities (Bergman, Fearrington, Davenport, & Bergman 2011) it was clear that social and peer-group pressures had a direct influence on participants' decisions to take selfies, and the number of selfies posted online (Gabriel, 2014). Nine participants reported social factors as direct influences on the number of selfies taken and posted. Although some participants reported that the opinions of others did not interest them, most spoke about social pressure to post selfies, and fear that if they did not, they would be seen as abnormal in some way:

> It's about pressure from other people as well because obviously if you've got friends who take selfies every other day or every day you feel pressured to do the same so obviously you're going to start taking selfies as well because you want to fit in.

Taking and posting selfies were social activities, and sharing the selfies on social media sites, and judging, or being judged and objectified, were seen as key parts of the process. Although women reported posting for their own enjoyment, most participants felt social pressure to post selfies, supporting those (e.g. Gabriel, 2014) who have suggested that selfie posting has become normative in young women.

Implications

Results show that links between selfie posting and body image are complex. Women represented their body image as fluid—affected by taking and viewing selfies and by comments by others about the images they posted. Selfie posting was linked to identity management, and women differentiated between their "unreal", digitally manipulated online, selfie identity and their "real" identity outside of *Facebook* and *Instagram*,

supporting authors who have suggested that identity management is key to understanding selfie posting (e.g. Mascheroni et al., 2015). Women conformed to expected body norms by editing and manipulating their selfies to present what they felt was a socially acceptable image of their bodies and faces in the online world, constructing an ideal (manipulated) body online and expecting others to do the same thing.

Women objectified their own bodies as presented in selfies and pressures to present flattering images online meant that women were sometimes unable to post a selfie because it did not correspond to how they hoped they looked. Results supported Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), which suggests that self-monitoring for faults is common in young women. Although women were attempting to control their online image through deciding which selfies to post (posting only those that approximated their ideal self), they were necessarily constrained in their choices because how they presented themselves was inextricably associated with other people's notions of what constitutes an ideal face and body (slender body, flawless skin etc.; Jeffreys, 2014). Results query constructions of these women as empowered and self-determined selfie posters who are free to showcase variations in beauty and celebrate uniqueness as suggested by Tiidenberg (2014) from her work with women using *Tumblr.* Accounts suggest significant constraints on women's posting, imposed by the women themselves due to concerns about the reactions of others, at least in women using *Facebook* and *Instagram* for posting selfies.

Women policed their own selfie posting and those of others, and there were key parameters outside which selfie posting was conceptualised as unacceptably vain. Most of the participants felt constrained in what was appropriate to post, talked in objectifying ways about how their bodies appeared in selfies, felt pressure to post flattering and non-sexualised selfies, and were highly aware of the likely impact on their perceived audience. It is particularly interesting that self-identified selfie posters in the current study acknowledged the social pressures to post these pictures while at the same time condemning women who chose to post sexualised selfies. These women did not acknowledge the different but related pressures which may exist to post *sexualised* selfies and used language which objectified this particular type of selfie poster. This provides further evidence for an Objectification Theory account of the data; if selfie posting is

associated with self-objectification, one would also expect that this behaviour would be associated with the objectification of other women.

Limitations, Strengths, and Future Directions

This small-scale exploratory study is the first to interview adult women about their selfie use in relation to body image and presents some original results, highlighting some of the complexities in selfie posting. The interviewer being a woman in the same age-range as participants and a selfie user enhanced disclosure, and responses were full and frank. The analysis also benefitted from being carried out by the interviewer, and three additional authors with different perspectives on the topic area. Having a range of experiences in this area was useful in informing our analysis and interpreting what was said in interviews. Some of the more complex nuances of meaning around selfie posting could have been lost without having a young woman who is a regular selfie poster, and who hence has some understanding of how it feels to post selfies, as a key part of the team. Similarly, having team members who understood some of the complexities of academic research on gender, qualitative analysis, feminist approaches, and body image research also helped in our analysis and interpretation.

There are also limitations in this study which can be addressed in future work. Participants were all psychology students studying at the same university in the UK within a narrow age range, and their experiences may not generalise to other women of different ages and backgrounds and from other cultures. Thus, future work is needed to replicate this study in other locations and with more varied samples in terms of educational background, and possibly different social norms on selfie posting. Also, these young women used *Facebook* and *Instagram*, and results should not be generalised outside these platforms; researchers (e.g. Duguay, 2016) have suggested that different internet platforms may influence whether selfies reinforce or challenge dominant discourses around gender. In addition, we do not have any ways of verifying what women said to us in relation to their online behaviour, so results should be evaluated in that context. Future research could also focus on male participants, to obtain an understanding of how they interpret selfies in relation to body image and self-esteem, as male selfies are becoming increasingly popular (Fox & Rooney, 2015).

References

Abidin, C. (2016). Aren't these just young, rich women doing vain things online? Influencer selfies as excessive frivolity. *Social Media + Society, 2*(2), 1-17. http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2056305116641342

Albury, (2015). Selfies, sexts, and sneaky hats: Young people's understandings of gendered practices of self-representation. *International Journal of Communication, 9,* 1734–1745. http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/3132

Askegaard, S., Gertsen, M. C., & Langer, R. (2002). The body consumed: Reflexivity and cosmetic surgery. *Psychology & Marketing*, *19*, 793–812. http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/mar.10038

Bergman, S. M., Fearrington, M. E., Davenport, S.W., & Bergman, J. Z. (2011). Millennials narcissism and social networking: What narcissists do on social networking sites and why. *Personality and Individual Differences, 50*, 706-711. http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0191886910006215

Bessenoff, G. (2006). Can the media affect us? Social comparison, self-discrepancy and the thin ideal. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 30*, 3, 239-251. http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1471-6402.2006.00292.x

Bordo, S. (2003). U*nbearable weight: feminism, Western culture, and the body* (Tenth Anniversary Edition), Berkeley: University of California Press.

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77-101. http://dx.doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Briggs, H. (2014). Selfie body image warning issued. Retrieved from http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-26952394.

British Psychological Society (2014). Code of human research ethics. Retrieved from http://www.bps.org.uk/system/files/Public%20files/inf180_web.pdf

Calvert, C. (2014). Revenge porn and freedom of expression: Legislative pushback to an online weapon of emotional and reputational destruction. *Fordham Intellectual Property, Media & Entertainment Law Journal, E*673. http://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/iplj/vol24/iss3/2

Carey, R. N., Donaghue, N., & Broderick, P. (2011). 'What you look like is such a big factor': Girls' own reflections about the appearance culture in an all-girls' school. *Feminism & Psychology, 2,* 3, 299-316. http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0959353510369893

Cash, T. F. (2004). Body Image: past, present and future, *Body Image*, *1,* 1, 1-5. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S1740-1445(03)00011-1

Cattarin, J., Thompson, J. K., Thomas, C. M. & Williams, R. (2000). Body image, mood and televised images of attractiveness: The role of social comparison. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, *19*(2), 220–39. http://guilfordjournals.com/doi/abs/10.1521/jscp.2000.19.2.220

Chua, T. H. H. & Chang, L. (2016). Follow me and like my beautiful selfies: Singapore teenage girls' engagement in self-presentation and peer comparison on social media, *Computers in Human Behaviour, 55*, A, 190-197. http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0747563215301424

Cialdini, R. B. & Goldstein, N. J. (2004). Social influence: Compliance and conformity. *Annual Review of Psychology, 55*(1), 591–621. http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.55.090902.142015

Coleman, R. (2008). The becoming of bodies. *Feminist Media Studies, 8*(2), 163–179. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14680770801980547

Coleman, R. (2009). *The becoming of bodies: Girls, images, experience*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

D'Alessandro, S., & Chitty, B. (2011). Real or relevant beauty? Body shape and endorser effects on brand attitude and body image. *Psychology & Marketing*, *28*, 843–878. http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/mar.20415

Duguay, S. (2016). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer visibility through selfies: Comparing platform mediators across Ruby Rose's Instagram and Vine presence. *Social Media + Society, 2*(2). http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2056305116641975

Featherstone, M. (2010). Body, image and affect in consumer culture. *Body & Society*, *16*(1), 193–221. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1357034X09354357

Fox, J., & Rooney, M. C. (2015). The dark triad and trait self-objectification as predictors of men's use and self-presentation behaviors on social networking sites. *Personality & Individual Differences, 76*, 161–165. http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0191886914007259

Fredrickson, B. & Roberts, T. (1997). Objectification theory. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *21*(2), 173–206. http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1997.tb00108.x

Gabriel, F. (2014). Sexting, selfies and self-harm: Young people, social media and the performance of self-development. *Media International Australia, 151, 104.* http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1329878x1415100114

Gill, R. (2008). Empowerment/sexism: Figuring female sexual agency in contemporary advertising. *Feminism & Psychology, 18*(1), 35-60. http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0959353507084950

Goffman, E. (1959). *Presentation of self in everyday life*. Garden City, New York: Double Day.

Grogan, S. (2016). *Body image: Understanding body dissatisfaction in men, women and children (third edition).* London: Routledge.

Hall, M. (2014). *Metrosexual masculinities*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hall, M. & Hearn, J. (2017). *Revenge pornography: Gender, sexuality and motivations*. London: Routledge.

Halliwell, E. (2013). The impact of thin idealized media images on body satisfaction: Does body appreciation protect women from negative effects? *Body Image, 10*(4), 509-514. http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S174014451300082X

Harper, B. & Tiggemann, M. (2008). The effect of thin ideal media images on women's self-objectification, mood, and body image. *Sex Roles, 58*(9-10), 649-657. https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11199-007-9379-x

Inoue, S. (2006). Embodied habitus. *Theory, Culture & Society*, *23*(2–3), 229–31.

Jeffreys, S. (2014). *Beauty and misogyny: Harmful cultural practices in the West (2nd edition)*. New York: Routledge.

Jones, D. C., Vigfusdottir, T. H., & Lee, Y. (2004). Body image and the appearance culture among adolescent girls and boys: An examination of friend conversations, peer criticism, appearance magazines, and the internalization of appearance ideals. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 19*(3), 323-339.

http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0743558403258847
Lasén, A. (2015). Digital self-portraits, exposure and the modulation of intimacy. In J. R. Carvalheiro & A. S. Tellería (Eds.), Mobile and digital communication: Approaches to public and private. Covilhã, Portugal: Livros LabCom.
Lasén, A., & García, A. *(2015).* '. . . but I haven't got a body to show': Self-pornification and male mixed feelings in digitally mediated seduction practices. *Sexualities, 18, 714–730.*
http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1363460714561720?journalCode=sexa
Lasén Dictionaries Online. (2015). [Online] Retrieved August 25, 2015, from http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/selfie
Lindner, D., Tantleff-Dunn, S., & Jentsch, F. (2012). Social comparison and the 'circle of objectification'. *Sex Roles, 67*, 222-235.
https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11199-012-0175-x
Mabe, A. G., Forney, K. J., & Keel, P. K. (2014). Do you 'like' my photo? Facebook use maintains eating disorder risk. *International Journal of Eating Disorders, 47*(5), 516-523. Retrieved from http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/eat.22254
Mascheroni, G., Vincent, J., & Jimenez, E. (2015). 'Girls are addicted to likes so they post semi-naked selfies': Peer mediation, normativity and the construction of identity online. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace, 9*(1), article 5.
http://www.cyberpsychology.eu/view.php?cisloclanku=2015051401&article=5
McLean, S. A., Paxton, S. J., Wertheim, E. H., & Masters, J. (2015). Photoshopping the selfie: Self photo editing and photo investment are associated with body dissatisfaction in adolescent girls. *International Journal of Eating Disorders, 48*(8), 1132–1140.
http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/eat.22449/abstract
Mendelson A., & Papacharissi, Z. (2011). Look at us: Collective narcissism in college student Facebook photo galleries. In Z. Papacharissi (Ed.), *A networked self: Identity, community, and culture on social network sites* (pp. 251–273). New York, NY: Routledge.
Miguel, C. (2016). Visual intimacy on social media: From selfies to the co-construction of intimacies through shared pictures. *Social Media + Society*, *2*(2).
http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/2056305116641705
Morris, M. W., Hong, Y., Chiu, C., & Liu, Z. (2015). Normology: Integrating insights about social norms to understand cultural dynamics. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 129,* 1-13. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2015.03.001
Office of National Statistics (2017). Internet access household and individuals 2016. Retrieved April 8 2018 from
https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetandsocialmediausage/bulletins/internetaccesshouseholdsandindividuals/2016
Office of National Statistics (2018). Internet access household and individuals 2017. Retrieved April 9 2018 from:
https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetandsocialmediausage/bulletins/internetaccesshouseholdsandindividuals/2017

Peter, J., Valkenburg, P. M., & Fluckiger, C. (2009). Adolescents and social network sites: Identity, friendship and privacy. In S. Livingstone & L. Haddon (Eds.), *Kids online. Opportunities and risks for children* (pp. 83-94). Bristol: Policy Press.

Puvia, E., & Vaes, J. (2013). Being a body: Women's appearance related self-views and their dehumanization of sexually objectified female targets. *Sex Roles, 68*(7/8), 484-495. https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11199-012-0255-y

Qui, L., Lu, J., Yang, S., Qu, W., & Zhu, T. (2015). What does your selfie say about you? *Computers in Human Behavior, 52*, 443-449. http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0747563215004720

Ridgeway, J. & Clayton, R. B. (2016). Instagram unfiltered: Exploring associations of body image satisfaction, Instagram #selfie posting, and negative romantic relationship outcomes. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 19*(1), 2-7. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26779659

Ringrose, J., Harvey, L., Gill, R., & Livingstone, S. (2013). Teen girls, sexual double standards and 'sexting': Gendered value in digital image exchange. *Feminist Theory, 14*(3), 305-323. http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1464700113499853

Rutledge, P. (2013). Branding with selfies. *Psychology Today*. Retrieved from https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/positively-media/201311/branding-selfies

Schwartz, R. & Halegoua, G.R. (2014). The spatial self: Location-based identity performance on social media. *New Media & Society, 17*(10),1643-1660. http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1461444814531364

Shah, R., & Tewari, R. (2016). Demystifying 'selfie': a rampant social media activity. *Behaviour & Information Technology, 35(10)*, 864-871. http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0144929X.2016.1201693?journalCode=tbit20

Shariff, S. (2015). *Sexting and cyberbullying: Defining the line for digitally empowered kids.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Skeggs, B. (2001). The toilet paper: Femininity, class and mis-recognition. *Women's Studies International Forum, 24*(3–4), 295-307. http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0277539501001868

Strelan, P., & Hargreaves, D. (2005). Women who objectify other women: The vicious circle of objectification? *Sex Roles, 52*(9-10), 707-712. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11199-005-3737-3

Stuart, A., & Donaghue, N. (2012). Choosing to conform: The discursive complexities of choice in relation to feminine beauty practices. *Feminism & Psychology*, *22*(1), 98-121. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0959353511424362

Tiggemann, M. & Slater, A. (2013). NetGirls: The internet, Facebook, and body concern in adolescent girls. *International Journal of Eating Disorders, 46*(6), 630-633. http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/eat.22141

Tiggemann, M. & Slater, A. (2014). NetTweens: The internet and body image concerns in preteenage girls. *The Journal of Early Adolescence, 34*(5), 606-620. http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0272431613501083

Tiidenberg, K. (2014). Bringing sexy back: Reclaiming the body aesthetic via selfshooting. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace, 8*(1). http://dx.doi.org/10.5817/CP2014-1-3

Tiidenberg, K. & Cruz, E.G. (2015). Selfies, image and the re-making of the body, *Body and Society, 21, 4*, 77-102. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1357034X15592465

Tiidenberg, A. G., Forney, K. J., & Keel, P. K. (2014). Do you 'like' my photo? Facebook use maintains eating disorder risk. *International Journal of Eating Disorders, 47*(5), 516-523. Retrieved from http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/eat.22254

Urban Dictionary (2013). Wefie. Retrieved November 28, 2016 from http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Wefie

Wagner, C., Aguirre, E., & Sumner, E. M. (2016). The relationship between Instagram selfies and body image in young adult women. *First Monday*, *21*(9). http://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v21i9.6390

Weiser, E. (2015). #Me: Narcissism and its facets as predictors of selfie posting frequency. *Personality and Individual Differences, 86*, 123-127. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2015.07.007

Wellner, G. (2015). *A postphenomenological inquiry of cell phones. Genealogies, meanings, and becoming.* Rowman and Littlefield: Lanham, MD, USA.

Willig, C. (2013). *Introducing qualitative research in psychology.* 3rd Ed. Berkshire: Oxford University Press.

Yardley, L. (2008). Demonstrating validity in qualitative research. In J. Smith (Ed.). *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods*, 2nd Edition (235-252). London: Sage.

Funding and Acknowledgements

The authors declare no funding sources or conflicts of interest.

Online Connections

To follow these authors in social media:

Sarah Grogan: https://scholar.google.co.uk/citations?user=5umoyU4AAAAJ
https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Sarah_Grogan
https://mmu.academia.edu/SarahGrogan

Jennifer Cole: https://scholar.google.co.uk/citations?hl=en&user=wd2SsUQAAAAJ
https://jcolepsych.wordpress.com/
https://twitter.com/Dr_JCole

Matthew Hall: https://scholar.google.co.uk/citations?user=UqCE5JUAAAAJ&hl=en
https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Matthew_Hall9
https://ulster.academia.edu/MatthewHall
https://twitter.com/blog_editor?lang=en