



## “Why do we post selfies?”: Vanity, Validation, and the Virtual Communication of Selfies on Instagram

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### Abstract

Over the last two decades, we have watched the selfie grow and establish itself in the virtual sphere, especially on the social media site Instagram. This article considers the role that selfies play in our communications and social relations in an online space through engaging with the experiences of young, Scottish women. It explores their thoughts on taking, posting, and interacting selfies in order to understand the meanings and motivations behind selfies on Instagram. It will find that regardless of how “vain” taking selfies may be, posting them is a method of virtual communication that cannot be ignored. This article also breaks down the association between women, selfies, and vanity through analysing the phenomenon of moral panics, and how this impacts the interlocutors in their selfie taking habits.

Select the photo. Write the caption. Post. It is like a routine. As I wait for the likes and comments to come in after posting a carefully angled picture of my face onto Instagram, I wonder, why did I post that? “Just because I wanted to” seems like the easy answer, but I sense there is more to it than that. I scroll down my feed to see more selfies from friends and acquaintances, and I wonder why did they post their selfies? I am not sure if everyone ponders a simple social media post as much as this, but I feel that this is a question that needs to be answered: why do we post selfies?

By reaching out to thirteen young Scottish women, I set out to answer this question. Some post selfies regularly, some only occasionally, others never post selfies at all, yet they all had their own thoughts, ideas and experiences on selfies which provided me with great insight into our perceptions of and motivations behind taking and posting selfies.

Through my investigation into why we post selfies, I discovered an interesting perception of selfies as being “vain”. This led me to consider whether we post selfies purely out of vanity, or if the practice carries more social implications? I also found a relationship between selfies, vanity, and women, which indicated that viewing selfies as expressions of vanity has more to do with the social perceptions of women than of the selfies themselves. My conversations with young Scottish women allowed an in-depth exploration into these issues, as they shared their own experiences of taking, posting, and viewing selfies. These issues are what I

hope to explore further in this paper, by looking into my interlocutors' experiences with selfies and situating these experiences within the broader context of being a woman in online spaces.

## **The Conversations**

As much as I would have loved to sit down with my friends, scroll through Instagram and have a chat about selfies over a cup of coffee, the lockdown restrictions in place during my research did not permit this. The conversations with informants were held via the video call platform Zoom, which was convenient as I was able to reach friends regardless of where they were. Having said this, the digital divide came with its disadvantages. The online space felt like an unnatural social environment, and I held a hyperawareness to the physical barrier of a computer screen and the more abstract barrier of the Internet between me and my interlocutors. At times our speech would get delayed, or we would encounter a technical difficulty that would interrupt the conversation. With that being said, I hope the fact that the informants were all friends of mine counteracted some of these barriers as our familiarity made it easier to smooth over any bumps. In fact, I was not disappointed by the conversations – talking with friends and connecting with the experiences of fellow women truly enriched my research. However, trying to balance friendship and research did not come without challenges. I knew from the start that I would have to let go of any assumptions I may have had about my friends' experiences and perceptions to allow for a space in which conversation could be led by them so that their own

accounts could inform my research.

It is also important to acknowledge that as a white woman, talking to mainly other white women, this research will not reflect the experiences of everyone. My position as a cis woman in society pushed me to explore the relationship between women and selfies, but a more comprehensive view of this relationship would require a wider analysis. Furthermore, to ensure that my short-term research could be more focused, I only held conversations with Scottish women, as I felt my own Scottish identity could help me relate to participants and their experiences. I believe that having a mutual understanding of what it is like growing up and living in Scotland as a young woman allowed for more fluid and dynamic discussions with informants. Therefore, the question, “why do we post selfies?”, is mainly considering the experiences of young Scottish women, although my interlocutors do come from different racial, social, economic, and religious backgrounds, which I hope, alongside engaging with literature on different demographics, will open a discussion that reflects the experiences of women more generally.

## **Are Selfies Vain?**

After starting the conversation with what I thought would be a light-hearted question, “Do you take selfies?”, an informant tells me it is embarrassing to admit that yes, she does. She explains how she feels arrogant and vain when she thinks about taking selfies and that she is “feeding into selfie culture”. In admitting that she has spent up to an hour trying to get the

right selfie, another interlocutor tells me that if someone were watching her, they would think she was a “narcissist”, yet in a “light-hearted” way as she puts it. These informants were not alone, with many of them expressing that taking selfies may be considered vain, with some noting that they feel an element of narcissism when taking selfies or that others will assume that the selfies that they see on their social media feeds are signs of vanity. This truly caught my attention – why did so many of these young women associated being perceived as vain with taking a simple picture?

First, we should consider what is meant by “vanity”. In a formal definition, physical vanity can be described as “an excessive concern for, and/or a positive (and perhaps inflated) view of one’s physical appearance” (Netemeyer et al., 1995: 612). It is the sense that one is obsessed over the way they look, and it typically has negative connotations (Durvasula et al., 2005: 182). Therefore, as pictures which capture one’s appearance through a photograph of the self, it is easy to see how selfies have been caught up in the concept of vanity. Informants told me that they may take selfies if they feel good about themselves and their appearance, or if they want to feel good – as taking selfies can give them a confidence boost. This indicates that selfies themselves could be an act of vanity, as they reflect the “concern for” and “positive view of” appearance as previously described. However, it is when we consider the act of posting a selfie that things become more interesting.

Informants had many reasons behind posting - or not posting - selfies on Instagram, but one thing is clear, they post

selfies in order to share a part of themselves with others, or refrain from posting selfies so as to keep a part of themselves private. These two common themes amongst interlocutors highlight how the act of posting a selfie holds less emphasis on physical appearance, and more on interactions with others. As pointed out by Miller et al. (2016: 158), when we use the word “narcissist” to describe selfies, we are ignoring the ways in which selfies can be used as tools for understanding “identity, aspiration and social expectations” as well as “to maintain social relationships”. This suggests that there is more to a selfie than just vanity, and that they can be used as tools to communicate one’s identity and facilitate social interactions. In Broadbent’s work on social networks, she finds that when one posts to a semi-public site, such as Facebook, they are not directly communicating with an individual but to a wider audience. This can make it easier to communicate as one does not need to negotiate the nuances of individual social interactions (Broadbent 2011: 62). This is supported by one interlocutor noting that she likes to post online to keep her family and friends updated on her life because it feels “arrogant” to message those updates to individuals. Here we can see how Instagram selfies can be considered a tool to communicate a message to others through a more indirect approach which avoids some of the barriers to communicating one-on-one. But what message does one want to share through posting a selfie?

As interlocutors described to me, they may post a selfie on Instagram if they feel confident in a picture, want to show off an

outfit, or to commemorate a special event. Among those who did not share selfies on Instagram, one noted that they did not want the attention that came with posting a selfie, another said that the selfies they take may not be “worth posting” as they did not show an above average level of appearance, and another stated that they weren’t trying to impress anyone with a selfie. One informant told me that she sometimes “hides” a selfie in a carousel post (multiple pictures in one post that viewers can swipe through) to avoid judgement from older family members who may disapprove of selfies. Furthermore, in a discussion as to why we thought women from working-class backgrounds tend to post more selfies than those from middle-class backgrounds, an informant who grew up in the same working-class community as me, suggested that working-class women may be trying to “prove they have money” by posting selfies with designer products. Through the act of posting a selfie to Instagram, informants hope to share a part of their life to their followers, perhaps to communicate the idea that they are happy, wealthy, or confident. In contrast, those who do not post selfies tend to do so as a result of not wanting to share a certain aspect of themselves on the Internet, typically in order to avoid unpleasant interactions such as judgement or excess attention. Therefore, it is clear that many of the motivations for posting, or not posting, a selfie are driven by social interactions with others.

This is further illustrated through the sense of reciprocity felt by many of my informants, in relation to their interactions with other people’s selfies. When I asked

if they felt there were any expectations or norms to follow when interacting with selfies on Instagram, they often noted a mutual exchange of likes – that is, you should like someone’s post if they like yours. They also expressed that they would expect some close friends to comment on their selfie as support or to provide validation. This contradicts Broadbent’s observations that larger networks such as Facebook have less sense of reciprocity than smaller networks like the South Korean social networking site Cyworld (Broadbent, 2011: 64). If Instagram is a platform that allows for a larger network, like Facebook, why can we observe expectations of reciprocity? Cyworld’s network is close-knit, which carries social obligations that one must follow in order to build connections with others (Broadbent, 2011: 65). It is possible that the sense of reciprocity experienced by my informants is the result of them having a closer network of followers, as well as the intention to build or maintain social relationships with others through interaction with their selfies. These expectations to comment on close friends’ selfies or to like the selfies of those who like yours demonstrate that selfies allow for social interactions which help to shape and maintain social relationships in a virtual space.

Posting selfies can communicate certain ideas to others, and interactions with selfies are influenced by a sense of obligated reciprocity. It can be argued that through the act of posting a selfie, there is more importance attached to the social interactions and implications behind a selfie, than to one’s physical appearance.

Therefore, we post selfies not purely out of vanity, but as a social tool to communicate with others in the online space.

## **Selfies, Vanity, and Women**

Perhaps what struck me the most about the perception of selfies as vain was the self-doubt that it seemed to trigger in the young women I spoke to. It really made me think about why we consider selfies to be an example of vanity, and why young women are so afraid to be perceived as vain.

In my research for this paper, it was hard not to be reminded of the countless claims in the media that selfies foster narcissism, lead to mental health issues and even to loss of self-control, and how these claims represent the moral panic surrounding selfie culture (Senft and Baym, 2015: 1590-1592). Stanley Cohen defines a moral panic as something which is perceived as a “threat to societal values and interests” and tends to be presented to the public by the mass media which curates a threatening image of the phenomenon (Cohen 2002: 1). These moral panics tend to be directed towards the practices of young people, women, or people of colour (Senft and Baym, 2015: 1592). In discussion with informants, most stated that they associate selfies with women more than men, with some even claiming that taking selfies is deemed a more “feminine” activity. Due to this association between selfies and women, a moral panic has been created to lead people to believe that their minds will be corrupted by the narcissism of selfie-taking and posting, as seen in the previously mentioned claims from the media. Through targeting selfies, the

media and panicked public can target women. Anne Burns argues that deeming selfies as narcissistic” is used to “chastise” selfie-takers, and in turn creates a “vicious cycle in which women are vain because they take selfies, and selfies connote vanity because women take them” (Senft and Baym, 2015: 1591). Essentially, it is way to assail women.

Therefore, women are stuck in a paradox: there is a pressure that exists for them to present themselves as physically attractive, while they are considered to be vain if they present their appearance through selfies. Interlocutors who told me they take selfies expressed that they use them as a method of self-presentation, especially throughout the selfie taking and posting process. Some told me that they either get ready to take a selfie or do so when they think they look good; they take a lot of pictures to get the “best” one; they may ask their friends for their opinion on which selfie to post. Some even post at a certain time, usually late evening, in order to reach more people. All of these practices reflect “highly managed” self-presentation online (Chalmers, 2013: 62). This shows that some interlocutors are using selfies as a tool to present a curated image of themselves to an online audience as they purposefully take “good” photos and post them to their Instagram profile for their followers to see. It is also clear that there is particular pressure on women to present themselves in an attractive way, with the importance of appearance being internalised in girls from a young age (Durvasula et al., 2005: 183), and the burden of the male gaze forcing women to meet certain beauty standards as set out by the patriarchy - expressed by John

Berger as: “Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.” (Berger 1973: 47). This was reflected in discussions with my informants, as one suggested that “women are taught that their appearance is part of their identity, so they incorporate that into their presentation on Instagram”. Others mentioned that women may make themselves look a certain way in selfies in order to cater to the male gaze or to receive male attention and validation. These internalised pressures on women emphasise the importance placed on an attractive physical appearance, subjecting young women to a cycle of pressure in which they must present themselves in a certain way online, and yet are perceived as vain when they do so.

I believe that this toxic relationship between women, selfies and vanity was explained particularly well by one interlocutor: women are not allowed to feel confident, so when they do, it is labelled as narcissism.

## Conclusion

After years of posting selfies on Instagram myself, the question “why do we post selfies?” really intrigued me. This research has led me to an answer much more interesting and complex than “just because”. Through my conversations with informants, I was able to explore the world of Instagram and the selfie culture that dominates it, allowing some great insights into how informants take, post, and interact with selfies. They also highlighted a common theme, the concern that one would be considered vain for posting a selfie – an anxiety that I have felt on many occasions myself. This led me to consider

if selfies were an expression of vanity or narcissism, or not. Despite informants concerns over vanity, they all described motivations behind and interactions with selfies that indicated that selfies were in fact a social tool of communication. Through posting a selfie on Instagram, one can express their confidence, identity, or share important aspects of their life.

Although, it is important to note that this anxiety had not come from nowhere. As young women, my informants felt that women were pressured to present themselves as attractive, especially due to the pressure to look pretty being instilled in them from a young age. This has naturally led to a concern over appearance in many women, which could be manifested in the act of taking and posting selfies. However, the accusations of vanity and narcissism that come with the posting of selfies is a tool for misogyny. It is one that criticises women for feeling confident in their appearance and hoping to share that confidence in an online space. One can hope that this label of vanity can be dropped, and instead selfies can be appreciated as an expressive tool, much like regular photography.

ShapeWhen asked to define a selfie, many informants told me “it’s just a picture of yourself”, but it is very clear that there is more to it than that. For me and my interlocutors, selfies are expressive tools which allow us full autonomy to capture ourselves and moments of our lives, which can later be shared online if we wish to communicate these aspects of ourselves to a virtual audience. Like many other interests which are predominately taken up by women, selfies are much more complex than they are given credit for.

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