Gender and Selfies in Social Media

Esther Klingbiel
Eugene Lang College

Introduction

Social media in global and regional culture is a relatively new phenomenon. In the past ten years, a wide array of social media networks (SNSs), accessible via computers, tablets, and smartphones, has proliferated across the world. Today, it is estimated that over two and a half billion people use social media, up from slightly less than a billion in 2010 (Statista, n.d.). People engage in online communities, relationships, and subcultures exclusively through the internet by curating personal profiles through text, images, video, and other media. One such type of curation that has exploded in popularity in the past six years (Souza et al., 2015; Enguix & Gómez-Narváez, 2018), is that of the *selfie*. Commonly defined as a type of digital self-portrait (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) partaking in selfie culture(s) is accessible to anyone with an internet connection and a webcam or smartphone camera.

Psychological literature on social media, too, is still new, particularly when it comes to describing and analyzing the behavioral cognitions that drive selfie taking and posting. In this paper, I specifically investigate the relationship between selfie culture and gender on social media, through readings and critiques of scholarly papers. I have chosen articles with diverse frameworks, methods, and populations so as to curate a review that is as varied as possible within this chosen subject matter, given my page limits. Specifically, I ask how the medium of selfies and the act of posting them to virtual forums mediates and homogenizes gender expression. I will negotiate between the viewpoint of selfies as hegemonic and gender stereotypical, versus the argument that selfies serve as a site of active resistance to gender

stereotypes, specifically for trans and non-binary individuals. I will then offer possible limitations and future directions on the study of this subject.

Current Literature and Findings

In this section, I will briefly outline a few studies on selfies and gender, diving deeper into frameworks and philosophies that are used to formulate the arguments and findings in these papers in later sections.

Souza et al. (2015) conducted one of the first and largest quantitative studies of selfies on the social media network site Instagram, which currently has one billion monthly users. (Statista, n.d.) Here the authors were working to give preliminary answers on who was posting selfies on Instagram, from where they were posting, and how they were being received by other users (i.e., how many likes/comments did selfies receive over other types of non-selfie media? Are interactions over SNSs mediated by culture?). A random sample of 100,000 images were collected using hashtag identifiers (pictures with selfie-related hashtags such as #selfie, #me) through the software Face++, which is used to designate age and gender in images of human faces and bodies. (Face++, n.d.) Out of this random sample, 62% of images were of 'female' faces (median age 18), and 38% were of 'male' faces (median age 23). Among their general findings, the authors reported that selfies, on average, received two to three times more likes than other content, and 1.1 to 1.5 times more comments than other content, although they note that this gap has been closing over time. They offer a possible explanation for such shrinking disparity, suggesting that as the cultural novelty of selfies wears off, and as more selfies saturate our digital landscape, their engaging effect diminishes as they become more mundane.

Souza et al. also analyzed male-to-female percentages of selfies by country and found that in nations with higher gender equality (measured by the Gender Gap Index and Patriarchal Values measure), women were more likely to post selfies. They argue that this is evidence that "selfies mobilize the power dynamics of representations and promotes empowerment (in this case for women)." (Souza et al., 2015, p. 10) Elsewhere, proponents of selfies also argue in favor of the beneficial empowering effects that selfies can give members of minority groups, including women, trans people, and gender non-conforming people.

In another quantitative study, Döring, Reif, and Poeschl (2015) compared gender stereotyping of women in print advertisements to stereotyping of women in selfies. Using measurements of gender display in the media (initially introduced by Goffman in 1979, and added on to later by Kang in 1997), the authors analyzed 500 randomly selected selfies on Instagram (identified through hashtags explicitly stating that the image in question was a selfie, e.g. #selfie, #I, #me)—250 of women, 250 of men. The measures by Goffman and Kang seek to identify specific visual features in advertising imagery that stereotype women as naturally inferior to and weaker than men. Finally, 183 print advertisements from German consumer magazines were collected and coded using the same measurements.

After coding both male and female images for these categories, the authors revealed that for women in selfies, statistically significant gender differences were found for all but two categories (out of seven)—that is, selfies of women exhibited Goffman and Kang's categories at far higher rates than selfies of men. They also found that gender stereotyping in Instagram selfies was higher than in print advertisements. In accounting for why this is, the authors surmise that "existing gender stereotypical Instagram selfies might be imitated by other Instagram selfie producers," (Döring, Reif, & Poeschl, 2015, p. 961) in effect creating a cycle of stereotype

proliferation between Instagram "influencers" (those who are able to 'persuade' others through social media, whether it be of gender hegemonies or the virtue of a certain product, among other things) (Pixlee, n.d.) and their followers.

In 2018, Enguix and Gómez-Narváez specifically studied selfies on Instagram and Grindr (a dating app for gay men) in cis and trans men. The authors conducted this analysis through qualitative interviews with participants about the cognitive processes behind taking and posting selfies. Specifically, they ask how selfies (or social networking sites, more generally) blur the line between publicity, privacy, and intimacy. The authors also "aim to analyze the tensions" (Enguix & Gómez- Narváez, 2018, p. 116) between traditional masculine hegemonies and emerging categories of masculinity in trans men. In collecting their data, Enguix and Gómez-Narváez focused on three specific body types: hegemonic (muscle and body hair as signifiers of masculinity), resistant (female-to-male trans men), and non-binary (individuals who identify as agender, gender fluid, and transgender fluid). In hypothesizing both quantitative and qualitative findings within the aforementioned population, the authors write that:

> "We considered that hegemonic bodies tend to reinforce the traditional indexes of masculinity whereas transsexuals and non-binary bodies are considered to contest, surpass, and subvert hegemonic representations although their relationship to hegemonies is neither linear nor simple." (Enguix and Gómez-Narváez, 2018, p. 119)

Enguix and Gómez-Narváez found that hegemonic body types were overrepresented in selfies on both Grindr and Instagram, most of which were seminude and displays of muscle. In addition, selfies of bodies that were not overtly muscular, fat or flat were almost invisible on these platforms. The authors also found that use of hashtags differed between body types: hegemonic men used them to "express different degrees of 'perfection'", (Enguix and Gómez-Narváez,

2018, p. 120); and trans men used them to document their transitions, thus transforming their use of hashtags from mere descriptors to sources of information (about trans rights and visibility) and emotional expression.

From information collected via interviews, hegemonic men reported that while they do expose their bodies, their character, or "'true' essence" (Enguix and Gómez-Narváez, 2018, p. 121) is the aspect of their identity which remains truly private and intimate. They also reported feeling less in control of how they publicly depicted their bodies than trans men did. Trans men seemed to be more interested in documenting their transitions and the feelings, emotions, and freedom of self-expression associated with this experience rather than just 'showing off.' Selfies, the authors argue, are a new mode of renegotiating what privacy and intimacy is, through the process of body display (or lack thereof) online. Selfies and social media have allowed us, at least within American culture, to expand and redefine our understandings of what intimacy is, and such expansion is rooted deeply in hegemonic images of gendered bodies.

Philosophical and Theoretical Currents in the Literature

Throughout my research and close readings of these articles, I found a high degree of theoretical overlap, specifically about the cognitive and social processes that underlie the act of taking and posting selfies; arguments for and against this act (i.e., between empowerment and loss of autonomy); and the viewpoint that selfies are reproducers of cisgender stereotypes. Selfies are an act of self-exploration, not only of the self individually, but of the self communally. Posting to online platforms fosters a sense of community (Souza et al., 2015), allowing one to participate in the "constant work of shaping and reaffirming social identity through social

actions." (Souza et al., 2015, p. 2) Yet along with this sense of community may inevitably come some degree of convention—as we have seen, in the context of selfies it is overwhelmingly the conventions of gender identity and expression that dominate its online context(s). (Döring, Reif, & Poeschl, 2015) Furthermore, it is well-established in social psychology that similarity breeds liking—if someone can recognize something easily (i.e., through gender binarism and stereotyping), are they more likely to 'like' it because it aligns to their schemas of the world? (Döring, Reif, & Poeschl, 2015) Thus, some critics argue, selfies act as a socially binding tool—encouraging gender stereotyping and restricting freedom of expression in favor of likes, views, and followers (Luckerson, 2017). When one experiences a loss of control over their self-image, do they feel pressured to post certain types of selfies (i.e. overtly sexualized, hyper-feminine/masculine) in order to maintain personal validation via attention? What implications on the psyche does digital and 'in-real-life' identity-doubling have? Do selfies function as a performative act—as perhaps something not done primarily for one's own satisfaction, but for the satisfaction of others? (Döring, Reif, & Poeschl, 2015)

All of these questions function under a philosophical theory of the post-modern world as one that is obsessed and fascinated with images and the visual. In his seminal work The Society of the Spectacle (1967), Guy Debord argues that our relationships with one another are mediated by images. Thus, other critical questions beg to be answered: to what extent do we reign control over our online image/presence, when that presence mediates our relationships with others both in the real world and online? How does what we do and see on the internet affect our 'offline' identities and conceptualizations of ourselves and each other? Is there an effective way that we can view our bodies and genders as separate from how they are displayed in broader visual media? How does rampant, heterosexist stereotyping in this world of images affect our own

modes of display? These are all questions purported by critics who see selfies as doing more harm than good. These questions still remain largely unanswered, mostly because psychological and philosophical work on selfies is still rather young.

Where critics argue that selfies (and social media) lead to lack of autonomy through displays of gender stereotyping, proponents of selfies argue that these very elements of body and identity display are what makes them empowering. In a study by Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz (2015) analyzing women who posted NSFW ('not safe for work'; i.e. sexually explicit) selfies on Tumblr (a blogging website), the authors found overwhelmingly that the women who posted these images considered them as exercises of autonomy over their image—by taking selfies themselves, they controlled everything about their visible bodies and how they were presented to the world. They could decide for themselves how they looked, where they looked, and when they looked, versus images of their bodies that were taken by other people, over which they had less control or none at all.

Among trans and gender non-conforming people, selfies are also widely regarded as sites of performance that become sites of disruption, resistance, and the questioning of the gender binary and hegemonic stereotypes. Thus, gender minorities who are commonly invisiblized or relegated to the fringes of mainstream society are empowered with a democratic tool to document their lives and experiences. They use social network sites to challenge common assumptions about what gender is, what gender should be, and what gender should look like, as well as to formulate new narratives and symbolisms of "recognition, power, stigma, and control, among other processes." (Enguix and Gómez-Narváez, 2018, p. 114)

Conclusion, Limitations, and Further Directions

As I have mentioned before, the psychological study of selfies, and social media more generally, is still at an early stage. Enguix and Gómez-Narváez write that "Selfies...have to be considered not as a uniform and stable image but as the result of a controlled, contextual, and negotiated process." (p. 124) Selfies are so nuanced, individualistic, and personal that they are near-impossible to quantify. The question here that psychologists must consider is how to conduct quantitative studies with this in consideration. Is there a way for us to mindfully engage in mass selfie data collection?

Furthermore, the actual software features of some social networking sites add to the difficulty of studying gender and selfies. For example, Instagram does not use gendered language —all user profiles are gender neutral (i.e., "Request to follow this person to see *their* posts"). Thus, psychologists cannot collect selfie data and divide it into genders based on user-designated software criteria. Unless gender is specifically declared by the owner of a user profile (through hashtags and profile bios, for example), gender must be inferred by those collecting and studying such data. This proves to be immensely problematic—in trying to 'determine' one's gender visually, we contribute to gender stereotypes and binarisms, allotting feminine pictures to women and masculine pictures to men, in effect invisibilizing individuals who may be trans or gender non-conforming. Judging people's gender via looks could very well taint data and subsequent findings, rendering many studies useless. Thus it is critical for researchers conducting quantitative studies to be especially scrupulous and mindful of the data they are analyzing. With regard to qualitative studies, researchers should continue to seek out gender identities as they are defined by study participants themselves. While these works provide valuable insight to the complex cognitive processes behind selfie culture, they are invariably limited in scope—

conducting qualitative studies with a large sample is time-consuming and expensive. With billions of people using social media around the world, scholars should seek out research methods that collect large amounts of data which are as gender-inclusive as possible.

In sum, psychological research on selfie culture and gender, although still new, has profound implications. From social and behavioral cognition to the philosophical reading of post-modern digital culture, selfies are a complex process that help us to inform ourselves, each other, and the cultures in which we live. Regardless of whether one believes that selfies are inherently 'good' or 'bad', we have a duty to keep searching for answers as to how the phenomenon of social media has permanently altered the ways in which we see the world and interact with others. Over time, I believe that interesting trends and insights will emerge on how online social networking universally informs and affects the human condition.

References

Debord, G. (1967). *The Society of the Spectacle.* France: Buchet-Chastel.

Döring, N., Reif, A., & Poeschl, S. (2015). How gender-stereotypical are selfies? A content analysis and comparison with magazine adverts. *Computers in Human Behavior, 55,* 955-962.

Enguix, B., & Gómez-Narváez, E. (2018). Masculine Bodies, Selfies, and the (Re)configurations of Intimacy. *Men and Masculinities, 21(1),* 112-130.

Face++ home page (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.faceplusplus.com/

Goffman, E. (1979). *Gender advertisements.* New York: Harper Torchbooks.

Kang, M. (1997). The portrayal of women's images in magazine advertisements: Goffman's gender analysis revisited. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research, 37(11).*

Luckerson, V. (2017, February 15). *The Rise of the Like Economy.* Retrieved from https://www.theringer.com/2017/2/15/16038024/how-the-like-button-took-over-the-internet ebe778be2459

Number of monthly active Instagram users from January 2013 to June 2018 (in millions) (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.statista.com/statistics/253577/number-of-monthly-active-instagram-users/

Number of social network users worldwide from 2010 to 2021 (in billions) (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.statista.com/statistics/278414/number-of-worldwide-social-network-users/

Selfie (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/selfie

Souza, F., de Las Casas, D., Flores, V., Youn, S., Cha, M., Quercia, D., & Almeida, V. (2015). Dawn of the Selfie Era: The Whos, Wheres, and Hows of Selfies on Instagram.

Tiidenburg, K., & Gómez Cruz, E. (2015). Selfies, Image, and the Re-making of the Body. *Body & Society, 21(4),* 77-102.

What is an Instagram Influencer? (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.pixlee.com/definitions definition-instagram-influencer