Third Year Sociology Special Topic Research Project

Put that phone away! An exploration of the selfie practices of Irish women and

their negotiation of selfie culture

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to explore the selfie practices of Irish women and add to the growing body of academic interdisciplinary research seeking to understand this new phenomenon. The selfie has generated a significant amount of media attention and debate. Selfie practice has been predominantly gendered with media discourses centering on its association with narcissistic behaviour. Moreover, feminist opinion is divided on the subject, with some feminists viewing the selfie as an emancipatory tool, while others perceive it as reinforcing hegemonic norms. Using a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight young Irish female students from Maynooth University, Co. Kildare, seeking to explore how selfie practice impacted upon the lived experiences of these women, and to what extent they claimed ownership of their selfies. The data collected revealed a set of themes that demonstrated the difficulties these women experienced negotiating the complexities of selfie culture. Analysing the data within a Technofeminist framework unveiled reflexive discourses that demonstrated a small window of opportunity through which women can view other women's lived experiences that serve to challenge the dominant selfie discourse and body and beauty norms.

Chaper 1 - Introduction

The selfie "a photographic self-portrait; *esp.* one taken with a smartphone or webcam and shared via social media" was named Oxford Dictionary's word of the year 2013 (Oxford English Dictionaries: 2014). Research conducted by Oxford Dictionary editors revealed that the frequency of the word selfie in the English language had increased by 17,000%, therefore meriting its inclusion and demonstrating the explosion of its use as both a word and a cultural phenomenon (blog. oxforddictionaries: 2013). The selfie has generated much media attention and debate. Significantly, the celebrity selfie appears to have contributed to its proliferation and association with narcissism and self- indulgence. Moreover, feminist discourse has demonstrated a split in opinion, with some feminists suggesting that selfies are not empowering but rather a cry for help that reinforces the view that women's most important quality is their physical attractiveness (Ryan 2013). Alternatively, it has been suggested that the selfie is "the feminist photo revolution" that allows young women to turn a symbol of narcissism into a new form of empowerment (Bennett 2014).

The selfie developed through the rise of social media sites that in turn cultivated the need for a profile picture. In the era of MySpace from 2006 to 2009 self portraits were often taken in front of a bathroom mirror producing an inferior "flash-blinded" image that invoked a self-representation of "bad taste" (Losse 2013). The launch of Facebook in 2004 with its superior profile photo "announced a clean, well-lit model of orderly selfhood" (Losse 2013). Crucially, the launch of the iPhone 4 with its front facing 5 megapixel autofocus camera in 2010 was a key technological advance (apple.com, 2010, Losse 2013, Day 2013, Malik 2012). These cameras now embedded in the smartphone and tablet market, transformed self-portraiture enabling the selfie to go viral (Losse 2013, Day 2013). On the go software

applications such as Instagram, with its mobile only photo orientated social platform of "shared experiences" and stylised filters challenged the dominance of Facebook's social network, eventually prompting Facebook to acquire Instagram for nearly a billion dollars in stock and cash (Malik 2012). More recently Snapchat, now valued at 15 billion dollars, has become an increasingly attractive way of sharing photos (Arthurs 2015). Snapchat's self-destructing quality provides its users with a level of control over who views their photos and the length of the time that they are available. Moreover, it appears that teenagers in particular are leaving Facebook for Instgram, Snapchat and Twitter, "at an estimated rate of up to a million a year" (Lang 2015).

The ubiquity of smart phones is making the selfie an everyday practice.However, selfie practice appears to dominate amongst young women and this is reflected in both media and feminist discourses. Popular media discourse appears to follow a critical standpoint, often stereotyping the selfie as a vanity project or cultural cliche. Feminist discourse demonstrates a split in opinion. One that values the selfie as a tool of self-empowerment or conversely as a reinforcer of hegemonic body and beauty norms. It is the tension between these two polarised views, and the cultural significance of the selfie that leads us to question its use, and in particular the personal experience and attitudes of young women to this new phenomenon. How do women view the selfie? Is it an empowering experience, or does it reinforce the hegemony of socially acceptable body and beauty norms? What stories do their selfies tell? Preliminary exploratory research conducted as a requisite part of my survey methods module indicated that the selfie is a possible tool of self-empowerment that allows women to share within their peer group and receive positive affirmation. However, survey methods did not provide sufficient data to interpret the meanings that women attach to their selfies. The goal of this research is to interpret the selfie practices of young Irish women and add to the growing body of interdisciplinary research seeking to understand this new phenomenon.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

This literature review will begin by looking at the history of self-portraiture and examine the selfie as a modern form of self-portraiture.The selfie can be seen as a digital display of the self, and as such we will then look at the work of Giddens (1991), Shilling (2003) and Featherstone (2010) and their work on identity, modernity and the body as a project of transformation and ambiguity. The selfie is very much a performance of the self, and Goffman's work on the presentation of the self, enables us to examine the dynamics behind this new phenomenon (1959). As this research seeks to explore the meanings that women attach to their selfies, the work of Judy Wajcman (2004) is discussed with a view to avoiding dystopian or utopian views of technology, and instead explore the selfie within a socio-technical framework. Finally, we will review some of the growing body of international, interdisciplinary academic research seeking to understand this new phenomenon.

Self-portraiture

Self-portrait is hardly a new phenomenon. James Hall in his cultural history of self-portraiture traces the genre from the middle ages where the mirror had become a powerful symbol and metaphor for knowledge of the self and others to the present day (Hall 2014). Hall argues that it is self-portraiture has become the "defining visual genre of our confessional age" (Hall 2014). Moreover, the idea of the artist constructing an image of themselves may sound "like an arch postmodern conceit", yet from the late fifteenth century artists began to manipulate their self images to suit their own purposes, adjusting their age and assuming both biblical and fictional roles "to heighten their brand profiles" (Hudson 2014) .

Stanford Professor Peggy Phelan, suggests that the selfie as a form of self-portraiture, poses the question of whether the selfie can be seen as a feminist act (Farmer 2014). Phelan contends that the answer lies "at the intersection of feminist art and photography", suggesting that self-portraits can shed light on how we look at gendered images (Farmer 2014). Renowned photographer Cindy Sherman created a series of self-portraits, *Untitled Film Stills*, from 1977-1980 in which Sherman photographed herself in Hollywood inspired settings, raising questions regarding the lack of diversity of women in mainstream images, and underlining "the porosity of the border between self and representation" (Farmer 2014). Phelan argues that Sherman's work anticipated the selfie, "creating new angles of perspective and gaze" promoting the idea that "representation is open for the insertion of the self" (Farmer 2014). New media cultures have facilitated the use of photography as a routine everyday practice, enabling women to document their own lives. *(Re)capturing Womanhood* is a portfolio of images that represents a small cross section of such emerging cultures and "how women have appropriated the lens, documenting the spaces of their lives (Aguayo and Calvert 2013:182). Aguayo and Calvert, suggest that such images which were once considered private are now publicly available and as such these images "recapture an undocumented womanhood" (Aguayo and Calvert 2013:184). *(Re)capturing Womanhood*, as a project sought to understand photography "first as a dynamic social practice, historical document, and finally as an aesthetic medium", a public call for images to" respond back to the commercial images of women as a way to recapture an undocumented womanhood" (Aguayo and Calvert 2013:183). Agauayo and Calvert argue that mobile photography has made it easy for women to capture their lives from their own perspectives and environments; and that the portfolio demonstrated a more "nuanced, dynamic version of womanhood that celebrates complexity across the life span" images (Aguayo and Calvert 2013: 183).

Modernity and identity

For Giddens self-identity is a distinctively modern project within which individuals can reflexively construct a personal narrative that allows them to understand themselves as in control of their lives and futures (Giddens 1991 in Jenkins 2014:35). It is something that has to be "routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual" (Giddens 1991:52). For Giddens, the self "like the body can no longer be taken as a fixed – a physiological entity- but has become deeply involved with modernity's reflexivity" (Giddens 1991:218). The body was once viewed as an "aspect of nature" and "governed in a fundamental way by processes only marginally subject to human intervention" (Giddens 1991:218). In our modern society, the body like the self "becomes a site of interaction, appropriation and reappropriation" (Giddens 1991: 218). Giddens argues that in the conditions of "high modernity" the body is "far less docile" in relation to the self, "since the two become intimately coordinated within the reflexive project of self-identity (Giddens 1991:218). Dominated by core perspectives of modernity, the project of the self remains one of control, guided only by" a morality of authenticity" (Giddens 1991:226).

However, in the same manner as the history of self-portraiture, identity and its complexities are not definitively modern. Ancient ethnographers grappled with identity as did early explorers when challenged with new societies that held a mirror up to their own. Shakespeare pre-empted Goffman by writing that all the world was a stage, while in 1690 Locke's essay on human understanding contained a detailed essay on identity and diversity (Jenkins 2014:32/Locke 2013). Jenkins contends that although discourses around identity may be historically or culturally specific, and that increased population and communication technologies have risen the global "noise and chatter "around the issue of identity, it is" too much" to say that concerns with regard to identity are specially modern (Jenkins 2014:32).

However, Jenkins does contend that one of the defining features of modern life has been increasing globalisation, directly impacting on the nature and "salience of identification in the modern world" (Jenkins 2014:33). As Jenkins argues, if all the world was a stage for Shakespeare, in contemporary society" the stage is all the world", a world in which people are increasingly aware of living in a global rather than a local context (Jenkins 2014:33)

Shilling argues that in the conditions of high modernity there is a tendency for the body to become increasingly central to the modern person's sense of self-identity (Shilling 2003:1). In a world where many may have lost their faith in religious institutions and grand political narratives, they are no longer "provided with a clear world view or self-identity by these trans-personal meaning structures, at least the body initially appears to provide a firm foundation on which to reconstruct a reliable sense of self in the modern world" (Schilling 2003:2). Shilling suggest that there is a propensity for the body to be seen as an entity "which is in the process of becoming", a project which can be continuously worked on as a part of one's self-identity (Shilling 2003:4). Women have been documented as cosmetically altering their appearance, decorating their flesh and creating illusions of body alteration from Classical Antiquity. Yet, what distinguishes contemporary "body projects" is the acceptance that the body is now open to the reconstruction of its appearance, size, shape and even its contents as per the designs of its owner (Shilling 2003:4). However, treating the body as a project does not necessarily mean complete transformation, but rather a concern with regard to the management, maintenance and appearance of the body, with a "practical recognition of the significance of bodies as personal resources and social symbols which give off messages regarding self-identity" (Schilling 2003:4/5). The selfie provides a space to document and evaluate on-going body projects and a sharing space for critical evaluation and feedback.

Mike Featherstone's work on body, image and effect within consumer culture addresses the sense of ambiguity of body image (Featherstone 2010:194). However, Featherstone contends that although it has been argued that the structure and nature of body image has shifted over time and cultures, he does not intend to understand the "process in terms of master logics, be they located in late capitalism, late modernity, post-modernity or whatever" (Featherstone 2010:194). Rather, if there has been "an effect turn", it has been conceived "primarily as stimulated by theoretical work, drawing on recent innovations in biology and neuroscience" (Featherstone 2010:194). However, simultaneously there is evidence that new information technologies and digitalization provide us with an opportunity to re-examine "the role of the affect and the body in relation to the image"(Featherstone 2010:213). Featherstone discusses the ambiguity between body image and body without image and its related concept "body schema" or the "felt body" (Featherstone 2010:194).

Identity as a performance

The presentation of the self presupposes an audience, observers or co-participants (Goffman 1959:26/27).In applying Goffman's theory of performance to the selfie we can see the selfie as the "front" performance managed through a setting of optional filters and aesthetic props. As Goffman argues, a personal front may include clothing, sex, age, racial characteristics, size and looks, facial expressions, bodily gestures (Goffman 1959:34). Goffman argues some are fixed yet some sign vehicles are mobile and transitory. However, Goffman suggests that performances are socialized and moulded and modified to fit into the understanding and expectations of the society in which they are presented (Goffman 1959:44). The presentation of the self in the selfie can in this manner be seen as very much a front stage performance that complies with a script of body and beauty norms. However, as Jenkins argues the problem with Goffman's framework "is its vision of the human world as rule-governed, scripted and

ritualised" (Jenkins 2014:94). Moreover, rules are not sufficiently flexible to deal with the variability and unpredictability of modern life (Jenkins 2014:94).

Technofeminism

Significantly, the global information society characterized by the compression of space and time "marks a whole new epoch in the human condition" (Wajckman 2004:1). Technological advances and the ubiquity of new mobile devices provide a space to allow the self, through the medium of the selfie, to perform upon the world stage. In Technofeminism, Judy Wajcman outlines the conflict within feminism with regard to the impact of technology on women. Wajcman contends that there is a split within feminist discourse between utopian and dystopian views of technology. The view of the selfie travels along the same divide, between explorative and challenging forms of reflexive agency and conform within societal structure. Wajcman contends that seen through the lens of cyberfeminism technology and virtual reality as a new space for "undermining old social relations, a place of freedom and liberation from old conventional roles" (Wajcman 2004:3). Through an alternative lens, technology is a key source of male power. The analysis that technology is socially shaped by men to the exclusion of women has generated a pessimistic view. Furthermore, the utopian view of technology is equally deterministic imbuing technology with "romanticized ideas of virtual voyages" (Wajcman 2004:77). Wajman argues that the problem with both perspectives is that they assign too much agency to technology and not enough to feminist politics (Wajcman 2004:128).

 Technofeminism presupposes a socio-technical framework of a mutually shaping relationship between gender and technology (Wajcman 2004:7). Wajcman not only argues against technological determinist thought, but also highlights feminist discourse that essentializes women's identity in order to identify commonalities in experience "that could

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form the basis of a shared moral commitment" (Wajcman 2004: 129). Similarly, Butler contends, "the insistence upon the coherence and unity of the category of women has effectively refused the multiplicity of cultural, social, and political intersections in which the concrete array of women are constructed" (Butler 1990:14). An appropriate identity is not a pre-condition for collective action, nor is an appropriate identity necessary prior to entering social networks; "identities are formed and shaped in the manifold relations that *are* social networks" (Wajcman 2004:129). It is in this space and context that feminist politics has flourished connecting the personal to the political and the local to the global (Wajcman 2004:129). Moreover, it is within this space we can engage in making gender trouble by subverting and displacing naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power (Butler in Gauntlett 2002:140).

Charteris, Gregory and Masters (2014) contend that the flexible self-destruct quality of ephemeral messaging technologies such as Snapchat, has the ability to support an "underlife" that affords young people the ability to contest "mainstream discursive practices" (389). Charteris et al. argue that the "willingness of young people to act upon the discourses that regulate and define them can be read as discursive agency" (Butler 1997/Charteris et al. 2014:391). Within a technofeminist framework, we can explore the selfie as a space for displays of discursive agency and the subversion of traditionally accepted body and beauty norms.

The selfie: remaining on the outside looking in

The area of self -photography has generated an international, interdisciplinary body of academic research and literature. The selfie in particular can be "conceived of as a multimodal convergence of older and newer technologies: the selfie is a mirror, and a camera, and a stage or a billboard all at once" (Warfield 2014:1). As Warfield argues, selfies have

emerged from "a convergence of technologies" which requires multi-disciplinary theoretical approaches (Warfield 2014:1).Warfield contends that a significant amount of research is being produced that seeks to interpret the visual content of social media images, along with post-structural and feminist critiques of the selfie that seek to reveal the "power matrices that shape the tropes and conventions within the frame of the image (Warlfield 2014:2). However, these methods view the selfie as a text and as thus "remain on the outside looking in" (Warfield 2014:2).

Selfiecity a large-scale global project has analyzed selfies from a dataset of five cities, Bangkok, New York, Berlin, Moscow and Sao Paulo presenting findings about the demographics of people taking selfies and examining their poses and expressions using algorithmic software (selfiecity.net, 2014). However, the purely aesthetic focus does not take into consideration cultural, social or local particulars. As Swaminathan argues, "such studies reductively conceive the selfie as just a digital product with no relational linkage to the real world culture, context and social relations of power" (Swaminathan 2014). As Swaminathan argues, seen in isolation a selfie is a point and click picture, however, in the "same spirit of things a Ferrari is just four wheels in motion", what "animates a selfie from a mere picture to a complex lifeworld of multivocal meanings is its unique ecosystem of production, distribution and consumption" (Swaminathan 2014).

The selfie: Stepping through the image

Warfield's research attempts to "step through the image and into the image making process" by conversing with the "embodied and emplaced image-makers themselves in the world on the backside of the image" (Warfield 2014:2). Warfield collected data from 42 online questionnaires of female avid-selfie takers, and four in-depth phenomenological interviews (Warfield 2014:2). Warfield discusses three findings, the subject on the stage (the self-

conscious thespian), the subject of the photo (the model) and sensing the real me in the mirror (Warfield 2013:4). Warfield's first finding, illustrated how the young female participants "deeply deliberated" over the "ethics of self-presentation in both online and offline spaces", indicating a policing of their actions within the public/private sphere (Warfield 2013:4). The second finding indicated that the women experienced themselves as photographic models, adopting "photographic tropes and conventions in their self-presentation" (Warfield 2013:4). They also assessed the quality of their self-images "through photographic standards of aesthetics", and presented themselves "as smiling and happy-the learned visual convention of portrait photography" (Warfield 2013:4). The third theme suggested that the women sought "authenticity" and "satisfaction" in the selfies that they produced, indicating a "step-by-step process" that was "highly emotional" (Warfield 2013:4). This process made some women happy, but others related a sense of embarrassment, indicating a feeling associated with Goffman's backstage play "before presenting a normative front stage self" (Goffman 1959/Warfield 2013:5). Overall, the women sought images that they felt were "real" and "natural", thus illustrating the "multi-subjectivity of the image producer as she mediates between the photographic self and what she proclaims to be the "authentic" self (Warfield 2013:5). Finally, Warfield found that approximately a third of the women said that they also took selfies just for themselves, bypassing socially constructed restrictions of self-presentation; a phenomenon that Warfield calls "the digital taliswoman- an image mantra young women use as confidence bolsters while going about their daily routine" (Warfield 2013:5). Warfield argues, that her research indicated a "reconsideration of the disembodied ontology " of a post-humanist standpoint "where the mind supersedes the body or the body no longer is an entirely necessary factor in digital subjectivities" (Warfield 2013:6). Rather,

Warfield's sample group suggests that the "material, spatially located, embodied offline subject is felt, experienced and connected to the subject of the image in the often online

selfie", as such "various subjectivities are experienced by young someone in the process of creating the selfie" (Warfield 2013:5).

The selfie as social capital

Kwon and Kwon argue that the key to understanding selfie culture is to understand selfie practice as social consumption practice, which is "highly managed, orchestrated, and stategized in the social context; taking, posting, and sharing selfie photos is for the most part, accompanied by exposure to, interactions with and feedback" (Kwon and Kwon 2015:2012). Kwon and Kwon's study explored the selfie practices of 66 Korean college students ranging in age from nineteen to twenty seven years, revealing a cycle of three phases of authenticating acts in selfie practice: to embody, transfer, and use of the self (Kwon and Kwon 2015:304).The first phase, a process of "embodying the features of one's self image on selfies", enabled participants to view themselves at different moments in "lieu of looking at themselves in a mirror", revealing the selfie as a "means of discovering self and of self-expression" (Kwon and Kwon 2015:304/305).Kwon and Kwon contend that the selfie "is an existential reflection of the self", providing a view in which we can see how we appear to others (Kwon and Kwon 2015:305). This process had two components, visualizing and recording (Kwon and Kwon 2015:304). Participants stated that they started taking selfies in Junior high or High school, encountering "unexpected photographic images" that they would not normally see, thus enabling an exploration of their self image (Kwon and Kwon 2015:304) The second phase, the transfer of the self is "a carefully engineered form of self from the private to the public field" in order to represent "who one truly is and what one wants to say" (Kwon and Kwon 2015:306). Participants preferred posting selfies online as it was more appropriate than "bragging" through direct communication as it would elicit a "spontaneous conversation" (Kwon and Kwon 2015:306). The third phase, the use of the

selfie to elicit social reactions, rendering the consumption of the selfie incomplete until other people react (Kwon and Kwon 2015:306). Kwon and Kwon argue that this makes the selfie an iterative process and it is through this process that they identified three identity benefits, feeling connected, feeling in control and feeling virtuous (Kwon and Kwon 2015:307). Kwon and Kwon argue that continuing interactions and identity benefits gained, create a feeling of genuine experience and connection to the real world, with consumers feeling "true to themselves leading to a notion of self-authenticity"(Kwon and Kwon 2015:310).

Swartz (2010) challenges the emergence of lay self-portraiture as emancipatory processes of increasing agency and self-revelation. Swartz argues that what this model lacks "are considerations of audience expectations, the logic of fields, or market demands – as if reflexive representations of self are produced under circumstances of artistic freedom, undisturbed by their intended uses, methods of appraisal, power-relations or interests" (Swartz 2010:164). Swartz contends that we are witnessing a transfer from photographing others for self-consumption to photographing and documenting self for consumption by others that in turn has developed new distribution platforms, that "serve the economic interest of the internet and mobile communication industries" (Swartz 2010:165). Swartz argues that these new distribution platforms have facilitated the emergence of new "fields in the Bourdieuvian sense" of cultural-production as "semi-autonomous spheres in which social worth is produced and contested" (Swartz 2010:165). Exploring self-portraiture among young Israelis, Swartz conducted both interviews with young teenagers and adults, and carried out an intensive analysis of online materials (Swartz 2010). Swartz contends that online photos are an enabling function in the exchange of cultural, corporeal and social capital (Swartz 2010). Swartz argues that in Social Networking Sites, the categories of audience and producers "almost perfectly collapse into one another", with users consuming each other and producing "self-documentary texts (blogs) and photos, which are incorporated in a complex

system of exchange" (Swartz 2010:179). This system of exchange incorporates "a view for a view, a comment for a comment" (Swartz 2010:179). Swartz notes that in particular amongst a group of teenagers with low levels of cultural capital, "whose ethos is anti-intellectual and fame-adoring, self-portraits function as a currency indexical of both corporeal and cultural capital" (Swartz 2010:180). Swartz argues that photos are not used randomly or as an expression of "who do I want to be, as if they freely chose a unitary identity, independent of its context of operation" (Swartz 2010:180). Rather their design is an attempt to achieve interests such as "views, friends and comments" following "the logic of the field", as a result of their lack of other resources, "rendering corporeality a main resource" (Swartz 2010:180).

The body positivity movement

Alexandra Sastre evaluates the growing "body positive movement" that has been garnering online interest in recent years. Sastre evaluates the growing number of websites "dedicated to nurturing bodily acceptance and challenging the normalization of thin, toned bodies" (Sastre 2014:929). Sastre argues that the movement's online well-intentioned manifesto "merits careful consideration for the ideological work it does to reposition the body within the public sphere" (Sastre 2014:930). Sastre, evaluated three prominent websites that purport a body positive philosophy, Lady Gaga's Body Revolution (littlemonsters.com/explore/Body-Revolution), My Body Gallery (mybodygallery.com) and Stop Hating Your Body (stophatingyourbody.tumblr.com) (Sastre 2014:930).Sastre contends that although the three sites explored explore the "performative paradigm differently", they all appear to eventually "reflect, more than reject" the "very narratives of conformity and regulation that they seek to push past" (Sastre 2014:930). Sastre maintains that such sites create new boundaries with regard to normativity and "thus foster corporeal performances that all too readily become mimetic of the very norms they seek to counter" (Sastre 2014:930/931). However, Sastre

argues that these sites provide us with "cracks in the mould", and through them we garner a glimpse of what body positivity may be, "instances where the sincerity of the body's inconsistencies, its ruptures, and textures are not just revealed, captured or processed, but seen" (Sastre 2014:931). Sastre suggests that the "visual rhetoric" of the body positive movements "mirrors the trend for the digital selfie" as young women seek to make "their private selves and authentic voices highly visible in public" (Harris 2004:119/Sastre 2014:936). The bodies of all shapes and sizes are now open to exposure with all who have access to a camera, or a phone and internet access. Sastre argues that the ideology put forward by the body positive movement is that the exposure of all types of bodies is "liberatory", yet in doing so it seeks the "relinquishment of privacy" and "the act of exposure" as the way to body acceptance, "rather than liberating the docile body (Sastre 2014:937). However, Sastre contends that if we are to be reminded again and again that the "Foucauldian model" leads us to the impossibility of detaching ourselves from "a matrix of hegemonic norms", then the body positive movement may be a "limited language" to push against "contemporary bodily ontologies" (Sastre 2014:940/941). This research seeks to explore if the selfie provides women with a space to push against such contemporary bodily ontologies, through "a critical and conscientious engagement with the ways in which we are expected to understand, perform and be our bodies" (Sastre 2014:941).

The Selfie as a possible platform for body positivity

 Lee 2005 examined how digital camera phones are utilized by young women. Although Lee states that it was difficult to find if camera phone usage heightened feminist awareness, her findings suggested that camera phones do allow women to develop a more intimate relationship with technology, challenge the conventions of the gaze give meaning to what is taken and circulate their own expressions.

Tiidenberg (2014), has conducted a visual narrative analysis of cyber-ethnographic material from a two and half year field research with bloggers and self shooters taking and sharing sexy selfies on tumblr.com; examining self-shooting and selfie blogging as a practice of reclaiming control over one's embodied self and over the body aesthetic .Tiidenberg's research found that participants actively reclaimed the body-aesthetic "from the regime of shame of the body normative society, thus redefining what sexy or beautiful is (Tiidenberg 2014). Tiidenberg views the selfie as "not merely reflections, but a construction of one's embodied self" (Tiidenberg 2014). For Tiidenberg's respondents "self-shooting means increased confidence, self-esteem and body acceptance" with images acting as conversation pieces and "carriers of social, cultural and corporeal capital" (Tiidenberg 2014). In particular Tiidenberg notes that her interviewees spoke at length with regard to the "unique, body-positive environment " that emerged in the blogging community, with angry rejection of photoshopped images appearing on their dashboards (Tiidenberg 2014).

Selfie discipline

 Walker Rettberg's recently published book examines how we view ourselves through technology, and how we use selfies, blogs and wearable devices to see and shape ourselves (Walker Rettberg 2014). Walker Rettberg discusses Bourdieu's concept that , what is considered " photographable", or deemed to be worthy of being photographed is"rigidly determined by social norms" (Walker Rettberg 2014). Walker Rettberg suggests, that although the "technological filter" has changed, allowing us to expand our notion of the "photographable", the "cultural filters are still in the process of changing" (Walker Rettberg 2014).

 Burns has conducted extensive research into media discourses with regard to selfie usage, documenting many examples of negative portrayals of selfie culture. Burns, taking a gender

focus, points to the stereotyping of the selfie as a trivial image within popular discourse that is associated with a predominantly negative set of female stereotypes relating to narcissism, vapidity and sexual impropriety (Burns 2014). Burns examines selfies through the framework of Michel Foucault's writings about discipline and power, and thus sees" the hatred, ridicule and pathologising of selfies as mechanisms that society uses to discipline and control the stereotypical selfie-takers: young women" (Burns in Rettberg 2014).

Chapter 3 -Methodology

<u>Research question</u>

The goal of this research is to interpret the selfie practices of young Irish women and add to the growing interdisciplinary academic research and literature seeking to understand this new phenomenon. Selfie culture has generated a significant amount of debate and discourse. In particular, feminist discourse has demonstrated a split in opinion, with some feminists suggesting that selfies are not empowering but rather a cry for help that reinforces the view that women's most important quality is their physical attractiveness (Ryan 2013). Alternatively, it has been suggested that the selfie is "the feminist photo revolution" that allows young women to turn a symbol of narcissism into a new form of empowerment (Bennett 2014). Within a feminist paradigm, this research reflects the view that gender is "a basic organising principle" that shapes the condition of women's lives (Creswell 2007: 26). Exploring selfie culture through this lens will bring into focus, the gender dynamics at play behind this new phenomenon. This research also seeks to explore the experiences of Irish women within a technofeminist framework that avoids deterministic views of new technologies. It seeks to understand if technological advances and the ubiquity of new mobile

devices and software allow a space for women to perform upon the world stage. Fundamentally, it asks if the selfie can be a statement of ownership that provides women with a platform to challenge socially accepted body and beauty norms.

Methodological approach

Initial quantitative research conducted at Maynooth University in November 2014, as part of my Survey Methods module indicated that young women view the selfie as a possible tool of self-empowerment, however quantitative methods proved to be limiting and unsatisfactory in interpreting the meanings that women attach to their selfies. As the selfie is a new and relatively unexplored phenomenon, in particular within an Irish context, "attitudes and actions" are hard to understand with a set of structured questions (Chambliss and Schutt 2013:179). Qualitative techniques allow me to share in "the understandings and perceptions" of these young women, and explore how they "structure and give meaning to their daily lives" (Berg 2004:7). Moreover, as my research is exploratory in nature I decided that qualitative methods which are designed to "capture social life as participants experience it", would provide me with a "focus on human subjectivity and the meanings" that women attach to their selfies (Chambliss and Schutt 2013:179). When collecting data for my 'selfie survey', respondents displayed a high level of interest in the subject, that indicated a willingness to engage with the subject matter. As I was cognisant of the association of the selfie with narcissistic behaviour, qualitative research methods would also enable me to engage directly and develop a rapport with my interviewees. This was a necessary requirement that provided me with the best prospect of garnering a meaningful and honest response regarding selfie usage and attitudes. Moreover, as a novice researcher, qualitative research methods would enable me to reflexively keep track of my own "actions in, and reactions to" the social process (Chambliss and Schutt 2013:179).

<u>Sampling</u>

As my research question involved young women who took selfies, it was of vital importance to ensure that data was collected from female regular selfie takers, who subsequently share their selfies within social media and were therefore knowledgeable and open to talking about the subject. As a student of Maynooth University, I had access to a young demographic of women that were likely to be selfie takers and active social media users. Participants were therefore selected from the population of Maynooth University using non-probability purposive sampling "in which elements are selected for a purpose because of their unique position" (Chambliss and Schutt 2013:97). Snowball sampling was also used in order to "locate subjects with the necessary attributes" (Berg 2004:36). As a mature student, I began by chatting with other mature students and asked them to tentatively approach younger students in their classes and enquire if they would be open to taking part in my research. I also began to talk with other younger fellow female students endeavouring to secure their assistance. This proved to be successful. My initial interviewees suggested other students, and after following up on their suggestions, I was able to secure the assistance of eight young women with the necessary knowledge and attributes.

<u>Semi-structured interviews</u>

I conducted eight open-ended interviews with relatively unstructured questioning to obtain information on the interviewee's age, field of study, experiences of selfie use, perceptions and attitudes. All of the interviews were conducted on Maynooth University campus. This provided ease of access to interview space, yet at times proved problematic when trying to arrange times that suited the interviewees with the reassurance of no interruptions. I composed a set of short questions prior to the interviews outlining the topic with regard to the literature that had been reviewed. Questions were put to the interviewees in roughly the same

order, with allowances for digression, probing and unexpected discussion (Berg 2004:81). Chambliss and Schutt argue that the key to eliciting a meaningful response from interviews is, to actively listen, "actively question, ask for explanations, and show a deep curiosity about the subject's views and feelings" (2013:196). I endeavoured at all times during the interviews to adhere to those recommendations. I was conscious of the fact that I was a fellow student, but one who is significantly older than my sample, placing me in a similar age range to their own mothers. Therefore, I was cognisant that the interviewees may feel less likely to fully disclose to someone who they may feel would judge their behaviour. I was at all times conscious of developing a rapport with my interviewees, and chatted with them informally prior to each interview, endeavouring to keep the tone of the interview as relaxed and informal as possible. I also took brief notes during the interviews in order to place emphasis on the meaning of the text and sometimes add new prompts or questions. Interviews lasted from between twenty five to fifty minutes. All of the interviews were recorded on my phone, and emailed to my own personal email address. Subsequently, all interview recordings were deleted from my phone and stored on my password protected laptop.

Ethical considerations

A qualitative researcher faces many ethical issues during the collection of data in the field, in analysis and in the completion of final reports (Creswell 2007:141). It was of vital importance that I adhere to a strict code of behavior and implement a number of rigorous steps during the collection of my data and in my final analysis. I endeavoured to ensure the well-being of my interviewees, to the best of my ability at all times during the interview process. At the beginning of each interview I ensured that the interviewees were fully aware of the purpose of the research and that they were welcome to ask me any questions at any stage of the interview process, before, during or at any point after. I obtained both verbal and

written consent to have the interview recorded on my own personal phone, ensuring the interviewees that I would transfer recordings onto my own personal password protected laptop, deleting the recording once the research was completed. I also ensured that consent forms were signed prior to the interview process. Consent forms indicated my own name, the purpose of the research, the recording of the interview, respondent burden, confidentiality; the benefits of taking part in the study and permission to withdraw from the study at any time.Pseudonyms replaced personal names on all transcripts, in analysis and the final report.

Data analysis

As Chambliss and Schutt suggest " qualitative data analysis is an iterative and reflexive process that begins as data are being collected" (2013:207). I began my data analysis during the interviews by making comments and jotting down ideas. I found the interview process challenging, and understood at all times the importance of recognising my own biases and preconceptions. I then carefully listened back to each interview. For ease of analysis I decided to transcribe a number of the interviews directly into word documents, ensuring that pseudonyms replaced personal names on all of the transcripts. Although this was very time consuming, it provided me with the scope to systematically analyse the data. I began by carefully reading the transcripts, highlighting recurring themes and making notes directly onto the transcripts. I then returned to my literature review and sought to make connections theoretically and thematically. Moreover, new themes that emerged from the collected data necessitated a review of new literature.

Chapter 4 - Discussion of findings

Selfie etiquette: the unwritten rules

In order to determine the meanings that young women attached to their selfies, the interview schedule first endeavoured to understand how, where and when these young women took their selfies. Selfie culture appears to be one with a particular kind of etiquette. One that demands an understanding of the "unwritten rules" of, where, when and how to take selfies. All of the interviewees' displayed a high degree of understanding of "selfie etiquette" and actively monitored their own behaviour with regard to selfie usage. Three themes emerged which related to the unwritten rules of selfie usage, shame and embarrassment, the policing of selfies and the acceptability of portraying body confidence, as opposed to vanity or narcissistic behaviour.

4.1 Shame and embarrassment

The majority of the respondents vocalised their reluctance to take selfies in public, indicating that they were embarrassed to be seen taking selfies, particularly alone in public spaces. Giddens considers shame as bearing directly on self-identity and in particular in relation to the integrity of the self (Giddens 1991:65). Interviewees stated that they would take most of their selfies at home in the private sphere, or alternatively as part of a group on a night out or at an event.

Anne, a twenty one year old student studying Science prefers to take selfies at home or as part of a group

> *It's kind of awkward to take a selfie in public you know, everyone would laugh at you, even though everyone does it, they just look at you like, oh look she's taking a selfie in public! You don't really want people to see you do it...but if I'm in the middle of doing something with my friends, I'll say let's take a selfie with what we are doing and send it to this person....then on nights out, that's a different scenario, like you'd take pictures of your friends, just selfies together...group selfies are kinda a big one now*

Rachel, a nineteen year student studying Finance notes that covert action is required when taking a selfie alone, Rachel is embarrassed about revealing the amount of selfies that she takes

> *I couldn't take a selfie on a bus or out shopping because everyone is looking at me. And if I am taking a selfie, it's a really quick one. I mean for people who can do it without getting caught, it's brilliant, but you catch so many people doing it.I take them every day (laughs, embarrassed)... but it's mostly on Snapchat...well, Snapchat, Instagram yea all of them. ...like I really have a problem with selfies (laughs)...but I don't put them all up on Facebook, because I kinda cringe when I scroll and see selfie, selfie, selfie!*

Rachel and Anne's embarrassment appears to stem from the fear of being caught or laughed at whilst taking a selfie in public. Their responses typified how the women in the sample were acutely aware that taking a selfie in public had consequences. This reflects Burns ongoing research with regard to the stereotyping of the selfie as a trivial image within popular discourse, one that is associated with a "set of predominantly negative female stereotypes relating to narcissism, vapidity and sexual impropriety" (Burns 2014). Walker Rettberg contends that such disciplining practice is about power, and who has the right to speak or share images in public (Walker Rettberg 2014).

The above findings also concur with Warfield's findings (2014). The young women in Warfield's study, who detailed appropriate places to take selfies as opposed to inappropriate places to take selfies, brought up the category of public/private repeatedly. Moreover, most of the women in Warfield's study relayed that they took selfies in private because they felt judged when they took them in public (Warfield 2014:3). The young women from this sample in particular did not want to be seen alone in public taking a selfie, conversely, group selfies taken in public were deemed socially acceptable.

Kate, a twenty year old student studying Arts, Geography and Sociology relates the etiquette of taking a selfie on a night out

> *We would take most of our selfies at the pre-drinks, like before we go out and all try and get the pictures we want, getting ready, on the bus, but once we are there I leave the phone in the bag. One girl might have her phone out, you see her recording or taking sly pictures and you think, put the phone back in please!!*

Many of the interviewees attached feelings of embarrassment with regard to selfie poses, often describing them as "cringy", **Kate** discusses her selfie pose

> *I suppose I do have a cringy selfie pose. ...the awkward smile, the face kinda forced, oh take it quickly!*

The selfie, Swaiminathan argues is, "ontologically located in a private space, but is specifically articulated and packaged for a public space" (Swaiminathan 2014: 2). The interviewees' preference for a private space to compose and frame their selfies reflects that dynamic. The stigma associated with taking a selfie alone demonstrates an embarrassment with the display of "backstage behaviour" (Goffman 1959). Although interviewees' responses indicated that group activity significantly diminished the embarrassment. The act of taking a selfie in public exposes the production that goes on behind the selfie. Consequently, the act of "impression management" is exposed for all to see (Goffman 1959). In terms of a "front performance", the selfie is a "personal front" performance, one that sees the focus, not on the setting of a scene, but on corporeal identity (Goffman 1959: 34). The act of taking a selfie exposes "mobile or transitory" vehicle signs such as facial expression, and in particular, any number of selfie poses (Goffman 1959: 34). Therefore, we can argue that, taking selfies alone in public, exposes backstage behaviour, has societal consequences of ridicule and public embarrassment, indicating that selfie culture necessitates a negotiation of the presentation of the self in the public sphere.

<u>4.2 The policing of selfies</u>

The interviewees' display of self-discipline with regard to their own selfie usage, extended to a level of comment and criticism regarding other women's and younger girl's selfie practices. Significantly, there appeared to be a split in opinion amongst the interviewees. With some interviewees contending that, women should be allowed to take selfies without criticism. On the other hand, three of the interviewees were quite critical of the selfie behaviour of other women and in particular young teenage girls. This split in opinion corresponds with the split in feminist discourse regarding selfies.

When asked if there was criticism amongst her peer group with regard to taking 'too many selfies'

Sarah a twenty year old Arts student, studying English and History responded

> *Absolutely, non-stop, non-stop you'd hear a full-blown debate, attacking her appearance, I mean it's ridiculous. But when you put up a picture you are aware that you could get all that. It's completely unnecessary...*

When asked the same question

Niamh a twenty year old Science student responded

> *We'd say, oh no, what's she doing that for, you know, why is she putting so many selfies of herself up, we know she's pretty or whatever, there's no need to put more of the same kind of picture up*

There also appears to be an acceptable age and limit to showing off the body. In particular with respect to provocative posing. All of the interviewees voiced their concerns with regard to younger girls taking provocative pictures and posting them online. The discourse around younger girls is contained within a context of concern, yet it still reveals a strong element of criticism and a regard for societal consequences.

Caitlin aged nineteen studying Media expresses a concern about younger girls getting the wrong type of attention

> *Like young teenagers, it's definitely about 'I am posting this picture of my body because I have boobs suddenly and I want to show them off because I think that's going to get me attention', they think that will get them attention......cause they are unfamiliar with the way...and it's not exactly the best form of attention*

Sarah commented on her discomfort at her younger cousin's selfie usage

> *Yea, I have noticed my younger cousin, she takes selfies at lot, she's just turned thirteen and she is trying to take selfies to make her look older and it's very oh, I don't know uncomfortable to look at, because she is so young and she is already trying to change herself and she is very, very vain...*

Burns research (2014) considers how photographic discourse acts as a means for enacting discipline and self-control. Examining selfies through the framework of Michel Foucault's writings about discipline and power, Burns argues that the selfie is stereotyped as a trivial image within popular discourse (Burns 2014). Burns contends that the ridiculing of selfies are mechanisms that society uses to control and discipline young women, by associating the selfie with a negative set of stereotypes relating to narcissism (Burns 2014). Criticisms of oversharing, body shape and gender performance dominate within this environment, and serve to discipline, not only the target of the criticism but also the viewer. Burns calls this multi-form of discipline, the "Carceral Net" a term borrowed from Foucault's, Discipline and Punish (Foucault 1995:297 in Burns 2014).

Criticisms of body shape were absent from the interviews, at no point was any criticism levelled at women's sizes or women wearing inappropriate clothing for their size. The main three areas of criticism were 'oversharing' vanity and revealing too much flesh, in particular with regard to younger girls. The quote above from Caitlin suggests that, younger girls are engaging with the selfie as a form of self-discovery and using the selfie to document their changing bodies. As Shilling suggests the body has become increasingly central to the

modern person's sense of self-identity (Shilling 2003). The selfie provides a space for these girls to document their on-going "body projects" for self-evaluation and feedback (Shilling, 2003:4).Kwon and Kwon's study of 66 college students, found that respondents started taking selfies when they were in Junior High, stating that this enabled them to learn about the different ways they looked, encountering unexpected images which aided an exploration of their own self-image and identity (2014:304). Most of the women from this sample began taking selfies at a similar age, out of curiosity, and to engage with their peers.

Swartz's (2010) evaluation of the Social Networking Site *Shox* in Israel, revealed that users with high levels of cultural capital were particularly critical of the standards of photos and exposure of the bodies of younger teenagers with lower levels of cultural capital, whose ethos was "anti-intellectual and fame-adoring" (179). Swartz contends that data from other Israeli SNSs indicate that the tendency to criticise derives from older users, and from those with a 'high culture' background (2010:178). However, Swartz argues that although it may seem like a rational decision to avoid such displays of the body, it seems more likely that users were affected by "deeper personal dispositions: feelings of shame and abhorrence" (Swartz 2010:178).

Considering that my sample consisted of Maynooth University students, it could be argued that their educational status and levels of cultural capital affect their critical outlook. Moreover, all of the interviewees referred to their older status as selfie users. Interviewees, commented that being older made them place less importance on getting feedback on their selfies, and more thoughtful about what they shared on social media.

Emma twenty studying Arts, History and Sociology discusses that it is no longer important to get feedback on selfies

> *I suppose it was at the start, when you were younger, now you don't really care as much*

This suggests that the interviewees are "reflexively construct[ing] a personal narrative that allows them to understand themselves as in control of their lives and futures (Giddens 1991 in Jenkins 2014:35).The selfie enables people to view themselves at different moments and at different times; it is a means of discovering [the] self and of self expression (Kwon and Kwon 2014:304). In conclusion, the women from the sample indicated that the policing of selfies takes various forms: the policing of one's own selfie behaviour, and the policing of other women's behaviour, with a level of criticism targeting younger girls who reveal too much flesh and post too many pictures. This indicates a critical gender and age dynamic at play between women and their negotiation of selfie culture. It also confirms that, "gender is integral to the sociotechnical process" and that "the materiality of technology affords or inhibits the doing of particular power relations" (Wajcman 2009:150).

4.3 Body confidence, as opposed to vanity or narcissistic behaviour.

All of the interviewees displayed an awareness of the association of the selfie with narcissistic behaviour. In particular, the celebrity selfie appears to have contributed to the selfie's association with narcissism and self- indulgence. When the interviewees were asked what they thought of celebrity selfies, they mentioned the same names consistently in their answers, in particular the Kardashians and Niki Minaj. All of the interviewees were aware of the enormous influence of the female celebrity selfie. Moreover, the female celebrity selfie appears to be highly influential not only on selfie culture and its association with vanity, but also on the promotion of different body projects.

When asked what she thought of celebrity selfies Anne answered

> *All the celebrities, would be like I am a size this and I am on these food diets, youknow health diets...Nicki Minaj with the big ass, like everyone is like I have to twerkloads and I have to squat loads, and now a while ago it was a small chest, now big. There are loads of influences that feed into your image and then the selfie just tops that off*

Shilling argues that in conditions of high modernity the body has become increasingly central to the modern person's sense of self-identity (Shilling 2003:1). The celebrity selfie appears to promote different body projects, with regard to the management, maintenance and appearance of the body, and the "practical recognition of the significance of bodies as personal resources and social symbols which give off messages" (Shilling 2003:4/5). As such, 'the body' in the selfie becomes "a site of interaction, appropriation and reappropriation" (Giddens 1991:218). Furthermore, as Featherstone argues, the cultivation of the body has a strong gender dynamic, "with greater scrutiny given to women's bodies (2010:202).

Caitlin discusses the influence of celebrities on selfie culture and body shape

> *Kim Kardashian, well she has brought about a culture, well recently there was a strive to be really skinny, but recently, thanks to her and Niki Minaj, suddenly curvy is a big thing...they have such an influence on the way selfies are taken*

Many of the interviewees mentioned celebrity culture and their association with body positivity. Sastre (2014) suggests that the "visual rhetoric" of body positive movements "mirrors the trend for the digital selfie" as young women seek to make "their private selves and authentic voices highly visible in public" (Harris 2004:119/Sastre 2014:936). Sastre's exploration of online body positive movements found that the 'body positive movement' espouses the maxim that the exposure of all types of bodies is "liberatory" (Sastre 2014:936). Yet in doing so it seeks the "relinquishment of privacy" and "the act of exposure" as the way to body acceptance, "rather than liberating the docile body (Sastre 2014:937). However, Sastre contends that if the " Foucauldian model" leads us to the impossibility of removing ourselves from "a matrix of hegemonic norms", then the body positive movement may be a "limited language" to push against "contemporary bodily ontologies" (Sastre 2014:940/941). Interviewees were also cognisant of the capitalist endorsement of the celebrity selfie. With

many of the interviewees mentioning the role of the celebrity selfie in product placement, such as waist-trainers, clothes, make-up and diet and health products. The celebrity selfie appears to be viewed by the majority of the interviewees as a product for consumption with a high degree of influence on women's selfie production and body image. As Kwon and Kwon argue, "selfie is self-consumption practice", an act of promoting the self and pursuing its authenticity (2014:301). The interviewees demonstrated a reflexive attitude to the consumption of the celebrity selfie and although they acknowledged that the celebrity selfie provided a narrow platform to challenge socially accepted body and beauty norms, they were mindful of the capitalist endorsement behind the challenge.

Displays of body confidence appear to be acceptable in selfie culture, whereas displays of vanity are to be avoided. Selfie etiquette demands that a certain amount of effort and self-promotion is on display if the final product of the selfie is for general public consumption. However, too much effort may be indicative of self-indulgence. Interviewees discussed how there was a process in the production of the selfie for public consumption.

Niamh notes, that there is an 'unwritten process" when posting selfies

> *Anyone knows that is going to post them that there is an unwritten process, that you just don't take one selfie and go oh, that's perfect, you take loads until you finally get down to your favourite few...there is a kinda unwritten rule, I don't know how things got to be that way.*

Moreover, the interviewees strived to display 'the right amount of effort' in selfie production

Sinead, twenty one studying Arts, Sociology and English

> *It's so funny despite people putting all the effort in. I think people don't want to look like they care too much. It's a kind of happy medium, it's not just oh! I just took this, or also not like I am being too posey, at the fear of being judged I guess...*

Kwon and Kwon suggest, that the selfie reflects the "cultural contradiction embedded in contemporary consumer culture: authenticity and self-promotion (2014:310). Giddens also argues that the project of the self remains one of control, guided only by" a morality of authenticity" (1991:218/226). The etiquette of selfie culture, prescribes a certain level of self-promotion, yet one that is delicately balanced between displays of body confidence as opposed to displays of self-indulgence. Findings from Warfield's study (2014) suggests that female selfie takers are "self conscious thespian [s]", who "deeply deliberated over the ethics of self-presentation in both online and offline spaces (Warfield 2014:3). Findings from this sample also suggest a deliberation over the ethics of self-presentation in the interviewees' negotiation of selfie culture.

Selfie Fatigue

<u>4.4. The case for Snapchat</u>

The second part of the interview schedule was focused on why these young women took selfies and how their selfie usage impacted upon their daily lives. A recurring theme in all of the interviews was a level of fatigue with regard to 'high production selfies' and a preference for selfies that transgress the normative selfie. Interviewees demonstrated a preference for sharing selfies among friends, informally on Snapchat, saving 'high production selfies' for group activity and formal socialising. Furthermore, there appears to evidence that the young women from this sample are spending less time posting selfies onto Facebook, using it primarily as a messenger application; choosing instead to spend their time on Snapchat, Twitter, Tumbr and Instagram. Snapchat provides a space for displays of backstage behaviour, where interviewees share photos at a 'conversational level'.

Kate discusses how important Snapchat is to her

To stay in contact with everyone, Snapchat, you know cousins, like family at home that I wouldn't see that often...I'd take what's going on with my day, it could be a picture of me, a picture of a chair, it could be anything. You know you can have the conversation without the hi! Without the how are you?I am only at home at the weekends, so it's nice to keep in contact..

Kate's comments are typical of the interviewees' discussion of Snapchat. Snapchat enables the selfie to become a conversation with pictures, rendering the selfie not only a photographic representation of the self, but a conversation of the self. One that documents social life as it is lived. Furthermore, Snapchat provides a space that blurs the line between backstage and frontstage behaviour (Goffman 1959). Although the interviewees discussed the casualness of the use of Snapchat, there was still an element of staging involved, as demonstrated above in Kate's discussion of how she uses props to highlight her daily activity in her selfies.

Sinead discusses the difference between Snapchat and Instagram

Snapchat is going to my friends, it's a lot more casual. I could send one if I am tired and in my pyjamas, it's not really as big of a deal...especially ones going to close friends...they don't care, I don't care, whereas Instagram it's going to a wider audience and you are controlling your public image really

Once again, Sinead's comments highlight the negotiation of the presentation of the self between the public and private sphere. As Snapchat facilitates the transmission of images and script within a time limit of up to 10 seconds before the image disappears, it allows the representation of elements of backstage social life. Conversely, other applications such as Instagram necessitate a negotiation of public image.

Rachel discusses why she prefers Snapchat

Because you have more control over who can see it, I have it set to all my friends...I would use Instagram more for scrolling down and seeing other people's pictures. Instagram, maybe at actual events, like *matches. I more or less use Facebook as a messenager app...

Emma discusses her avoidance of Instagram

> *I try to avoid Instagram, I am on the app all the time looking at other people's pictures, but I don't really post ones myself because it does seem like such an effort...*
>
> *Snapchat ,I wouldn't even take a second glance*

Swamainthan argues that "the unique digital DNA of the selfie", allows it to exist in multiple forms and spaces simultaneously: a picture one moment, a deeply personal communication at another, a social statement and even an epistemology on occasions" (Swamainthan 2014). The interviewees demonstrated that their negotiation of selfie culture allows them to attach multiple meanings to their selfies. A selfie can be an informal conversation with a friend or a highly managed public representation of the self. Moreover, the selfie can maintain family and social ties through 'selfie conversations'. Giddens (1991) argues that modernity "breaks down the protective framework of the small community" leaving the individual feeling bereft and alone. However, it would appear that many aspects of modern life, such as 'selfie conversations' allow the maintenance of social ties and family bonds. This demonstrates the socio-technical dynamic at play in selfie culture, as the selfie becomes shaped within a network of social relations (Wajcman 2004:7).

4.5 The Ugly Selfie

Chateris, Gregory and Masters (2014), have explored how the ephemeral nature of messaging technologies such as Snapchat may enable young people to take up a range of discourses, and thus demonstrate discursive agency in ways that support social mobility through shifting relationships with their peers (Chateris et al. 2014:389.) Chateris et al. argue that such discourses, in particular amongst younger teens, often generate new language codes and slang that sets it apart from the dominant adult discourse (Chateris et al. 2014: 389).

Amongst this sample of young women one of the recurring themes that emerged in relation to new slang was the 'ugly selfie'. Most of the interviewees mentioned taking ugly selfies, joke pictures, or 'fake posing'.

Sarah*:*   *I'll take joke or ugly pictures of myself, for fun that kinda thing. On Snapchat I'll send particularly bad pictures of myself*

Anne: *When I take selfies they're kinda joke selfies, they are not serious, like you do the posing, but it's all put on, that kinda thing*

Caitlin: *I have sent some of the ugliest pictures to my friends, and I know that they have laughed about it, and I got funny pictures of them, so to your friends that is the time to show your true self*

This element of selfie culture was not highlighted in any of the literature, and therefore necessitated further research. Further research indicated that one of the internet's long term aesthetic trends is' Internet Ugly', a "particular style that appears in different aspects of online culture, specifically through its memetic content (Douglas 2014:314). Despite its anti-memetic self-destruction element, Snapchat is "possibly the most effective meme-creator yet" (Douglas 2014:329). Its markedly short-lived appeal promoting "a lack of care, slickness, or beauty" (Douglas 2014:329).

There has been a growing trend to share ugly selfies on social media sites with UglySelfieChallenge appearing on Instagram, a Tumblr blog called "Pretty Girls Making Ugly Faces" or subreddit "PrettyGirlsUglyFaces/R (Bennett 2014/reddit.com 2014). Subsequent discussions within the media with regard to the 'ugly selfie' have concentrated on its transgressive nature and the challenge it presents to cultural beauty norms. *TeenVogue* has commented that they are a "way to subvert social media's permanent link to physical appearance" (Manrodt 2014)**.**

The fact that this is a growing trend within selfie culture makes it difficult to assess its transgressive nature. However, as Wajcman argues, we must avoid utopian and dystopian views that assign too much agency to technology and not enough to women in their negotiation of this new phenomenon (Wajcman 2004). As Phelan (2014) suggests self-portraits enable us to shed light on gendered images (Farmer 2014). Moreover, new forms of photography have allowed women to appropriate the lens and document the space in their lives (Aguayo and Calvert 2013:182).

When asked about the positive side of selfies Kate replied

> *I suppose the selfie does bring you back down to earth a bit, I mean we all want to look amazing, but you know this is what we all do, we just sit on the couch looking at the tv, like normal people do*

Fundamentally, women view other women's lives. The selfies that are shared on Snapchat document the ordinary and everyday in women's lives, not just the photoshopped image of a perfect life. These selfie images are "cracks in the mould", through which women can view images of other women that transgress body and beauty idealized standards.

Chapter 5 –Conclusion

The goal of this research was to interpret the selfie practices of young Irish women and add to the growing interdisciplinary academic research and literature seeking to understand this new phenomenon. Within a feminist paradigm, this research has argued that gender is "a basic organising principle" that shapes the condition of women's lives (Creswell 2007: 26). Exploring selfie culture through this lens brought into focus, the gender dynamics at play behind this new phenomenon. This research has demonstrated that selfie culture is one with a particular kind of etiquette, that demands an understanding of the unwritten rules of where, when and how to take selfies. Three themes emerged which related directly to those rules, shame and embarrassment, the policing of selfies and the acceptability of displays of body

confidence as opposed to displays of vanity. A discussion of these themes highlighted how these young Irish student women are affected by powerful gender discourses that determine a policing of their own behaviour and the behaviour of others, in particular younger girls. Moreover, as studies have revealed that users of social networking sites with high cultural capital are particularly critical of the photos of others with lower levels of capital (Swartz 2010). It must be acknowledged that as this sample consisted of Maynooth University students, their educational status and high levels of cultural capital may affect their critical outlook. Further research into other socio-demographic groups of selfie takers are needed to explore class distinctions between selfie communities. This research has also demonstrated that women's negotiation of selfie culture has allowed them to attach multiple meanings to their selfies. 'Selfie conversations' strengthen social ties and family bonds, revealing the socio-technical at play in selfie culture, as the selfie becomes shaped within a network of social relations. This research has demonstrated that these young women reflexively construct a personal narrative, that allows them to understand themselves as in control of their lives and futures. Fundamentally, in answer to our question, if the selfie can be a statement of ownership that provides women with a platform to challenge socially accepted body and beauty norms. The research proffers a maybe. The women in this sample demonstrate a level of selfie fatigue with 'high production' selfies, and seek new ways of sharing images with their peers and families, in particular on Snapchat. It is the contention of this research that these spaces allow women to claim ownership of their selfies, thereby creating the "cracks in the mould", that may challenge socially accepted body and beauty norms. Although this research is limited to a small representative sample and is not generalizable to the general population, it adds to the growing body of 'selfie' research and initiates an exploration of how Irish women experience this new phenomenon.

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Appendix 1 -consent form

Thank you for agreeing to take part in my research project, "An exploration of the selfie phenomenon amongst Irish women". My name is Bernice Mc Laughlin and I am conducting this research as part of my final year Sociology thesis at Maynooth University.

This interview may take up to one hour and with your permission I would like to record the conversation. A copy of the interview can be made available to you afterwards should you wish to hear it. Please be assured that there are no risks involved in this research and the interview does not constitute any type of counselling or treatment. The benefit to you is that you will have access to the research when it is finished and you may use it to understand how your experience compares with others.

Please be assured that all of the interview information will be kept confidential. I will store the recording of our conversation safely on my password protected computer. Your identity will be kept confidential at all times and I will use a pseudonym to identify your interview data. Please note that your participation is voluntary. You are free to refuse to take part, and you may refuse to answer any questions or may stop at any time. You may also withdraw from this research at any time up until its completion.

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact me at bernice.mclaughlin.2012@nuim.ie or my research supervisor Dr. Paul Ryan at paul.ryan@nuim.ie

"I have read the description above and consent to participate."

Signed_____ Date_____

Appendix 2 – Interview questions

Can I begin by asking how old you are and what you are studying

1. Can you remember the first time that you took a selfie?

2. Where and when are you most likely to take your selfies?

3. Who are you most likely to take selfies with?

4. How do you feel when you are taking selfies?

5. Is it important for you to look your best in a selfie?

6. How do you share your selfies?

7. How do you feel when you review your selfies?

8. What kind of feedback do you get on your selfies?

8. Have you ever received criticism for taking a selfie?

9. What do you think of the criticism that taking a selfie is a narcissistic thing to do?

Interview 5

Interviewer: Can you remember the first time that you took a selfie?

Respondent: Probably about fourteen or fifteen, I had put a dip dye in my hair and I was very proud of it, so I took a selfie of it and put it on Facebook to show everyone, either that or when I was at my first concert, a Girls Aloud concert I think.

Interviewer: So was it just for fun?

Respondent: Yea, I wasn't taking myself too seriously.

Interviewer: Would you say that you take them regularly now?

Respondent: Not as much as I used to, not only do I not have the time, but I feel a little too old for selfies now, I take myself a little bit more seriously than I did when I was younger. I don't really take them too much any more. If I do, I'll take joke or ugly pictures of myself, for fun that kinda thing. On Snapchat I'll send particularly bad pictures of myself.

Interviewer: So would you say that it's decreasing as you get older?

Respondent: I was a bit more vain when I was younger, I don't really care anymore. I was coming out of that kinda awkward thirteen where I was all puppy fat and I wanted to show everyone to see that I looked better.

Interviewer: When you take them now do you post them a lot?

Respondent: No, I don't post selfies at all really. If I did it would be once every couple of months, it wouldn't be a regular thing.

Interviewer: And in what format would that be?

Respondent: A group one maybe, from a party or something I would very rarely take one of just me in a room on my own where I look nice, it would be for 'memories sake'. I wouldn't really take them myself but get into them more.

Interviewer: And if you did take one now would you be happy with how you looked?

Respondent: I don't know really, I might be a little bit self critical now, I'd notice it more, a part of my face or body that I am not happy with. I suppose it's the closest thing to someone else's view of you, so I'd see how other people see me. I'd look at it and see how they saw me.

Interviewer: So when you look in a mirror and you look in a selfie are you seeing different things?

Respondent: Yea, because in a mirror you are seeing your own view of yourself, you see yourself a few times prettier than you actually are, but in a picture you are kinda getting another point of view, like someone else's, it's coming from a different angle kind of, a different eye so to speak.

Interviewer: So when you look at your selfie you are seeing what other people see, do you think that is a positive thing?

Respondent: It can be and it's can't be, (pause) I don't know, I think depending on how the picture turned out anyway. If the picture turns out nice and I am happy with how I look, then if there is a not so nice one you think, oh God, is that how people see me.

Interviewer: So would you be very careful about how you filter your pictures?

Respondent: Yea, I'd say so, you want people to see you at your best, your best side, so. I don't know, if I ever did put up selfies I'd want people to see me in a nice way.

Interviewer: So how long would it take you to take a selfie until you were happy with it?

Respondent: I'm not sure because I don't really take them, but if I did and I'd be taking them and deleting them and taking them because I might not ever get a good result, and I would see them and I would think no ,no, nope. So, up to maybe half an hour, at the longest.

Interviewer: So half an hour, so would you be taking them from a different angle?

Respondent: Yea, different angle, different lighting, different make-up, the usual kinda thing yea, until you are happy with how it looks and happy with yourself, that kinda thing.

Interviewer: And are they full shot selfies, or half body shots?

Respondent: Probably, half body shot.

Interviewer: So not a full body shot, why not?

Respondent: Well, I'm not very confident in my own skin, I wouldn't really take a full length one. I wouldn't know how to position myself, what do I do with this arm, what to do with this leg.

Interviewer: So would you look at other people's selfies and would that influence how you take selfies?

Respondent: Not really, cause everyone has got their own style so to speak, so someone who has got a really nice figure would show off their figure by positioning themselves in a certain way and someone who is a different shape would do something else to look better. Your kinda positioning and manipulating your body to look its best I think.

Interviewer: So what kind of feedback you get on your selfies and from whom?

Respondent: Mostly positive from my friends and family. I've never really gotten a negative comment on a picture. If I did, I don't know if I would take that into account, if it was a stranger.

Interviewer: Is it important to you?

Respondent: Em, I don't know, it's nice to get reassurance, like positive feedback is reassurance that you do look good. Like if someone says, aw you look really good, it's a nice feeling to hear it, but it wouldn't be why I would put a selfie up to get the reassurance or the positive feedback, it wouldn't be the reason why. If I am putting something on Instagram, I wouldn't put something on Facebook, it would be documenting what is going on in my life

more than putting it out there to get feedback, it would documenting something for 'memories sake' so in a few years time, I'll be like, oh I remember that.

Interviewer: So what you were saying earlier on about looking in the mirror and looking at selfies, do you think that looking at selfies has made you more self conscious about any particular part of your body?

Respondent: I'd notice more like, especially in full length, well, I did try to take full length, but they didn't work out, I'd notice in a mirror I would see myself in one way and in selfies I was, is that actually how I look, especially like the full length ones cause you see your own body shape and its size and it's like how you carry yourself and how you hold yourself as well, and you get a bit like oh, I need to change that I need to do something about that.

Interviewer: But do you feel in control of that?

Respondent: Em, when you notice it when you see something in a selfie you can see something that you can work on whereas in a mirror you think oh that looks fine.

Interviewer: Do you think that it is empowering to be in charge of your own image?

Respondent: Yea, well cause you can get the best result from it, you are in control of where and when the picture is being taken and how the picture is taken and how you look. You know your best angles.

Interviewer: What do you think about celebrity selfies?

Respondent: Em, not much I think people have a lot of stigma around it, because it is documenting their lives and people are more obsessed with celebrities than any other times, but, I think that celebrity selfies are used for product placement more than anything, I think. Like I'd notice more like Vanessa Huddgens would be advertising a slimming product or Kim Kardashian would be advertising a waist controlling corset almost, I think it's a trend setter the celebrity selfie. Millions of people are looking at it and analyzing it and trying to apply it to their own lives I think.

Interviewer: Is there any celebrity that would be a positive role model?

Respondent: Em, I don't know, a lot of celebrities are very body confident and in recent years there is more of a feminist thing, every woman should have the right to feel confident in her own skin and all that sort of stuff and I think a lot of celebrities at the moment are trying to convey body confidence and everything so.

Interviewer: And do you think that's a positive thing?

Respondent: Yea, I know that a lot of people are not comfortable in their own skin and if they see big names have a lot of followers and fans and they see that it's ok not to be perfect to be a size whatever.

Interviewer: Do you think that there is a difference between younger girls and older girls taking selfies?

Respondent: Yea, I have noticed my younger cousin, she takes selfies a lot, she's just turned thirteen and she is trying to take selfies to make her look older and it's very, oh I don't know uncomfortable to look at, because she is so young and she is already trying to change herself . And she is very very vain I think, and she would put a lot of editing into her pictures and

filtering and would use certain apps to get herself lots of likes and comments to make it look like she has a certain amount of fans almost. Strange, and people kind of my age and older would not put that much emphasis on it. It's become more of a hierarchy kind of thing, of someone who is near the top but hasn't got as many likes. I don't know it's hard to explain. She's very obsessed with how she comes across socially and she wants everyone to see her in a certain way and if it doesn't come across that way she will become obsessed with it. But I think that older people are a lot more relaxed about it, it's not that a big of a deal. It's just kind of, I don't look that great, but it's not a big deal.

Interviewer: So do you think that it's a negative thing to be vain?

Respondent: I don't know I think there is a difference between being vain and being confident, I think she has gone way past confident. I think that she is very self obsessed.

Interviewer: So do you think in general that taking a selfie is a vain thing to do?

Respondent: I think if there are people who look really, really good, people go, oh look at her taking a selfie again. It can come across as being very vain and narcissistic.

Interviewer: And amongst your own friends would you hear them slagging off other girls for being vain or taking too many selfies?

Respondent: Absolutley, non-stop, non-stop, you'd hear a full blown debate, attacking her appearance, I mean it's ridiculous. But when you put up a picture you are aware that you could get all that. It's completely unnecessary, I mean, if you are putting up a picture and you are happy with how you look, it could have taken so many tries to finally get that picture, and I am happy with how I come across and then you put it up and you are getting all the negative, you are getting attacked for it really.

Interviewer: And would people get negative comments online or would it be behind their backs?

Respondent: It depends a lot of it its behind someone's back, but if it's a picture where they are a bit revealing they would get a few kinds of hateful comments beneath their pictures.

Interviewer: Do you think for younger girls that would be harmful for their self confidence, their body image?

Respondent: When I was younger the selfie wasn't a big deal, it's only a recent kind of thing so. You are kind of growing up discovering yourself becoming comfortable in your own skin, but younger girls are becoming aware of their own appearance through selfies and pictures of themselves on the internet. I think the selfie thing might have a psychological effect on younger girls. That's just my personal opinion, like I think that if they get negative comments it will really get to them more than anyone a bit older because they have learned to handle it differently. I think it's a generational thing.

Interviewer: So for you then do you think that they have been a positive thing, for your own body image and body confidence?

Respondent: I think that it has been a positive thing, because I do get positive comments on pictures that I am in and it does give me a bit more confidence like this is how people are seeing me and I am getting this reaction from it, I must be doing something right with my appearance then so for me I don't see a problem with it.

Interviewer: So as you were saying earlier, when you review your selfies that you might be critical, do you think that affects your confidence?

Respondent: Well, I am the kind of person that is hard on herself, so if I find something wrong I amplify it. I don't want to come across as being big headed so you try to be humble.

Interviewer: Do you think that is a common thing amongst your age group?

Respondent: Well, no one wants to come across as big headed or vain, or cocky you kind of want to come across as a very humble person.

Interviewer: If you see someone and you think they are very body confident, do you think that is a positive thing?

Respondent: Well, it is hard to become confident, so if someone is, you might be a bit jealous, but happy for them. But you wouldn't want them to not feel that.

Interviewer: Do you think that girls that are not that traditionally beautiful are less likely to take selfies?

Respondent: Em, (pause) I'd say so because they have kind of grown up seeing other girls that are naturally slimmer or prettier, nicer hair, nicer skin, and they are constantly comparing themselves. They might find it hard for them to be happy with how they are looking, and let alone project it onto the internet for God knows how many people to see it. I think it depends on the person, cause there are people who might be a bit overweight, like not as pretty as someone else, but they might be completely confident and put up 50 selfies a day, I think it just depends on the person really. But you would definitely see more pretty girls and pictures.

Interviewer: So do you not think then that you get a lot of pictures with women looking realistically what they really look like?

Respondent: Yea, it can be very artificial, some people might put make-up on just to take a picture and put on their best clothes. Like I know a girl who looks completely different in her pictures compared to what she looks like in real life. Like you would not even recognise that they were the same person. It's a bit crazy to see how much you can manipulate your own body appearance for everyone else, but then again if that's how you are happy with yourself you should be able to do it. But it's crazy to see someone look so unnatural.

Interviewer: Do you think that there is always an awareness of an audience there?

Respondent: Especially if you have got like a large group of followers, you might have a couple of thousand, so you are aware that there are hundreds of people seeing your picture and they are complete strangers as well. People take it very seriously, they have certain themes and they want it come across a certain way.

Interviewer: So what do you mean by themes?

Respondent: Like, there are people who would follow certain trends and they would only use those trends in their accounts, like there might be certain colours, and angles and lighting, and it would all be very uniform, and each account is different (Social media account)

Interviewer: Do you think that because of smartphones and apps that women are becoming more interested in technology?

Respondent: Well especially smartphones because you can do so many things with it. And everyone is becoming aware that you use different filters or brightness or backgrounds, like frames around them. As I was saying, my cousin she would use apps and put lash extensions on herself and different photoshop ones to make herself look slimmer and try to take inches off her waist. At thirteen! She is trying to look perfect, it's just it's crazy.

Interviewer: Do you think that women in general like looking at other women's selfies in the same manner that they might look at a magazine and compare themselves to other women?

Respondent: Yea, I suppose so, that selfies on social media are like the modern day magazines, I mean I haven't looked at a magazine in years I just kinda follow celebrities and their pictures on different accounts. Women are kind of gossipers and bitchy really more than anything, and you do want a certain image to prepare yourself, if you are not getting people's images and views you can't really get one of yourself. It's really weird like, I know that like being in a room on your own and not seeing anyone else and you don't know how everyone else is looking and you don't know how that is compared to you and you don't know the different standards of people.

Interviewer: So then when you look at other women's selfies is it something to measure yourself against?

Respondent: I do that cause as I said I am quite hard on myself. So if I see someone look great, I am like I wish I looked like that, she has a fabulous figure, or eyes or hair, Oh my God, but I am also aware that she put hours into that picture to look her absolute best.

Interviewer: So is there an awareness then that that is not really how that person looks?

Respondent: Yea, initially you are kinda like, so she looks amazing, but she's wearing make-up and false tan, and those are hair extensions. You are aware of the thought process and the editing that has gone on behind all of the pictures.

Interviewer: So is it still something that's there that you compare yourself to?

Respondent: I think girls are very like that in general like every girl compares herself to someone else.

Interviewer: Do you think that affects how they value themselves?

Respondent: Yea if you are surrounded by people who are supermodel standards of beautiful and slim, and you are not like that. Especially if you are seeing all these gorgeous girls getting all the positive comments and the reinforcement and you might think oh God! I have to look like that, to feel like that, anyway.

Interviewer: But just using Snapchat and sharing with your friends, is that a fun thing to do?

Respondent: I think so anyway, I take purposely ugly pictures of myself and send them out because I think that it's kind of funny. I don't take myself as seriously as I did. I just put up bad pictures of myself sometimes because I find them funny.

Interviewer: So would you have a problem wearing no make-up in a picture?

Respondent: A bunch of strangers, I would be a bit more self-consious and I'd want to look a little bit nicer, but if it was just my friends that I am comfortable around I wouldn't care.

Interviewer: But if you were putting something up on Instagram?

Respondent: Yea, I'd be more inclined to put more effort into it.

Interviewer: So it depends on the audience?

Respondent: Yea,

Interviewer: Well, I think that is it now, thanks very much.