

# Of Real Identities: Expressions of Femininity and Sexuality in Online Spaces

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## Abstract

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Most mainstream media discourses frame discussions around selfies of young women in ways that see selfies as promoting narcissism, self-obsession and as damaging self-esteem. In most of these discourses, there has been a jarring exclusion of the voices of young women who are the central subject of discussion. In response to such an exclusion, this paper presents ethnographic research conducted with twenty young women in the age group of 13-19 years, exploring their engagement with selfies. The paper argues that selfies need to be read as sites where, through the act of self-representation, young women explore the specific experiences of their bodies, including their negotiations with social constructions of gender and sexuality. The paper also explores the contradictions that are present within the narratives of young women and how these might complicate our ideas of agency, resistance and empowerment.

Keywords: Selfies, Social Media, Self-Representation, Youth Studies, Feminist Media Studies

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## Introduction

*I find it annoying when girls pout or make duck faces in their selfies. They think they are looking sexy but they are not actually looking at the pictures themselves. If they see it themselves, they will find it funny.*  
[Tanvi<sup>1</sup>, 18]

*There are some who will behave a certain way in person and behave differently on Facebook. On Facebook when you comment on their pictures, they will thank you and behave very graciously. In person, they will crib about you. They can be very friendly and sweet to people on such sites even when they aren't.*  
[Jessie, 16]

*I don't believe in double standards or that girls should be virgins or anything. Do whatever you want to do. But anyone will tell you that putting a selfie with your cleavage showing or in skirts that show everything is a stupid thing to do.*  
[Sheela,  
15]

I begin this essay with snippets of conversations I have had with young women on the subject of selfies. Statements such as the ones above came up in response to discussions centring on self-presentation, authentic selves and online versus offline interaction, with ideas of body, sexuality and femininity getting invoked in different ways. This article attempts to make sense of these different narratives.

Self-portraits have had a long history, much before the advent of digital self-portraits or selfies. The autonomous self-portrait is believed to be an invention of the Renaissance era, when artists began to construct themselves as the central figures of paintings (Woods-Marsden 1998). The self-portraits of the Renaissance era have been seen as “an attempt to care for the self, a kind of self-exercise and self-examination, a duty to the exploration and advancement of the self” (Avgitidou

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<sup>1</sup> The respondents' names have been changed to protect their privacy.

2003: 132). Avgitidou (2003) states that throughout history, self-portraiture has been “a primary tool in visibility politics, a visual statement of: ‘I exist’” (Avgitidou 2003: 133). Such a reading of self-portraits can be seen in Amelia Jones’s (2014) work, where she points out that the self-portrait as an autobiographical act has been explored by a number of female artists, such as Claude Cahun, Cindy Sherman, Hannah Wilke and Laura Aguilar, as a means of understanding how subjectivity relates to representation.

The body has been at the centre of many of these self-portraits. The self-portrait, at a visible level, is expected to mimetically represent the body. But more significantly, the self-portrait also allows an examination of the relationship between the body and subjectivity. In the case of women's self-portraits, the body assumes special significance because while women continue to be identified and associated with the body they are also seen as lacking knowledge of the same. This can be seen in the way most mainstream media discourses frame the discussions around selfies of young women. Most of these discourses presume that teenage girls more than any other demographic participate in taking and disseminating selfies; at the same time framing selfies in ways that see them as promoting narcissism, self-obsession and as damaging self-esteem. Together, such assumptions have led to an increasing moral panic around the selfies of young women and the inevitably negative consequences of the same. In an article titled, “Selfies aren't Empowering. They're a Cry for Help”, Erin Gloria Ryan (2013) states, “Young women take selfies because they don't derive their sense of worth from themselves, they rely on others to bestow their self-worth on them — just as they've been taught”. In such narratives on the selfies of young women, the derision and even alarm around selfies has come from seeing them as foregrounding the importance of physical appearances of young women in their identity formation. There have been critiques of how such self-representations are in fact objectification of the body and how their existence in public spaces only serves to garner validation within the male gaze. Selfies are thus seen as leading to a further sexualisation or “pornification” of culture, considered a potentially worrying situation especially with regard to young women. Any attempt to understand the selfie as an expression of identity, body or pleasure is dismissed in favour of seeing the act of taking a selfie as catering to validation by the male gaze. However, as the coming sections demonstrate, the selfie needs to be read as a site where, through the act of self-representation, young women explore the specific experiences of their bodies, including their negotiations with the social constructions of gender and sexuality.

## Methodology

In order to understand their experiences of taking and sharing selfies, I interacted with 20 young women in the age group of 13-19 years. I interacted with them both online and offline, conducting in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with 12 respondents and administering email questionnaires to 8 respondents. In-depth interviewing as a method was particularly useful for my project in order to understand the, often unarticulated, realities of the lives of young women; including the complex negotiations with power that they make in their day-to-day lives. I also employed the auto-photography method, which can be defined as “photography carried out by the research participant rather than the researcher as part of the research process” (McCarthy 2013:100). With the purpose of creating a site where the respondents could insert specific selfies as part of the research process, I created a “secret<sup>2</sup>” group on Facebook, called “The Selfie Project”. The group was created so that the respondents could have a safe space where they could share their images. Most selfies that the respondents shared consisted of a written comment stating why they thought the selfie was interesting, the context in which the selfie was taken, what they wished to convey through the selfie and the ways in which they thought the selfie could be read by the audience. By bringing together the different respondents, the Facebook group also became a site where the respondents discussed and debated their ideas of selfies. Through my use of auto-photography, I attempted to find a method that would make the process of understanding the selfies as collaborative as possible. Reflecting on the participatory nature of visual methodologies such as auto-photography, McCarthy (2013: 87) says that what underpins these methods are “a notion of sharing- arriving at understandings together”. She states,

*This goes some way to redressing imbalances of power between researcher and participant, often cited as a major methodological obstacle in feminist research. These visual methods hope to allow for a process of 'reflection' by allowing the participant time to think about what she expresses to express; to be able to do this creatively; and to express what may be difficult to express in words alone (Guillemin and Drew 2010). Images offer avenues that go beyond the spoken word, allowing the participant to say things that may be difficult to express verbally (Hogan and Pink 2010); to show their world as well as speak it. (McCarthy 2013: 87)*

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<sup>2</sup> A secret group refers to a Facebook group, where the name of the group, its members, as well as the discussions happening on the group, in terms of both text and images shared by the members, can only be viewed by those who have been invited to the group.

However, I must emphasise that despite the collaborative nature of these methods and the attempt at highlighting the voice of the producers of images, my role as a researcher needs to be kept in mind. In the writing of this paper, only those narratives that I deem significant find their way into the text.

### **The Body in Online Spaces**

When looking at acts of identity construction, what are the modes of self-presentation that are possible in online spaces? What are the markers of identity that become relevant and are privileged in online environments? The impact of online environments in identity construction, especially with regard to the construction of bodies has been studied by a number of theorists. Early theorisations on the internet constructed it as a space which allows individuals to author their own self-representations and construct multiple, fragmented selves in opposition to unified selves and bodies. Sherry Turkle (1995) points to the possibilities of such fluid, multiple selves as the evidence of the Internet's potential of "disembodiment". Jenny Sunden (2003) unpacks Turkle's ideas and describes the articulation of Internet as a site for disembodiment "as a space unconstrained by the meaning and matter of the corporeal where the disappearing body is tied to the ancient dream of transcending the body" (Sunden 2003: 4). Early studies on the internet (Rheingold 1995; Turkle 1995) focussed on anonymous online environments, including chat rooms and MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons). These studies found that the possibility of disembodiment and anonymity allowed users to engage in radical acts of identity construction. In these environments, users engaged in constructing online personae that differed from their offline identities (Turkle 1995). This was seen as an empowering aspect of online spaces, since it allowed those marginalised by their bodies to escape their marginalisation, express their hidden selves (Suler 2002), and explore various unconventional identities (Rosenmann and Safir 2006). Such a potential for disembodiment also had radical implications for how gender was understood. Jodi O'Brien (1999: 77) looking at the earlier writings on the body in cyberspace, states,

*Current research, science fiction and wishful thinking suggest that cyberspace will be a realm in which physical markers such as sex, race, age, body type and size will eventually lose saliency as a basis for the evaluative categorization of self/other. An implication of much of this writing is that since these features are not obviously discernible in cyberspace they will cease to be a primary means of structuring interaction and freed of any embodied corporeal experience, the mind will generate new forms for rendering self and other and for organizing interpersonal communication.*

However, the studies mentioned above are, for the most part, centred on sites that allow the option of anonymity. In my interactions with young women, I found that their engagement with anonymous online environments, such as chat rooms or MUDs, was almost none. Instead, most of their engagement with online spaces consisted of their participation in nonymous – opposite of anonymous – environments, including social media sites. Unlike early users of the internet, who sought participation in interest-driven communities (boyd 2008), and embraced the possibility of anonymity, the young women I spoke to used online spaces to strengthen their communication with already-established networks of friends, acquaintances, family members, relatives and teachers. Zhao (2005) calls such “offline-based online relationships” as “anchored relationships”. He states that such environments are characterised by online users disclosing identifying information, including legal name and residential location. It needs to be noted that Facebook emphasises such a structure of being nonymous. The Help Center<sup>3</sup> page of Facebook states, “Facebook is a community where people share and interact using their authentic names. When everyone uses their authentic name, you always know who you’re connecting with. This not only makes it easier for you to find who you're looking for, but it also helps keep our community safe. If you notice an account on Facebook that may be impersonating someone else or using a fake name, let us know.”

A study by Zhao, Grasmuck, and Martin (2008) finds that identity construction in nonymous online environments differs from those constructed in anonymous online environments. They state that within such environments identity construction tends to conform to established social norms and people tend to express hoped-for possible selves. Zhao et al (2008: 1821) state that as part of constructing these hoped-for selves, “...Facebook users may emphasize or even exaggerate the part of their possible selves that are socially desirable but not readily discernible in brief offline encounters, such as one’s character, intelligence, and other important inner qualities”. On Facebook, which is the site most used by the young women I spoke with, the possibilities of presenting these inner qualities was seen in curated lists of interests, including favourite books, music, films and hobbies. One's inner self is also expressed in the status updates posted by users. Shikha highlights the possibility of such acts of identity construction afforded by Facebook when she states:

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/help/112146705538576> [Accessed March 8, 2017]

*People think I am a very intelligent person when they interact with me on Facebook. On Facebook, people say my posts are mostly sensible, like intelligent videos or good updates about different issues.*  
[Shikha, 17]

How do bodies relate to such acts of identity construction in online spaces? A number of studies have looked at how, despite the utopian narratives surrounding the liberatory possibilities of disembodiment afforded by cyberspace, bodies created in anonymous settings, through the use of *avatars*<sup>4</sup>, continue to adhere to specific kinds of bodies. Angela Thomas's (2007) study of avatars in *Second Life*, an online virtual world, found that most users create avatars that are thin and conform to heterosexual ideas of attractiveness. Commenting on the pervasiveness of thin bodies even in anonymous online spaces, which otherwise allow for explorations of multiple bodies, Connie M. Morrison (2010: 2) states, "in ideal worlds such as Second Life, and in competitive online spaces such as World of Warcraft, perhaps the message is that individuals should choose ideal bodies". The construction of bodies becomes even more significant in the case of nonynous environments, such as Facebook. The structure of Facebook is such that the home page of the user, which gives information regarding the user's identity, also requires a picture of them to be uploaded. As Megan Boler (2007: 140) states, "...despite the hypes and hopes of the freedom offered by transcending usual images of the other, there comes a point at which users crave information about the traditional markers of the body- to know the 'meat' that accompanies the textual bones". Through profile pictures and albums, these online spaces encourage the sharing of one's photographs as a way of displaying markers of identity but also for purposes of self-presentation.

With such a strong association between identity, self-presentation and the use of photographs in online spaces, what do young women seek to represent through their selfies? danah boyd (2007) points out that since bodies are not immediately visible in mediated spaces, the act of constructing bodies needs self-reflexivity. She states, "While text, images, audio, and video all provide valuable means for developing a virtual presence, the act of articulation differs from how we convey meaningful information through our bodies" (boyd 2007: 12). In the coming sections, I will look at how young women represent their bodies through the selfies that they share on social media and how they understand these acts of self-presentation.

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4 Avatars are characters that represent online users in sites such as online discussion boards and role-playing games. Most sites allow avatars that are custom-designed by users.

## “Looking Good But Not Too Sexy”: Presentation of Desirable Femininity through Selfies

On being asked which kind of selfies she most shares on Facebook, Zaara states:

*I take a lot of selfies at events where I am dressed well and have put make up. Even at home, if I think my face is looking good I take a selfie. My checklist for a selfie that will get uploaded on Facebook is that my face should look good, my hair should look good, my eyes should look good and I should smile. If I am looking tired or if my hair is dishevelled, then I don't put up that selfie on Facebook.*  
[Zaara, 19]

“Looking good” as a criterion of a good selfie or a selfie that is likely to be shared, was echoed by most of my respondents. Most of them stated that anytime they felt like they looked good and were happy with their appearance, they would take a selfie. While some respondents would initially use the term “looking good” without any substantiation, on prodding a little, most young women would add qualifiers of “thin”, “unblemished”, “tall”, “smooth hair” as constituting good looks. A number of respondents also shared that they prefer to smile in their photographs. Some of the respondents revealed that they had certain ways of taking selfies that would highlight their best features. Meera shared that since she is conscious of her short height, she prefers to take selfies with her camera held above her head rather than taking full body shots from the front. Ayesha shared that earlier she would take photographs with her spectacles on, but she now takes them off so that her eyes appear bigger. These ideals of big eyes, smooth hair and skin, thin tall bodies need to be critically examined for the model of desirable heterosexual femininity that they construct. The smile too can be seen as adding to this construction of ideal feminine appearance, indicating innocence and a pleasant and non-threatening demeanour.

In the interviews with young women and in an examination of the captioned selfies they posted on The Selfie Project, what becomes apparent is that such a performance of ideal femininity is not limited to how young women present their own selves and their bodies but extended to their presentations of friendships with other young women. In The Selfie Project, a number of participants discussed representations of femininity that they consider ideal and those they reject. Some of the selfies posted and the discussions that followed focussed on the act of pouting in photographs. Sheela posted a selfie where she is smiling and captioned it as:

*I don't pout. I prefer to smile anytime! Smiles all the way!*  
[Sheela, 15]

Some of the other participants responded by “liking” her picture. Tanvi commented on the picture, stating:

*I agree! I never pout in pictures too.*

[Tanvi, 18]

Interestingly, in my interview with Tanvi, she underlines this aspect of shared aesthetic choices between her and her friends, stating:

*My friends and I make fun of girls who wear lipstick and pout in selfies, like they are models or something! We only make silly faces or smile in our selfies. It's so much better than these pouty ones, which look so wannabe.*

[Tanvi, 18]

Tanvi's narrative points out that her idea of a friendship network is not just based on the aesthetic choices that she and her friends consider ideal but also in opposition to an 'other', in this case representations of femininity that come across as “wannabe”. Presenting her circle of friends as superior in this regard to other young women also invokes a sense of exclusivity implying the uniqueness of her circle of friends. Tanvi's use of the word “wannabe” highlights that stereotypically feminine poses, or those that are considered too sexualised are seen as undesirable. Tanvi is not alone in this belief. In addition to physical attractiveness, a number of respondents stated that they would not upload selfies where they come across as though “they are trying too hard”, or selfies where they look “fake”. While highlighting one's best features through different poses and expressions was seen as acceptable, most respondents considered applying too much makeup and then clicking selfies as undesirable. Similarly, the use of editing softwares such as Photoshop to enhance one's appearance to conform to conventional models of attractiveness, for example using editing tools to cover acne scars, was critiqued by my respondents. Also considered fake are exaggeratedly feminine or sexualised poses, for example close-up shots of one's cleavage or pouting lips – derisively known as the duck face in popular parlance. Thus, conversations revealed that for some of the respondents, a display of desirable femininity in their selfies should be effortless and innate. Selfies that point to the labour that goes behind the construction of desirable femininity, through makeup or sexualised poses, are considered undesirable. In such an assessment, young women seem to imply that being able to present an attractive, feminine self should be organic and not be revealing of external influence. Such a linking of the moral and the aesthetic is explained by Kelly Buckley (2010) in her work on young working class women's engagement with celebrity culture. Buckley states among the young women she interviewed,

“natural beauty” is not just seen as a physical quality but a moral quality; those seen as wearing excessive makeup are considered “fake” and “tasteless”.

In conversations with my respondents, I found that in addition to rejecting what they consider “fake” self-representations, there was a strong resistance on the part of young women to the idea of “being too sexy” in selfies. When asked what they defined as too “sexy”, the responses included “girls wearing short clothes, exposing a lot in their selfies”, “looking hot, not looking cute, different from pretty”, “wearing tonnes of makeup, pouting, wearing really short clothes in your selfie.” In these descriptions, there was a distinction made between looking “pretty” or “beautiful” and looking “sexy”. All the respondents without exception stated that while they wished to look good and look pretty in their selfies, for most of them sexy selfies had negative connotations. Buckley (2010) too highlights how in the narratives of the young women that she interviewed, wearing excessive makeup is directly associated with “excessive female sexuality”, thus connecting processes of beautification with the notion of sexual respectability. Interestingly, it was when they were asked to describe what they considered as selfies that are “too sexy” that the respondents used the photo elicitation method the most. I observed that in response to the question, the respondents rarely responded with their own narratives. Instead, most of them chose to either describe or share selfies of other young women. In doing so, most of them deliberately distanced themselves from such representations. Pinky was the most critical of sexualised self-representations. She showed me a number of selfies of other women, both on Instagram and Facebook, adding her comments on each of them. Commenting on one of the pictures, she said:

*Most of these girls look at pictures of Deepika Padukone or Katrina Kaif and they think that since those are the women that boys of their class like, they too must look like that. So they copy their clothes, their makeup, their pouts. But they don't realise that these actresses get paid to look like that. Actresses also do item numbers, now will you do item numbers just to be like them? These 14-year-olds who wear tiny dresses and makeup in their selfies think they look hot. They actually don't realise that others are judging them. They are getting “likes” not because they look good, but because they are getting attention from desperate boys.*

[Pinky, 14]

Pinky's response also constructs a sexualised display of self as being influenced by imagery from popular culture, and therefore being contrived and not “natural”. On being asked whether such selfies are popular on social media, some of the respondents agreed that sexy selfies get more “likes” than just pretty selfies. Trishna states:

*The pouty, cleavage showing pictures do get more likes than my silly expression selfies. But then I don't care about such likes because they mostly come from cheap boys who don't know you, who have added you because they want to see your picture. I don't want random boys to look at my pictures in such a way.*  
[Trishna, 17]

In the narratives of young women where they reject sexy selfies, not only are they attempting to reject outside influence but are also underlining the importance of self-awareness with regard to acts of self-representation. Phrases such as “they think...but they don't know/they don't realise” show that young women are aware of how images of self can be read in different ways and the meanings can differ from the author's intention. By rejecting such self-representations, young women seek to construct themselves as self-aware authors. This awareness of audiences goes beyond a simple need for validation. However, this attempt to “speak” for themselves as authors has the opposite effect of valorising control and agency or of rejecting influence. In recognising the *need for control*, most young women articulate the acknowledgement of an audience and how this influences their acts of self-representation. I look at this in the coming section.

### **Complicating Empowerment/Disempowerment through Narratives of Femininity and Sexuality**

In the previous section, I have looked at how young women take selfies where they attempt to highlight and accentuate their physical attractiveness. Almost as a corollary, discussions of what constitute “good looks” were followed by what the respondents considered unattractive in selfies. Neharika confessed that even though she likes wearing dresses and skirts, she does not upload selfies where she is wearing a dress because she considers herself too fat. Similarly, Meera stated that she does not upload selfies where she thinks she looks double-chinned. It appears that even in the absence of an audience or feedback, young women learn to adhere to certain standards to what constitutes ideal bodies in self-representations.

Does the above discussion of how young women understand ideal bodies and femininities mean that they have internalised the male gaze in their self-representations? Such an assessment of their own bodies seems to echo Foucault's (1979) ideas of biopower. Foucault explains that the central role of biopower is controlling the bodies of individuals, thus creating ‘docile bodies’ that turn their ‘gaze’ upon themselves and regulate and discipline themselves on a material level, according to the cultural expectations and requirements. How they ‘should’ behave, or perform, is not subject to individual interpretation but is determined by mass standards. Applying Foucault's ideas of

biopower explains the pervasiveness of certain beauty ideals, which can be evidenced at multiple sites. In the case of beauty ideals that are pervasive in the Indian context and are valourised by young women, the popularity of fair complexion shows the predominance of Brahminical ideals, one that excludes Dalit women who are mostly identified with darker skin tones. Such a relationship between skin colour and caste is reiterated in the work of Amali Phillips (2004) who looks at the significance of skin colour in marriage negotiations in Christian middle class families in Kerala. She states,

*...based on the degree of conformity to such cultural ideals, Christians' preference for fair skin works to the advantage of certain categories of women by positioning them for better marital outcomes...social norms that compel women from supposedly "superior" communities to display the ideal beauty standards and corresponding attributes that define their superior status, tend to marginalize other women who fall short of the expected standards. They lead to the "erasure"(Jayawardena and De Alwis,1996: xi) of women from other communities who are collectively excluded from similar expectations based on cultural definitions of caste identity and social place. (Phillips 2004: 269)*

Similarly, in their study of how Indian magazine advertisements and television commercials construct ideal femininity, Radhika Parmeswaran and Kavitha Cardoza (2009: 217) find that advertising “educates customers into particular technologies of the self” with their “pedagogical doctrines of femininity - fairness, slimness, youthfulness, light skin, long legs, and big eyes...”. As Amali Phillips (2004: 254 notes, “...as culturally defined categories, beauty and health also encode values and ideas about position and privilege in their myriad manifestations in specific cultural contexts”. Identifying feminine beauty with able-bodied features- perfect skin, perfect hair, perfect body- also shows the invisibilisation of disabled people from most mainstream discourses around beauty practices. Thus, while the ideals constructing feminine beauty may seem ahistorical and apolitical, a deconstruction of the same reveals that certain communities of people, including the upper caste, upper class and able bodied women, are vested with more power even within the all-pervasive male gaze.

However, it is important to note that despite often conforming to and not subverting the expectations associated with a performance of heterosexual femininity, exploring the self-portrait as a genre has allowed these young women to explore the implications of such a performance. On asking how important it is to “look good” in today's context, Shikha replied:

*It is important to have a healthy self-esteem, but you can't expect everyone to be happy about their appearance. We live in a society where some sets of people are accepted, some are not. Looking good is*

*important. Even today, good looking girls have better chances when it comes to getting a job. It becomes even more important during teenage and also when you are about to get married.*

[Shikha, 17]

Pinky too attests to this when she says,

*There is more pressure on girls to be good looking, especially because of the whole pressure around marriage. I have come across a lot of scenes even on television where they talk about how dark skin will create troubles when you want to get married. Because of this, the general tendency is to pit girls against girls in a competition. Because of this competitiveness around physical appearance, you start underestimating yourself which is not the case with the guys. All these upcoming cosmetic products, those add to this pressure- “buy this or use this, you will look good, you will be successful”. Look at our actors, you take only very good looking women, who are fair and thin. There are very narrow standards for what is beautiful. Even matrimonial ads ask only for tall, fair, thin girls. I feel girls should be judged according to their education, the way they carry themselves and the way they talk. One can do very little with their looks, it’s something you have since birth.*

In Pinky’s narrative, not only does she point out the disproportionate ways in which women are identified with their bodies, but highlights the different institutions where this pressure to perform heterosexual femininity is reinforced, including the institution of marriage. She is also critical of seeing the consumerist discourse as a means of self-validation and questions the rhetoric employed in the advertisements of cosmetic products. Such a reflection on how societal structures impact notions of beauty was most seen in my discussions with young women on the theme of positive body image. In a discussion on the kind of selfies she prefers uploading on Facebook, Meera states:

*As a teenager, I am quite conscious of my figure, especially when I put these full mirror selfies, which show your full body and not just your face. I am a little conscious of my hips. I have never been uncomfortable with how I look but somewhere down the line I thought I need to start losing weight and be a little more active. My parents wouldn’t be mean about it but they would say stuff like Meera you are putting on weight, stop eating so much. It is also because a lot of kids can be really rude, which is why high school can be so difficult on some people, because of the stress on physical appearance.*

[Meera, 15]

It is interesting to note that Meera’s narrative moves almost seamlessly from selfies to her desire to lose weight, to the pressure that she faces from her family and her peers regarding her weight. In another conversation, Sheela recounted how one of her classmates, who is dark and overweight, was relentlessly bullied by the others in her class. According to Sheela, the bullying had such an

impact on the self-confidence of the girl that she refused to be photographed even on social occasions. Most young women I spoke to were thus able to draw connections between society's preoccupation with thin, fair bodies and how these hegemonic ideals shaped their self-representations. Their narratives question the rhetoric of "choice" which justifies beauty practices as arising from the innermost "private" selves and as an expression of their own notions of beauty rather than one enforced from the outside. In the narratives of Sheela, Pinky and other young women, there is anger expressed at the pressure they experience to look good. This anger was most expressed in narratives where they asserted the importance of being happy with one's appearance and having a positive body image *despite* societal pressure and lack of validation. Jyotsna highlights a possible rejection of beauty ideals when she states:

*I have seen that photos that are not typically beautiful don't get a lot of likes. Sometimes photographs of my fat friends barely get 10-12 likes. I tell them to not care about likes, to upload what makes them happy. If someone likes it or not shouldn't be their problem.*

[Jyotsna, 16]

Sheela too advocates a rejection of beauty ideals when she states:

*People say that girls should look beautiful all the time, girls shouldn't be fat and those who are chubby should try lose some weight, stop eating outside. My friends tell me to lose weight, I tell them I don't want to. Losing weight might get me a few extra likes on my selfie. But I don't care because I am a national level football player. I can play because I have power in my foot. I don't need those likes to be a great football player.*

[Sheela, 15]

Similarly, through my conversations with young women, I learned that a rejection of "trying to be sexy" as a form of self-representation should not be taken to mean an avowal of slut-shaming or denial of sexual subjectivity. Instead, the narratives point to complex ideas regarding the sexual subjectivity of young women. 'Sexual subjectivity' has been defined by Deborah Tolman (2009) as "a person's experience of herself as a sexual being, who feels entitled to sexual pleasure and sexual safety, who makes active sexual choices, and who has an identity as a sexual being" (Tolman 2009: 6). Were my respondents dismissive of the importance of sexual subjectivity? To understand this further, I asked them about other aspects that could also be seen as constitutive of sexual subjectivity. One of the questions I asked them was whether they thought it was acceptable for girls and boys their age to have romantic and sexual relationships. 15 out of the 20 respondents stated that young women experiencing sexual and romantic feelings should not be considered

inappropriate. Most of these respondents stated that such feelings are “natural” and “inevitable” during teenage years. Seven of the young women shared that they themselves are dating and are involved in romantic relationships. On being asked if she thought it was ok to be in sexual relationships with boys as a teenaged woman, Jyotsna stated emphatically:

*You do get attracted to boys, if they look good, if they have a good voice. If you get physically attracted there is nothing wrong. If I want to be physical with someone, have sexual relationships with someone, it is my choice, no one should interfere. You should do it with full knowledge and try to be safe.*  
[Jyotsna, 16]

Jyotsna's words capture her sexual subjectivity – she sees herself as a heterosexual being, recognises that she has the right to express sexual desire and that she has the responsibility of making decisions regarding to her sexuality. She also expresses her agency in heterosexual relationships when she highlights the necessity of “full knowledge”.

However, there were ambivalences in these narratives. Not all the young women I spoke to were so unequivocal about their right to express sexual desire. A number of them grappled with what the appropriate age for engaging in sexual relationships is. Sheela, Ayesha and Shikha stated that young women below the age of eighteen should not engage in sexual relationships, and that they should focus on their school, career and other activities. In most instances, such an expression of their own sexual desire was absent from the narratives of my respondents. While the yearning for romantic relationships with boys, centred on love or emotional connection, was something they expressed, I noticed a hesitation on the part of most of my respondents when it came to seeing themselves as sexual beings. Most of them spoke about sexual desire in abstract terms, preferring to talk of how they would react to their friends or strangers being in sexual relationships. Interestingly, more than one respondent clarified that despite their ambivalence regarding age-appropriate sexuality, they were also against any kind of regulation of other's sexuality. Meera stated:

*Just because I might or might not do something, doesn't mean that I can tell others what they should do. If a friend of mine wanted to have sex with a boy, I would ask her once, maybe twice if she is sure. But if she states yes, then I would tell her to go ahead.*  
[Meera, 15]

It seems that young women do not reject sexual subjectivity but question the decision to put sexy selfies. In such a complex articulation of how they understand sexuality, they seem to differ from popular understandings of girls' relationship to sexuality. One such study that explores the

relationship that young girls have with sexuality is by Ariel Levy (2005) who states that within a “highly sexualised” American culture young women are encouraged to be “sexy but not sexual”. Levy argues that a sexualised media culture has encouraged young women to present themselves in sexually explicit poses and conceive of themselves as sexual objects to be desired by men. Levy (2005) points out that such an expression of sexuality is not empowering since it does not allow young women to express their own sexual desire. Unlike a number of scholarly articles that have debated the harmful effects of sexualisation on young girls (Bragg and Buckingham 2009; Gill 2008), my objective has not been to look at the empowering or disempowering effects of sexualised self-representation. Instead, what has emerged in the course of my research is that reading these narratives of what young women think about sexualised self-representations in conjunction with what they think about sexual desire or sexual relationships presents an interesting paradox. Unlike Levy's (2005) thesis, ideas of young women being pressurised to be “sexy but not sexual” were complicated in my conversations with young women. Some of my respondents echoed feminist ideas in their avowal of personal choice when it came to the decision of being in sexual relationships. However, when it came to talking about sexy selfies, the popular opinion was “better be safe than sorry”. They evoked ideas of loss of control over representation, improper impression management, risk, and violence in their rejection of sexualised representations of self in online spaces. Here, too, was an examination of offline structures of violence and control as they act on the lives of young women.

### **Conclusion: Selfies as a Site of Incoherent, Contradictory Identities**

With my initial objective, in this study, of exploring performative possibilities of the selfie as subverting the male gaze, the pervasiveness of heterosexual femininity in the selfies of young women came across as a puzzling phenomenon. As seen in the narratives of young women on what they consider as “good selfies”, notions of attractiveness remain limited to a narrow range of thin, fair, straight-haired bodies. However, one must be cautious of dismissing such acts of identity-construction as disempowering. It is here that my methodology, one that foregrounds the importance of listening to the voices of young women, becomes relevant. In further conversations, where young women reflected on their own notions and ideals of beauty, they began reflecting on the socio-cultural influences acting on them that pressurise them to conform to certain standards of attractiveness. In their narratives, there is an awareness that such appearances are not “natural”. Their affirmation of a positive body image over societal validation shows that such normalised performances of femininity are always under the threat of disruption. This is not to state that

young women have been able to actively reject hegemonic ideals of beauty. However, for many of them, the selfie becomes a site where struggles over meaning formation and identity take place. Reflecting on this process of identity-construction and a questioning of the norms that regulate it is the first step of challenging the disciplinary mechanisms operating on the body. Grosz's (1994) ideas of partial, "perspectival" knowledge is especially useful in my understanding of selfies since she rejects the binaries of disempowering, not-knowing victimhood versus an ahistorical, non-contextual notion of agency. For Grosz (1994: 196), "...the body can be regarded as a kind of hinge or threshold: it is placed between a psychic or lived interiority and a more sociopolitical exteriority that produces interiority through the inscription of the body's outer surface". Such an articulation of the body as a text that both projects one's "interiority" as well as is inscribed by disciplining regimes is where the potential for subversion and resistance lie. In "Making Selfies/Making Self: Digital Subjectivities in the Selfie", Katie Warfield (2014: 2) suggests employing a phenomenological standpoint in studying selfies, a standpoint which forges "...a connection between image and body, rather than a Cartesian/positivist cleaving of the image from the body that produced it". Describing her study done with female selfie-takers, she states,

*By exploring the person producing the image, the place of production, as well as the potential emotional and bodily relationships users had to these new digitally-circulated images as a connected whole process, the discussion became not just one of what the images say to various readers, but rather what the relationship is between the producer and the image in the process of image-making and how does that relationship provide insight into the emerging digital subjectivities for this group of plugged-in young women? (Warfield 2014: 2).*

Foregrounding the relationship between the text and its producer also highlights the confusion associated with online spaces' possibilities of multiple selves and identities and the impossibility of performing and presenting a stable gendered self. As seen in the sections above, issues of identity are of great importance to young women. However, their explorations of identity, particularly their attempts to articulate their subjectivity through self-presentation and representation, give rise to seemingly contradictory narratives of self. Their relationship with beauty ideals and display of sexuality remain ambiguous, even contradictory with their lived experiences. Despite their desire to look attractive in their photographs, most young women reject make-up and edited images as "fake". While young women stress on the importance of looking "natural", they also recognise that beauty ideals in themselves are not "natural". They take selfies that conform to narrow standards of beauty, yet their affirmation of a positive body image seems to hint towards a questioning of the desirability of conforming to hegemonic beauty standards. Most of these young

women also question the appropriateness of sexy selfies, yet they do not disavow the importance of sexual subjectivity. Why is it that when attempting to understand acts of identity construction, the selfie presents more dilemmas and contradictions than coherent narratives? Butler's (1999) central thesis in her theory about performativity is that gender is not something we are endowed with, but something we perform, through "conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility" (Butler 1999: 22) which make one an "intelligible" subject. While recognising the difficulties of identity construction, the function of the self-portrait becomes a site for young women where through "repeated stylization of the body" (Butler 1999: 43), young women are attempting to produce themselves as intelligible female subjects. In her work on 'Taiwanese girls' self-portraiture, Wang (2012) states,

*...gender is never merely presented as a fact in self-portraits, because it is constituted in the act of self-presentation and representation. When we talk about girls' construction of identity, we are talking not about the conscious constructing and planning of the appearance of 'final' identity, similar to an architect's blueprint for a house, but rather the construction of gender through iterative acts, some deliberate and some unconscious. This reflects the frequent assumption about photography that there is an agent - the photographer - who plans the subject, and when and where to take the photograph; but in the everyday context of self-portraiture, it is more often the case that one thinks through and in the act of self-portraiture, that the action feeds into one's sense of being a subject (Wang 2012: 227).*

It is this possibility of "thinking through and in the act of self-portraiture" that gives rise to seemingly incoherent and unstable constructions of gender and sexual identities. The selfie becomes a site where young women neither accept nor reject the male gaze, but perform complex negotiations. The selfie becomes not a display of young women's passivity but an unstable site where they grapple with concepts of subject/object, agency and influence.

To conclude, the selfie eludes the expectation of finding a unified self, identity or body. The value of the selfie lies not in the "truth" that it tells about the lives and bodies of young women, but in the multiplicities, incoherencies and contradictions it reveals. These contradictions make the process of identity construction and presentation one that requires constant engagement, even questioning. Thus, the selfie as a site continues to be enthusiastically adopted by young women, as well as anxiously analysed by all those seeking to understand young women.

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