

Selfies as Practices of Care-Taking (and Giving)

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Abstract: Research on selfies finds that negative feedback in comments and the currency of likes reinforce and police dominant feminine or masculine beauty ideals, including binary gender ideals. For example, Döring et al. (2016) analysed 500 Instagram selfies to explore if they conform to gender stereotypes as identified in Erving Goffman's 1976 *Gender Advertisements*. The study revealed that gender stereotypical behaviours found in adverts are repeated in selfies, and that some of the behaviours feature in selfies more frequently than in magazine adverts. The prevalence of dominant beauty ideals in selfies is demonstrated in #bodypositivity and #curvyfit posts that tend to depict slender female and muscular male bodies (Webb et al, 2017). However, selfies are an important mode of self-presentation. Research on queer and fat activist selfies has highlighted their role in enhancing visibility, raising awareness of oppression and challenging stereotypes. In research with trans and gender-fluid Tumblr users, Vivienne (2017) found positive comments on selfies helped promote body acceptance and that users viewed trans and gender-fluid selfies as defying industries that promote binary beauty ideals and capitalise on consumer's insecurities. In my book *Consuming the Body: Capitalism, Social Media and Commodification* I argue that fat activist selfies challenge dominant modes of self-presentation and looking. This paper will draw on my research into selfie taking practices, and also a participatory research project around queering the gender binary (*Bois of Isolation* co-produced with Dr AC Davidson) to identify methods of producing creative selfies that evade commoditisation and discipline (#EmpoweringPresence, new project), and consider selfie taking and sharing as practices of care.

Keywords: Selfies, Care, LGBTQI+, Fat Activism, Body positivity, Neoliberal, Participatory Research.

1. Introduction

Research into selfie taking and sharing practices finds that negative feedback in comments and the currency of likes reinforce and police dominant feminine or masculine beauty ideals and binary gender stereotypes. Despite these negative impacts, selfies are an important mode of self-presentation. This paper draws on my research into selfie taking practices and a participatory research project around queering the gender binary to consider selfie taking and sharing as practices of care.

On social networking sites, selfies are viewed as 'advertisements for the self' and an important tool in the construction of a self-brand (Marwick, 2013 142). To produce a self-brand, an individual must view 'the self as a commodity for sale in the labour market, which must generate its own rhetorically persuasive packaging, its own promotional skin' (Hearn, 2008 201). As adverts, selfies reproduce the visual language of adverts. Veum and Undrum analysed the text accompanying selfie posts on Instagram and found that 'consumers are...applying the advertising style to their own texts' (2018 98). In stock photographs people tend to be depicted in a 'generalized, decontextualized and stylized way' so they appear to be symbols of a lifestyle, and this is replicated in the visual norms of selfies (Veum and Undrum, 2018 99). Users present themselves as decontextualised, generalised symbols: brands. Veum and Undrum conclude:

Individuals who publish self-portraits on social media networks such as Instagram (usually) do not have to fulfil commercial targets. Still ... they seem to adapt the homogenized multimodal language, thereby contributing to spreading values and interests of global corporations. As a consequence, SNS users get a rather narrow impression of how people, especially young girls, should behave and could look (2018 15).

The standards for socially acceptable selfies are informed by multiple codes and norms relating to gender, race, sexuality, class, and numerous other identity markers. For example, selfie-taking by white men is heavily stigmatised as narcissistic by white women who view male bathroom selfies as an extreme violation of acceptable masculine behaviour. In contrast, black and Latino men are not stigmatised for taking selfies, provided their selfies reinforce their community's masculine ideal and they do not take too many (Williams and Marquez, 2018 1781). Selfie-taking and sharing produce positive feelings that may also shield the selfie-takers from experiences of racism and discrimination (Williams and Marquez, 2018).

In his research into the selfie-taking practices of Moroccan-Dutch youths in Amsterdam, Koen Leurs found that gender stereotypes are 'powerful ideological models, to which users aspire in order to achieve social acceptance, make new friends, find romance and gain popularity' (Leurs, 2018 212). Leurs concludes that the participants may feel empowered by the attention and popularity that stereotypical gender performances produce, but there are also negative consequences because:

versions of femininity are increasingly becoming unattainable, leading to frustration and a loss of (peer-generated) self-worth. Additionally, exposing oneself implies susceptibility to victimization practices [...] that may put an end to the sense of agency users may have affectively felt (Leurs, 2018 212).

The exaggeration of gendered ideals in selfies is implied in research by Nicola Döring, and colleagues, who conducted content analysis of 500 selfies on Instagram to determine if they conform to the gender stereotypes identified by Erving Goffman in his 1976 study of photographs in magazines (Döring et al., 2015). In addition to Goffman's five categories, Döring added Kang's category of bodily display, which classifies how much of the body is revealed by the individual's clothing (Kang, 1997), and three categories deriving from selfies: muscle display; kissing or pouting face; and faceless portrayal. The study revealed that the gender stereotypical behaviours found in adverts are repeated in selfies and that some are featured in selfies more frequently than in the magazine adverts. These findings suggest that an intensification of gender stereotypes has taken place on social networking sites.

Although selfies allow an individual to produce an image of their choosing, they also increase self-surveillance and foreground the value of appearance, encouraging 'unhelpful body critique' (Grogan et al., 2018 24). Furthermore, 'the prolonged and intense interactions taking place on social media could amplify the impact of peer influence, as the judgment that each girl receives is collective, enduring, and public' (Chua and Chang, 2016 196).

Evidence of this is suggested by articles recently published in *The Wall Street Journal* reporting leaked information from Facebook relating to the impact of Instagram on mental wellbeing. Facebook employees with backgrounds in computer science, psychology, and quantitative and qualitative analysis carried out a 'teen mental health deep dive' (Wells et al., 2021 Online). The findings confirm conclusions already reached by researchers examining social media and selfies: selfies intensify self-scrutiny and peer comparisons which can contribute to low self-esteem and poor body image. However, spokespeople for the platforms continue to downplay the impact on young people's mental health. At a congressional hearing in March 2021 Mark Zuckerberg said: 'The research that we've seen is that using social apps to connect with other people can have positive mental-health benefits', and Adam Mosseri, the head of Instagram told reporters in May 2021 that negative effects on mental health were likely to be 'quite small' (Wells et al., 2021 Online). This brings to mind a description used by The Care Collective in their *Care Manifesto*, which paraphrases Hannah Arendt, saying 'a systematic level of *banality* permeates our everyday carelessness' (2020 45).

2. Body Positivity and Fat Acceptance Selfies

In popular visual culture, fat bodies are absent or subjectively erased (Woolley, 2023). However, since the 1960s, fat activists have fought to make fat bodies visible and valued. They organise demonstrations against fat prejudice, challenge dominant views, advocate for fat people and lobby companies accused of prejudice. Activists also reclaimed the word 'fat' as a descriptive term that does not carry the moral stigma or medicalisation of 'overweight' and 'obese' (LeBesco, 2004). In 1969, the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA) was established in the USA and in the 1970s, former NAAFA members in San Francisco formed Fat Underground (FU), a radical feminist group. FU's 1973 Fat Liberation Manifesto asserts that fat women are ridiculed and exploited by 'commercial and sexist interests [...] thereby creating an immensely profitable market selling the false promise of avoidance of, or relief from, that ridicule' (Freespirit and Aldebaran, 1973 Online). Contemporary fat activists continue to draw attention to the prejudice experienced by fat people and challenge the assumed link between thinness and health. The Health at Every Size (HAES) movement emerged in the 1960s alongside the fat activist movement. HAES practitioners do not prescribe weight-loss treatments and instead focus on improving the emotional and physical well-being of fat people, in order to achieve good health at 'the weight you turn out to be when you are living a good life' (Burgard, 2009 44). In the 1990s, the Body Positivity movement became popular, using feminist discourse of empowerment and a rhetoric of self-love to reduce social stigma and increase the visibility of fat bodies. However, in her discussion of three Body Positivity websites featuring user-generated content, Alexandra Sastre says the websites

frequently function as spaces where a particular mode of acceptability is modeled to those liminal bodies that...[are] not-quite thin enough to stand in as an ideal, not-quite large enough to incite panic, and not-quite visible enough to merit attention. Therefore, many of these sites problematically emerge as channels through which to construct proprietary boundaries around

normativity despite their paradoxical emphasis on dismantling bodily standards altogether (Sastre, 2014 930).

By expanding but not rejecting the definitions of an acceptable body, the movement 're-inscribes, rather than liberates, the body' (Sastre, 2014 930). Many of the photographs published on the websites present bodies as fragments, predominantly the torso but also 'other body parts, often identified as the area of the body the subject feels most insecure about' (Sastre, 2014 936). The bodies are presented in a manner reminiscent of the magnifying, dissecting gaze commonly found in advertising in which the 'flawed' body parts are the only parts that are shown (Woolley, 2023).

Research shows that #HealthAtEverySize, #CurvyFit, and #Fatspiration posts contain greater racial and body diversity than #BodyPositivity and #Fitspiration posts (Webb et al, 2017). In #HealthAtEverySize and #Fatspiration posts, full or ¾ body length shots are common and body fragmentation is rare. However, like body positivity images, #HealthAtEverySize and #Fatspiration photographs predominantly show high 'normal weight' and low 'overweight' bodies, and so they marginally extend the boundaries of acceptable bodies without challenging them. Disturbingly, HAES posts have been found to contain the same amount of fat stigmatising content as fitspiration posts (Webb et al, 2017). Similarly, #CurvyFit photographs do not depict very fat bodies, and like #Fitspiration, present 'a stronger appearance-focus orientation to "fitness" and "health"' and often emphasise 'weight loss, body modification (e.g., before-and-after images), and objectification (e.g., exposing bare midriff and visible cleavage)' (Webb et al, 2018 Online). HAES content tends to focus on exercise and healthy eating, whereas #Fatspiration posts are more likely to present fashion and beauty content 'exemplifying how beauty and style are attainable and not privileges reserved only for thin women' (Webb et al, 2017).

Fat Acceptance selfies have been found to critique the positive and negative aspects of creating and sharing selfies. Afful and Ricciardelli analysed the content of four fat acceptance blogs and found that gender stereotypical beauty ideals are reproduced in some of the posts (Afful and Ricciardelli, 2015). Marianne Kirby, one of the bloggers that features in the study writes:

No bold colors, no stripes, nothing that would ever make us look bigger. [...] we draw less attention to ourselves when we comply with fashion rules. We occupy less space, metaphorically if not physically. We minimize ourselves for the comfort of other people. It reinforces the sense of shame we're supposed to feel because of our bodies, until we police ourselves (Afful and Ricciardelli, 2015 463).

However, Kirby does not feel shame because she rejects and disrupts dominant social ideals: 'sometimes I like to dress to piss people off – I like to use color and texture and certain pieces of clothing really aggressively to provoke reactions' (Afful and Ricciardelli, 2015 464). She demands the right to be visible and in doing so, Kirby, and other fat activists

extend modes of fat embodiment [...] by refusing to present their size as an unfortunate reality that thinner people should tolerate, and instead embrace their bodies by performing their fatness (e.g., wearing clothes that highlight it) to pressure their audience to confront their own fat biases (Afful and Ricciardelli, 2015 463–4).

Fat Acceptance activists reject the shameful fat identity. They demand to be seen as complex individuals and in forcing viewers to confront their own prejudice they may be viewed as empowering. Tiidenberg writes that selfies may be empowering, rather than offering rewards to the selfie-taker for conforming to social ideals, if they produce 'a personal sense of power and control, which carries the potential for social impact through exerting influence on existing discourses and ways of looking' (Tiidenberg, 2018 95).

3. Queer Selfies and Care

On social networking sites, selfies are viewed to be liberatory, but they are double-edged swords: Peer pressure, social expectation, and shame, compel people to post selfies, and the types of selfies they take are constrained by complex social expectations and ideals. They contribute to the competitive neoliberal environment in which the body is a sign of success and source of bodily capital (Woolley, 2023). They can also reinforce social hierarchies and inequalities because being visible is experienced as empowering or disciplining depending on the individual's social status and the type of body they possess. Those who are white, able-bodied, middle-class, heterosexual, and thin are likely to be visible for praise but less visible to negative scrutiny. Marginalised people are likely to be visible for criticism and overlooked in terms of their needs, desires, and values (Gailey, 2014).

Online aggression is also common, and LGBTQI+ people are 2 to 4 times more likely to be attacked online than heterosexual people (Felmlee, 2020 17).

Selfie practices and the social media platforms on which they are shared seem to produce risk and harm, rather than care. As adverts for the self, selfies reinforce the neoliberal ideal of an individual working alone in competition with others. They seem to exclude the mutual dependency and vulnerability that care taking and giving require. Indeed, Hil Malatino writes that a 'care web' specifically isn't 'exploitative, appropriative, or alienated... it challenges us to be deliberate, to communicate capacity, to unlearn the shame that has become attached to asking for, offering, and accepting help when we've been full-body soaked and steeped in the mythos of neoliberal, entrepreneurial self-making' (2020 2).

However, communities of care do coalesce around selfie-taking and sharing practices, particularly in LGBTQI+ communities. Research has found that selfie-takers are empowered to present themselves in a manner that challenges stereotypes, affirms the complexity of gender-fluidity, and provides visibility for people who are under-represented in mainstream media (Duguay, 2016). Vivienne undertook research with trans and gender-fluid Tumbler users, who report that positive comments from other users are self-affirming and enable body acceptance. The participants benefit from seeing diverse bodies online, and view trans and gender-fluid selfies as empowering expressions of defiance against beauty industries that promote binary beauty ideals and capitalise on consumer's insecurities (Vivienne, 2017). In this respect, selfies that unashamedly present diverse bodies, genders, and sexualities disrupt the disciplinary aspect of social networking sites. Additionally, sequential selfies by trans participants enable individuals to closely examine their bodily changes. One of the participants in Vivienne's research, took a selfie each month to 'analyse the soft-tissue changes around her face that are hard to see in daily observation', and shared the photographs on Facebook so her friends and family can follow her transition (LB quoted in Vivienne, 2017 136). In this respect, the selfies contribute to 'forms of care that enable co-constituted, interdependent subjects to repair, rebuild, and cultivate resilience in the midst of, and in the aftermath of, experiences of overwhelming negative affect' (Malatino, 2020 43).

Research shows that selfies raise awareness and challenge stereotypes, *and* reinforce dominant ideals. They can contribute to a more inclusive visual culture online and disrupt existing power hierarchies that determine who is worthy of being seen, but they also increase opportunities for surveillance and hostility. In their selfies, individuals are encouraged to assimilate to dominant social ideals that are gender-stereotypical, ableist, sizeist, and predominantly white, middle-class, and heteronormative. These conflicting characteristics of selfies bring to mind Baraitser's description of care as:

durational practices that keep "things" going...These durational practices are forms of labour that maintain the material conditions of ourselves and others, maintain connections between people, people and things, things and things, people and places, and social and public institutions, along with the anachronistic ideals that often underpin them, and that constitute the systems of sustenance and renewal that support "life". Maintenance is in part generated by conditions of vulnerability that we all share, and in part by the excesses and internal logics of capitalist cultures that make maintenance so necessary (Baraitser, 2015b 21).

Selfies enable maintenance activities: liking, commenting and sharing are acts that maintain supportive networks and online communities, but selfies can also maintain anachronistic ideals in the form of binary gender and beauty ideals. Therefore, it is important to find ways to participate in selfie cultures online that are resilient to these ideals, and resist assimilation and discipline.

4. @BoisOfIsolation

My current research considers how creative methods can be used to increase visual literacy around gender stereotypes and visual power imbalances so that selfie taking practices might also be practices of care. In the Bois of Isolation Instagram project, that took place during lockdown in collaboration with Dr AC Davidson, we aimed to explore how selfies might disrupt dominant visual representations of the gender binary. We created a space in online workshops in which participants could choose to remain invisible if they wished to (not switching their webcam on) and were under no pressure to share the selfies they took. We wanted to create what Cowan and Rault describe as 'public space [...] constituted by something like the negotiated intimacies and ethics of risk' in which participants are enabled to express their vulnerabilities but continue to feel safe (Cowan and Rault, 2018 130).

We also shared resources in the form of a series of our own ‘spoof’ self-portraits that identify gender stereotypes and visual power imbalances.

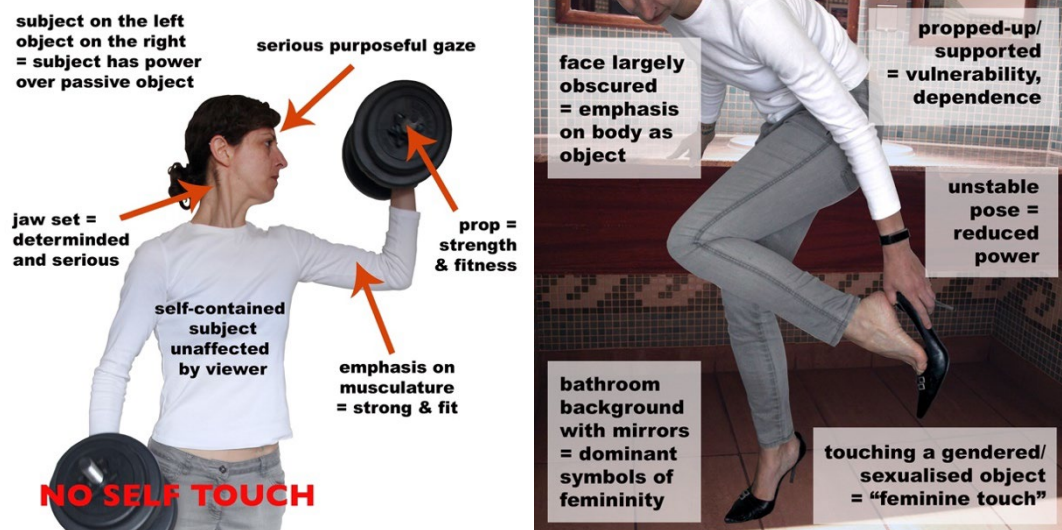


Figure 1: Spoof Instructional Selfies by AC. Davidson and D. Woolley. *Bois of Isolation Instagram Project* (<https://www.instagram.com/boisofisolation/>), UK (2020)

These annotated images aimed to enhance visual literacy and were informed by the content-analytical schemes devised by Goffman, Kang, Döring and others. In many ways these spoof images mimic and parody the binary gender performances that we hoped to disrupt in our project.

We also took selfies and shared them online in order to learn from the experience and to reduce the power imbalance between researchers and participants. It was our intention to work collaboratively with participants to co-produce knowledge through our discussions in workshops and on Instagram regarding the visual patterns and tropes we observed in the selfies participants shared. We invited participants to comment on groupings of selfies that displayed similar or different but related characteristics. This produced limited responses on Instagram, but during workshops participants gave written and verbal descriptions of their intentions and interpretations of the images and in email conversations some participants said they planned to use the methodologies in their own research projects in the future. The intention to develop ideas in collaboration with participants resembles the circular system of research that values process over product, called for by Dorothy Kim and Eunsong Kim in their “#TwitterEthics Manifesto”, which they describe as ‘sharing and shuffling the analysis feedback loop so it allows folks to ask questions to the data themselves’ (Kim and Kim, 2018 Online).

To allow for a range of gender expressions, we asked people to submit multiple selfies that queer the gender binary. We wanted to defy the idea of a single, coherent identity and avoid pairs of images that might imply a gender binary or the ‘before’ and ‘after’ transformation common in adverts. The groups of selfies also enabled us to present gender and identity as something that may change over time and in differing contexts, therefore presenting our selves as ‘multiversal beings’ to use Barker and Iantaffi’s term (Barker and Iantaffi, 2019 202). Barker and Iantaffi suggest that using both/and thinking will help us to escape the binarism of either/or thinking that pits female against male, healthy against unhealthy, fat against thin and good against bad, leaving no space in between for nuance and variation. They write: ‘Both/and requires us to move away from the rigid binary of either/or—which closes down possibilities—to consider a binary that opens up more possibilities’ (Barker and Iantaffi, 2019 203). Employing this mode of thinking in selfies could result in montages or series of images showing different aspects of identity, lifestyle, pleasures, and displeasures. Multiversal beings present a challenge to social media platforms that require each user to present a singular, coherent identity in order to more effectively sell their data and attention. They would enable code switching: blending signs and values to express a range of identity markers and potentially destabilise dominant values in the process. These selfies could also challenge the human centrality of consumer culture, blending the self with different objects, places, and people, to give a complex impression of life in a moment in time.

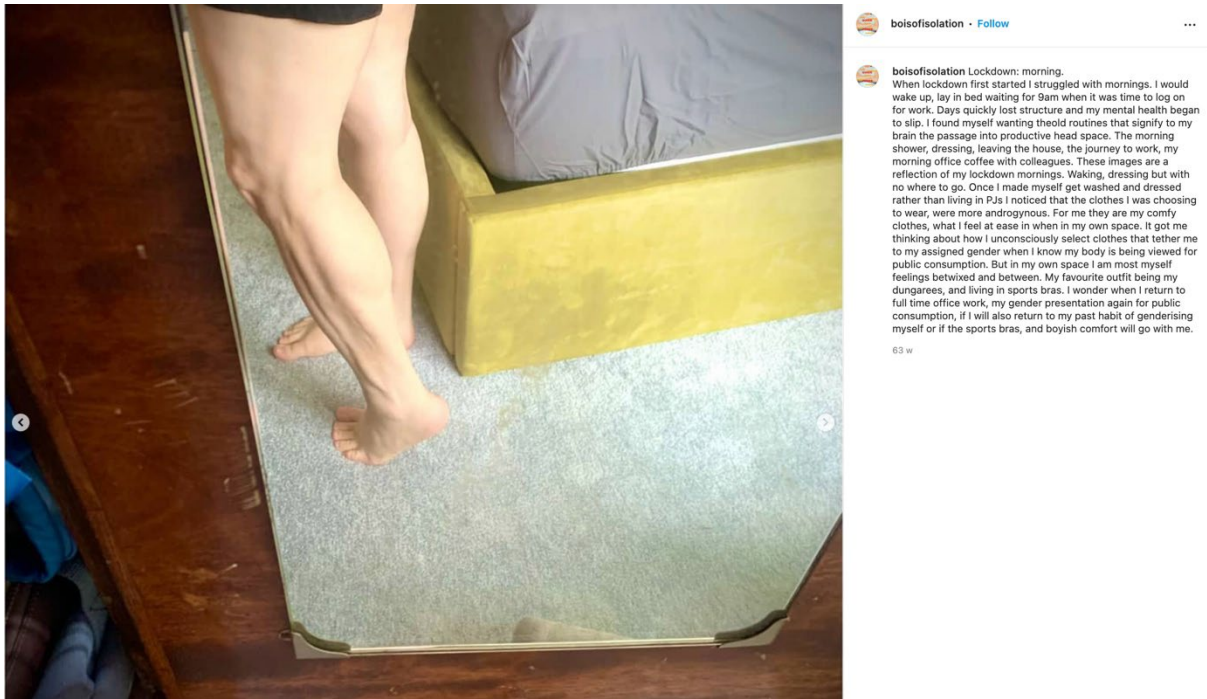


Figure 2: Selfie by A. Homes. Bois of Isolation Instagram Project (<https://www.instagram.com/boisofisolation/>), UK (2020)

In their selfies, participants creatively present their bodies, whole or as fragments that challenge binary gender expectations and body ideals. They also focus on body hair, facial expressions and props to destabilize normative ideals. Like the fat acceptance activists who extend modes of fat embodiment in their selfies in order to challenge fat prejudice, these selfies extend modes of presentation by foregrounding their marginalized gender and sexualities. However, presenting selfies that highlight marginalized characteristics in which individuals are identifiable leaves those individuals open to hostility and censure from other users.

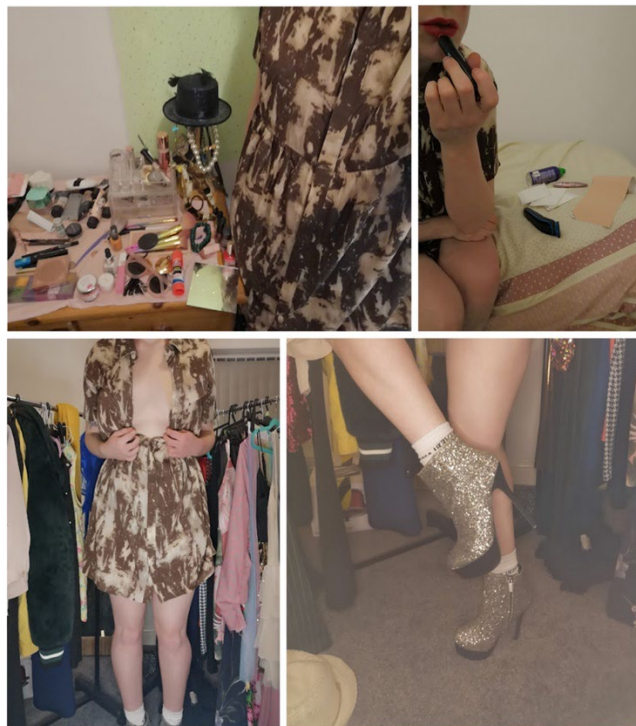


Figure 3: Selfie by H. Nona. Bois of Isolation Instagram Project (<https://www.instagram.com/boisofisolation/>), UK (2020)

5. Abstracted and Empowering Presence

During the process of making selfies AC and I unexpectedly received glitchy selfies produced by our smartphones when uploads to Instagram fail. Legacy Russell, a curator, writes that queer bodies are glitchy because they 'are encrypted' and 'not meant to be easily read' (2020 147). The glitch dissolves the body and renders 'our factual fragments [...] scrambled, [and] unreadable' (Russell, 2020 68).



Figure 4: Glitch Selfie by D. Woolley and AC. Davidson. *Bois of Isolation Instagram Project* (<https://www.instagram.com/boisofisolation/>), UK (2020)

Image degradation, such as glitch, blur and pixelation, may also produce images that disrupt the dominant modes of looking. Artist Hito Steyerl writes:

Focus is identified as a class position, a position of ease and privilege, while being out of focus lowers one's value as an image. The contemporary hierarchy of images, however, is not only based on sharpness, but also and primarily on resolution [...] a high resolution image looks more brilliant and impressive, more mimetic and magic, more scary and seductive than a poor one. It is more rich, so to speak (Steyerl, 2012 33).

Low resolution, blurred images are outside the system of value that preferences sharpness and high resolution, and so 'their status as illicit or degraded grants them exemption from its criteria' (Steyerl, 2012 38). Pixelated, blurred selfies may be exempt from comparison against neoliberal white, ableist, thin, and heteronormative body ideals.

In *Trans Care* Malatino writes that 'there is comfort in abstraction ... It names the linguistic and epistemological crisis we regularly produce and also a fantasy structure of reprieve where we might, for just a moment, leave that crisis behind' (2020 29). In relation to an experience of viewing a billboard by Jonah Welch featuring an abstract design with a pro-trans message Malatino writes 'Anonymous, named but not represented, and hailed in the complexity of my need-to be seen and unseen simultaneously, to be comforted and also left alone, to, for once, feel held and witnessed within a public space without being made subject to other people's witness of me' (2020 29). Using glitch, montage, pixelation and blur in selfies, individuals can be visible and confrontational,

masked and obscured, while preventing categorisation and comparison in relation to white, ableist, heteronormative neoliberal ideals.

6. Conclusion

Selfies are an important mode of self-expression that provide positive affirmation and communities of care for marginalised communities. Fat acceptance selfies present fat bodies without shame, expanding the types of bodies seen online, without assimilating to sexualised, gendered norms. Similarly, queer selfies also contribute to a more diverse online visual culture of bodies while challenging binary gender stereotypes in relation to marginalised genders and sexualities. However, selfies that present marginalised bodies in which the selfie-taker is identifiable remain vulnerable to online hostility from other users expressing fat- homo- and transphobia. The visual methods of abstraction and ambiguity that I am developing aim to create a caring space similar to that described by Malatino. The images do not escape the need for self-presentation and self-exposure, and they carry the risks attached to being visible in the public sphere. However, they also present opportunities to play with identity and offer a way of being present, without being subjected to discipline and recuperation. They enable marginalised individuals to take part in caring communities with expressions of vulnerability while minimising risks associated with vulnerability.

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