

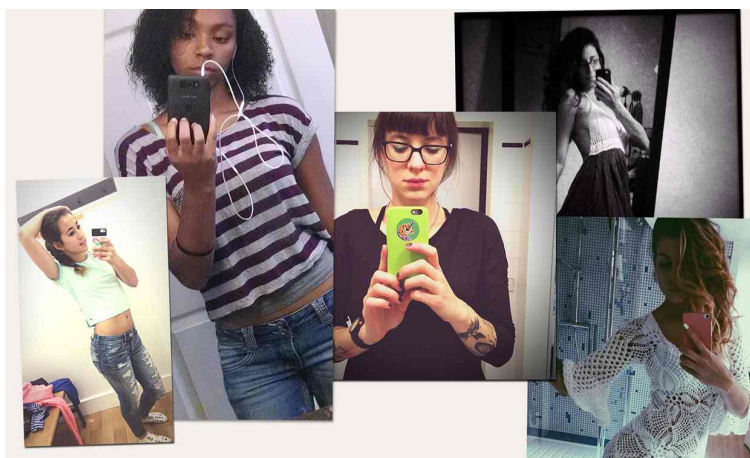
Bates, Laura 'Are selfies empowering for women?', The Guardian, (4 February 2016)

<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/feb/04/are-selfies-empowering-for-women>

Are selfies empowering for women?

Laura Bates

It's claimed that the average 16-25-year-old woman spends more than five hours a week taking photos of themselves. So does this reinforce the idea that a woman's value lies in her looks?



There's a tendency to dismiss selfies as narcissistic, but many women use them specifically to counter sexism. Photograph: Getty Images

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In the beginning was the selfie. Then came the belfie (bottom selfie), the relfie (relationship selfie), the helfie (hair selfie), the welfie (workout selfie) and the felfie (farmer selfie – **no, really**). The explosion of the selfie has triggered a deluge of products, from the selfie stick to the **belfie stick**; launched a thousand **lazy headlines**; and even cost some people the ultimate price; dozens of people were **injured and killed in 2015 while taking selfies**.

People of all genders are seen to be keen selfie-takers (special mention must go to the creators of “**nutscaping**”; the artful combination of a single testicle hovering over a beautiful landscape), but the phenomenon is particularly associated with young women. A Pew Research Center report in 2014 found that **68% of millennial women had posted a selfie**, compared to 42% of millennial men, and only 24% of members of Generation X. And a One Poll survey for the website **feelunique.com** last year claimed that the average 16-25-year-old woman spends **more than five hours a week taking selfies**.

If 2015 was the year of the dangerous selfie, 2016 is seeing the medium elevated to new cultural heights. Argentinian-born artist Amalia Ulman used Instagram selfies to create an extended performance project called **Excellences & Perfections**, excerpts of which are to **go on display at Tate Modern** as part of its **Performing for the Camera** exhibition. The project saw Ulman depict a fake life in three stages: the first introduced her as a Los Angeles “it girl”, the second portrayed a period of drug abuse and a stint in rehab, and the third charted her “recovery” through yoga sessions and healthy juice drinks. Ulman has said that these distinct phases were **inspired by stereotypes of how young women present themselves online**, but it is the stereotypical responses she received that are perhaps the biggest eye-openers. Art project or not, to her

followers, she was a real and vulnerable young woman – yet she was bombarded with what [Slate](#) described as “a mess of envy, disdain and enthusiastic schadenfreude”. When she uploaded a post during her “self destructive” stage, one follower accused her of being “#kindawhiney!” and when she shared a picture of herself crying, another wrote: “Cry me a river.”

Finally, when Ulman appeared to be recovering, people accused her of being boring, calling her an idiot and a bitch. “People started hating me,” she says. “Some gallery I was showing with freaked out and was like, ‘You have to stop doing this, because people don’t take you seriously any more.’ Suddenly I was this dumb bitch because I was showing my ass in pictures.”

In many ways, her work highlights exactly the kind of superficial assumptions people make about women based on image alone. “It’s more than a satire,” she said. “I wanted to prove that femininity is a construction, and not something biological or inherent to any woman. [Women](#) understood the performance much faster than men. They were like, ‘We get it – and it’s very funny.’ The joke was admitting how much work goes into being a woman and how being a woman is not a natural thing. It’s something you learn.”

Elsewhere, many young women are harnessing the power of the selfie for particular causes or campaigns. Artist Molly Soda last year [leaked her own nude snaps](#) in a statement about regaining power and control from nude picture hackers, while others continue to share selfie snaps in a plethora of inspiring and uplifting [body-positive blogs](#) and [hashtags](#).

But is posting selfies an empowering and uplifting activity, or does it reinforce the notion that a woman’s value lies solely in her looks?

The statistics don’t have a clear answer. A body image survey by Today and AOL found that [65% of teenage girls](#) said seeing their selfies on social media boosted their confidence. However, 55% said social media made them more self-conscious about their appearance and 58% agreed that “seeing pictures of other people living glamorous-looking lives on social media makes me feel bad about myself”.

“Selfie campaigns” arouse similarly mixed responses: the “no makeup selfie” – started to raise money for breast cancer charities – was both [praised](#) as brave and uplifting and [criticised](#) for suggesting it was scary or daring for women to be pictured without makeup.

The issue is complex, not least because the online reception of the images can have as much of an impact as the intent of the creator. When Welsh teenager Maisie Beech posted a “half makeup selfie” online she thought she was doing something fun and empowering. But after [the pictures went viral](#), strangers commented to say she was sick or ugly and some even threatened physical violence, leaving her shocked at people’s cruelty.

Many teenage girls find themselves subject to sexist pressures when it comes to selfies – both expected to present a beautiful, confident image, and navigating extreme criticism or even abuse if they are perceived as too sexy, “slutty” or posed.

There is a tendency to derisively dismiss selfies as narcissistic, but it’s no coincidence that so many of the young women who have hit the headlines for using them are doing so in response to sexist societal norms or abuse – from damaging, unattainable beauty ideals, to the hacking of women’s private photographs. While female celebrities are accused of being self-obsessed and oversharing, one could equally see their selfie habits as a clever means of taking back control of their own image from the male-dominated media and paparazzi. It’s also worth noting the palpable sneering and contempt for selfies (which most people would hesitate to regard as an art form) may well be influenced by the fact that society views them as a predominantly young, female creation.

But it is encouraging to see the considerable number who are pulling the rug out from under the traditional criticisms of selfies by harnessing the medium to send their own powerful, often feminist messages.