Selfie Surveillance: Exploring Postfeminist-Neoliberal Visibility in Young Women's Selfie-Practices

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Abstract

This doctoral thesis explores how young women negotiate postfeminist-neoliberal visibility through selfie-practices. It is based on a discourse analysis of twenty interviews with female college students aged 18 to 30 which took place from April 2017 to January 2018. Using feminist methods of analysis, it explores how young women relate to and 'make sense' of selfie-practices in the context of everyday life. In doing so, it explores the gendered implications of the rising surveillance enabled by new technological practices and the types of subjectivities they cultivate. Thus, this study builds on feminist media scholarship which explores women's engagement with cultural products and practices while incorporating and contributing to the emerging field of feminist surveillance studies.

Specifically, this thesis explores the interplay between discourses of postfeminist and neoliberalism, and their relation to the entrepreneurial ethos and architecture of social media, within which selfie-practices are enmeshed. Although selfie-practices are often sold to young women as 'empowering' and as a means to 'control' their image, this assertion becomes complicated by the perspectives this study analyses. Rather, the discourses which characterise selfie-use and the surveillant environment in which these practices occur are shown to attempt to structure visibility along highly normative lines which produce punitively dissonant effects. Critical to this is how such practices direct the gaze, both in terms of self-gazing and gazing at others, in which watching and being watched produce a return to femininity, placing significant prohibitions on visibilities and subjectivities which land outside the normative. This thesis finds that discourses of postfeminist-neoliberalism seek to 'normalise' the increased demand for visibility and intensification of surveillance which selfie-practices represent, thereby supporting the introduction of new, ever more intimate modes of gender discipline and scrutiny, enabled by technology.

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Declaration

I, Mary McGill, certify that this work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any other degree.

This work is the result of my independent work and investigation, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged giving explicit references.

Signed: …… (Candidate)

Date:

Introduction

In March 2019, *Forbes* declared 21-year-old Kylie Jenner of the Kardashian-Jenner[1] clan the youngest ever 'selfie-made' billionaire (Robehmed 2019). 'Selfie-made' was a tongue-in-cheek reference to firstly, what *Forbes* tried to suggest was Jenner's singular success and secondly, her association with the much-derided selfie. The announcement drew understandable criticism for what many regarded as its elision of Jenner's famous family, a factor which, critics argued, undoubtedly aided her ascent to beauty mogul status (Smith 2019). Jenner, however, attributed the global success of her make-up line to other factors. "It's the power of social media," she told *Forbes* in July 2018, "I had such a strong reach before I was able to start anything." In a video made to mark her success, she reflects on how cosmetics helped her overcome her teenage insecurities, saying of her new career, "I knew I was passionate about make-up but I didn't know I could have fun every day doing my job." (*Kylie Jenner: From Lip Kits to a $900 Million Fortune in Just 3 Years*, 2018)

While not discounting the benefits of coming from a high-profile, well-connected family, Jenner's success also reflects wider contemporary trends which this study explores. Jenner's framing of her feat draws on familiar narratives which position the combination of the right attitude and a keen ability to self-brand through social media as a gateway to success. What Jenner calls 'reach' refers to her tens of millions of followers across platforms like Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook, platforms which she, like her elder sister Kim Kardashian, has shown an almost prophetic ability to utilise. Central to this is the sisters' astuteness in cultivating and disseminating a highly compelling version of femininity. Against a backdrop of rising surveillance, they cast the demand for visibility so central to contemporary femininity as desirable and profitable, positioning themselves as experts in providing the necessary tools to help their followers emulate their success. In classic entrepreneur-speak, this approach to femininity is presented by Jenner as both professionalized yet liberating whereby one can make tens of millions of dollars by pursuing one's passion while still having fun. It is an appealing notion albeit one which completely ignores the precarity of the current economic climate and the manner in which

[1] 'Kardashian-Jenner' refers to the two branches of the Kardashian family which is headed by matriarch Kris Jenner. The elder sisters – Kim, Kourtney and Khloe – are the daughters of the deceased lawyer Robert Kardashian. The younger sisters – Kendall and Kylie – are the daughters of Caitlyn (formerly Bruce) Jenner.

the ethos Jenner and her family so readily exalt further complicate the already tricky business of 'doing' femininity.

The intense visibility of youthful femininities in the present cultural moment, which Jenner is undoubtedly representative of, is often touted as empowering and transformative. This touting brings together the aspiration of postfeminism (promoting a world view in which gender equality is achieved while politicized feminism is passé) and the self-management philosophy of free market entrepreneurialism to which the term 'neoliberal' refers. The reality, however, is much more complex. Far from being a simple matter of being seen, this study defines visibility as a social process, one which goes beyond the image, requiring continuous self-work (Brighenti 2007). It is also by nature exclusionary, for it relies on invisibilized 'others' against which to cast itself, underscoring the complex relationship between visibility and inequality (Brighenti 2007). As Sarah Banet Weiser (2015a, p.55) notes, feminist media and cultural scholarship on the 'politics of visibility' is longstanding. Politics here speaks to relations of power in terms of what is represented, how it is represented and who is excluded. The aim of such work has always been to effect social change through changes in representation. However, as Banet-Weiser argues, the shift towards economies of visibility in recent times, where visibility in terms of gender or race is not necessarily linked to a demand for social change, challenges how we construe the use of visibility for political ends. In such a context, visibility is absorbed and neutralised, put to work furthering market-approved norms, its political dimensions removed or diluted as it becomes part of a value exchange where certain kinds of visibilities are more highly prized than others (Banet-Weiser 2015a, 2018; Rottenberg 2018). This has particular implications for women and girls, for whom visibility is strongly encouraged in part because of their importance as consumers, and, as in the case of selfie-practices[2], for their ability to create the types of visibility which contribute massively to the success of social media sites like Snapchat and Instagram. As Banet-Weiser (2015a, p.57) puts it, 'the product in gendered economies of visibility is the feminine body.'

Addressing the context Banet-Weiser describes, this project was originally inspired as an exercise in feminist media research exploring the factors driving young

[2] What this study terms 'selfie-practices' refers to the cultural, emotional and psychological processes which are inherent to the production and circulation of selfie-imagery. Following the important insights of Senft and Byam (2015) and Cruz and Thornham (2015), this definition emphasizes that the selfie, as a text, is one moment in a complex practice which weaves together existing and emergent cultural and technological norms that centre visibility. Hence, understanding the selfie requires that we go beyond the text to consider the wider factors which shape visibility through selfie-practices.

women's selfie-use.[3] While feminist researchers have explored sexualised gendered identity formation on social media (see for example, Dobson & Ringrose 2016, Renold & Ringrose 2017, Ringrose, Harvey, Gill & Livingstone 2013) and the nature of postfeminist online culture (for example, Nurka 2014, Rossie 2015, Dobson Shields 2015), there is as yet little audience/user-focused feminist media research examining the selfie as a distinct visual practice that is personal, public, participatory and markedly gendered[4]. There is less still on its relationship to the implications of rising social media surveillance as it intersects with postfeminist, neoliberal visibility. This is a critical point given that recent studies of young women from the field of cyberpsychology suggest beauty-orientated selfie-practices are particularly linked to low body image and negative emotional responses. (Cohen et al. 2018, Mills et al. 2018) As Hille Koskela (2012, p.49) highlights, despite clear points of shared concern[5] between the fields of gender studies and surveillance studies, they remain poorly integrated. The feminist media research that is in existence on the gendered aspects of the selfie phenomenon (see particularly Dubrofsky & Wood 2015, Elias & Gill 2018, Warfield 2016, 2017, and Burns 2015) provides important insights on this relatively recent, ubiquitous and highly feminized cultural practice, insights which this project contributes to further. In doing so, this study also advances scholarly understandings of the motivations behind selfie-practices in the contexts explored, an aspect of the phenomenon that remains under-researched (Diefenbach & Christoforakos 2017).

The overarching question guiding this project is: *what do young women's perspectives and experiences of selfie-practices reveal about the nature of contemporary femininities?* From this base, a further three sub-questions developed: firstly, *what discourses[6] govern these*

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[3] The term 'young women' is used advisedly here and throughout, acknowledging the diversity of women's experiences and perspectives, a point reflected on further in this study's Methodology chapter.

[4] Quantitative studies from around the world repeatedly find a greater degree of proclivity for selfie-use and social media-use among women. See for example Losh (2015), Sorokowski et al. (2015) Dhir et al. (2016) and Pew (2018).

[5] As Koskela argues, surveillance has always been critical to the reproduction and policing of gender and sexual norms, a point reflected in feminist work on gaze theory and the social construction of gender.

[6] The primary definition of 'discourse' used in this study comes from Stuart Hall (1997, p.6) who describes discourses as 'ways of referring to or constructing knowledge about a particular topic or practice' that include 'a cluster (or *formation*) of ideas, images and practices [emphasis Hall's]' which enable the individual to talk about an issue. Following the influential work of Michel Foucault (1988,1991), Hall's concept of discourse emphasizes its relation to power, that is, how discourse strives to 'fix' certain ideas while rendering others moot. This struggle over meaning, which Hall (1998) saw as a critical and defining aspect of popular, everyday culture, produces tensions and contradictions that are played out at the level of discourse. By identifying these tensions, scholars can interrogate and denaturalise discourses 'in-action', gaining insights on how discourses attempt to structure subjectivity and suggest certain truths about the world.

femininities? Secondly, *what types of subjectivities do they produce?* Lastly, *what does the interplay between these discourses and the emerging technological norms the selfie represents suggest about femininity and visibility in the current moment?* To answer, this thesis utilises a feminist audience studies approach, applying an analytical framework developed from key literatures to data collected from twenty semi-structured interviews with young women aged 18 to 30 between April 2017 and January 2018. These young women were drawn from a university population in Ireland, a population that is largely middle-class. Although interviewees come from a range of countries within and outside the Anglophone world, it is important to note that participants were also predominately white. Hence, it is necessary to highlight that this study deals with a specific cohort of young women who are middle-class and, in the main, white. Given these factors and given the size of this study, it does not claim to be representational. Rather, it is concerned with the subjective experiences of participants and what these suggest about how they use and view selfie-practices. Thus, its findings are presented as specific and contextual rather than generalised, a point further underscored by the awareness that selfie-practices are themselves context-specific and polysemic, open to multiple uses and interpretations.

Combining key theoretical insights from feminist analyses of postfeminism, neoliberalism and the gaze with scholarship from the emerging field of social media surveillance and applying them to young women's accounts of selfie-practices, this study introduces *selfie surveillance* as an analytic for unpacking and denaturalising the gendered modes of looking which characterise the contexts explored. These practices represent a mode of postfeminist, neoliberal visibility which is channelled through and structured by the types of interactivity supported by social media. In all, this thesis examines three aspects of selfie surveillance distilled from participants' accounts: *self-surveillance* which explores the forms of critical self-analysis participants undertake when discussing their perceptions and experiences of the phenomenon; *homosocial-surveillance*, focusing on the tension participants report in looking between women engaged in selfie-practices and *celebrity-surveillance*, examining participants' accounts of looking at selfies of female celebrities.

In selfie surveillance, photography's personal, recreational and surveillant capacities are collapsed into each other; one's image is surveyed not only by one's self and one's chosen audience but by numerous 'others', known and unknown. In this context, the archival, monitoring and recording properties associated with photography are facilitated and extended via social media with hitherto unparalleled immediacy and ease. This

facilitation enshrines modes of judgement and circulation which quantify and rank images through commercial mechanisms which prioritize the normative. This process is productive, re-inscribing notions of idealised personhood (those who are granted visibility) while prohibiting others (those who are denied visibility). This arrangement has particular implications for the types of feminine subjectivities which selfie-practices call into being.

Selfie surveillance is a practice and a mode of visibility shaped by the between interplay postfeminist, neoliberal discourses and social media's entrepreneurial logics and architecture. It produces new 'ways of seeing' (Berger 1972) which reshape the individual's relationship to their image and images of other women. In this interplay, the discursive and the technical work in concert to incentivise the reproduction of desirable forms of specular femininity. Together they create a reinforcing, co-constitutive effect whereby the feminine subjectivities produced are heavily marked by surveillance. This technologically-enabled and discursively supported surveillance serves, as other forms of mediated surveillance have done in the past, to promote conformity. Central to this is the cultivation and reassertion of normative femininities, the circulation of which are essential to the economic and cultural foundations which social media relies on for profitability. This point is critical in the current moment as the surveillance of everyday life increases (Lyon 2018) and new forms of surveillance-orientated economics are rapidly on the ascent (Zuboff 2015). Social media is representative of this profound shift, a reality that confounds any notion that such sites are unencumbered spaces where people can simply explore their identity online. Rather, as Tamara Shepherd (2013, p.157) asserts, social media utilise 'business models that create particular gendered identities in the interest of capital.' Far from being an original approach, this dynamic reflects the longstanding ways the market has sought to utilise and structure gendered notions of the consumer in order to create demand for goods and services (Pollock 1988, Lury 2003, West 2000, Holland 2009).

The conformity promoted by selfie-practices is, however, heavily clouded by a contemporary language of expectation and individualised empowerment typical to discourses of postfeminism and neoliberalism. These discourses depict practices like the selfie as enabling rather than constraining. This produces a tension which participants experience as a form of *dissonance,* where the demands and expectations of selfie-practices cannot be reconciled to their experiences of being both the surveyor and the surveyed. This leads to a return to femininity in which the individual must reinvest to achieve the

elusive coherence between self and image, a process which exemplifies the 'new traditionalism' (McRobbie 2009) of postfeminist culture. This new traditionalism is reinscribed via selfie surveillance which encourages competitiveness, judgement and notions of complicity that render the individual accountable for the failures and successes of her image, thereby eliding the wider technological and cultural factors at play.

Selfie surveillance produces a dissonant effect in two respects: firstly, through the incoherence between the embodied self and the image/images that is/are supposed to represent it and secondly, through the inconsistencies of postfeminist, neoliberal subjecthood which it promotes. Although this dual-dissonance stems from the limitations of the postfeminist, neoliberal promises within which selfie-practices are enmeshed, it nevertheless produces a reinvestment in them as a means to achieve coherence. This investment is routed through surveillant practices that are framed by discourses of empowerment, control and celebrity as a means to achieve visibility, discourses which the Findings and Analysis section of this thesis explores in detail. This visibility is tied to the reproduction of normative and hyper femininities, whereby the potential for selfie-practices to create space for alternative femininities is contained while new traditionalism is reasserted.

Through the denaturalisation of the modes of looking which underpin selfie surveillance, this thesis shows that dissonance stimulates a contradictory but intense effect. The individual often remains invested in selfie-practices even when such practices are shown to produce outcomes which are notable for their ambivalence and inconsistences. This denaturalisation reveals how the intensification of surveillance in everyday life in the current moment, which social media is representative of, marks a highly invasive stage in the longstanding public scrutiny of women in which the psychological is incorporated as much as the physical. In this context, I argue that selfie surveillance marks a key contemporary site for the articulation and negotiation of tensions in the gender field, where the interplay between emerging technological norms and the deepening entanglement of postfeminism and neoliberalism can be observed. For feminist media scholarship, this presents a fresh avenue for expansion of the gaze theory tradition to explore how the participatory, surveillant nature of social media is changing the ways femininity is expressed and experienced on a subjective and collective level.

Section One: Literatures & Methodology

Chapter 1: Postfeminism - Neoliberalism

1.1 Introduction

Writing in 2010, Imelda Whelehan asks, somewhat provocatively, 'Why is postfeminism so boring?' For Whelehan (2010, p.159), postfeminist media culture, as an object of analysis, 'can be boring and frustrating to analyse because its message requires little unpacking and lies prominently on the surface of these narratives.' Hers is certainly not the only criticism of the immense focus given to postfeminism in feminist media and cultural scholarship since the 1990s. Writing in 2018, at a time when reinvigorated forms of politicized feminism had gained traction in the public consciousness, Keller and Ryan (p.2) call for an 'expanded theoretical lens' to account for the cultural shifts which had occurred in the previous decade. Rather than assuming the ubiquity of postfeminism, Keller and Ryan (2018, p.4) propose a more historicised approach, which, while not discounting the usefulness of postfeminism as an analytical frame, can also accommodate, 'diverse feminist politics that can both align with and challenge postfeminist sensibilities.'

Both Whelehan and Keller and Ryan raise interesting points which were much reflected on in the course of this study. However, when it came to analysing participants' transcripts, the presence and influence of postfeminism was not only clear, its logics served as a core tenet for how participants 'made sense' of selfie-practices and negotiated visibility. Given that participants came from different countries, including those beyond the Anglophone world, this underscored not only the enduring appeal of postfeminism but its diffuse, globalised nature (Lazar 2006, Banet-Weiser 2007, Springer 2007, Butler 2013, Dosekun 2017). In short, the psychic life of postfeminism theorized by scholars like Rosalind Gill (2017) and Angela McRobbie (2009, 2015) was illuminated in the data. As Gill (2017) urges, postfeminism is not merely a media phenomenon, it is also a psychological one. Rather than diminishing in significance, in the current moment she regards postfeminism as a 'hegemonic' cultural force, one which encourages certain emotional states while 'systematically outlawing others' (Gill 2017, p.610), a position this research supports. Hence, in this study, postfeminism is deployed as a vital tool for understanding participants' experiences and the logics underpinning selfie surveillance. Its influence in the data suggests that selfie-practices – in the contexts explored - may be producing a resurgence and retrenchment of postfeminism which is itself in evolution as it further entwines with neoliberalism. Thus, this study refers to *postfeminist-neoliberalism*

to underscore this deepening attachment, providing insights into how postfeminism and neoliberalism feed and bolster one another online. This corresponds with Riley et al.'s (2017, p.9) suggestion regarding social media, in which what they term the 'mediating effect of technology' highlights new terrain for the study of postfeminism.

Following Riley et al.'s point, this chapter discusses key scholarly literature on postfeminism and is arranged to correspond with the main discursive themes distilled from the interview data. In doing so, it shows how dissonance, as an effect, functions as a central characteristic of postfeminist-neoliberal femininities. In particular, dissonance signals a failure to cohere which is intrinsic to how such logics attempt to ignore or 'paper over' the inconsistences in the modes of subjecthood they valorise. The first section outlines central definitions and developments in postfeminist scholarship, followed by sections exploring postfeminism's engagement with neoliberalism, empowerment and finally, celebrity. Notwithstanding their inherent limitations, postfeminist-neoliberal femininities are highly-prized by the many young women who use social media as a means to reproduce themselves as these orthodoxies dictate, often in the hope of enjoying the fruits of visibility. As this study explores, this can be a profoundly precarious, disciplining process, revolving around the judgement and relentless monitoring of self and others. Yet, it remains a highly appealing one. Reflecting on why this is the case, the following section explores the promises and contradictions of postfeminism.

1.2 Unpacking Postfeminism

For much of its history, postfeminism has been a contested term. As Ann Brooks (1997) notes, it can be used in a variety of ways, referring to the backlash against second wave feminism which emerged in the Eighties or to signal a generational divide between younger and older feminisms. In academia, the 'post' in 'postfeminism' can be understood as symbolising a break with foundationalist thinking, exemplified by the kinds of universalising theorising associated with second wave feminism (the idea of sisterhood, for example, has been criticized for eliding the differences between women) (Brooks 1997, Genz & Brabon 2009). Genz and Brabon (2009, p.5) describe postfeminism as a 'hybridisation', untethered from a singular epistemological framework, manifesting from the intersections of, 'media, consumer culture, neo-liberal politics, postmodern theory, and, significantly, feminism.' In its most popular incarnation, the media depicts what Genz and Brabon (2009, p.37) term 'postfeminist utopia' in which, 'women can do as they please, provided they have sufficient will and enthusiasm.' Such narratives conveniently

displace from view structural inequalities and the enduring necessity for a collectivised feminist politics. Instead, the focus falls on the individual woman, the quality of her choices (most particularly when it comes to consumption and heterosexual romance) and her ability to reproduce herself as an autonomous, ambitious postfeminist archetype.

Postfeminism, in an analytical sense, is now most commonly utilised within feminist media scholarship as a sensibility which characterises a wide range of female-orientated media and certain types of female subjectivities. This approach was crystallised in a highly influential essay by Rosalind Gill. In it, Gill (2007) proposes that the postfeminist sensibility is endowed with the following physiognomies: the notion that femininity is a bodily property; a shift from objectification (the external policing gaze) to subjectification (the internal policing gaze); an emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline; a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment, usually through the prism of neoliberal norms; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; and a resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference. Another important component of the sensibility is the emphasis it places on visibility, which produces femininities that are notable for their energy, agency and confidence, a marked contrast to more passive iterations. However, any claims to progress in terms of representation and self-expression must be tempered with the awareness of how postfeminist culture repositions and prioritizes traditional but limiting expectations of femininity as highly desirable, personally liberating, and economically powerful (Gill 2007, McRobbie 2009, Tasker & Negra 2007). Emphasizing this dynamic as a concerning point of return, Angela McRobbie (2009, p.34) refers to it as 'the new traditionalism' with the media acting as the primary point of its dissemination.

Crucial to this mode of visibility is the assumption femininity is *freely chosen and enjoyable*, a move grounded in the postfeminist insistence that equality has been achieved. As a consequence of its own success, this view insists that feminism is now redundant, or, as McRobbie (2009, p.60) puts it, postfeminism takes feminism 'into account' only to undo it, thereby enabling 're-configured and spectacular modes of femininity to come to prominence.' Hence, as Gill (2007, p.151) writes, women's 'liberated interests', once regarded as rooted in the rejection of femininity, become re-aligned with it. For Gill, this marks not simply a return to femininity but an intensification which prioritises normative, youthful and often hyper-feminine femininities while excluding others.

Critical to the attainment of the femininity Gill describes is the undertaking of intense bodily and psychic labour in order to reproduce oneself as an ideal postfeminist, and increasingly neoliberal, feminine subject. Elias, Gill and Scharff (2017, p.5) introduce the concept of aesthetic labour to capture this formation, whereby, 'contemporary injections to look good require not only physical labours and transformations but also the makeover of psychic life to embrace qualities such as confidence, happiness and authenticity.' As Diane Negra (2014, p.278) highlights in her exploration of popular advice books for women published in the wake of the 2008 recession, these texts' postfeminist address assume a culture in which, 'women are cued to undertake routine mental, physical, and emotional work on the self while implicitly cultivating imperviousness to the decline of social health, democratic institutions and meaningful manifestations of citizenship.' This arrangement is far from politically benign, as McRobbie (2009, p.73) notes, cautioning that this 'landscape of self-improvement' promotes isolating, limiting ideas of personhood as opposed to 'feminist values of solidarity'.

The kinds of practices and logics Elias, Gill and Scharff, Negra, and McRobbie describe are typified by ambiguity and inconsistency. Thus, they behove academics to develop arguments which can capture, as Jane Arthurs (2003, p.87) describes, the 'complex contradictions' which characterise postfeminism. Critical to this, Tasker and Negra (2007, p.18) argue, is the necessity, 'to avoid, or at least analyse, the simultaneous denigration and appropriation of girls' culture', keeping in mind that, 'the images and icons of postfeminism are compelling; the women and girls who (literally) buy into this visual and narrational repertoire are not simply dupes.' (Tasker & Negra 2007, p.21) Further to this, McRobbie (2004, p.262) highlights that 'relations of power are made and re-made within texts of enjoyment', a point which underscores the enduring importance of taking pleasure and its politics seriously. These assertions find new urgency today with the proliferation of social media sites like Instagram of which young women are the most enthusiastic users, navigating online cultures which are, as Amy Shields Dobson (2015) notes, deeply postfeminist in nature, saturated with enticements to judge. This engagement demands the kinds of nuanced scholarly approaches advocated by Tasker and Negra, McRobbie and Dobson herself, which emphasize complexity and nuance rather than a rush to judgement, approaches which can account for both the appeal of postfeminist promises and their inevitable disappointments.

Social media enables young women to claim visibility as no media before. However, it is important to situate this claiming in the context of postfeminist digital cultures which *demand* visibility (Dobson 2015). In such contexts, as this study explores, enticements to visibility through interactivity intersect with the logics of postfeminism and the enterprising neoliberal self. This produces a redoubling effect whereby postfeminist-neoliberalism and emerging technological norms reinforce one another by making certain kinds of self-representation and self-disclosure an obligatory, primary criteria for access to these spaces. Visibility, it is suggested, is a pathway to that which is highly prized by postfeminism: empowerment. However, in exposing their physical and psychological selves in the public sphere[7], young women's 'interior world' runs the risk of becoming subject to what Harris and Dobson (2015, p.152) describe as, 'new kinds of regulation'. Yet, the promise of exposure is unfailingly presented, as Dobson (2015, p.159) notes, 'as a source or means to power and social and material value for girls and young women'. In reality, the power on offer is strictly delimited, notable for its precariousness and exclusivity. Those young women infused with the requisite 'subtle and unconscious kinds of cultural and social capital' are most likely to succeed, that is, to produce self-representations that are positively interpreted and will therefore yield power and status (Dobson 2015, p.160). However, as Dobson's (2015) important work with young women shows, even those self-representations that fit within the limited convenes of normative femininity are subject to the possibility of judgement and shaming. Hence, while the call to visibility in these spaces may appeal to young women, empowerment, if attained, is quite likely to be transient given the unending demand for self-articulation which characterises social media. It is also tainted by ambivalence; in claiming visibility, young women are simultaneously opening themselves up to judgement from their peer group and wider society.

1.3 Neoliberal Governmentality

Reflecting on the emergence of new femininities in the early 21st century, Gill and Scharff (2011, p.7) observe that 'the autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism bears a strong resemblance to active, freely choosing, self-inventing subject of postfeminism'. As a consequence, they propose that the postfeminist

[7] Following Zizi Papacharissi (2015), this thesis regards social media and dimensions of the internet more broadly as part of the contemporary public sphere, which has been transformed by the rise of digital technologies. In doing so, it is mindful of feminist critiques of the public/private divide and the complexities therein, although they are not the focal point of this work. For a fuller account of the two spheres debate, see Nancy Fraser's (1990) 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', *Social Text*, No.25/26, pp.56-80

sensibility must be understood, not only as a response to feminism, but also as being 'at least partly constituted through the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideas.' (Ibid) In particular, they emphasize the need for feminist scholarship to engage with Foucault's later work[8] on subjectivity and governmentality, to explore how, 'governing practices quite literally 'get inside us' to materialize or constitute our subjectivities.' (Gill & Scharff 2011, p.8) This section explores scholarship which does exactly as Gill and Scharff propose, with particular focus on key insights from Angela McRobbie, Catherine Rottenberg and Johanna Oksala which form a critical part of this study's analytical frame.

Neoliberal governmentality refers to a contemporary and highly persuasive form of self-management, in which the individual is cast as the master of their life (Duggan 2004, Harvey 2005, Hall 2011, Brown 2016). This mastery comes with the expectation that the individual remake themselves through the logics of consumerism and entrepreneurialism, an arrangement which, as this section explores, produces gendered effects. Under it, the principle of a woman's right to choose shifts from a political focus concerned with collective rights to a consumerist focus in which freedom is tied to the individualized act of choosing, rather than interrogating what enables and constrains women's choices.

This formulation, as Harris and Shields-Dobson (2015, p.148) propose, makes unpacking an already tricky concept like 'choice' all the more difficult given that, "choice' has become the central organising concept for the constitution of modern identity.' In this arrangement, Shelley Budgeon (2015, p.307) asserts that, 'Individual choice… is upheld as the primary criterion for judging women's actions.' Although presented as progressive, this freedom to choose also positions women as *responsible* for the successes but also the failures of their lives. This leads to a situation in which women are expected to 'think of themselves as liberated individuals regardless of their immediate social position.' (Budgeon 2015, p.314)

With its emphasis on highly individualised, apolitical formations of self-fulfilment, postfeminist empowerment makes a ready bedfellow for neoliberal concepts of selfhood.

[8] In his later work, the philosopher Michel Foucault (1988) outlined changes in how the economic and cultural climate of the West had introduced new forms of societal and psychological discipline or governmentality. Far from diminishing existing power structures, Foucault saw the trend towards different forms of social control as an attempt to reinforce such structures. This is achieved not by force but by inviting the individual to 'see themselves' and discipline themselves through discourses or forms of 'common sense' which profess autonomy while concurrently shaping and restraining it. In terms of contemporary gender politics, postfeminism and its entanglement with neoliberalism are representative of the dynamics Foucault describes.

As Alexandra Rutherford (2018, p.622) aptly puts it, empowerment has become, 'a key conceptual and discursive lynchpin of neoliberalism and postfeminism, and which has also become distinctly gendered.' If a young woman fails to empower herself in keeping with socially sanctioned standards, she faces judgement and censure. On this point Marina Gonick (2006, p.17) cautions that neoliberal discourse leaves those who do not succeed with 'few other explanations for their lack of success except for their own individual failings.'

Gonick (2006, p.19) rightly highlights that as much as neoliberal governmentality addresses females as 'the potential idealized autonomous neoliberal subject', women and girls nevertheless remain, 'always already at risk of failing to secure the position.' This has implications for women and girls who manage to embody – however precariously – these new forms of femininity but also for the many who find themselves economically, racially, sexually or otherwise excluded (Harris 2004, Gonick 2006, Gerodetti & McNaught-Davis 2017). These exclusions and uncertainties are experienced at a subjective level and at a cultural level. As Eva Chen (2013) outlines, it is precisely because of the way neoliberal popular culture aimed at women draws on notions of universal freedom and equality that makes it at once so compelling but ultimately so disappointing. This gap is a critical source of dissonance which serves as a potential threat to neoliberal order because it highlights its inherent incoherence. Hence, it is, as Chen (2013, p.449) writes, 'glossed over deliberately.'

In her essay *Notes on the Perfect*, McRobbie (2015) updates key ideas from her 2009 book *The Aftermath of Feminism*. McRobbie makes these revisions in light of what she describes as the re-emergence of a politicized feminism just as the 'individualising project' of neoliberalism intensifies its grip. In this context, the perfect is presented as a different manifestation to postfeminism. McRobbie (2015, p.3) characterises the perfect as a 'horizon of expectation' aimed at young women, through which they are expected to pursue what McRobbie (Ibid) terms 'self-definition'[9]. Crucially for McRobbie, the perfect serves to neuter re-emerging politicized feminism by ensuring that it is focused on the individual thereby rejecting 'the older, welfarist and collectivist feminism of the past.'

[9] To develop 'the perfect', McRobbie draws on Lauren Berlant's (2011) concept of cruel optimism. A practice or object can be said to be imbued with 'cruel optimism' when it 'ignites a sense of possibility' while concurrently making it 'impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or persons risks striving' (Berlant 2011, p.2). Berlant (2011, p.11) links this effect to 'the emergence of a precarious public sphere' in which commonly held fantasies about 'the good life' are becoming undone as neoliberalism intensifies. Despite this, people remain deeply attached to hopeful concepts like upward mobility even as 'they work against the flourishing of particular and collective beings.' (Berlant 2011, p.13) The effects of cruel optimism, Berlant proposes, lead to impasse, reflecting the discursive tensions this study explores when participants encounter the limitations and dissonances of postfeminist-neoliberalism's promises.

(McRobbie 2015, p.4) Instead, feminism is utilised as a way to 'solve' problems on an individualised basis, not to tackle wider structural issues. Central to McRobbie's conceptualisation of the perfect is the retrenchment of competitive femininity, centred on the achievement of 'the good life' which is defined in purely consumerist terms that are notable for their conservatism. Although operating in a contemporary context, the perfect derives its force through the restoration of the traditional gender order which centres normative femininity. What McRobbie (2015, p.7) terms 'successful domesticity' and 'successful sexuality' become representative of the 'having it all' ethos, an ethos which is highly aspirational. In this context, the perfect elevates self-regulation and self-assessment so that one's life and achievements are reduced to 'a kind of neoliberal spreadsheet' (McRobbie 2015, p.10).

By cultivating a 'perfect' life, the labour which is central to the domestic and to beauty is elided and the kind of gender fantasy Betty Friedan (1965) took aim at in the Sixties becomes re-enshrined. However, unlike *The Feminine Mystique* in which middle class women's lack of choices in terms of career confined them to suburbia, the perfect positions girls and women as 'being in control' and thereby *choosing* to embody the new femininities the perfect cultivates. McRobbie notes that this re-structuring of patriarchal power is knotty and increasingly difficult to unpack; however, she identifies the news media, the selfie and celebrity culture in particular as key sites for the articulation of the perfect. Rather than rejecting feminism as with postfeminism, the perfect instead urges girls and young women to absorb feminist logic as a means to achieve individualised, self-orientated success. In this arrangement, feminism is, as McRobbie (2015, p.15) writes, 'instrumentalised and personalised', creating an environment in which self-beratement' is normalised and internalised while structural inequities go untroubled. This creates a 'melancholic effect' where:

> …all ideas of gender justice and collective solidarity [are] thrown overboard in favour of 'excellence' and with the aim of creating new forms (and restoring old forms) of gender hierarchies through competition and elitism. (McRobbie 2015, p.16)

McRobbie proposes that, far from facilitating more progressive approaches to gender, digital technologies imbued with the logic of the perfect intensify and reinvigorate female competitiveness. In doing so, she argues that the perfect purposely maintains boundaries which support the gender binary, normative femininity and heterosexuality. This neutralises the potential of a collectivised feminism and queer sexualities to transcend and dissolve such structures. The perfect thus ensures that change – if achieved - is highly

restrained, leaving inequality largely intact without 'any angry and outright critique of male domination.' (McRobbie 2015, p.17) McRobbie locates the emergence of the perfect at a moment when feminist theorizing lacks the conceptual tools to fully unpack and name current modes of male dominance without resorting to second wave, potentially essentialist notions of 'patriarchy'[10]. Yet, this lack is not just an issue for feminist scholarship. It is also, as this project shows, a problem for participants who struggle to make and sustain critiques of the very contexts which McRobbie identifies. Without the necessary language and intellectual confidence that politicized feminist insights provide, bolstered by an active, collectivized movement, the outcome for the individual woman is likely to be a retreat into self-beratement, as McRobbie describes.

While the perfect attempts to contain the threat posed by the re-emergence of politicized feminism, Catherine Rottenberg (2018) explores how neoliberalism uses feminism's new visibility to 'solve' problems it creates. Rottenberg (2018, p.5) classifies this effect as 'political anesthetizing' in that it charges individual women with 'fixing' problems which originate from neoliberal structures and orthodoxies. Critical to this, Rottenberg argues, is harnessing language such as 'work-life balance' in which *balance* rather than *emancipation* become the goal for women, thereby leaving the status quo unchallenged. However, unlike the postfeminist rejection of the political, balance is presented as a feminist goal, couched in terms like 'choice' and notions of personal autonomy. Hence the 'neoliberal feminism' Rottenberg so aptly captures is put to work in service of neoliberalism while purporting to serve the needs and desires of women. In this landscape, rhetoric like 'balance' becomes the channel through which feminism is simultaneously invoked and contained. It also works as a linguistic demarcation, whereby that which falls outside the realm of market logic is rendered invisible and unsayable. Rottenberg argues that this demarcation produces a chasm between elite women who manage to achieve much-prized balance and the underpaid, undervalued (female) childminders, cleaners, and others, whose labour is required in order for this much-touted balance to be achieved.

The subjecthood prized by the postfeminist-neoliberalism McRobbie and Rottenberg capture finds expression in Johanna Oksala's (2011) work on the neoliberal

[10] This thesis takes its understanding of patriarchy from a definition offered by bell hooks (2004) who characterises patriarchy as a system in which both men and women are implicated. Hooks' definition emphasizes nuance over essentialism by highlighting how patriarchal institutions like religion reproduce themselves on a subjective and cultural level. This is achieved through the assimilation of men and women into gender roles which they endeavour to uphold as social norms. To note, hooks does not capitalise the first letter in her name and surname.

subject of feminism. Returning to and updating Sandra Lee Bartky's (1990) compelling analysis of the fashion-beauty complex, Oksala (2011, p.105) outlines how Bartky uses Foucault's (1991) early concept of power to show how women's subjectivities are, 'constructed through an ensemble of disciplinary habits.' This kind of disciplinary power becomes part of the logics through which people understand themselves as individuals. As such, it does not constrain women as with traditional patriarchy, by restricting them to the home or denying them civil or political rights. Instead, this is a system which subdues women via 'normalisation' in which they are constructed as, 'particular kinds of subjects, not simply by taking power away from them.' (Oksala 2011, p.106) Central to this is the notion of repetition, a 'normative mechanism' that, along with the effect of shame which women strive to avoid by embodying femininity 'correctly', produces the illusion of a gender core. (Oskala 2011, p.107 drawing on insights from Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity).

To update Bartky's insights, Oksala utilises Foucault's previously discussed later work on neoliberal governmentality, which, she argues, is critical to shaping how current modes of femininity are created, circulated and embodied. To reiterate, governmentality encourages subjectivities that are driven by self-interest, a self-interest which is characterised by aspiration and freedom but one that is, as Oskala (2011, p.111) notes, 'eminently governable'. Where earlier forms of discipline instilled docility, Foucault (1988) proposes that neoliberal governmentality produces an active subject whose energies are directed into the market-sanctioned categories of the entrepreneur and the consumer. Oskala (2011, p.115) argues that such logics depict the embrace of femininity as economically strategic and rational. In this arrangement, *femininity is something a woman pursues for herself,* to maximise her economic worth as a neoliberal subject, as opposed to something she only does for the attention of men. Rather than normative femininity being retrenched solely in subtler disciplinary ways as Bartky describes, Oskala (2011, p.115) asserts that femininity is now also retrenched by, 'a rationality based on financial loss and gain.' Thus, neoliberal governmentality does not need to rely on shame, judgemental or ostracization alone to produce feminine subjects. By introducing a market-orientated prerogative, 'it installs habits constitutive of normative femininity increasingly through their economic rationality.' (Oskala 2011, p.116)

1.4 Empowerment

As feminist media and cultural scholarship has well-explored, 'empowerment' is a buzzword and an ethos regularly deployed by marketers and advertisers to target women and girls. Its intersection with neoliberalism is summed up neatly by Banet-Weiser's (2017, p.268) avowal that, 'empowering oneself as an individual is a key logic within neoliberal capitalism'. Postfeminist-neoliberal empowerment conjures up appealing notions of agency, autonomy and choice but instead of pushing the radical potential of these terms, it instead reroutes this potential towards individualised modes of consumption and self-fulfilment, a point perhaps best captured in L'Oréal's infamous advertising catchphrase, 'Because You're Worth It'. Unsurprisingly, this has led to much critique and analysis of empowerment rhetoric by feminist scholars, key literature on which this section explores with particular attention to how postfeminist empowerment intersects with neoliberalism.

In this study, participants' invoking of empowerment discourse brings to mind a well-made observation by Angela McRobbie (2009, p.49) who cautioned that, 'women are currently being disempowered through the very discourses of empowerment they are being offered as substitutes for feminism.' What McRobbie (2004, pp.260-261) calls 'female individualisation', brought about under postfeminist, neoliberal orthodoxies, calls upon girls and women to 'have a lifeplan' which they assume responsibility for under the guise of 'empowerment'. Conveniently, this logic displaces from view the structural inequalities still faced by women (which collective struggle has traditionally sought to challenge) while simultaneously entrenching competition between women.

As is particularly pertinent for this project, empowerment is also a key element of the kinds of popular discourse which credits social media with enabling women to express themselves in the public sphere as never before. For example, a 2018 article published on Cosmopolitan.com entitled, 'Selfies: An underrated form of female empowerment?', argues: 'A selfie lets you take control of your image on social media and express yourself however you want.' However, these self-expressions are not as unencumbered or open as such rhetoric implies. As the discussion of the work of Alice Marwick in Chapter Three elucidates, social media is heavily shaped by the logics of neoliberal governmentality which emphasizes status, reputation-cultivation and hyper-competitiveness. Thus, the kinds of expressions and representations which are prioritized in such spaces are typically the ones which most align with this outlook, an outlook which postfeminist-neoliberal discourse compliments rather than contests.

Postfeminist empowerment positions 'freely chosen' femininity as the site and source of self-betterment. Such an address is powerful not only in its commodity form (as in advertising), but also because of how it functions as a form of popular logic on a cultural, social and psychological level. A longstanding example of this is the Spice Girl's rallying cry, Girl Power. More than twenty years since the band's arrival on the music scene, the empowerment-lite rhetoric Girl Power spawned has found its way into institutional and policy settings (McRobbie 2009, Koffmann, Orgad & Gill 2015), and remains a compelling and lucrative mode of feminine self-branding[11]. In the following passage, Tasker and Negra succinctly capture why postfeminist empowerment narratives continue to endure while economic precarity intensifies:

> Postfeminism frequently imagines femininity as a state of vitality in opposition to the symbolically deathly social and economic fields of contemporary Western cultures, and the highest-profile forms of postfeminist femininity are empowered to recharge a culture defined by exhaustion, uncertainty, and moral ambiguity. (Tasker & Negra 2007, p.9)

Empowerment, then, should be understood as a symbolic site of potential and transformation which is gendered, one which reinvigorates an ailing order through the creation of youthful luminosity (McRobbie 2009). Yet, the very ailing economic order it reinvigorates is undoing the already weak foundations postfeminist promises are built on. Empowerment routed through such logics inspires hope only to ultimately extinguish it for all but a select few, creating a cycle which is appealing but self-defeating, an effect that manifests as dissonance. Central to this arrangement is consumption or more precisely, the reproduction of the self through the acquisition and display of the right kinds of material goods. At this juncture, postfeminism and neoliberalism synergise to produce, as an ideal subject, the self-starting, hyper-feminised and highly visible young woman who is the entrepreneur of her life. Thus, she is 'empowered' by, not dismantling the status-quo, but in finding meaning and purpose within it. As Tram Nguyen (2013, p.158) writes, noting the postfeminist emphasis on youthful femininity, 'postfeminists encourage "girls" to immerse themselves in the pleasures of femaleness, to find self-fulfilment and carnality, rather than to dismantle, critique, expose, or challenge systematic discrimination and violence.'

The usefulness of empowerment as analytic lens is questioned by scholars like Nicola Gavey (2012, p.719) who criticises its, as she puts it, conceptual flabbiness. Yet, in

[11] At the time of writing, the Spice Girls are reformed (*sans* Victoria Beckham aka Posh Spice) and are once again preparing to tour sold-out arenas around the world.

positioning empowerment as 'an object of analysis', Evans and Riley (2015, p.37) indicate a way in which the term can be used productively. Following the development and popular dissemination of empowerment-lite rhetoric since it came to the fore in the Nineties is, I contend, useful for feminist scholarship precisely because the flexuous nature of such rhetoric lends itself to iterations and reinventions that remain compelling to many women and girls. As Ellen Riordan (2001, p.282) posits, the imprecise meaning of empowerment facilitates co-option by market forces and postfeminist-neoliberal cultures based on interpretations which position it as 'an individual sense of entitlement' as opposed to 'a challenge to patriarchal and capitalist structures.' Empowerment, therefore, is easily rendered individualised and commercialised rather than something that is experienced by women as a class through the advancement of human rights and freedoms. Any such arrangement should sound a note of extreme caution for those concerned with progressive politics for, as Gavey (2012, p.719) incisively puts it, 'feeling empowered is not necessarily the same as *being* empowered [emphasis Gavey's].'

Gavey's point is reflected in this study, during moments of dissonance when participants acknowledge or become aware that their lived experiences do not tally with the postfeminist-neoliberal discourses available to them, which brings assertions of empowerment abruptly into question. This often produces the aforementioned moments of impasse, when they cannot reconcile the language of postfeminist-neoliberalism with their experiences. As Emilie Zaslow (2009) argues, although Girl Power was reconfigured in such a way as to elide its political origins in the DIY cultures of third wave feminism, this reworking was not wholly successful, resulting in a form of discord. She observes:

> Coming of age in girl power culture, girls experience a cultural discordance that arises in the tension between the neoliberal empowerment language and narratives that they adopt, and their social and emotional experiences of gender, race, and class inequities… Girl power is a watered-down feminist position available as a stylish accessory, but it is also a meaningful and widespread embodiment of some feminist positions that girls draw upon as they create their gender identities. (Zaslow 2009, p.9)

As a consequence of the reconfiguration Zaslow describes, the discourses of empowerment available for young women to draw upon are necessarily limited as they are decoupled from their political origins. However, the promise of their origins remains, however faint the facsimile. In this study, when the promise of postfeminist-neoliberalism clashes with material reality, the discursive limits of empowerment rhetoric are reached, leaving participants without the necessary rhetorical tools to hold a critical position. This results in an ambivalent emotional response directed at the self,

in which the individual feels unable to defend her criticisms of the norm under the weight of discourse which positions choice and visibility as sacrosanct. Highly individualised, imbued with neoliberal logic, the discourses of empowerment available to participants in this study act all too often as a eunuch rather than 'the real thing'. Indeed, as one participant explained, she feared it was un-feminist of her to criticise the behaviour of the Kardashians, since such criticisms called into question the kinds of choices the Kardashians made in the building of their brand and the choices their followers make in buying into it. As querying a woman's choice is verboten - according to the strictures of postfeminist-neoliberalism – the participant in question was forced to turn her unease back on herself in the manner McRobbie (2015) describes, shutting down her critical instincts for fear of not being suitably supportive of other women's choices.

This incident and others like it highlight the degree to which notions of feminism themselves have become entangled with neoliberal norms. As empowerment discourse seeks to emphasize individualised female achievement and render invisible prevailing inequalities and contemporary gender challenges, it produces, Budgeon (2013, p.285) suggests, a sense of uncertainty which stems from failed attempts to embody the subject position of successful femininity. Women seek relief from this uncertainty in what Budgeon (Ibid) terms 'highly individualized strategies' which, 'do not necessarily work to women's advantage nor do they result in the expansion of their capacity to exercise autonomy.' This point is repeatedly reflected in the ways in which participants in this study recount negotiating with the visibility they feel is expected of them, a negotiation that produces varying levels of success and a great deal of pressure.

Girl Power proved to be a massive financial boon for the Spice Girls, establishing a market and popular ethos that flourishes in various guises to the present day. This is no accident, for as Sarah Banet-Weiser (2015b) observes, situating girls and women concurrently as 'empowered' consumers and as a distinctly vulnerable class is highly lucrative, naming a problem which can be 'cured' through the right kinds of consumption. In essence, as Banet-Weiser (2015b, p.183) argues, 'positioning of girls as 'in crisis' and in need of empowerment and, simultaneously, as important consumers, has helped create a *market* for empowerment [emphasis Banet-Weiser's].' As an exercise in marketing, Girl Power packages empowerment as something to be consumed; thus, it is empowerment, rather than feminism, which postfeminist-neoliberalism offers women, as a means of

transforming the self rather than society. Hence, the quest for empowerment becomes, as Banet-Weiser argues (2015b, p.186), 'a practice that *absorbs* - rather than energizes or mobilizes - political sensibility [emphasis Banet-Weiser's].'

Under postfeminism, the increased visibility of women in the media and online is depicted as inherently empowering both for the individual woman and those aspiring to be like her. While the significance of this new visibility should not be underestimated, neither should it be oversold. As Banet-Weiser (2015b, p.190) cautions, 'media is visibility is not… a guaranteed access to power.' Expanding on this point in her very timely 2018 book *Empowered*, Banet-Weiser (p.23) explores how easily the modern media landscape – digital technologies included – absorb politicized visibility, including expressly feminist visibilities, so that they become '*the end*, rather than a means to an end [emphasis Banet-Weiser's].' Thus, politics begins and ends in the image, leaving the source of inequalities – that is, wider societal structures in which the media itself is embedded - untroubled. In this context, Banet-Weiser argues that empowerment, rather than liberation, is presented to young women *as feminism*, its conceptual nebulousness conveniently providing little in the way of direction or ambition beyond the self. Such enticements encourage practices which lend themselves to marketization and surveillance while brushing over the vulnerabilities inherent to self-exposure. As Banet-Weiser (2018, p.25) concisely puts it, 'The visible body is also the commodifiable body', a point which reflects the longstanding relationship between much of Western visual culture and the female body.

1.5 Celebrity

The final section of this chapter explores a recurrent theme in participants' transcripts which this study terms 'postfeminist-neoliberal celebrity'. It is created when the scripts of postfeminism and neoliberalism combine to produce a particular performance of female celebrity which venerates and promotes the kinds of visibility critical to selfie surveillance. The presence of postfeminist-neoliberal celebrity and its significance in participants' accounts should not be underestimated, especially when it comes to the cultivation of new feminine subjectivities. As Evans and Riley (2013, p.286) note, 'celebrity culture affects gender politics.' They argue that cultural changes over the course of the early twenty-first century make it necessary to, 're-evaluate what current representations of celebrity suggest about existing social tensions.' (Evans & Riley 2016, p.269) Importantly, they propose that contemporary modes of female celebrity act not only as an authority which reasserts existing forms of femininity but also as a site where new forms of femininity are brought into being.

Celebrity has played a long, critical role in the reproduction and representation of femininity (Doane 1988, Stacey 1994, Holmes & Negra 2011). Yet, surprisingly little expressly feminist literature exists which tackles the issue of contemporary celebrity culture (Holmes & Negra 2011). This is particularly striking given the findings of this project, for example, which illustrates how postfeminist-neoliberal celebrity functions as a key point of dissemination for norms which position social media surveillance as desirable and economically astute. Whatever one may think about the Kardashians, they have been a global force for a decade now, building a massive empire through the cultivation of a distinctly female audience and the utilisation of multiple platforms across old and new media. Despite their notoriety, feminist literature on the Kardashians remains quite scant. The literature which is in existence provides valuable insights (a key selection of which this section explores), further underscoring the need for more sustained academic attention. This lack potentially means that the richness of women's engagement with emerging forms of social media celebrity goes underexplored while the problematic elements of this engagement goes unchallenged. As Evans and Riley (2016, p.272) illustrate in their study of postfeminist celebrity culture, the ubiquity of celebrity in the current moment is keenly felt by the women they interviewed. The complex and negotiated manner in which their interviewees engage with celebrity culture is also clear. Such findings echo the conclusions of this study, which, unlike Evans and Riley, is focused on a social media phenomenon. Taken together, they illustrate the need for a deeper feminist focus on how women incorporate issues and intersections of contemporary celebrity and digital technologies into everyday life.

In *Understanding Celebrity*, Graeme Turner helpfully defines celebrity as:

> …a genre of representation and a discursive effect; it is a commodity traded by the promotions, publicity, and media industries that produce these representations and their effects; and it is a cultural formation that has a social function we can better understand. (Turner 2004, p.9)

From Turner's definition, we see that 'celebrity' is far from a static concept, confined within the parameters of a text like a film or a television show. Rather, celebrity is constructive, descriptive, and *active*; a discursive formation symbolising a type of value which is used in turn to reproduce that same value. The 'social function' of celebrity is the factor which I want to emphasize here, since it is precisely this aspect of celebrity which participants 'shine a light on' in their accounts. Echoing Turner's (2004, p.8) points about the representation of celebrity more broadly, these accounts are characterised by

contradiction, contrast and ambiguity. They are also reflective of what Turner (2004) defines as the demotic turn, referring to the ways in which modern celebrity has become increasingly focused on the 'ordinary' individual which is reflected in claims to 'realness' and authenticity. Although often dismissed as a realm of frivolity, the significance of celebrity in shaping the kinds of subjectivities currently in vogue should not be underestimated. As Hearn and Schoenhoff (2015, p.195) posit, 'The celebrity embodies exemplary forms of selfhood, models how those forms of selfhood might be achieved and lived, and functions as a catalyst in and through which desire and power are seen to coalesce.'

In their important edited collection of essays exploring contemporary female celebrity, Holmes and Negra (2011, p.1) note that 'stark differences' still persist in the treatment of female celebrities compared to male celebrities. Drawing on Richard Dyer's (1979) foundational work on the star system which explores the political nature of celebrity, Holmes and Negra (2011, p.3) emphasize the role of the female celebrity in, 'testing dominant social norms.' Hence, we can understand female celebrity not only in terms of the aspirational and the idealised but also in terms of that which troubles and challenges the limits of femininity at a specific historical point. Holmes and Negra's points are reinforced by Kristy Fairclough (2012, p.91) who, in reflecting on the evolution of celebrity studies, notes that although gender is critical to processes of celebrity, 'it is only recently that it has become part of the theoretical, conceptual and historical interrogation of the field'. Further to this point, Fairclough (2012, p.90) argues that, 'Female celebrities have become the chief site upon which contemporary tensions and anxieties surrounding femininity, motherhood, body image, cosmetic surgery, marriage and ageing are played out.'

Key to this arrangement is an ever-more dissecting, surveillant focus on celebrity bodies which are, as Fairclough (2012, p.91) describes, 'still revered and aspired to, but they are also exposed, examined and scrutinised in order to reveal their corporeal construction.' This is an important point for, as Anna Watkins Fisher (2011, p.318) highlights, digital media offer a plethora of new ways in which female celebrities' 'failures' – physical, emotional and mental - can be amplified and endlessly recirculated as a form of ridicule. This study finds that the dynamics Fisher describes serve to discipline not only the celebrities concerned but the female audience who are invited, through the participatory surveillance enabled by social media, to judge their failures. As later chapters exploring participants' accounts of selfie-practices outline, the enticement to

judge other women through selfie surveillance makes subjects keenly aware of the myriad ways in which they too fail in their pursuit of femininity and the punitive effects of such failures.

When discussing postfeminist-neoliberal celebrity, the obvious focal point is the aforementioned Kardashian clan, the celebrities most frequently mentioned in participants' accounts. With their shrewd use of reality television and social media, the Kardashians have produced a highly lucrative and culturally influential form of entrepreneurial femininity. Utilising key aspects of what Jerslev and Mortensen (2016) term the 'celebrity selfie', a distinct format and practice, the Kardashians frame their use of social media in particular as an 'empowering' exercise in personal and commercial control over their image, one which also grants their fans direct access to their lives. However, as Jerslev and Mortensen (2016, p.249) outline, while the celebrity selfie draws on the assumed intimacy of social media, thereby seeming to reduce the distance between follower and celebrity, in reality it reinforces that distance by emphasizing the stark differences between the lives of civilians and the famous. Hence, the celebrity selfie functions as a deeply commercialised, strategic process which draws on notions of realness and accessibility yet is rife with contradictions. The Kardashians exemplify these contradictions, touting images they classify as 'real' which are in fact heavily edited and often linked to their own business interests.

The reality show which first brought the family to widespread public attention, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, is now over ten-years-old, showing remarkable staying power in a notoriously fickle industry. The show's stars – Kourtney, Kim, Khloe, Kylie, Kendall and matriarch 'momanger' Kris – have created a billion-dollar empire which extends to numerous endorsement deals, spin-off television shows, apps, clothing lines, books, and cosmetics. In a move illustrative of the postfeminist-neoliberal media culture this chapter explores, the Kardashians emphasize femininity as a means to both personal and economic empowerment. Rather than hide the labour that goes into maintaining their bodies and looks, the Kardashians place it front and centre; the cameras follow them as they work-out, while getting their make-up done and looking impossibly glamourous after giving birth. What is not as readily 'offered up' is the family's use of and reliance on plastic surgery to achieve their distinctive look. In selectively 'showing their work', the Kardashian's emphasize their business acumen, casting femininity as something which ambitious, savvy women should invest time, and crucially for their empire, money in acquiring (Pramaggiore and Negra 2014).

Alice Leppert (2015, p.216) argues that the Kardashians occupy a liminal position in the sense that they harness old and new forms of celebrity. She describes them as, 'icons for postfeminist self-entrepreneurship' and expert self-branders, who utilise material from their lives that might normally be classified as 'private' to produce an image derived from ideas of realness, accessibility and endeavour. This private material includes Kim Kardashian's sex tape with a former lover, the births of various Kardashian offspring and numerous 'showdowns' between the sisters themselves and their rotating stable of beaus. In the context of this study, this liminality also speaks to cultural representations of shifting understandings of the public and the private. This is exemplified by the encroachment of social media into realms previously considered private, such as the home and increasingly, emotional, bodily and cognitive states. With their 'access-all-areas' ethos, the Kardashians normalise the creep of social media surveillance and the media more broadly into hitherto off-limits aspects of the everyday, happily offering up the minutiae of their lives to television cameras and smartphone cameras. This is not to claim that these representations are not mediated – they very clearly are – but to highlight how the Kardashians package self-exposure and increasing surveillance as desirable rather than intrusive through their enthusiastic acceptance of it.

Like their use of old and new forms of celebrity, the Kardashians also interweave contemporary and longstanding aspects of femininity to produce an effect which marks them as key exemplars of current era postfeminist-neoliberalism in which tradition intertwines with entrepreneurism. Commercially ambitious they may be but they are also, as Leppert (2015) notes, keenly concerned with their roles as mothers, aunts, sisters and partners in heterosexual unions. The domestic features heavily in their content, both as a setting for their television show and in their social media, where their bathrooms, children, and pool-sides frequently form the backdrop for selfies. It is this aspect of their image, particularly the emphasis the Kardashians' place on sisterhood, that Leppert regards as central to their appeal. In a key passage, she writes:

> Whereas postfeminist entrepreneurial culture tells young women they don't need to build connections with other women, the overwhelming popularity of the Kardashians' investment in sisterhood suggests that young women do value and desire bonds with each other, even though those bonds may be in the name of a brand. (Leppert 2015, p.217)

As Leppert sees it, by celebrating sisterhood, albeit for commercial rather than political reasons, the Kardashians open up some much-needed space within the convenes of contemporary postfeminism for the expression of female bonds and intimacies. This point

is reflected in the Kardashians astute use of social media to encourage their followers, as Leppert (2015) observes, to participate in the sisterhood. However much one might criticise the Kardashian's shameless self-promotion and harnessing of femininity to re-intensify the beauty myth[12] for the digital age, Leppert's point here is insightful. As she suggests, the appeal of the kinds of sisterhood enacted by the Kardashians can be construed as supplying a relief from the demands of postfeminist-neoliberal hyper-individuality while also producing an image – a new iteration of Girl Power, for example – that is read as desirable. From a feminist perspective, this illustrates an interesting tension, namely that the Kardashians' exploitation of sisterhood illustrates its enduring importance in the lives of young women. Hence, like the Spice Girls before them, they create a space within postfeminism where sisterhood is powerful - so long as it is not political and highly profitable.

Of all the Kardashian sisters, Kim Kardashian is arguably the most famous (Kylie's recent success accepted). In her essay on Kim's appeal, Alexandra Sastre (2014) does not explore her online presence but she does examine how Kim, as a celebrity text, operates in complex, contradictory ways which draw on current and longstanding notions of femininity and female sexuality. While Kim first came to public attention through the release of a sex-tape of her with a former partner (a release she at first resisted then sought to profit from), her growing fame built on her ability to reassert traditional norms as evidence of her contrition, such as her pursuit of matrimony and motherhood. As Sastre (2014, p.127) argues, by attaching herself to such traditional narratives, Kim, 'repeats, reminds and reinforces her literal physical exposure through new and 'corrective' forms of exposure that themselves lend her the visibility necessary to build a tremendously lucrative career.' It should be stressed that what is being corrected here is the kind of femininity Kim is construed as embodying. The notion of correction implies a form of work which is directed towards the self and achieved through the pursuit of more correct forms of femininity (i.e., the traditional forms of matrimony and motherhood) and profit.

Sastre (2014, p.129) also highlights how Kim, who is of Armenian descent, tactically co-ops different notions of raced female bodies. She describes how Kim expresses 'both the trope of the heavily regulated 'white' body and the trope of the

[12] 'The beauty myth' refers to a book and concept developed by Naomi Wolf (1991) to describe how fashion and beauty imagery is used against women to dissolve their collective power and restrain the gains made by second wave feminism.

curvaceous, exoticized, non-white (implicitly black) body.' Such manoeuvring undermines the notion, often put forward by fans of the Kardashians, that Kim's figure marks a departure from earlier, exclusionary representations of the female form. Hence, while Kim's body may presage the histories of women omitted, fetishized and ridiculed for their failure to conform to a white normative femininity, her ability to also embody whiteness, not to mention her wealth and influence, enable her to be cast as, "exotic' without any of the burdens that typically also accompany that designation.' (Sastre 2014, p.131) Here again, the Kardashian phenomenon can be seen to reassert harmful norms while also benefiting from them. However, as Sastre (2014, p.134) rightly cautions, not even a Kardashian can prevent public backlash on the occasions when 'the production behind her public self' is revealed. Thus, although in a position of great privilege, Kim's celebrity does not absolve her from judgement or negativity. This point is exemplified further in the kinds of discipline and judgement participants describe female celebrities being subject to through the surveillant cultures of social media.

In her fascinating article on Kim's hugely popular (and profitable) computer game *Kim Kardashian: Hollywood*, Alison Harvey (2018) shows how the game exploits several narratives which are central to the success of the Kardashian brand, all of which represent the furthering entanglement of postfeminism with neoliberalism: the veneration of entrepreneurialism, the power of manufactured 'realness' in self-branding, and the desirability of celebrity. The manner in which the Kardashian brand toys with notions of 'realness' is reflective of trends in the wider culture, particularly on social media where such claims are critical to self-branding[13] practices. This 'realness' or 'authenticity' is typically focused on the female body (Keller 2012). It is also revealing of how the demand for authenticity online produces effects which are gendered, raced and highly specular, whereby normative femininity is ultimately reasserted rather than disrupted or transcended (Keller 2012, Genz 2015, Sastre 2014). As Banet-Weiser (2012) argues, girls and women have little choice but to engage in self-branding practices if they want to have a presence online, central to which is the presentation what is interpreted as a desirable,

[13] This study utilises the widely-cited definition of self-branding developed by Alison Hearn (2008, p.198): 'Self-branding involves the self-conscious construction of a meta-narrative and meta-image of self through the use of cultural meanings and images drawn from the narrative and visual codes of the mainstream culture industries. The function of the branded self is purely rhetorical; its goal is to produce cultural value and potentially material profit.' To note, social media has enabled the further dissemination of the trends Hearn identifies into everyday life.

'authentic' self.[14]. Given the structure of social media and their inbuilt feedback loops, Banet-Weiser (2012, p.57) cautions that, 'one's online presence will be viewed by others using the same rubric to judge brands: through evaluation, ranking, and judgement, and with the ideal of visibility in mind.' Critical to this, and the cultivation of authenticity more broadly, is the notion of 'self-disclosure', a key self-branding strategy which the Kardashian phenomenon has taken to new heights, that relies on, 'traditional discourses of the "authentic" self as one that is transparent, without artifice, open to others.' (Banet-Weiser 2012, p.60) Hence, as Banet-Weiser suggests, in these contexts, authenticity is understood as something that exists not just within but is outwardly embodied by an individual, giving insight into their 'true' being. However, as participants' accounts illustrate, the scripts of postfeminist-neoliberal celebrity are rife with inconsistencies which severely undermine claims to authenticity. While the Kardashian brand and many others like them sell surveillance through bodily and self-disclosure as empowering, 'real', and financially savvy, participants' attempts to reconcile these narratives with reality inevitably leads to dissonance.

1.6 Summary

Through its analysis of postfeminist-neoliberalism, this chapter maps core aspects of this study's analytical framework in which the new traditionalism (McRobbie 2009) of postfeminism meets the idealised feminine subject of neoliberal governmentality (Oksala 2011, McRobbie 2015, Rottenberg 2018). This intersection produces a logic of postfeminist-neoliberal femininity which is characterised by hyper-individuality, responsibilization and homosocial competitiveness which is directed towards the reproduction and re-entrenchment of normative gender. It is also deeply characterised by dissonance, where the scripts and assertions of postfeminist-neoliberalism fail to cohere, producing effects which are ambiguous and disciplining yet difficult to critique. Femininity, although still rooted in the traditional, becomes imbued with an appealing economic logic as an investment and a means to empowerment over which women have ultimate control. In this arrangement, feminist discourse is at once instrumentalised and politically neutralised, whereby women are heralded as free, independent agents while concurrently being held accountable for the failures and successes of their decisions in

[14] It is also important to highlight that the expectations created by self-branding practices can be re-cast as sites of negotiation and contestation, as participants' accounts reveal. Through their use of humour, ugliness and other forms of subversion, participants echo the findings of Maguire (2015) and Kanai (2017) in showing how they pre-empt the demands of visibility, thereby developing personalised strategies to cope with the possibility of judgement.

contexts which remain far from equal. This displaces from view the wider factors shaping, enabling and constraining women's choices, in which postfeminist-neoliberalism itself is heavily implicated. Thus, as we will see, the negative outcomes of selfie surveillance are often treated by participants as a failure of the individual rather than society or technology.

As exemplars of postfeminist-neoliberal celebrity, the Kardashian phenomenon provides critical insights on these dynamics 'in-action'. With their emphasis on the domestic, the bodily, the aesthetic and the heterosexual, they reflect the ethos of postfeminist new traditionalism in which a return to femininity is presented as progressive on the grounds that it is freely chosen and economically astute. This ethos incorporates the neoliberal economic logic Oksala (2011) describes, in which femininity is presented as a sensible investment one makes in one's self which requires visibility and self-disclosure. Thus, the access-all-areas visibility promoted by the Kardashians depicts the rising surveillance of women's lives and bodies as a new norm which is an inevitable, desirable aspect of 'doing' contemporary femininity. This outlook elides the intensification of aesthetic labour provoked by perpetual visibility and the vulnerabilities inherent to such exposure. In their use of sisterhood, the Kardashians instrumentalise feminism in the way Rottenberg (2018) identifies, as a discursive strategy which simultaneously draws on and dissolves the political in pursuit of profit. Thus, this evoking of notions of friendship, kinship and solidarity actively absorbs and reworks feminist ideas regarding the power of the collective for profit and popularity rather than political change. For the Kardashians' many millions of followers, these elements undoubtedly make a compelling script - but they cannot escape the limitations of their foundations. As later chapters explore, the surveillant activities postfeminist-neoliberal discourses support are far from as enthusiastically embraced by participants as they are the Kardashians.

In digital cultures which demand visibility, postfeminist-neoliberalism provides a set of logics which reinforce this mandate. Centring visibility and individualism, addressing women as the archetype neoliberal citizen, discourses of postfeminist-neoliberalism provide an uncritical embrace of emergent technological norms which are themselves heavily shaped by neoliberalism, a point Chapter Three explores in detail. Such an embrace leaves little scope for sustained criticism of this 'new normal' (Elias, Gill & Scharff 2017) nor does it offer many alternatives beyond a retreat from visibility. Gill's (2017) assertion regarding postfeminism's hegemony in the current moment is supported by these dynamics, which illustrate how postfeminism is being replenished and further

disseminated through the rise of neoliberal 'common sense' and digital technologies which promote a very similar outlook. Critical to this process are the new 'ways of seeing' (Berger 1972) promoted by selfie surveillance with the support of postfeminist-neoliberal discourses, a development the next chapter explores.

Chapter 2: The Gaze

2.1. Introduction

While the previous chapter explored the characteristics of postfeminist-neoliberalism, this chapter focuses on postfeminist-neoliberal visibilities of which selfie surveillance is representative. As feminist media scholarship has much analysed, in Western culture visibility is shaped by the gaze or 'the look' as Rosalind Coward (1984) terms it, drawing our attention to the political dimensions of the visual field which are, as she reminds us, never neutral. With Coward's salient observation in mind, the chapter explores the gazes which structure postfeminist-neoliberal visibilities. In particular, it examines the role of surveillance and dissonance as effects which reflect longstanding and fundamental aspects of looking as a woman which have become intensified in the current era by cultural practices like the selfie. It is important to note that such practices, although often dismissed for their popularity, are complex signifying systems which, as Pollock (1988, pp. 6-7) argues, 'produce meaning and positions from which those meanings are consumed.' Thus, cultural practices from cinema to the selfie directly shape visibility, both in terms of those who are permitted visibility and how, and those who are denied it.

Writing in the *New Review of Film and Television Studies* in 2017, Kelly Oliver (p.451) cautions that the rise of digital technologies has rendered the male gaze, 'more relevant, and more dangerous, than ever.' The reason for this, Oliver argues, is how these technologies – which are 'born out of the male gaze' (Oliver 2017, p.454) - enable the circulation and proliferation of images which seek to harass, objectify and demean women, such as revenge porn and creep shots. By enabling men to produce and share such imagery in everyday contexts on a scale hitherto unparalleled, Oliver makes the compelling case that social media inevitably intensifies the effects of the male gaze. Oliver is not alone in her concern. As scholars like Emma A. Jane (2017) outline, the internet provides new and evermore invasive ways for misogyny to manifest and circulate. In the early stages of the selfie phenomenon, sociologist Ben Agger (2013, no pagination) described it as, 'the male gaze gone viral'. More than forty years after the publication of Laura Mulvey's foundational treatise on the male gaze, Oliver and Agger's remarks show the remarkable influence and continued relevancy of her ideas. However, it is important to stress that social media practices like the selfie also offer women new ways to see themselves and each other. As Mulvey (2006, p.27) herself highlights, technological changes 'affect human perception', ushering in alternative ways to experience media. This

point is further complicated in the current moment, as Evans and Riley (2015, p.32) argue, by the ways in which 'women now increasingly gaze at both other women and at themselves'. They propose that in this context, 'the male gaze, it seems, has sometimes been removed altogether.' (Ibid) Thus, in the contemporary visual landscape, images of women – including those created by women themselves - can be used in nuanced and contradictory ways; they can be deployed to resist objectification while concurrently representing sites of concern for, as Evans and Riley argue, 'both reproducing the male gaze and producing a narcissistic neoliberal self-policing gaze in relation to women's apparently "freely chosen look".' (Ibid)

What Riley, Evans and Mackiewicz (2016) term 'looking talk' features prominently in participants' transcripts, providing insights on how selfie-practices are used to negotiate postfeminist-neoliberal visibility and how selfie surveillance structures this visibility. 'Looking talk' refers to a selection of discourses participants draw on to describe their use of the selfie that are shot-through with postfeminist-neoliberal logics of visibility which feminist conceptions of the gaze are vital to unpacking. These conceptualisations have traditionally sought to 'denaturalise' the act of looking in order to reveal and examine the political forces shaping how we see and are seen. It is precisely because of this important work that we can say that surveillance of the female body is not only not new, it is a fundamental, determining aspect of how femininity has come to be embodied and represented in Western culture. The current moment marks an evolution in this surveillance in which, as this chapter explores, women themselves are directly implicated. This is not to diminish the very real effects of online abuse which Kelly outlines or the enduring, active presence of the male gaze but rather to expand, from a feminist perspective, our understanding of the multiplicity of gazes enabled by digital technology. This is underscored by the surveillant female gaze which emerges from participants' accounts, it being the primary gaze they project and respond to. This gaze utilises current and longstanding 'ways of seeing' (Berger 1972) to structure participants' engagement with visibility in a contemporary technological context. This structuring typically occurs along highly normative lines; hence, in true postfeminist-neoliberal fashion it functions as a way to contain and redirect any potential threats to the established gender order posed by women's new-found ability to represent themselves through digital technologies like social media.

In emphasizing the role of the female gaze in the contexts under analysis, this study seeks to create the reflective, open-minded space necessary to consider the dynamic

ways in which the participants utilise the selfie in their everyday life. This stance is informed by the insights of Lasén and Goméz-Cruz (2019) who argue in relation to digital photography that such practices represent a 'complex game of gaze', emblematic of how social media activities like the selfie are changing visual culture and media production. This change is reworking how media is created and consumed and how we understand audiences and users. As Feona Attwood (2011, p.207) argues, 'looking and being looked at no longer necessarily signify powerlessness', urging that 'context and circumstance' be taken into account when exploring such processes. (Attwood 2013, p.205) To that end, this study considers very carefully the surveillant architecture within which selfie-practices are embedded and how this influences the kinds of looking that are encouraged and those which are prohibited. This follows Rosalind Gill's (2016 no pagination) assertion that surveillance is 'a feminist issue', one which urgently requires new feminist scholarship on looking as it relates to 'doing' and shaping feminine subjectivities in the current moment.

2.2. Overview of Key Theories

The rise of gaze theory begins in the Seventies, when the impacts and insights of progressive movements began to make themselves felt in academia. An expansive account of this development is beyond the scope of this project; hence, the following is offered as an overview of selected key scholarship pertinent to this study. 'Every image,' the great art historian John Berger (p.10) wrote in 1972, 'embodies a way of seeing'. It follows then, that those who have the ability to shape the visual landscape command a great deal of power, for it is *their way of seeing* that determines what is shown, how it is shown, and what is excluded. As Berger details in his classic work *Ways of Seeing*, under the patronage system which funded early European painting, wealthy men were the 'spectator-owner' of the work. This impacted how paintings were devised, with depictions of the female being made to flatter the spectator who was typically anticipated as male.

Berger's (1972, p.47) ground-breaking analysis of the male gaze in Western art is often summed up in the few words, '*men act* and *women appear* [emphasis Berger's]'. A woman, Berger (1972, p.46) argues, 'must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself.' To illustrate how this process of looking is justified in art, Berger describes a painting of a naked woman with a mirror in her hand entitled *Vanity*. He argues that although the woman has been painted nude for the male spectator's pleasure, the addition of the mirror 'was to make the woman connive

in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight.' (Berger 1972, p.51) In this arrangement, femininity is characterised by its visibility – or *to-be-looked-at-ness* as Mulvey (1975) would later term it – a visibility which women themselves are charged with colluding in, even encouraging. As Dubrosky and Magnet (2015) note in the introduction to their foundational work on the emerging field of feminist surveillance studies, this dynamic is still used today in media contexts where women's use of social media is taken as 'evidence' that they welcome the male gaze and therefore, deserve to be publicly shamed for enticing it.

Berger's analysis is largely confined to Western art, the motifs of which have had a major influence in shaping the visual field in broad terms. However, as Celia Lury (2003, p.200) points out, what Berger does not explore is how the scopic processes he outlines became so widely disseminated, a development in which the mass reproduction of images played a critical role. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century and gathering pace across the twentieth, this period is characterised by technological advances which enabled the deepening penetration of images into everyday life, through print, cinema, television, advertising, photography and more recently, the internet. The pleasure of looking became associated with a range of now established cultural, social and economic practices, from the movies to the *flâneur* to the hallowed glass halls of the first department stores (Bowlby 1985, Pollock 1988). Thus, images and the act of looking itself became integral factors in the selling of goods and services so central to industrialised societies. Consequently, so too did femininity, as an 'object and market for consumerism' (Lury 2003, p.203) or indeed, as Gaye Tuchman (1978) famously asserted, as the primary commodity object of Western visual culture.

The impact of this mass diffusion of images should not be understated. As Susan Bordo (1999, p,114) argues, images are 'never "just" pictures.' Rather, images reflect and are shaped by the concerns of the societies and industries from which they originate. As Rosetta Brookes (1992, p.18) puts it, 'The mass circulation of photographic images emphasises our awareness of self-image, and establishes a relationship between the particular and the typical.' Hence, images provide powerful social clues as to what is considered normal, desirable and, of course, deviant at a particular historical moment. The effects of this are far from benign particularly for vulnerable populations, a point reflected in John Tagg's (1988) study of the rise of documentary photography. Tagg outlines how this type of surveillant imagery was – and still is – put to work in the facilitation of cultural homogeneity (Tagg 1988). Mapping the use of photography as a

form of evidence by the likes of the legal, media and medical professions from the Victorian period to the present day, Tagg highlights how certain representations are made acceptable while others are not, and the 'truth' gleaned from an image – however questionable - can be translated into knowledge. This knowledge is then used to sustain pre-existing assumptions about categories like race, class, gender and ability. This process has long had punitive effects for the marginalised.

In the Seventies, scholars began to formulate criticisms of the ways in which the media and advertising represented women. This work, as E. Ann Kaplan (1983, p.23) describes, 'emerged from the daily, ongoing concerns of women re-evaluating the culture in which they had been socialized and educated.' Initially, this gave rise to oversimplified cause-and-effect analyses, which called for more realistic depictions of women as an antidote to sexist media representations (Van Zoonen 1994, Hollows 2000). As Suzanna Danuta Walters (1995, p.47) notes, this early work, while path-making, failed to appreciate, 'how representations *construct* sexual difference [emphasis Walters]' nor was it fully attentive to how issues of pleasure, negotiation, identity and desire shape women's engagement with popular culture. Reflecting on the development of feminist media and cultural scholarship, Walters writes:

> …we began to examine how our cultural images produce this category "woman" and thus help to produce gender distinctions and gender dominance… this emphasis on the constructiveness of images is quite different in that it focuses – particularly in feminist film theory – on the specific 'signifying practice' of a medium itself. (Ibid)

Buoyed by this insight, increasingly sophisticated research approaches developed out of the early assumptions Walters describes, something clearly illustrated by what Joanne Hollows (2000) refers to as the 'images of women' tradition. Hollows (2000, p.20) sees this tradition as exploring, 'how the processes and practices of representation worked to produce ideas about what it means to be a woman.' One of the most influential pieces of feminist theory to emerge from this period was Laura Mulvey's conceptualisation of the male gaze which draws on psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud's controversial theory of the mind, for radical ends.

Psychoanalytic theory, particularly that derived from the work of Freud and Jacques Lacan (whose concept of the Mirror Stage Mulvey utilises), enabled feminist media scholars like Mulvey to create useful analytical frameworks designed to interrogate representations of femininity in popular culture. This development was not without criticism, given psychoanalysis's less-than-appealing interpretation of femininity, its

reliance on binary notions of gender and the nuclear family, and its inability to account for factors such as race and class (Butler 1989, Van Zoonen 1994, hooks 1992). Despite these drawbacks, psychoanalysis proved to be, if not the perfect tool or the only tool, nevertheless a very thought-provoking one for unpacking how filmic and other texts 'produced 'woman as image'.' (Hollows 2000, p.43) For feminist film critics, this 'woman as image' was not a warped representation of 'real' women but rather 'woman' as a signifying practice' (Hollows 2000, pp.43-45). Hence, as Walters (1996, p.112) observes, psychoanalytic insights have contributed significantly to feminist gaze theory which she states:

> … attempts to locate resistance in woman's ways of seeing images and constructing meaning. In addition, it tried to give substantive weight to the theoretical position that meaning is not just apparent in the text but is actively made in an interaction between viewer and image.

Mulvey's publication in 1975 of *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* was a landmark for feminist media scholarship. To denaturalize the cinematic look, Mulvey dismantles it, highlighting how gendered cinematic looking is from the camera to the editing to the direction – roles traditionally dominated by men. This dominance is not only unacknowledged, it is presented as seamless, natural. To the audience, the narrative is presented as reality playing out unencumbered and unconstructed, a move which disguises how film is created. Critical to this is how power is expressed through looking, be it behind the scenes with male film crews, on-screen between the characters or the spectator, who is positioned to look through the male gaze of the director and the cameraman. From all angles, female characters are submitted to an objectifying, fetishizing gaze which she cannot return, a gaze which desires to control her in a way that is presented, through the language of cinema, as part of the natural order of things.

For Mulvey, film exemplifies the patriarchal supremacy of the culture from which it surfaces. In an oft-quoted passage, she writes:

> Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of the woman, still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning. (Mulvey 1975, p.7)

Mulvey employs psychoanalytic theory as a 'political weapon', revealing how patriarchal societies' subconscious has organized cinema in such a way that positions women as

passive objects ensnared in the male gaze. Drawing on Freud's theory of castration, whereby the woman's lack of a phallus implies a suspicious wound thereby deeply troubling the male, Mulvey shows how cinema attempts to contain – and at its most extreme, extinguish – the 'threat' posed by the female 'other'. Hence, female characters are subjected to intense surveillance, a surveillance designed to control, even destroy her. Mulvey argues that cinema enables an extreme form of voyeurism - a fetishistic scoophilia – which focuses on the physical beauty of an object while attempting to control it. As Mulvey (1975, p.13) notes, female characters who fall in love with the male protagonist find their 'eroticism is subjected to the male star alone. By means of identification with him, through participation in his power, the spectator can indirectly possess her too.'

Mulvey's male gaze marked an important contribution to feminist gaze theory. However, as mentioned, it was certainly not without criticism. Fellow feminist film theorists argued there were avenues Mulvey did not explore in-depth in her original essay, such as how women themselves internalise and pass on the gaze or the possibility of a distinctly female form of identification and spectatorship (Doane 1982, Kaplan 1983, Stacey 1987, Doane 1988). In answer, Mulvey published the 1989 essay *Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'* to review and expand the position of the female spectator by exploring her pleasure as arising from identifying with the male hero. To make her case, Mulvey refers to films where the female protagonist struggles to achieve a stable, i.e. heterosexual, identity. The protagonist's plight, Mulvey argues, symbolises the psychological experience of the female spectator, which links back to Freud's conceptualisation of femininity as 'unstable'. This instability arises from the point in the girl child's development when she realises that she must relinquish the aspects of herself which are construed as 'masculine' in order to embody femininity in keeping with the strictures of binary gender. This relinquishment, however, is never fully secured. Throughout their lives, women are required to oscillate between a femininity they can never fully achieve and a masculinity they are told is not theirs to own. Hence, oscillation, Mulvey argues, is precisely what makes classical Hollywood cinema so appealing to the female spectator. Through the narrative of film, she is able to engage with the masculine aspects of herself which are typically prohibited, accessing masculine power and pleasure. Mulvey proposes that psychoanalytic understandings of the gender binary are played out, not just in cinema, but in narratives of all kinds. Thus, the story structure enables women to transgress, if only on a psychological level, the expectations and restrictions of their gender. This echoes Berger's account of looking as a woman, whereby the male gaze is

imbibed by women, becoming the primary gaze through which they come to see themselves.

While Mulvey's work was foundational, as feminist media studies developed scholars became increasingly aware of the need to go 'beyond the text' to understand what 'looking' as a female spectator and consumer entails. As the Methodology chapter of this study discusses, this approach, while not without issue, has repeatedly borne fruit for feminist research. For example, speaking to black women about their experiences as viewers of whiteness-obsessed Hollywood cinema, bell hooks (1992) uncovers what she terms 'the oppositional gaze'. The gaze hooks (1992, p.116) describes is resistant, active and interrogative, whereby, 'the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating "awareness"' encourages the individual to 'look a certain way in order to resist.' Here, hooks alerts us to a critical point, namely the possibility of different types of female ways of seeing, depending on how the spectator is situated in terms of their identity, the context they are located within, and the level of their critical awareness.

By the Eighties, feminist media and cultural researchers were adopting and adapting sociological methodologies such as those of ethnography and anthropology for their own ends. Consequently, less emphasis was placed on the functioning of the unconscious as in psychoanalysis or in determining a foreclosed, unified 'truth'. Instead, in order to better appreciate the complex and fragmented nature of female experience and subjectivity, academic focus shifted to women's perceptions of the world and their perspectives on their position within it (Walters 1996). Writing in relation to her own ground-breaking research on women's relationship to the romance novel, itself a classic example of the benefits of going beyond the text, Janice Radway argues:

> …the analytic focus must shift from the text itself, taken in isolation, to the complex social event of reading where a woman actively attributes sense to lexical signs in a silent process carried on in the context of her ordinary life. (1984, p.8 as cited in Walters 1996, p.100)

The 'complex social event' Radway refers to can be understood as speaking to the multifaceted and often surprising ways women engage not just with reading but with all kinds of cultural products and practices. These practices can be, as Radway (1991, p.12) highlights, complicated and contradictory, especially when women, 'use traditional female forms to resist their situation *as women* by enabling them to cope with the features of the situation that oppress them [emphasis Radway's].' Echoing Radway, Jackie Stacey (1994) contends that theory alone - no matter how compelling, as in the case of Mulvey -

is sufficient if we want to more deeply understand the complexities of female media consumption. While acknowledging too the limitations of empirical studies, she nevertheless emphasizes the need for lived experience to be taken into account. Stacey (1994, p.34) also cautions that we should not treat audience or user categories, like 'selfie-takers' for example, as something foreclosed and fixed but rather 'as a dynamic and historically specific category', stressing the importance of context and the need for scholars to be judicial rather than generalising in their claims. These insights find renewed energy today, as, thanks to the rise of social media, women themselves are now amongst the key creators, consumers and disseminators of the images taken to represent them.

2.3. Postfeminist-Neoliberalism Visibility & the Female Gaze

While feminist challenges to the ways in which women are represented have been a force for change, all too often the images produced by media and society in response are, as Myra MacDonald (1995, p.220) writes, 'tinkered with, not redrafted.' As Naomi Wolf (1991, p.10) illustrates in her exploration of the beauty myth, in late-capitalist societies images of women are often deployed as a hindrance to impede their advancement and subdue the gains made by successive waves of feminism. The effects of these images, Wolf (1991, p.19) argues, are so powerful and so limiting that to free themselves, 'it is not ballots or lobbyists or placards that women will need first; it is a new way to see.'

In the current moment, new cultural forms like selfie-practices are on the ascent while mass market women's magazines, a previous staple of women's media culture, are in sharp decline. This reflects wider shifts in the media industry in response to the rise of digital technologies. The participatory nature of these technologies is typically heralded as enabling women to claim visibility as never before – an activity and logic which draws on feminist arguments on the value of representation - but the reality is rather more complicated. As Banet-Weiser (2015a, 2018) cautions, in the current moment the immense visibility of certain kinds of femininity has more to do with economics than it does the political dimensions of representation, which neoliberalism so effectively absorbs for its own ends. In this context, visibility itself is transformed while the female body - which remains its locus - is subject to new forms of scrutiny. As postfeminist-neoliberalism intensifies, and cultural and economic demands for visibility escalate, *being visible* becomes substituted for a *politics of visibility* that can challenge the dominant forces

which enable and constrain representation. Thus, as Banet-Weiser (2018) observes, visibility begins and ends in the image, leaving wider structures untroubled.

The decline of mass market women's magazines and the rise of digital technologies has created a very different ecosystem of women's media. Much of the fashion, lifestyle and beauty content typical to such magazines is now migrating online. This marks a significant change in how content developed for female audiences (content which feminists have long taken issue with) is produced, disseminated and consumed. The authority which was once the preserve of women's magazines almost exclusively now extends in varying degrees to social influencers[15] and celebrity moguls like the Kardashians. The significance of this authority and its relationship to shaping and reproducing postfeminist-neoliberal visibilities should not be undersold. As Wolf writes:

> A woman's magazine is not just a magazine… A woman reading *Glamour* is holding women-oriented mass culture between her two hands. Women are deeply affected by what their magazine tells them (or what they believe they tell them) because they are all most women have as a window on their own mass sensibility. (Wolf 1991, p.70)

From the Gibson Girl[16] era to the pages of *Vogue* to the rise of the Kardashians, fashion and beauty imagery has long been a source of instruction and inspiration for how best to embody femininity. As women's magazines decline and/or attempt to repackage themselves as primarily digital products[17], this tradition continues today perhaps most obviously in the Instagram aesthetic, which enables ordinary internet users to study, mimic and publish the type of imagery once reserved for fashion and beauty shoots. These activities are channelled through the logics of postfeminist-neoliberalism emphasizing visibility, individuality and the reproduction of femininity. As with magazines, these

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[15] Crystal Abidin (2015 no pagination) helpfully defines social influencers as follows: 'Influencers are everyday, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in digital and physical spaces, and monetise their following by integrating "advertorials" into their blog or social media posts. A pastiche of "advertising" and "editorial", advertorials in the Influencer industry are highly personalised, opinion-laden promotions of products/services that influencers personally experience and endorse for a fee.' As is particularly pertinent to the shifts in the current women's media landscape detailed above, influencers are typically young women with a large female following (Abidin 2016, 2018).

[16] Sketches of 'the Gibson Girl' became emblematic of a desirable form of femininity which was very popular in the United States and Canada from the late-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. The character was created by the artist Charles Dana Gibson.

[17] In recent years, publications like *Glamour* (U.S. and U.K.) and *Company* (U.K.) have drastically changed their business model, reducing the number of print editions produced each year in favour of expanding their online presence. Whether this hybrid approach will be enough to stem the decline in women's magazine publishing remains to be seen.

spaces provide women female authority figures 'to admire and obey', offering the kinds of motivation and expertise 'which women are rarely offered anywhere else but in their glossy magazines' (Wolf 1991, p.74). Such spaces also address and elicit a distinctly female gaze, providing women with something which is still relatively rare – the space and freedom to deeply look at other women without the risk of punitive consequences. As scholars of fashion photography note, such imagery attempts to stimulate complex, sometimes same-sex desires and fantasies in female consumers whereby femininity is presented as a relief from the strictures of patriarchy while remaining firmly entrenched within it (Griggers 1990, Fuss 1992, Rabine 1994). These desires - rendered largely verboten in a postfeminist-neoliberal culture which places a heavy emphasis on what Adrienne Rich (1980) termed 'compulsory heterosexuality' - are then redirected towards consumerism; hence, the female consumer is encouraged to purchase what is otherwise off limits in attempt to *consume*, rather than *have*, what she truly desires (Fuss 1992). The new traditionalism exemplified by the Kardashians re-establishes this dynamic, using the intense visibility afforded by selfie-practices to express hyper-femininity and court a desiring female gaze for the purposes of commercialising rather than queering it.

In *Looking On: Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts and Media*, Rosemary Betterton (1987, p.4) argues that in Western culture, looking as a woman is most often associated with narcissism, an approach which ignores women's 'critical and investigative gaze'. It also misconstrues the complex, often negative relationship many women experience in relation to their appearance and their perception of the imagery which is taken to represent femininity in the media, a relationship, she argues, that is characterised by dissonance. Hence, Betterton observes:

> …women will anxiously scrutinize images held up as ideals of femininity for signs that they can appropriate to themselves. But since there is usually a mismatch between ourselves and the images held up to us, the response cannot be one simply of pleasurable narcissism. The relation of women to their images is profoundly uncomfortable. (Betterton 1985, p.9)

Betterton sees this discomfort as representative of the distance that women feel when looking at idealised representations of femininity. It is within this distance that Betterton locates a distinctly female way of seeing. While acknowledging that femininity 'is not necessarily constructed in the same way for all women, nor are they addressed equally by systems of representation' (Betterton 1987, p.10), androcentric culture produces 'experiences of looking' (Gamman and Marshment 1988, p.4) which affect and address men and women differently. Betterton (1985) proposes that these

experiences of looking are not based on essentialist notions of womanhood but are the result of the complex ways in which women are situated within and are addressed by androcentric culture. In an important passage, Betterton acknowledges the difficult and sometimes contradictory effect of this kind of female gaze:

> In looking at a glamour photo or a nude it is possible to be both fascinated and attracted by the image, and *at the same time*, well aware of the difference between the image and our own experience… I am not arguing that this ability is innate to women by virtue of biological sex, but that it *is* a condition of women's viewing under patriarchy [emphasis Betterton's]. (Betterton 1985, p.10)

A good example of the discordant tensions Betterton captures can be found in Betty Friedan's (1965) landmark study, *The Feminine Mystique*. In her observations of suburban women in the United States in the early Sixties, Friedan noted how often their experiences of domestic life differed from the then popular, now iconic (in a retro sense) representations of the happy, middle class housewife. This disaccord led Friedan (1965) to hone in on the disconnect between how these women felt about their lives in contrast to the images circulating in the culture. For Friedan, it was the gap between women's lived experiences and the images which purported to represent them, a gap further articulated by the women she interviewed, that alerted her to the phenomenon of the feminine mystique. Dissonance, then, is a longstanding feature of the female gaze, one which this study finds the scrutinizing, participatory nature of selfie surveillance intensifies.

The ambivalence Betterton captures in her account of the female gaze strikes at a critical contradiction, namely that images which court a female gaze, particularly those that focus on pleasure and desire, may appeal to female audiences but they are also implicated in '*producing* and sustaining feminine positions (Coward 1984 p.16, emphasis Coward's)' which re-inscribe inequality. Such positioning attempts, as Coward (1984, p.14) describes, to tie women, 'to structures which in the end are destructive of joy, if indulgent of pleasure.' These positions may offer relief from the effects of inequality in the short term but ultimately serve to uphold and reinstate those same effects in the longer term (Coward 1984, Radway 1991, Lury 2003), an arrangement typical of the new traditionalism which characterises postfeminist-neoliberalism. Further to this point, as Coward (1984, p.16) argues, such positions, and the images taken to represent them, are not only educational, they are *productive*, reproducing and supporting 'feminine positions', which shape female identity and subjectivity.

The dissonance Betterton identifies is a recurrent theme in participants' accounts of selfie-practices; as such, this study understands dissonance both as a longstanding aspect of looking as a woman and as an effect produced by and through the surveillance of self and others as enabled by selfie-practices. This digitally-stimulated dissonance is productive, structuring participants' emotional and subjective responses to their image and those of other women, encouraging the cultivation of subjectivities that are heavily shaped by surveillance. These responses often mark a moment of return in the way that Coward describes. This 'return' keeps participants tied to the 'doing' of femininity rather than rejecting it for its inconsistencies, as the ability to 'control' one's image is depicted in the postfeminist-neoliberal discourses they draw on as helping to relieve the dissonance participants experience. Yet, as participants' accounts reveal, selfie-practices themselves also intensify and provoke dissonance; for example, editing techniques produce manipulated images which often do not correspond with the self they are professing to represent, further emphasizing to the selfie-taker the distance or dissonance between their altered image and their embodied selves. As later chapters explore, this has significant implications for how the individual sees herself and others.

Betterton (1985, 1987) rightly cautions that the female gaze should not be construed as wholly dependent on the male gaze for its scaffolding. As this study illustrates, assuming young women always take selfies expressly for the male gaze misses the possibility that such images are taken, in varying degrees, for themselves and for other women. It reinforces the hierarchical aspect of the gender binary by presuming, as Agger did in the early stages of the phenomenon, that the male gaze must always be the primary motivating gaze behind women's selfie-use, thereby re-establishing the gender hierarchy and foreclosing on alternative, possibly subversive readings. Yet, the presence of a female gaze also requires that scholars be cautious in our claims about its effects. As the media and cultural sphere has been dominated by the male gaze for so long, it is natural that the increased presence of the female gaze should be considered in positive terms. However, just as the democratisation of media production does not automatically translate into increased democracy and freedom, the expressions it enables are rarely straightforwardly progressive. As we will see over the course of this work, the presence of a female gaze in participants' selfie-practices is a highly complicated affair, one which speaks directly to Coward's aforementioned reworking and re-enshrining of inequality through processes of pleasure.

A critical stumbling block for early conceptualisations of gaze theory was its limited ability to account for looking between women (Stacey 1994). This point, along with Stacey's (1994) urging that scholars take historic specificity into account when exploring women's cultural engagement, underscore the value of Alison Winch's (2012, 2013) timely conceptualisation of the girlfriend gaze, marking an important contemporary contribution to this still under-theorised area. From television shows like *Girls* and *Sex and the City* to the pop star Taylor Swift's infamous 'squad' of glamorous female friends, what Winch (2012, p.21) terms the 'culture of girlfriendship' positions, as she writes, 'women's relationships at the core of feminine identities, rather than relationships with men, or a search for male approval.'

While such positioning may seem progressive, displacing as it does the primacy of the male gaze, it cannot be considered without taking the always-suspect motivations of capitalist-patriarchy into careful account. Winch (2012, p.21) cautions that these ubiquitous, idealised notions of female friendship are being deployed to create and profit from a female-orientated 'system of mutual governance' filtered through the ever-appealing rhetoric of empowerment. Consumption and the reproduction of youthful femininities are deeply implicated in this system, as is the intimacy that is taken to characterise female friendship. The girlfriend gaze in-action can be observed across a plethora of traditional media, such as celebrity magazines and the aforementioned television shows but it is online, Winch theorizes, that its effects intensify. With its heavy emphasis on homosocial gazing which orientates around monitoring, dis/approval and judgement, selfie surveillance supports this hypothesis.

Rather than supplanting the male gaze, the girlfriend gaze instead functions as its handmaiden (Winch 2013). As such, it is highly divisive and ruthlessly effective. Although it projects an image of closeness and kinship, in reality, the girlfriend gaze is highly isolating and competitive, orientating around the control of oneself and of one's peers. The intimacy that is often the hallmark of female friendship becomes weaponised and commodified, put to work evaluating, monitoring and judging one's ability to embody desirable (i.e. normative) femininity. Yet, the will to friendship still remains. This produces an arrangement whereby experiencing the closeness of female friendship 'means submitting oneself to regimes of looking by the girlfriend gaze.' (Winch 2013, p.5) Thus, the girlfriend gaze can be seen as representative of a contemporary culture where rising surveillance is increasingly both a part of everyday life and a gender-based activity conducted amongst women.

Winch (Ibid) introduces the concept of the *gynaeopticon* to outline how the girlfriend gaze works, describing it as a 'gendered, neoliberal variation on Bentham's panopticon[18] - where the many girlfriends watch the many girlfriends.' She continues:

> My argument is that girlfriend culture revolves around homosocial forms of control where women bond through the bodies of other women. This element is significant because the male gaze is veiled as benign, and instead it is women who are represented as looking at other women's bodies. (Ibid)

Popular culture offers many examples of Winch's gynaeopticon in action, perhaps most notably in relation to the Kardashian phenomenon. While the family can certainly be seen to court the male gaze across a surfeit of media platforms, it is their address to the female gaze that has arguably turned them into billionaire business moguls through their myriad product lines and endorsements. This willingness to submit themselves to be surveyed by a duality of gazes across multiple platforms is what makes the Kardashian phenomenon so strikingly reflective of girlfriend culture. However, as Winch (2013, p.20) notes, female celebrities' willingness to embrace ever higher and more intimate forms of visibility intensifies girlfriend gazing by encouraging women to 'interact, engage and participate' in collaborative ways that raise the 'bar of feminine perfection' for both celebrities and ordinary women. As this study explores, a clear example of what Winch describes can be found online. Apps like Instagram which centre the visual enable not only self-gazing and homosocial gazing, but the means to rank, respond and participate in judgemental modes of visibility, producing the 'loving meanness' that is characteristic of girlfriend culture's cruel excesses (Winch 2013, p.14).

Under the girlfriend gaze, empowerment becomes signified by the amount of control women wield over their appearance and how they manifest this visually, a point reflected in the types of discourses participants' use when discussing selfie-practices. In true postfeminist-neoliberal style, these discourses render the individual 'in control' of their image in contexts which are notoriously fickle while also positioning them as responsible for its failures and successes. In girlfriend culture, success and autonomy are epitomized by the right kinds of consumption, having the right kind of (inevitably slim)

[18] In *Discipline and Punish: the birth of the prison*, Foucault (1991) uses Victorian social reformer Jeremy Bentham's design for a model prison, known as 'the Panopticon', to explore how the disciplining gaze of modern societies produces the subject. In Bentham's model, the prison cells circle a central tower, from which the viewer or guard can see directly into each cell at any given time. In theory, this is highly effective as the prisoners' uncertainty over whether or not they are being watched leads them to behave as if they are at all times. Thus, the Panopticon symbolises the power of the disciplining, surveillant gaze and its ability to exert its force at a subjective level even when the subject is not under its direct supervision.

body, representing oneself in the right way. As Elias and Gill (2018) highlight in their work on beauty apps, this 'surveillant sisterhood' is further enabled by digital technologies which fragment, quantify and survey the female body as never before. The female body, already a spectacle, now becomes even more so. In this context, friendship, a bond which can sustain and support women, becomes toxified. As Winch puts it:

> Women are uniting in sisterhood against their own bodies. The body is alienated from the self, commodified and subjected to analysis. Misogyny itself is being rebranded and appropriated by women for women. (Winch 2012, p.30)

Under the arrangement Winch describes, the labour required to produce the right kind of femininity is re-imagined as 'me time', repackaged as 'glamourous' and as an economic imperative. Social media extends the demand for this labour since the reproduction of femininity and the affective bonds of female friendship are critical to the kinds of interactivity its economic model relies on. Thus, the girlfriend gaze sits in perfect alignment with neoliberalism, which emphasizes the production of the self in entrepreneurial, self-interested ways that elide inequalities, displacing the blame for failure to achieve onto the shoulders of the individual. It is also representative of the ways in which, as Banet-Weiser (2015a, 2018) describes, visibility as a project is being transformed, away from the political towards the consumeristic, where the harms of intensifying demands for visibility are downplayed or ignored. This speaks to the trap which characterises the girlfriend gaze, whereby women's desire to belong requires them to submit to the gaze which in turn 'means being complicit in its perpetuation.' (Winch 2013, p.191) Participants' accounts illustrate how the interactive and judgemental nature of selfie-practices deepens the dynamic Winch theorises here, making any criticism of surveillant cultures and activities difficult as a criticism of them invariably becomes a criticism of the self. Again, this is characteristic of postfeminist-neoliberal visibilities which simultaneously demand visibility while positioning the individual as responsible for the consequences.

Despite the critical role that 'looking' as a disciplinary function plays in the reproduction of femininity, Riley Evans and Mackiewicz (2016, p.94) note, echoing Winch, that a 'significant gap' exists in scholarly literature exploring how women's looking, structured by the postfeminist sensibility (Gill 2007), produces certain subject positions. To address this, they develop the 'postfeminist gaze' which is offered as, 'a framework for thinking about contemporary femininity within postfeminist sensibility.'(Riley et al. 2016, p.95) Rather than presuming an internalised male gaze as

Mulvey or Berger do, instead Riley et al. (2016, p.98) see the postfeminist gaze as, 'a new type of disciplinary regime' which selfie surveillance can also be viewed as representing. Like Winch's girlfriend gaze (which Riley et al. draw on in their conceptualisation of the postfeminist gaze) the authors regard judgemental looks between women as a significant factor in feminine subjectivity creation. This does not negate the influence of the male gaze but emphasises concurrently the role of a distinctly female gaze. In keeping with the postfeminist sensibility, judgement and discerning consumption are central to postfeminist gazing, as is the willingness to perform body work and to exemplify correct (i.e. normative) femininity, as determined by one's female peers.

Where the male gaze finds expression through objectification, the postfeminist gaze finds its disciplinary effect through the ways in which women assay other women 'according to their ability to reproduce a hyper-feminine femininity' (Riley et al. 2016, p.108). This is reflective of the kinds of homosocial gazing which also characterise selfie surveillance. Central to the functioning of the postfeminist gaze is peer approval; in short, whether granted or withheld, approval is what lends this framework its emotional, social and, ultimately, disciplinary heft. Although bathed in the postfeminist rhetoric of self-empowerment, in reality these dynamics seek to return women to their longstanding roles as consumers enmeshed within what Bartky (1990) memorably termed 'the fashion-beauty complex'. Riley et al. underline this in the following passage, which refers to the looking talk of the women they studied:

> …while positive comments were constructed as deeply appreciated and with the power to positively affect subjectivity, they folded participants back into a regularly framework in which they were valued through their appearance. (Riley et al. 2016, p.106)

Riley at al. (Ibid) find that looking between women is crucial to the postfeminist sensibility, enabling postfeminism, 'to reshape, intensify, and reinforce forms of gender power.' This is because positive evaluations from their female counterparts 'bound' the women whose accounts they analysed to, 'a postfeminist sensibility where successes and failures were measured through their ability to achieve hyper-feminine looks.' (Riley at al. 2016, p.105) Riley et al. point out that this intensified focus on body work and 'self-scrutiny' undercuts 'the new visibility of women in the public sphere' ensuring they do not 'challenge gender power because women are redirected back to traditional feminine appearance concerns.' (Riley at al. 2016, p.107) Critically, by the rules of the postfeminist gazing, in order to know if one has been successful, one must compare themselves to other women, reflecting the ways in which both postfeminism and neoliberalism re-

scribed female competitiveness through visibility. Although Riley et al. do not explore digital contexts, the modes of looking they describe are not only inherent to selfie surveillance, they are further encouraged by the myriad enticements to judge and look offered by social media. Indeed, by directing and making visual (through ranking and quantification) the processes of judgemental looking between women so integral to girlfriend gazing and postfeminist gazing, selfie surveillance can be seen to intensify and re-inscribe their effects while commodifying bonds between women. Thus, seeking empowerment via visibility, as prescribed by the logics of postfeminist-neoliberalism, is far from the straightforward affair its proponents suggest.

2.4. Summary

In exploring the gazes which characterise postfeminist-neoliberal visibilities, this chapter illustrates the continued importance of feminist-informed denaturalisation to interrogate how looking is structured in the current moment. Digital technologies lend this work a revitalised urgency, as new ways of looking and being seen rapidly disseminate into the everyday. As this thesis illustrates, this development raises in particular the issues of dissonance and surveillance as longstanding, fundamental aspects of looking as a woman which are being reworked and intensified in the current moment. Dissonance, a key effect of women's relationship to androcentric culture as Betterton (1985, 1987) argues, has often been 'hidden' by the mischaracterisation of the female gaze as predominately narcissistic. Yet, dissonance, by its very presence, calls into question the authority of dominant images which are taken to represent women and the manner in which women identify with them. As Betty Friedan (1965) felt moved to ask, if these images merely reflect what is natural and inevitable, why do they provoke such discord in those they purport to represent? As participants' accounts attest, these aspects of looking as a woman have become intensified in the current moment by practices like the selfie which are enmeshed within technological and discursive logics which orientate around the postfeminist and the neoliberal. In this context, the dissonance provoked by surveillance of self and others is used to promote a re-investment in rather than a rejection of normative femininity, despite the inconsistencies and pressures therein.

Postfeminist-neoliberal visibility is, essentially, an exercise in power, functioning as a site of contradictions, enabling and restraining, compelled and critiqued. The logics underpinning this visibility owes a great deal to earlier feminist

demands for representation and challenges to depiction of women in the media and advertising. However, as Banet-Weiser (2015a, 2018) argues, the political dimensions of visibility are being displaced in the current moment, where increased visibility of women and girls serves commercial rather than political ends. Given how strongly images are linked to the creation of meaning and their ability to determine who gets to be regarded as a social agent, visibility channelled through postfeminist-neoliberalism will inevitably reproduce its harmful logics. This has significant implications for the kinds of feminine subjecthood which are permitted visibility and those that are denied it.

Postfeminist-neoliberal visibilities utilise long-established notions of female complicity in courting the male gaze. This conveniently renders critiques of the demand for visibility difficult to sustain, as submitting oneself to the gaze is read as agentic and freely chosen; ergo it is the individual, rather than the structures which enable and constrain their choices, who is held responsible for the outcomes. The foregrounding of a female gaze deepens charges of complicity further, even when such a gaze is working, as Winch (2013) puts it, as a handmaiden of inequality. This underscores that while the expression of female looking is freshly enabled by social media, it often serves the traditional rather than the transformative.

As this chapter outlines, the girlfriend gaze and the postfeminist gaze can be regarded as the latest in a long tradition of looking-modes which attempt to position women as (hetero)sexually desirable consumers. However, they mark an evolution in how these ends are achieved, underscoring the insufficiency of relying on the male gaze alone to unpack the kinds of looking enabled by selfie-practices. Rather than utilising objectification as with the male gaze, these gazes find their purchase in homosocial looking between women. It should be asserted that, with their emphasis on normative and hyper-femininities, neither the girlfriend gaze nor the postfeminist gaze threatens the gender order which undoubtedly accounts for their flourishing. Rather, they take their cues from longstanding configurations of femininity albeit with the veneer of progressiveness provided by postfeminist-neoliberal notions of subjecthood. By emphasizing a highly specular but reassuringly 'normal' femininity, both also satisfy the male gaze, firstly by reinforcing and reinvigorating the gender order, and secondly, by providing new sites and practices for commodification. This pertains to, for example, the affective bonds of female friendship or selfies which do the job of advertisers for them by showcasing the latest cosmetics and clothing. Hence, although the male gaze certainly

endures, in certain contemporary contexts – among which I number the selfie-practices explored in this study – certain types of female gazing achieve primacy because they are better equipped to evaluate and encourage the kinds of specular femininity so prized by postfeminist-neoliberal culture. In contexts like those this study explores, achieving successful femininity now depends not only on appeasing the male gaze but also the surveillant female gaze, an arrangement that is doubly restrictive.

Chapter 3: The Selfie - Definitions, Uses & Contexts

3.1. Introduction

In 2015, a video clip of a group of sorority sisters taking selfies at a baseball game in Arizona went viral. In it, two male commentators, who typically discuss the game, instead honed in on the girls' activity in the bleachers as they posed with their food and each other. The commentators' tone was mocking and derisive, depicting the girls' behaviour as excessive, misguided, even stupid. In an article published on Canadian news website CBC, one of the male commentators was reported as saying, "Wait, one more now. Better angle. Check it. Did that come out OK? That's the best one of the 300 pictures of myself I've taken today." (O'Neill, 2015) The video's virality whipped-up the kind of public scorn exemplified by the male commentators' reactions on a global level. However, it also caught the attention of those who understood the hypocrisy at play. "What have we learned today?" asked Amanda Hess (2015) of Slate.com. "Men like to look at young women. Young women like to look at themselves. Men don't like it when young women look at themselves. But they don't dislike it enough to stop looking at them when they're looking at themselves."

The sorority girls' incident, and the intense international focus that followed, reflect how selfie-practices are commonly perceived as extreme, abject and feminized. Such interpretations, while sensationalistic and entertaining to some, fail to account for the phenomenon's complexities, including the political significance of the selfie's alignment with femininity. Nor do they address the role of selfie-practices as part of rapidly advancing technological infrastructures which are ushering in new forms of everyday surveillance, an advancement that until quite recently went largely uncontested. To that end, this chapter reflects on the technological and cultural dimensions of the selfie and their relationship to surveillance, with a particular focus on the phenomenon's alignment with femininity. In doing so, it aims to situate selfie-practices as a point of multifaceted, intersecting discursive and technological elements. Throughout, this chapter is informed by feminist scholarship on technology which advises a cautious approach to emancipatory claims about the internet, emphasizing the myriad ways in which technology, particularly in terms of ownership and design, remains male-dominated and market-orientated, showing a marked tendency to exacerbate rather than alleviate existing inequalities (Braidotti 1996, Paasonen 2011, Wajcman 2004, 2010, Wilding 1998, Yeatman 2014).

3.2. Definitions

Since its rise to cultural prominence, the selfie has become a regular focus of ridicule, concern and controversy. A classic example of this kind of hostile reception took place in 2013 when the Oxford English Dictionary declared 'selfie' its 'word of the year'. This reflected the huge increase in the everyday use of the term, thanks to the rise of social media and the development of smartphone front-facing camera technology which makes self-shooting considerably easier. This recognition of the selfie caused debate, as illustrated by a piece in the *New Yorker* which linked, in a tongue-in-cheek manner, the esteemed dictionary's recognition of the term to, 'the demise of the English language' (Killingsworth 2013, no pagination). The *New Yorker*'s withering sentiment echoes scholarly literature on the phenomenon in which selfies are found to be considered 'frivolous and self-absorbed' (Tiidenberg and Goméz-Cruz 2015, p.78) and 'self-centred, narcissistic, and contrived' (Bellinger 2015, p.1811). Henry Giroux meanwhile (2015, p.159) regards the rise of the selfie as evidence of, 'the disintegration of those public spheres, modes of solidarity, and sense of inclusive community that sustain a democratic society.'

The definition of the selfie offered by the Oxford English Dictionary (2019) is: 'A photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and shared via social media.' Taking a more layered approach to the phenomenon, Aaron Hess (2015) characterises the selfie as an 'assemblage', referring to four elements which he proposes characterise it. Hess regards the selfie as a site where (1) the self, (2) physical space/a moment in time, (3) technology and (4) networked digital media all combine. While the Oxford definition describes what a selfie is in a very basic sense, Hess captures intersections critical to shaping selfie-practices, addressing the complexity involved rather than, as much mainstream discourse seeks to do, dismissing the phenomenon for its popularity. This is a helpful approach which 'opens out' the phenomenon, creating scope to consider the selfie's complicated appeal. The selfie is a photograph but crucially it is a new kind of photograph in which the demarcation between subject and object becomes blurred and liminal. It is an action or practice, something an individual decides to do, which raises the issues of subjectivity, choice and agency. This action or practice results in the creation of a text which, as Albury (2015) highlights in contrast to the dictionary definition, is not necessarily taken to be shared.

The selfie is instantly recognisable as a photographic self-portrait. However, as Paul Frosh (2015) outlines, digital technologies and digital culture shape selfie images and selfie-practices in ways that differentiate them from traditional photography. Instead of attempting to capture a trace of reality, be it an object or a memory, the selfie is a 'connective performance' instigated by a photographer or selfie-taker who anticipates an engaged audience, facilitated through online interactivity. Thus, the selfie becomes a 'conversational practice' (Frosh 2015, p.1609) in which the photographer inserts themselves into the image. Self-portraiture aside, this breaks a cardinal rule of much traditional photography in which the photographer is rarely seen in the image itself. As Frosh (2015, p.1610) argues, rather than saying to the viewer '"look at this"' as a traditional photograph might, the selfie says, '"see me showing you me"'. In doing so, the selfie demands that the individual learn the skills necessary to produce successful iterations of the form and to evaluate the images of others. This involves, amongst other things, learning to pose, gauging how lighting works, investing in the smartphone with the best camera, becoming adept at using filters, and so on. Hence, Frosh (2015, p.1614) underlines that the selfie is not 'natural' to the body. It is, as he writes, 'both expressive and disciplinary.' As later chapters explore, the expectation that one acquires selfie 'skills' and become adept at the practice produces effects which are distinctly gendered.

The popularity of the selfie can be taken as an indication of how digital technologies have democratised photographic practice. Such technologies have also dramatically reduced the amount of time needed to produce an image and made sophisticated editing and publishing software more accessible. This has resulted in what Nancy Van House (2011, p.128) describes as, 'the increased publicness of personal images.' The capabilities of new technologies enable selfie-producers to exert a considerable degree of control over their images compared to earlier forms of photography. However, all expectations of control in selfie-practices must be tempered by the risk inherent to the digital environment itself, where content can be repurposed beyond the intentions of its creator and judgement is ever-present in the form of likes, comments and shares. As we will see, narratives of postfeminist-neoliberal visibilities that emphasize control as an inherent positive of selfie-practices without taking this factor into account, produce subjective experiences notable for their tensions and ambivalence.

Although not everyone on social media is a keen selfie taker, the ability to easily create selfies undoubtedly kindles the drive to produce them. As Van House (2011, p.130) notes, 'digital images are often seen as both fragile and of short-term interest' thereby

creating an effect that is 'both immediate and transitory'. Observing the use of the selfie in online identity formation and how social media like Snapchat and Instagram stimulate a demand for such images, Brooke Wendt (2014, p.16) argues, 'one can see how the former practice of taking images to *preserve* one's life has turned into taking photographs to *collect* one's life, without aim or purpose [emphasis Wendt's]'. In a rather bleak assessment, Wendt (2014, p.24) regards the type of selfie-practice typical to Instagram as empty and self-alienating in which, 'this particular image [becomes] all that matters to us.' However, while not discounting the issues Wendt raises or the significant pressures produced by sites like Instagram's hyper-focus on aesthetics, it is important to highlight that the norms fostered by social media can themselves become the object of resistant and subversive selfie-practices. Young women use the selfie to critique social media censorship of the female body (Olszanowski 2014), to return the gazes they are subject to in terms of gender, race and sexuality and to manifest their identities (Murray 2015, Pham 2015, Rocamora 2011, Vivenne 2017, Wargo 2017, Zappavigna & Zhoa 2017), including mounting challenges to Eurocentric beauty norms (Iqani 2016). Such practices may not transcend or transform the mechanisms they are situated within but, by acting as a form of contestation, they draw our attention to the problematics of visibility both on social media and in wider society.

While critical engagement with any new phenomena is essential, situating the selfie within 'discourses of pathology' as Senft and Baym (2015, p.1589) put it, is not wholly productive to unpacking its appeal. Neither are, as Chapter One discusses in relation to selfie-practices and empowerment, simplistic, undercooked celebratory analyses that regard the selfie as 'liberating' or inherently feminist. Rather, analysts should treat the selfie, and its attendant practices, as complex, contextual and in-flux, developing what Pham (2015, p.221) describes as 'more historically and politically nuanced' understandings of the phenomenon. As Nemer and Freeman (2015, p.1832) rightly assert, 'selfies are *produced* and *experienced* by people in sociocultural terms. It is difficult to understand selfies without taking into account the deeper sociocultural context in which they were created, used, and interpreted [emphasis Nemer and Freeman's].' In their account of young people's selfie-use in Brazilian favelas, Nemer and Freeman show how selfies are utilised as a vital communicative tool between displaced children and their families, and as a form of self-expression in difficult circumstances. As they outline in relation to one of the young people they interviewed:

> For André, taking and posting selfies had nothing to do with narcissism or attention seeking… His selfie was a strategic way to show his grief about the shooting he witnessed, his disappointment about his current living situation…and his expectation for a better life…His selfie practice was embedded in a socioculturally dense context and cannot be reduced to a simple act of self-promotion. (Nemer & Freeman 2015, pp.1838-1839)

Hence, understanding selfies as 'situated' is key to interpreting the processes and strategies selfie-users deploy in claiming visibility. These may differ across platforms and networks for a variety of reasons, often requiring considerable psychic and aesthetic work on behalf of selfie-takers, particularly the devotees. This situatedness provokes what Nancy Thumin (2015) describes as *multiple subjectivities*. The selfie-taker must negotiate with the norms governing individual social media and also the differing norms governing specific networks and/or communities therein. They must also embody certain types of personae to produce coherent, well-liked representations that 'fit' social expectations. The architecture of social media therefore requires that individuals endlessly shift between various positions. This 'shifting' influences how they view themselves and others, a complex process which comes into focus when participants in this study discuss their selfie-practices and those of other women.

In their analysis of the selfie as a global phenomenon, Senft and Byam (2015, p.1589) advocate that it be treated as a 'cultural artefact and social practice.' In problematising popular discourse on the phenomenon, particularly the 'polarizing rhetoric' (Senft & Byam 2015, p.1597) casting selfies as 'good' or 'bad', they argue that no authoritative, peer-reviewed research has, as yet, categorically linked selfie-use to mental illness. Rather, they propose that the moral panic around selfie-use is 'good for business', especially for the media and medical industries for whom new 'syndromes' and folk devils create content and expand markets. This is not to downplay the effects of such discourse, or indeed the real potential downsides of selfie-use, but to highlight how 'common sense' yet untested interpretations of the phenomenon are themselves political, requiring careful analysis.

In the rush to 'diagnose' the selfie, what is new about the phenomenon tends to be emphasized over what is not. Such analyses may be entertaining and provocative, but they often fail to take into account the ways in which the selfie can be interpreted as a contemporary extension of longstanding practices of self-representation and visual communication. As Jill Walker Rettberg (2014) observes, human beings have always tried to represent themselves, developing various ways to document and archive their

lives using text, images or whatever was to hand. In his famous treatise on the rise of mass media, Marshall McLuhan (2008, p.26) proposed: 'All media are extensions of some human faculty – psychic or physical.' McLuhan's point highlights the obvious appeal of the selfie, which, as with the mirror, enables us to 'see' ourselves in ways we otherwise could not. But better than a mirror, the selfie enables us to preserve our image, just as those human beings with the means to do have done throughout history through portraiture, photography and so on. Ignoring the historical specificity of the selfie also fails to take into account how it reflects the individualizing effects of personal photography since its inception whereby, as Patricia Holland writes:

> …photography helps people explore issues of identity, a process which is deeply implicated with consumer culture, where one's tastes and experiences are communicated through what we purchase. These cultural shifts change the kinds of photographs people take and how we read them. (Holland 2009, p.123)

Rather than treating the selfie as a practice that is straightforwardly positive or negative, this study adopts the stance of those scholars who emphasize the phenomenon's nuances, contradictions and especially, its intricacies. Following Cruz and Thornham (2015, p.3), analysing the selfie requires a multi-layered approach that considers not only the image, but, crucially, the selfie as a practice and site bound within 'several connection processes' which are shaped by, 'the power dynamics, design of and normative practices of social networks.' Another critical factor, which Holland raises in relation to personal photography, is the role of the selfie as a commodity in late-capitalist societies. Selfies are now an intrinsic part of the interactivity and content fundamental to the social media business model; as such, the ways in which they transform images of the self into something that can be consumed, visually, by others, requires close academic attention (Iqani &Schroeder 2016, pp.410-411). As Cruz and Thornham rightly argue, by focusing on the selfie image alone, we risk overlooking the dynamics of power inherent to techno-social spaces and wider society. In these spaces and practices, the selfie as 'image' is one moment in an intricate, on-going process that is public *and* personal, disciplined *and* disciplining.

3.3. Contexts

While digital photography existed before the advent of social media, the selfie phenomenon is strongly linked to the rise and immense success of image-orientated sites like Instagram and Snapchat. The origins of these sites, like so many others, lie in Silicon Valley. From her time spent living in and studying this culture, Alice Marwick

developed critical insights into the neoliberal orthodoxy which shapes not only the mindset of the Valley's engineers and inventors but also the technologies they create. In her valuable book on the subject, Marwick (2013a) maps how young, (mainly) male technologists' love of entrepreneurs like Mark Zuckerberg and Steve Jobs and the status-obsessed nomenclature of the tech world infiltrated the wider culture. As she argues, the neoliberal, profit-orientated entrepreneur so beloved by Silicon Valley is regarded by his/her acolytes as embodying, 'bravery, gumption, self-promotion, and creativity, the predictors of contemporary success.' (Marwick 2013a, pp.3-4) This veneration is enshrined, Marwick proposes, in the design of new technologies which, while seemingly more democratic than earlier forms of media, are in fact structured to recognise and reward an individual's status. Hence, far from reducing inequality, these new technologies exacerbate it.

Marwick (2013a, p.5) argues that the social media platforms designed by these tech professionals reflect their creators' concerns. Consequently, embedded in social media is the requirement that people, 'compete for social benefits by gaining visibility and attention.' In order to enhance their status, Marwick (Ibid) proposes that individuals, 'adopt self-consciously constructed personas and market themselves, like brands or celebrities, to an audience or fan base.' This kind of self-branding requires significant effort to produce personas which Marwick (2013a, p.5) describes as 'highly edited, controlled and monitored' yet which must read as 'authentic' or 'real', a process she describes as 'inherently contradictory' (Marwick 2013a, p.167). Ultimately, the norms and design of social media can be traced back to the culture of their origins, reflecting as Marwick argues (2013a, p.5), 'the values of where they were produced: a culture dominated by commercial interests.'

Drawing on Foucault's (1988) concept of governmentality, Marwick makes a further series of points about social media and self-branding which are pertinent to this project. Firstly, she (2013a, p.11) argues that these new technologies are productive in that they 'constitute technologies of subjectivity' or as she also puts it, 'social media has become a way that people govern themselves.' This mode of governance is tied to neoliberalism. Marwick uses Foucault's ideas to explore how the logic of the free market has now become a logic of everyday life. At the heart of governmentality is a concept of power which is not simply a top-down conceptualisation but one which is diffuse, emphasizing how subjects are *brought into being* through self-regulation. Key to this, Marwick (2013a, p.13) notes, is 'a discursively embedded ideal subject' who incorporates neoliberal 'common sense' into all aspects of their lives. Marwick (2013a, p.13) posits that

this ideal neoliberal subject can be found in many locations in Western culture, including online where a very specific type of persona is prized, one which is, 'highly visible, entrepreneurial, and self-configured to be watched and consumed by others.' As Marwick suggests, the effects of online status-seeking are not innocent, a point underscored by Hearn and Schoenhoff (2015, p.208) who write of social media, 'these social-scoring measurement mechanisms discipline, direct and intervene in social identities, social relations, and social life, rendering visible the power of capital through their branded, yet opaque, form of scoring semiotics.'

In her work, Marwick illustrates how the diffusion of neoliberal norms throughout society shaped the norms of social media which in turn further enables the dissemination of these norms. This speaks to wider, structural changes which have sought to re-order Western societies since the 1970s, most notably the decline of the welfare state, the rise of precarious labour practices and the widespread privatization of public utilities (Duggan 2004, Harvey 2005, Hall 2011). Christian Fuchs (2012, pp.385-386) makes an important point in this regard, arguing that modern 'moral panics' centring on social media ills allow, 'the structural changes in society that need to be taken in order to overcome social problems' to be elided. Instead, simplistic solutions are offered like sophisticated surveillance and censorship, which bring with them their own issues while failing to address the root causes of the problems they are charged with solving. As Fuchs argues, reducing social problems to the level of technology ignores the complexities of their lineage, displacing their origins in society itself. As he succinctly puts it, 'technology is a medium (enabling and constraining) and outcome of society.' (Fuchs 2012, p.387)

Marwick outlines how powerfully social media enables the circulation and diffusion of neoliberal norms into everyday life. The impact of this capability should not be underestimated, given how social media has, as José Van Dijck (2013) argues, infiltrated every aspect of contemporary culture faster than any media before, bringing new practices and experiences of which the selfie is one of many. This shift is emblematic of how the internet has evolved from the 'communal and collaborative space' of the late Nineties into a highly commercialised arena (Van Dijck 2013, p.11). Although the digital landscape has altered dramatically since the heyday of tech utopians of the Eighties and Nineties, this early idealism still persists in the bold claims made by Facebook and others about social media's role in a building better, freer, more transparent world. Yet, as Morozov (2012), Andrejevic (2006) and others warn, the democratization of technology should not be assumed to automatically translate into increased democracy or freedom.

Indeed, as recent events such as the Cambridge Analytica scandal[19] show, social media has the potential to undermine democracy through its own infrastructure. The kinds of data harvesting and data circulation social media facilitate has also resulted in cultural trends which should trouble those of a feminist persuasion, most notably the increasing visibility of misogyny and racism online which social media companies have been desperately slow to tackle (Jane 2017, Banet-Weiser 2018). Hence, as Van Dijck (2013, p.18) highlights, far from being a space of unremitting freedoms, social media is characterised by tension and contradiction, a space which is both empowering and exploitative, where user engagement, 'is enjoyed and exercised through precisely the commercial platforms that also exploit online social activities for monetary gains.'

Although social media companies position their platforms primarily as places where communities are built and connections are created, the connectivity these practices facilitate has become a highly valuable commodity (Van Dijck 2013). Engineers devise social media in ways which firstly, create a kind of sociality specific to a site (see Instagram's focus on the image, for example) and secondly, package this sociality so it appeals to commercial interests. Algorithms – coding designed to observe, shape and respond to user patterns - deployed by companies Google and Facebook help package and sell data distilled from user interactivity to private companies. Although social media are often presented as 'free' in that they typically do not charge to join and 'free' in the sense that they give users the impression they can create their own image however they like, the presence of algorithms is one example of how such platforms subtly monitor and shape human behaviour. As Van Dijck (2013, p.12) puts it, 'Sociality coded by technology renders people's activities formal, manageable and manipulable, enabling platforms to engineer the sociality in people's everyday routines.'

Underlying the economy of social media is what Van Dijck (2013, p.13) terms the 'popularity principle' which is symbolised in the language of friending, following and trending. Far from being passive, this monitoring of self and others produces gendered effects. Bivens and Haimson (2016) argue that, rather than freeing individuals from gender norms, social media's use of algorithms effectively 'bakes in' gender to suit the needs of its primary audience: marketers and advertisers. Online, the assertion of norms

[19] In 2018 Cambridge Analytica, a British political consultancy, was revealed to have used flaws in Facebook's design to harvest massive amounts of users' data without their knowledge or consent. The data was then used to develop psychometric digital campaign materials for both the 2016 U.S. Presidential election and the Brexit Referendum. The scandal is regarded as a landmark with regard to how users' data can be amassed and used in powerful ways, enabled by the rise of social media.

occurs incrementally but imperceptibly resulting in 'gradual transformations' in what users are willing to do and accept (Van Dijck 2013, p.19). The impact of algorithms and the ways in which social media categorize and collect personal data move Biven and Haimson (2016, p.2) to caution that such platforms now have 'great power over users' which can be used 'to shape both users and advertising clients perceived needs and desires.' Carah and Dobson (2016, p.1) echo this point in their analysis of how algorithms function as a kind of technological 'male gaze' in online environments where images (often selfies) of 'hot female bodies generate more likes, tags, and views'. In response to users' reactions to this kind of imagery, over time algorithms grant greater visibility to such images so as to collect more data on users which can then be turned into profit. Here again, despite its claims to 'freedom' of various kinds, social media can be seen to participate in what Carah and Dobson (2016, p.5) describe as 'a naturalization of gendered social processes and desires.'

In her breakdown of various types of social media, Van Dijck (2013 p.8) categorizes the likes of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and others as 'social network sites'. She argues that such sites are distinctive for their emphasis on 'interpersonal contact'. This includes contact among individuals and groups in order to foster, 'personal, professional, or geographical connections.' Such sites share many of the same characteristics. These include facilitating the maintenance of networks between people, both pre-existing and new; the ability to cater to specific audiences based on individual and group identity; facilitating the creation and sharing of content through video, audio, photography, micro-blogging and so on (boyd & Ellison 2008). However, as previously mentioned, the cultures which develop around different social media, as danah boyd[20] and Nicole B. Ellison (2008) observe, are distinct. For example, participants in this study discussed how they produced different kinds of selfies for different social media. A selfie shared on Instagram – where the emphasis is predominantly on beauty and fashion, and the audience is of peers – is likely to be different to the selfie used as a Facebook profile picture, which is likely to be viewed by family members and perhaps employers. This speaks to the different norms of visibility associated with different kinds of social media which in turn shapes the kinds of content users create.

Key to this kind of engagement, as boyd and Ellison (2008) note, is making one's social network *visible*. Dating apps like Tinder aside, rather than trying to meet new

[20] boyd does not capitalise her first or surname.

people, ordinary social media users are generally engaged with maintaining their existing relationships in a public manner (boyd & Ellison 2008). Visibility is not only something which people perform in these spaces; it is also a core requirement for anyone seeking to access these platforms. As boyd and Ellison highlight, most social media require users to set up a profile which includes, at a minimum, the person's name and a picture. Networks also make visible interaction between users, in the form of commenting, liking, sharing content and so on. Visibility, then, is something which social media grants the individual but also something it demands they undertake. Given how highly postfeminist-neoliberal femininity also prizes visibility, it is not difficult to see how the logics underpinning both can become reinforcing and co-constituting, particularly given how immensely valuable female labour[21] and representations of femininity are to social media's profit model.

The manner in which social media enables users to self-represent is often presented as one of its greatest boons. In a world where representation in the public sphere remains a struggle for marginalised people, the platform social media offers holds clear appeal. In terms of media and cultural studies, representation is understood as an element – an object, a sign, a symbol – which is constructed and 'stands for' the original object it references (Hall 1997). Rather than mirroring or reporting reality, representations are subjective and constructed interpretations of events, feelings and so on, that we are trying to make meaningful by turning them into what Hall (1999) terms a 'communicative event'. Hence, while representations might embody a dominant meaning, they are also polysemic, leaving room for multiple interpretations depending on context, perspective and so on. The ability to self-represent also speaks to the *power* to self-represent. As Thumim (2015, p.19) concisely puts it, 'representations tell stories and who tells what stories is a question of power.'

Online, Thumim (2015) notes that access is predicated on the individual's willingness to self-represent, or in other words 'become visible', creating in the process what she terms 'bounded texts' of which the selfie is a perfect example. While these texts may be, as Thumim (2015, p.6) notes, 'fleeting and ephemeral' they are nevertheless a record which multiply whenever users engage in online sociality. As manifestations of self-representation, bounded texts are delimited by the same platforms which enable them. This delimiting is informed by such factors as the commercial interests of the

[21] For detailed explorations of the relationship between women's emotional and creative labour and digital technologies see Abidin (2015, 2016), Arcy (2016), Jarrett (2013), Ouellette & Wilson (2011), Duffy (2015, 2017) and Duffy & Hund (2015).

platform, the user's ability to use the technology, and the imagined or anticipated audience the self-representation is devised to address. Hence, while the claim that self-representation online is 'freer' or less mediated than other forms, Thumim (2015, p.154) cautions, 'self-representation is *not ever* free of mediation, but it *is always* mediated differently in different settings [emphasis Thumim's].'

As an act of self-representation, selfies posted to social media are often derided for being staged and dishonest but, as Rettberg (2017, p.436) attests, these are longstanding claims made against photography since its inception. What makes the selfie distinctive is the context in which it is shared and produced, on and through social media that makes visible the processes of identity creation, positioning the selfie within a system where visibility is based on a commercialised hierarchy which is tied to ranking systems privileging certain kinds of self-representation. As Rettberg (2017, p.441) points out, self-representation on social media is highly strategic, negotiated and evolving, a point which is heavily echoed in the experiences of the participants in this study.

3.4. Surveillance

As outlined thus far, visibility is critical to social media's appeal, both in terms of what it offers the individual and in terms of what it expects from them in return. Central to this arrangement is how social media attempts to structure visibility in order to commercialize it. This raises the issue of surveillance. As leading surveillance studies scholar David Lyon (2017 pp.824 -825) asserts, in the current era 'an unprecedented surveillance culture is emerging' which is 'becoming part of a whole way of life.' In this context, behaviours we associate with social media – sharing, self-disclosure and so on – also expose users to layers of surveillance which the user and their peers are actively engaged with, alongside commercial and state interests (Lyon 2017, 2018).

It is important to stress that surveillance is not a new concept or practice nor is it necessarily ominous, although it has always had distinct implications for gendered, raced and classed bodies. The advent of social media, however, has reconfigured surveillance in everyday contexts in ways which require careful scholarly attention. Surveillance is very much a part of life; we are all surveyed by others and institutions in different ways. As Daniel Trottier (2017, p.465) describes, referencing his foundational work on social media surveillance, surveillance is inherently linked with the social. The 'social' in 'social media' refers to longstanding modes of sociality which digitization now renders visible and therefore, viewable. Still, regardless of its prevalence, surveillance can be an

uncomfortable concept. In Trottier's (2012, p.7) definition of the concept, we find a clear an articulation of why this is. Surveillance, as Trottier posits, is a 'loaded term' which refers to the 'sustained and targeted collection of personal information' which is 'pervasive to everyday life'. Surveillance troubles the notion of privacy; it is also associated with categorizing individuals into classifications which may be unhelpful or even limiting. (Tagg 1988)

Social media encourages what Trottier (2012, p.7) terms 'perpetual visibility' in which users are 'expected to routinely submit information'. The ubiquity of social media, how heavily these technologies stress the need to 'share' personal information, and the ways in which social media render personal details 'searchable and archived indefinitely' (Ibid) raise significant questions about everyday surveillance and how these technologies enable it. Critically, Trottier (2017, p.468) advises that these same technologies which encourage the individual to watch others can lead the individual to increasingly watching themselves in a context where socialising and surveillance are collapsed into one another.

In his 2006 paper, *The Discipline of Watching: Detection, Risk, and Lateral Surveillance*, Mark Andrejevic (p.398) notes that social activities between humans always involve a degree of 'mutual monitoring'. However, in the social media age, new forms of surveillance are emerging which enable, 'asymmetrical, nontransparent information and gathering modelled [sic] by commercial and state surveillance practices.' (Ibid) Where once institutional surveillance and commercial surveillance were distinct entities – the police for example, monitored the population in different ways to marketing companies – online these entities merge, melding and intensifying surveillance. Andrejevic (Ibid) notes that while these technologies offer enhanced ways to connect with others and manage existing relationships, they also put the responsibility for 'managing the potential risks of interactions' squarely on the individual, echoing the kinds of individualised responsibilization supported by postfeminist-neoliberalism. Problematizing the notion that self-representation on social media is progressive, Andrejevic (2006, p.396), echoing Foucault (1988), reclassifies self-expression online as self-disclosure which he regards as migrating from 'the confessional and examination into cyberspace'. This kind of surveillance intensifies and amplifies the reach of existing power relations in which Orwell's (2013) infamous Big Brother becomes instead 'little brothers' (or 'little sisters' in the case of this study) who partake in diffuse and ever more intimate forms of data-collection and observation (Andrejevic 2006).

While Rettberg explores how social media enables self-representation, giving the individual a degree of control over their image, Trottier, following Andrejevic, emphasizes how self-representation on social media can lead to a loss of control whereby one's personal information is used in ways which the individual cannot anticipate or control. Trottier (2017, p.464) uses the term 'surveillance creep' to refer to the phenomenon of people's data 'provided in one context is repurposed for new practices'. It is a phenomenon which also speaks to Alice Marwick and danah boyd's (2011) concept of 'context collapse' where boundaries between sites become blurred online, thanks to the unpredictable ways in which information circulates. This can lead to data being misrepresented and misunderstood outside of the original context in which it is shared. In an online context 'creep' also refers, as Trottier notes, to something quite stalker-ish which users do to other people – endlessly scrolling through another person's Instagram images for example, to 'see' what they are up to – and know is being done to them. Hence on social media, Trottier (2012, 2017) proposes that the process of watching and being watched is multi-directional; it is a process of visibility which users both engage in and submit to.

Critical to this arrangement are the 'new conditions of visibility' (Trottier 2012, p.16) which social media facilitates. These conditions, I argue, speak directly to the kinds of dynamics of looking that participants in this study describe when discussing selfie-practices, particularly when recounting the presence of a highly surveillant female gaze. For example, participants often refer to times when they have taken a break from social media as a consequence of the pressures they felt while engaging in these spaces. These pressures can be directly linked to the demands of new kinds of visibility which, as later chapters illustrate, produce gendered effects. Participants' retreat from the visible – by going offline or reducing their social media use – speaks directly to Trottier's observation that the increased visibility offered by social media sites is gradually something people seek respite from. Visibility online may enable us to express ourselves and connect with others but it also leaves us vulnerable to the kinds of self-monitoring, peer-to-peer monitoring, and surveillance by third parties which is disciplining rather than freeing (Trottier 2012).

In these contexts, being seen – and therefore heard - is also never assured, as visibility is significantly determined by algorithms which are programmed to reward normative behaviours. The act of looking is foundational to this kind of discipline. In his analysis of students' use of Facebook, for example, Trottier (2012, p.71) notes that, 'peer

visibility triggers self-scrutiny. They come to watch over themselves, using imaged audiences as yardsticks for appropriate content on the site.' Hence, rather than 'freeing' the individual to self-represent as they wish, in the context Trottier describes, social media is more inclined towards reinforcing conformity. While Trottier does not consider the gendered implications of his findings, my analysis suggests that these new 'relations of visibility' (Trottier 2012, p.27) as he terms them, intensify competitive femininity in ways which are emotionally harmful, re-inscribing postfeminist-neoliberal norms which are isolating and self-limiting.

Over the past few years, feminist media scholarship has increasingly begun to turn its attention to the issue of technological surveillance and its consequences for those traditionally other-ed by systems of visibility (Van der Meulen & Heyden 2016, Dubrofsky & Magnet 2015). Like Trottier, such studies note that surveillance in everyday life is longstanding and not necessarily benign; as Lisa Nakamura (2015, p.221) writes, 'there is no form of surveillance that is innocent.' She argues that for women on social media, 'there is a constant negotiation between the desire to connect and the need to self-regulate. Our identities are inextricably attached to the cultural contingencies of our gendered bodies.' (Nakamura 2015, pp.222-223) Here, Nakamura underscores how gender shapes online identities within a context where digital technology facilitates new modes of surveillance which are innovative in terms of discipline, producing specific gendered outcomes. These effects, 'remake the body, producing new ways of visualizing bodily identities' which emphasize the 'otherness' of those marked as different along gendered, racial, sexual and other lines. (Dubrofsky & Magnet 2015, p.9)

As social media turns longstanding modes of surveillance into a participatory, everyday act (in which women themselves are implicated), it strives, as other forms of media have done in the past, to present these practices as normal, desirable parts of daily life. In the process, such surveillant activities endeavour to play a governing role in what Regan and Steeves (2018, p.319) term 'the building of subjectivity'. In doing so, practices like the selfie illustrate how social media endeavours to elide the undesirable aspects of increased surveillance and intensifying demands for visibility, a process in which it is ably abetted by the discourses of postfeminist-neoliberal femininity.

In unpacking how online surveillance reproduces gender, Marwick (2012, 2013b) once again traces this impulse back to the cradle of Silicon Valley. Echoing the arguments of feminist theorists of technology like Judy Wajcman (2004, 2010), Marwick (2013b, p.61) notes how information technologies like the internet 'can perpetuate norms of

masculinity'. As she (2013b, p.75) outlines, underpinning this is the context in which technologies are developed. Simply put, creators usually create for themselves. If, as is so often the case, creators are predominately young white heterosexual males, 'a large number of technologies will be designed for that demographic group.' That is not to say that other groups cannot adapt these technologies for their own ends or use them subversively but to highlight how the origins of technologies powerfully shape them and, in turn, influence modes of engagement.

For Marwick (2012, p.384), social media use is enmeshed within the 'power differentials' of everyday life (of which gender is a classic example) where individuals 'strategically reveal, disclose and conceal personal information' to build relationships and bonds across networks and between people (Marwick 2012, p.391). By engaging in these types of activities, individuals learn to 'self-manage', adjusting their behaviour accordingly through lenses which are highly normative. The kinds of looking associated with social media, which include 'stalking, watching, creeping, gazing' create a 'panoptic-type' environment that is 'characterised by both watching and a high awareness of being watched.' (Marwick 2012, p.379) Marwick suggests that gender is re/produced on social media in two ways which orientate around surveillance, resonating with earlier points on how gender is 'baked' into new technologies: firstly, via the software design and secondly, via interactivity. Online communication, she states, viewed through a gender lens, 'reveals patterns in the types of communication that are encouraged and discouraged.' (Marwick, 2013b, p.62) These patterns tend to follow longstanding feminine/masculine norms, placing a high premium on conformity. This follows Trottier's insights into the manner in which social media promotes conformity through surveillance and Fuchs' cautioning that technology is best understood as enmeshed in society rather than as separate from it. Consequently, we can understand how the regulation of femininity is transposed from the offline world to the online world in subtle but effective ways which are rooted in social media's own architecture and the nature of sociality itself. Hence, in a commercial, social and structural sense, social media surveillance promotes the reproduction of normative femininity in ways which are far from innocent.

While the technologies involved in this process may be new, the ideologies underpinning them are not. Rather, as the previous chapter outlines, these ideas can be observed in a long line of earlier forms of visual art and media. Just as Berger (1972) describes how classical art is constructed to make women appear complicit in their own objectification, Rachel E. Dubrofsky and Megan M. Wood (2015), writing about social

media surveillance, illustrate how celebrity women's use of social media marks them as responsible for the unintended consequences of their image, even when these consequences are beyond their control and punitive. This is a complex issue, for as Dubrofsky and Soshana Amielle Magnet (2015, p.10) note, 'newer surveillance technologies both produce and are produced by new forms of pleasure in looking.' This highlights how technologies like social media enable women to see and be seen in ways which are enjoyable and assertive, while concurrently requiring that they submit to judgement and surveillance. Thus, by claiming visibility, women are interpreted as choosing to submit themselves to surveillance, a process which positions them as 'empowered and agentic' but also 'complicit' in their own objectivation (Dubrofsky & Magnet 2015, p.11, referencing the work of Dubrofsky & Wood 2015). This narrative conveniently but harmfully 'elides the misogynist context that hails them to perform in particular ways' (Dubrofsky & Wood 2015, p.94), within a culture that places increasing emphasis on self-disclosure and visibility. This follows a very similar logic to postfeminist-neoliberal discourse, where the individual woman is responsibilized for the consequences of her choices with no regard for the context or constraints underpinning those choices.

Reflecting on their work exploring young women's experiences of social networking, Steeves and Bailey (2016) capture the tensions that visibility online heralds. On the one hand, there is the desire to see and be seen but on the other, there is also the desire to 'draw boundaries around what can be seen and how it is interpreted' (Steeves & Bailey 2016, p.57). These desires are complicated by the manner in which social media amplifies gender norms, whereby female users are confronted by endlessly circulating images that privilege heteronormative performances, emphasizing the female body as an object for surveillance and judgement (Steeves & Bailey 2016, p.72). This desire for visibility is also undermined by the risk inherent to social media use, whereby control over one's image can be lost as easily as it is asserted. This is exemplified in what Regan and Steeves (2018, p.324) term 'the persistence of identification', in which social media's ability to record and archive one's actions and words undermine the claims to empowerment proffered by social media sites. As Steeves and Bailey (2016, p.77) note, 'social media can push young women into the realm of super-visibility, where their performances are easily distorted by the mainstream tropes through which others – and the girls themselves – interpret those performances.'

The kind of surveillance enabled by selfie-practices is new in terms of its intensity, its ubiquity and the technology used. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, the manner in which such surveillance fragments and categorises bodies and reasserts cultural norms such as traditional gender roles and compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980) is certainly not new. For example, the fragmentation of the female body, emphasizing specific parts such as breasts or legs, is a longstanding, insidious process of objectification which casts women as the passive, sexualised 'other', the object of male desire. The continuation of this tradition in the present is exemplified by the use of filters on apps like Facetune and Instagram's filters, which forensically fragment and analyse the body and face, reasserting dominant ideas of 'correct' appearance which are often Westernised, sexist, racist and classist. This is what Rettberg (2014, p.24) rightly stresses when she argues that, 'cultural filters are as important as technological filters.' By evaluating and adjusting their appearance through filters and apps, through a gaze that is ostensibly female but deeply marked by surveillance, young women engaged in selfie-practices learn to 'mimic' cultural norms (Rettberg 2014, p.22) as prescribed by the technology which reflect the concerns of wider society. Here again, the heightened visibility afforded by selfie-practices and social media more broadly can be seen to produce effects which reinforce rather than challenge harmful aspects of femininity while endeavouring to present increasing surveillance – and its demands – as desirable and inevitable.

3.5. Discipline

At this juncture, the question arises: what purpose does selfie surveillance serve? In response, one must consider the longstanding, deeply rooted surveillance women and girls have traditionally been subject to in androcentric societies. It is a surveillance which seeks firstly, to govern, secondly, to produce profit, and lastly, to contain any threat posed to the normative order by female desire, especially relating to issues of sexuality and equality. In short, surveillance serves to *discipline* not only through the practice of selfie-taking but also through the logics which govern how selfie-practices are understood. Fundamental to this is the phenomenon's alignment with femininity in popular discourse, which is given weight by young women's proven proclivity for selfie-use. Yet, what is critical here is how such proclivity is interpreted and framed. As Anne Burns (2015) illustrates with her compelling insights into the disciplinary function of such discourse, the discursive alignment of the selfie with femininity serves patriarchal rather than progressive ends.

Burns' (2015, p.1716) important analysis shows how online social commentary about the selfie phenomenon serves 'a regulatory social function' in which, 'the discursive construction of selfie practices and the negative perception of selfie takers' becomes co-constitutive. This chimes with analyses of photography more generally (Tagg 1988, Sontag 2008) which consider how it functions as a form of social control, creating categories and norms which shape notions of identity on both an individual and group level. As Rettberg (2014, p.80) asserts, 'photos are regularly used against the subject's will as a form of discipline'. Rather than proceeding from an objective position, Burns (2015, p.1716) argues that much popular commentary on the selfie phenomenon is reflective of 'contemporary social norms and anxieties' centred on the actions of young women. As such, it is politically loaded, promoting negative feminine stereotypes while obfuscating the presence of patriarchal power.

Through repetition, the kinds of rhetoric Burns rightly takes issue with becomes accepted as 'common sense', in which selfie-practices are maligned because of their identification with the feminine and how they act as photographic 'evidence' of excessive attention-seeking, a perspective that reflects the inequitable position of women and their interests in androcentric culture more widely. This process is not simply about generating sexist interpretations of the phenomenon; it is also *productive*, producing new categories of gendered social behaviour which require policing. As Burns puts it:

> …selfie discourse does not merely *express* prejudice toward others; it also justifies their denigration by establishing punishment as a socially accepted response to certain activities (taking selfies) and subjects (women who take selfies) [emphasis Burns']. (Burns 2015, p.1717)

Classifying selfie-practices as 'feminine' facilitates what Burns (2015, p.1718) describes as, 'the imposition of rules governing how and when to take selfies' which works to, 'secure the acceptance of – and adherence to – social norms.' Hence, when narcissism and vanity are offered as an explanation for young women's selfie-practices, and as a means to rebuke them, little attention is paid to factors which might complicate such conclusions. As discussed in Chapter Two in relation to Rosemary Betterton's conceptualisation of the female gaze, claims which assume women's narcissism utterly miss the uncomfortable and insecure relationship many women have with their image. They also cannot account for how participants in this study struggle to balance the demand for visibility online with the threat of being judged as narcissistic for endeavouring to do so. This is no easy feat but one many young women are increasingly called upon to somehow master. Thus,

although women's relationship to narcissism and vanity are historically complex (De Beauvoir 2011, Berger 1972) and not necessarily pathological, aligning selfie-use with deviant female behaviour in the way Burns describes creates an easily digestible narrative in which one 'feeds' the other. The effect of this kind of social discipline, as Burns observes, is not merely to ridicule women but to assert patriarchal governance over how they engage with digital technologies, a point Burns' sums up in the following passage:

> …the normalised connection between women and an abjected form of photography – achieved through repeated accusations of narcissism – impacts women's entry into the social media's public sphere by forbidding or outright preventing certain behaviours. (Burns 2015, pp.1722-1723)

Burns raises a critical point here regarding the lack of nuance in popular accounts of the phenomenon. Thankfully, academia provides insights on narcissism and the selfie which serve as an important counterpoint to tired mainstream narratives. Rather than selfie-practices functioning as a simple causation of narcissism, studies on personality, selfie-use and narcissism suggest that such practices can exacerbate existing narcissistic tendencies producing a 'self-reinforcement effect' (Halpern, Valenzuela & Katz 2016, p.98; Weiser 2015). This may increase levels of narcissism, but that is not equivalent to causing them, nor does it suggest that such behaviour – in general - is so extreme as to be disordered in a clinical sense. Yet, as Burns (2015, pp.1728-29) notes, selfie-practices and selfie-takers are regularly depicted as 'excessive', engaging in narcissistic behaviours which require castigation.

In his engaging 'queer reading' of narcissism and selfie-use, Greg Goldberg (2017) follows Burns in problematising 'common sense' understandings of the phenomenon. He challenges normative understandings of narcissism, often deployed in relation to selfie-practices, which are preoccupied with producing 'responsible subjects.' (Goldberg 2017, p.1) This type of popular discourse is less concerned with narcissism that is 'an exaggerated focus on the self' and more concerned with 'a failure of responsibility for oneself, and/or sufficient concern for the well-being of others to whom the narcissist ought to be responsible' (Goldberg 2017, p.2). As Goldberg illustrates, the roots of such discourse and their anxieties can be traced back to maintaining traditional social order. In his analysis, rather than desiring another, selfie-takers become *self-focused*, rejecting the 'social bonds' of relationships (particularly of the romantic, heterosexual variety), thereby posing a threat to societal norms. This 'absence of desire' ultimately threatens the heteronormative reproductive order, resulting in the production of a 'failed subject' which

Goldberg (2017, p.6) classifies as the homosexual or the narcissist, but can just as easily apply to young women. As Goldberg notes, women are expected to embody notions of self-sacrifice and domesticity, an expectation that is challenged when women focus on themselves and seek visibility in the public sphere. In Goldberg's (2017, p.9) reading, far from being pathological, narcissism in the selfie – if present - functions as a form of resistance to normative designs of 'correct' personhood, a point he regards as, 'the selfie's most radical political accomplishment'.

Burns and Goldberg both link the derision of young women's selfie-use to the disciplinary treatment of women in the public sphere more broadly. This is an important point, one brilliantly discussed by Bailey, Steeves, Burkell and Regan (2013) in their exploration of how alarmist Victorian attitudes to women cyclists echo popular discourse around young women's use of social media today. As the authors explain, the arrival of the bicycle allowed women numerous kinds of new freedoms. It was an easy form of transport, a new form of exercise; it allowed women to move about in public in ways that they had not been able to before. But this freedom was taken by society as threatening. 'Women who dared to cycle publicly,' they write (2013, p.92), 'were regularly labelled inappropriately forward, sexually promiscuous and just plain dangerous.'

Bailey et al. argue that social media are designed to intensify the surveillance and discipline that women's entry into the public realm has long been subject to. In this realm, certain types of femininity are prized over others, particularly those with commercial appeal. Hence, although young women can use social media in ways that can be read as nonconforming, nevertheless Bailey et al. (2013, pp.106) contend that 'social stereotypes continue to structure girls' online gender performances.' This observation again complicates narratives unproblematically linking selfie-use to empowerment. It also highlights, as Bailey et al. (2013) discuss in relation to their focus groups with young women, the potential disciplinary effects of selfie-practices, in which gender stereotypes are reproduced, normative femininity is rewarded, and non-conformity is punished. This 'punishment' has gendered effects, as they explain:

> …perhaps most disturbingly, our study suggests a perception among our participants that girls will not only be more harshly judged than boys because of the content of their online profiles, but also for their degree of publicness. (Bailey at. al 2013, p.107)

While Bailey et al. (Ibid) see the potential for social media to, 'take back the pen from the consumerist forces of mainstream media and rewrite social scripts about what it means to be a girl', they concede that this is not what is happening. Instead, social media continue

to delimit the kinds of representations they enable along normative lines. This is a critical point. As Stefanie Duguay (2016, p.1) outlines in her discussion of queer visibility through selfie-use, social media shape the selfie's 'conversational capacity' thereby influencing 'whether selfies feature in conversations reinforcing dominant discourses or in counterpublic conversations'. Duguay (2016, p.7) uses Instagram as an example of a social media app that encourages selfies which emphasize 'celebrity glorification, consumerism, normative beauty' through their design, elevating certain kinds of aesthetics and devaluing others. Thus, just as popular commentary shapes perceptions of selfie-users and selfie-practices, social media by design shapes the kinds of selfies which individuals are incentivised to produce. This in turn, as Bailey et al. (2013) point out, influences what types of femininity are granted visibility in online environments. In her analysis of intimacy creation via online sharing of images, Cristina Miguel (2016, p.7) echoes this point. She observes that self-censorship is an intrinsic part of the kinds of ongoing self-monitoring young women do to anticipate external judging gazes which might disapprove of, for example, 'sexy' images. The young women she interviewed reported posting sexy selfies infrequently to avoid judgement, especially on sites that are construed as more public like Facebook. In contrast, the young men she interviewed who had pictures of themselves on Facebook in swimming trunks, did not consider these to be intimate images nor were they concerned about who may see them. Miguel (2016, p.8) concludes, 'These findings seem to suggest that the patriarchal gender roles have not changed, but they are simply reproduced online because participants take their social/cultural assumptions online with them.'

Miguel's assertion here is a critical one and it is not unique in the literature. In her research into pregnant Russian women's presentations of femininity on Instagram, Tiidenberg (2015) found that selfies can be used to assert hegemonic forms of femininity and to reaffirm the heterosexual binary. This inability of selfie-practices to break with the norms of the offline world is also captured by Ori Schwarz (2010, p.175) who, in his work exploring digital self-portraits on the Israeli dating website *Shox*, proposes that the internet makes visible categories which remain 'virtual' in the offline world. In doing so, digital technologies and the processes of visibility they enable and support are more likely to endorse hierarchies and norms rather than dismantle them. As Tiidenberg (2015, p.1754) remarks, 'What is seen as photographical in a particular culture at a particular time illuminates the pertinent dominant ideologies.'

In terms of femininity, selfie-practices are not only productive in that they produce hegemonic representations of femininity, they are also *instructive*, in that they act as a cultural guide on how to achieve the kinds of femininities most prized by society. On this point, Valerie Steeves (2015) draws attention to how McRobbie and Garber's concept of 'bedroom culture'[22] has morphed into the 'virtual bedroom' (Reid-Walsh & Mitchell 2004). Critical to the concept of the bedroom was the notion of privacy which enabled girls to, as Steeves (2015, p.154) writes, 'retreat from the pressure of the public sphere, produce their own cultural meanings, and potentially challenge restrictive stereotypes.' However, the rise of social media has infiltrated the bedroom as it has everyday life more broadly, bringing easier access to the public sphere but also making the public sphere much more difficult to retreat from. This raises serious questions about the ability of girls and young women to access spaces in which they are free to play with their identities without the imposition of digital technologies and their mechanics of judgement, alongside commercial and peer surveillance.

Rather than producing innovative, creative spaces to experiment with femininity, in her exploration of how her participants' feel about posting their image online, Steeves' (2015, p.158) finds that 'social media came with a clear and vigorously enforced set of social roles about acceptable ways of being a girl.' This resulted in participants feeling compelled to closely monitor their images and the images of others, 'to ensure that photos conformed to highly gendered behavioural norms.' In this context, judgement was rife, competition intense and the awareness of one's and others' image much heightened, with 'good' images determined to be those most normatively feminine. It is perhaps unsurprising, given these factors, that Steeves' (2015, p.165) participants reported that social media increased the pressure to be beautiful. Interestingly, like participants in this study, many of Steeves' participants reported taking extended breaks from social media as a way to escape the pressure they felt, marking a retreat from the visibility so relentlessly touted by postfeminist-neoliberal culture as a positive and empowering.

Echoing the findings of Steeves' work, Schmeichel, Kerr and Linder (2017) analysed selfies produced by college-age American women featuring the trope of 'the southern lady', a very traditional notion of womanhood with significant cultural cache in the Deep South. They found that these kinds of gendered displays, disseminated via the

[22] 'Bedroom culture' developed from McRobbie and Garber's (2001) work in the 1970s which explored how girls utilised the space of the bedroom to develop their identities. This was in contrast to their male peers, for whom access to the public sphere such as the streets, sports clubs and so on, was more available.

selfie, 'circulate a pedagogy of femininity that contribute to idealised notions of traditional gender and physical attractiveness that reinforce classed and raced norms of beauty.' (Schmeichel et al. 2017, p.2) Young women may not blindly consume those selfies which serve the kind of pedagogical, disciplinary function Schmeichel et al. identify but nevertheless, as Steeves shows and as this study further explores, such images can and do produce intense, often negative responses which can be read as disciplining. These responses, combined with the terms of visibility they are attached to, have significant consequences for the kinds of feminine subjectivities which are permitted via selfie-practices and those which are not.

3.6. Summary

As this chapter makes abundantly clear, despite the claims of net utopians, technology is not neutral or inevitably progressive. Hence, we must understand selfie-practices as occurring within power and value systems which actively shape their parametres, incorporating the performative, the conversational, the anticipatory and the strategic, along with shifting gazes and subjectivities. As a practice, selfies require that the individual become adept at taking, evaluating and publishing their image for an 'imagined audience' (Marwick & boyd 2011). This activity is often framed as social media providing the individual with more control over their image. However, in order to access this control, the individual is required to submit to the self-discipline and self-branding inherent to social media, along with the risks typical to such environments. Selfie-practices are also deeply commodified, reflecting the evolution of personal photography as it intersects with the market demand for digital content and the ethos of contemporary neoliberal individuality.

Selfie-practices mark a site of connections, where emergent social media norms and technological surveillance fuse to produce new kinds of self-representations and new 'ways of seeing'. (Berger 1972) Given the knottiness of this arrangement, totalising explanations for the appeal of the selfie phenomenon are, as this chapter makes clear, unhelpful. Such explanations are also political in how they assume 'common sense', supposedly objective explanations for the phenomenon which do not take into account either the subjective or the wider social and historical influences which drive selfie-use and make such use meaningful. In short, these kinds of explanations cannot account for the selfie as a practice which is socially and politically *situated*, that is, as a practice which is used in different ways by different people in different contexts. Thus, as this chapter

stresses, when making claims about the phenomenon, the sociocultural contexts informing selfie-production must be taken into account in order to recognise the multiplicity of ways in which the selfie is interpreted and instrumentalised not only by users but by technology companies and the wider culture.

Social media is heavily influenced by the logics of neoliberal governmentality. In the context of this study, this helps explain why participants' perspectives on selfie-practices dovetail so neatly and intertwine so supportively with the discourses of postfeminist-neoliberalism to powerful effect. Both are shaped by logics which emphasize the importance of visibility rendered through individualized forms of self-disclosure and self-management, which social media is primed to facilitate and collate. As this chapter details, status-seeking via social media is a fraught process which shapes subjectivity. By committing themselves to becoming visible through social media, the individual is ranked and observed – and is required to do the same to others. Hence, we can see how critical visibility is when it comes to how social media structures human relations, both as a mode of engagement and as element to be quantified and commodified. These 'new conditions of visibility' as Trottier (2012, p.116) terms them, are fundamental to understanding how social media functions as a surveillance apparatus within which selfie-practices are embedded. As Fuchs (2012) cautions, it is important to position social media *as part of society* as opposed to separate from it, being cognizant of how technology reflects and is shaped by longstanding social issues.

As a 'feminized' practice, selfie-practices are regularly dismissed and ridiculed at a cultural level while being encouraged and harnessed at an economic and technological level. This creates a context in which popular commentary on the phenomenon is notable for its sexism, its exclusions and its hypocrisy in its refusal to acknowledge the ways in which women's engagement with selfie-practices, firstly, helps generate huge wealth for social media companies, and secondly, subjects them to intensifying surveillance and judgement for endeavouring to acquire the visibility so promoted under postfeminist-neoliberalism. This produces the doubly-disciplining effect that this thesis explores, whereby both discourse and technology seek to control and direct women's selfie-practices for their own ends. This effect attempts to structure visibility and subjectivity, thereby endeavouring to control the kinds of femininities which are 'brought into being'.

While the ideologies underpinning these dynamics are far from new, social media enables modern forms of surveillance in which the individual girl or woman is charged with participating. In doing so, cultural expectations of femininity, along with the neoliberal ethos of new technologies, combine to encourage a high degree of self-disclosure and visibility, the downsides of which women are viewed as responsible for even when they have little to no control over how their image will be received. Yet despite the punitive consequences of heightened surveillance, it is increasingly presented as a desirable part of 'doing' contemporary femininity, producing an impossible bind in which visibility is both demanded and critiqued. This bind is also reflected in the discourse around narcissism and deviancy, which is, as Burns (2015) argues, used to not only condemn women's selfie-practices but to justify their condemnation. Thus, the selfie, as a form of what Burns terms 'abject' photography, produces a category of practice and of user which can be freely surveyed and judged, thereby eliding the patriarchal origins of such attentions. Again, this type of popular commentary dispenses with nuance and alternative readings of the phenomenon, emphasizing instead the behavioural excesses and 'wrongness' of women.

Social media's surveillant architecture strongly directs the conversational and representational capacity of selfie-practices along highly normative lines, where conformity is granted visibility and hegemonic notions of femininity are endlessly reinscribed. Thus, although the potential for disruption most certainly remains, it is curtailed by both discursive and technological structures. The presence of these structures and the ends they serve underscore most deeply the political significance of the selfie's association with femininity, an association which reflects what is new about the phenomenon and also what is longstanding, particularly when it comes to governing women's visibility in the public sphere. Hence, as this chapter makes clear, far from being frivolous, selfie-practices function as a critical site of contestation and of articulation, one where new social norms are developing while contemporary tensions in the gender field are endlessly manifesting and circulating.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1. Introduction

Writing about contemporary challenges for feminist media and cultural scholarship, Elana Levine (2015, p.33) argues that while longstanding concerns around the issue of femininity and androcentric societies remain, 'more recent incarnations of such concerns do take on new dimensions.' In particular, she cites the mediatization of ideas about gender through 'horizontal, peer-to-peer versions like the blogs and social media pages of "regular" people' (Ibid) as a critical shift in how femininity is represented and embodied. The landscape Levine describes presents many fresh avenues for researchers. It also provides the primary motivation for this project – to gain deeper insight into selfie-practices and their relation to new forms of visibility - and the inspiration for the methodology it employs, which is indebted to feminist media scholarship.

With these factors in mind, this chapter outlines the research context, methodological plan and methodological choices made over the course of this study. It describes the original impetus, the methods utilised, participant selection and interviewing, restrictions and challenges, as well as ethical considerations. It also reflects on the role of the researcher in the research process and on the nature of 'doing' feminist data collection and analysis, with a particular emphasis on issues regarding researching a digital phenomenon from a feminist perspective. In doing so, this chapter seeks to explore and illustrate how feminist audience studies, which have contributed much insight in the past, can be utilised today to explore women's relationship to digital media. It begins by explaining the feminist approach and methods deployed before turning to the study's epistemological and ontological foundations, followed by the data collection and analysis process, before finally turning to ethical considerations and limitations.

4.2. Doing Feminist Research

The idea for this study began to take shape in 2013, when the selfie rose to cultural notoriety. The genesis started many years before, when I completed a BA in Media Studies which drew heavily on the perspectives of scholars from Britain's Birmingham School of Cultural Studies (CCCS) such as Angela McRobbie and the late Stuart Hall. Their insights, which cast the popular culture as a site of struggle over meaning (Hall 1998) with particular implications for gender, race, sexuality and class, alerted me to the kinds of gendered framing taking place in the media around the selfie phenomenon. Much

of this framing positioned the category of 'young women' as uniquely aligned with the selfie, a point which, as discussed in the previous chapter, was, and still is, used to disparage both selfie-takers and selfie-practices. At the time, such associations were striking – and concerning - given the lack of academic research on the phenomenon.

This study was conceived as a way to address this lack from a feminist perspective, centring the voices of young women while appreciating the diversity of perspectives and experiences such a category inevitably represents, along with the necessity for nuanced, contextualised accounts of the phenomenon. Most particularly, this study is concerned with *subjective experiences of the phenomenon*, exploring how the individual makes sense of the selfie and the kinds of subjectivities this sense-making produces. Given the scale of this study, it does not claim to be representative but it does aim to offer insights into how the phenomenon is experienced and navigated by the individual in the contexts explored. As the study progressed, the theme of visibility came to the fore as a critical aspect of participants' accounts which captured the mutually reinforcing intersection of postfeminist-neoliberal rhetoric and the logics of social media surveillance. This intersection, and its consequences, became the study's focal point.

To reiterate, the central research question which guides this project is: *what do young women's perspectives and experiences of selfie-practices reveal about the nature of contemporary femininities?* From this, a further three sub-questions developed: firstly, *what discourses govern these femininities?* Secondly, *what types of subjectivities do they produce?* Lastly, *what does the interplay between these discourses and the emerging technological norms the selfie is representative of suggest about femininity and visibility in the current moment?* To answer, this project uses a mixed-method approach which breaks down as follows:

1. Critical discussions of key academic literature, informed by themes and findings distilled from the interview data, exploring and advancing scholarly understandings of postfeminist-neoliberalism, gaze theory, and the selfie as a technological practice and a gendered practice.
2. Qualitative interviewing to gather empirical insights into young women's perspectives on the phenomenon (including the collection of visual data in the form of selfies).
3. A discourse analysis of interview data to explore feminine subjectivity formation in selfie-practices.

Positioning a piece of research as 'feminist' is to bring a political awareness to one's approach and to the nature of research. What makes feminist research distinctive is, firstly, its focus (women's experiences, appreciating the diversity therein), secondly, how the researcher is positioned in the process ('within' rather than 'removed from') and, finally, its overall aims, which are concerned with creating knowledge about women's lives that can be used to identify and dismantle inequalities (Letherby 2003). While there is no singular feminist method, research techniques can be used in methodologically feminist ways which are characterised by 1) reflexivity, 2) an awareness of the role of the researcher's subjectivity in the research process, and 3) an appreciation for the role of participants (Harding 1987).

'Reflexivity' refers to the manner in which feminist scholarship emphasizes the need for researchers to, 'reflect on, examine critically, and explore analytically the nature of the research process.' (Fonow & Cook 2005, p.2218) Thus, the researcher is understood to be an 'active agent' (Fonow & Cook 2005, p.2219) in the research process, rather than as a detached, wholly objective entity. Reflexive approaches are not without critique, as Kathryn Roulston (2010, p.118) cautions. Reviewing key literature on the topic, she argues that reflexivity can encourage narcissism on behalf of the researcher, 'nihilist textual experimentations', and a fudging of the power dynamics which shape research. As a consequence, she advocates for honest accounting of data without recourse to overtly indulging in reflexivity.

Roulston's points are well-made in highlighting the pitfalls of taking reflexivity to excessive lengths. Nevertheless, when conducted judiciously, thinking reflexively can be a rewarding aspect of research, one which necessarily charges the researcher with being attuned to their presence within, rather than removed from, the process. In this study, for example, being reflexive helped me think through the issue of power between interviewer and interviewee as something which shifts throughout the process. Although interviewers may have more power in the interview setting, putting out the call for participants was a very vulnerable time for me as a researcher, given that I did not know if anyone would respond. Hence, it is important to note that power dynamics are not automatically set in favour of the researcher. For this project, had my participants declined to take part, I would not have been able to conduct the study in the manner I desired. Thus, as researcher, I was in the vulnerable position of being reliant on participants' engagement and their willingness to share their experiences with me. As a consequence, this study purposely utilises the word 'participant' to refer to interviewees

out of respect for their willingness to share their perspectives on the selfie phenomenon, thereby providing insights which would otherwise have been difficult to capture.

The semi-structured interview method, which this study utilises, has a particular relationship to feminist qualitative research (Reinharz 1992). Given the aims of feminist research, this is unsurprising as the semi-structured interview format centres the experience of the interviewee focusing on, as Reinharz (1992, p.19) puts it, 'their own words'. This has specific implications for the study of women's experiences for, 'learning from women is an antidote to centuries of ignoring women's ideas altogether or having men speak for women.' (Reinharz 1992, p.19) While quantitative studies like those cited in the Introduction to this study repeatedly illustrate women's proclivity for selfie-use (a point which highlights the usefulness of quantitative methods to feminist scholarship in gleaning statistically significant insights) little qualitative scholarship exists as yet on the motivations and personal narratives which drive the phenomenon (Diefenbach & Christoforakos 2017) and less still on women's personal experiences of social media surveillance. Feminist scholarship provides a valuable pathway for thinking through how these deficiencies might be addressed from a gender standpoint, given its preference for qualitative methods which prioritize the lived experience.

After considering other forms of data collection such as questionnaires and group interviews, the semi-structured interview was selected as primary method of data collection. The reasons for this are manifold. Firstly, as DeVault and Gross (2006) discuss, interviewing is notable for how it enables researchers to capture the complexities of human perspectives and experiences. Given the exploratory nature of this study – examining a new cultural practice – flexibility was also a key consideration and something that the semi-structured interview format can readily accommodate. This enabled me to incorporate questioning on how the selfie phenomenon had been framed in popular discourse while also allowing scope for participants to introduce their own insights and tangents. Semi-structured interviews proved an ideal way to marry these two aspects, producing rich data that exceeded expectations. The format also enabled participants' selfie-images to be introduced into the process with relative ease, an aspect of the interview process which proved to be very illuminating in terms of understanding how the young women interviewed related to images of themselves they had created and shared (or not) online.

All interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder. The length of interviews varied, from half-an-hour to one hour, reflecting once again the flexibility of

the semi-structured format. All interviews were conducted in person with participants' submitting a selfie of their choosing ahead of time. In the last stage of the interview, this selfie was brought up on a laptop for discussion. The interview questions were designed to be as open-ended as possible to inspire conversation and to emphasise to participants – as I did during the interviews themselves – that there were no 'right' or 'wrong' answers, what mattered was their perspective (see Appendix 3 for semi-structured interview protocol).

As well as being deployed in feminist research more broadly, the semi-structured interview is also a good example of the kinds of qualitative methods fruitfully used in feminist audience studies, a school of feminist media scholarship which explores how women relate to media and cultural products and practices in everyday[23] life (Van Zoonen 1994, Walters 1995, Hollows 2000). This approach finds a new urgency in the current moment as audiences not only consume media but actively produce it. In this context, feminist audience studies' central concern - namely the uses and interpretations of 'gendered media texts by gendered audiences' (Van Zoonen 1994, p.108) – is revitalised as consumers also become users and creators. It is a methodological approach which, as Joke Hermes (2013, p.61) puts it, 'bears witness to a spirit of solidarity and recognition of unequal gender relations without imposing ideological dogma or political correctness.' It also, as Hermes (2013, p.64) writes, 'allows both for recognizing agency on the part of individuals and for understanding individuals as always subjected to regimes of power that are more encompassing than they seem to be.'

This approach is a central inspiration for this study, a factor reflected in its methodology. In the Eighties and Nighties, audience studies like Janice Radway's (1991) *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Culture* and Jackie Stacey's (1994) *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* highlighted how exploring women's perspectives and lived experiences can provide important insights which go beyond the text to show how media are used and understood by female audiences in everyday contexts. While these studies were not without issue (Radway, for example, faced criticism for not considering in more detail wider structural issues like class in her

[23] In this study, the 'everyday' is understood, as Cavalcante, Press, and Sender (2017, p.4) describe, as representing the 'dynamics of repetition and familiarity, it is a routine sequence of taken-for-granted experiences'. They argue that it is 'from within this rich earth of everyday experience—a contradictory assemblage of structure/agency, pleasure/pain, routine/rupture, and the ordinary/extraordinary—that audiences engage with media and communications technologies.' In the social media age, the everyday has been 'profoundly altered' by the flow of information, both private and public, enabled by digital technologies, the outcomes of which users and audiences now must navigate (Cavalcante at al. 2017, p.5)

analysis (Press 1986, McRobbie 1990, quoted in Parameswaran 2003, p.312), nevertheless their findings complicate assumptions about women's media use, which is often dismissed by androcentric society as frivolous and guilt-worthy. Instead, insights distilled from work like Radway's and Stacey's underscores the diversity of women's experiences. In doing so, such studies show the importance of specificity over generalisations about media-use, and the ability of women to engage with media ways which are unexpected and sometimes resistant, thereby complicating popular, often dismissive assumptions about female media consumption.

Sonia Livingstone (2010, pp. 567) rightly argues that these kinds of studies reveal, 'the everyday micro-tactics of appropriation that reshape and remediate media forms and goods, forcing academic recognition of marginalized voices, unexpected experiences, and the importance of the lifeworld in the circuit of culture'. The need for such insights is heightened in the current moment by the rising ubiquity of digital technologies, the use of which, 'is never a wholly individual act… it always advances certain interests.' (Livingstone 2013, p.24) However, in more recent times, the role of audience studies has diminished somewhat, with some media studies practitioners, as Radhika E. Parameswaran (2003, p.315) puts it, rushing to 'herald the demise of the audience as an object of study.' This assumption that scholars know all we need to know about audiences ignores, as Parameswaran argues, those audiences who do not correspond to the Western subject which is presumed by much of the field. It also fails to appreciate the fresh terrain of experience which technologies like social media create. This opens up alternative paths of inquiry for how we understand audiences/users and their relationship to digital media practices, a critical point for gender researchers given how the media has long sought to structure audiences along gender lines. As Hermes urges (2013, p.67), the current moment demands that we, 'not just take audiences seriously but be aware of what can be gained by paying close attention to "bad taste" sexism, and the meanings and pleasures of media texts and practices that celebrate gender inequality.'

In the contemporary moment, as women act as both consumers and producers of media-products, the richness of feminist audience studies' findings and approaches provides both a valuable foundation and a forward-looking path for thinking about how these new terrains might be studied. As Cavalcante, Press, and Sender (2017, p5) assert, 'Media production is no longer the domain of the media industries proper, and media reception is no longer confined to a specific place and time. Rather, performing and audiencing happen constantly.' In this project, the semi-structured interview was an

obvious, proven tool with which to collect participants' accounts of a new social practice that they, as young women actively engaged online, have specific expertise. In approaching the selfie as a *practice* which participants both *participate in and reproduce*, introducing a visual component to explore how participants *relate to and make sense* of their own image and utilizing discourse analysis which respects the integrity of the personal and the subjective while submitting it to rigorous assessment, this study illustrates how longstanding methodological approaches in feminist audience studies can be adapted for the digital age.

Gathering participants' accounts revealed the nuances and complexities of the selfie phenomenon in specific contexts, dynamics which qualitative tools, with their emphasis on personal testimony, are well-positioned to unpack. This is particularly important for feminist scholars who seek to 'give voice' to women's stories. As DeVault and Gross (2006, p.177) posit, feminist researchers have been drawn to interviewing as a means to make 'experience hearable' while 'subjecting it to systematic analysis.' Critical to this, they advise, is the researcher's awareness that they are always working with perspectives which are 'constructed linguistically' in a specific context in which 'telling and listening' actively shape the account. As such, researchers need to be cognizant of the limitations of qualitative approaches, not treating interviewees' accounts as transparent 'truths', remaining mindful of how interview transcripts are themselves constructed and our role in that process. In short, we should also be cautious of the claims we make. As Gayle Letherby (2003, p.90) advises, while qualitative interviewing can be useful for gathering individual perspectives, interviewing is always an active process of construction which provides 'an insight into a point in time: a snapshot' rather than account we can proffer as 'total'. Context is key, as Angela McRobbie (1982, p.48) points out, because research is never 'carried out in a vacuum'; it always speaks to the political, social and historical moment we find ourselves in. Nor is it a case of merely discovering and reporting truths. Rather, in attempting to distil knowledge from women's lived experiences, scholars must be conscious that '*representations are interpretations* [emphasis McRobbie's].' (McRobbie 1982, p.51) Hence, feminist scholars must challenge themselves to think critically and exercise caution in their claims, being aware at all times of how the processes of collecting, transcribing and interpreting data themselves shape our findings. Ultimately, McRobbie (1982, p.52) cautions that research, 'can never present more than a *partial* portrait of the phenomenon under study [emphasis McRobbie's].' Extending this point to the work of audience studies, Hermes (2000, p.356) proposes that such research

can only ever provide 'fragments of stories' which contribute to an incomplete picture of 'cultural knowledges.' However, the partiality of the portrait should not elide the important work of feminist knowledge creation and the usefulness of qualitative approaches. As Beverley Skeggs (1995, p.12) advises, on the subject of how knowledge functions politically, 'the more feminist knowledge we have, at the widely diverse levels and sites, the greater the potential for understanding and change.'

4.3. Epistemological Perspectives

The epistemological and ontological approach deployed by this study incorporates two strands of feminist thought: *feminist standpoint theory* and *poststructuralist feminism.* While these strands emerge from different theoretical traditions it is possible, as I will show, to bring them together productively to explore how feminine subjectivities are produced and positioned. As a project, feminist epistemologies challenge masculinist notions of knowledge production which claim to be neutral and generalizable while eliding the experiences of women (Van Zoonen 1994). For feminist researchers, this means being attuned to the manner in which traditional epistemologies have overlooked women (intentionally or otherwise) as what Harding (1987, p.3) terms '*agents of knowledge* [emphasis Harding's].' Harding's use of the term 'agents' here is instructive, a reminder that while feminist scholarship deals with silences and exclusions it is also concerned with the myriad ways women - as active agents rather than simply passive victims - can and do resist patriarchal forces. Thus, through centring women's perspectives, feminist epistemology seeks to expand the definition of what can be 'known' and to reimagine the creation of knowledge itself (Narayan 1989, 2013).

Feminist standpoint theory seeks to develop what Nancy Hartsock (1983, 2013, pp.355-366) calls 'liberatory possibilities' developed from 'a specifically feminist materialism' which names and challenges patriarchal assumptions and institutions. To do this work, Donna Haraway (1988, pp.580-581) asserts the importance of understanding feminist objectivity as *situated*, that is, as working within specific contexts in order to develop sophisticated accounts of 'how meanings and bodies get made'. This is a mode of working which runs counter to universalizing claims to truth made by much scientific, masculinist research. As such, Haraway (1988, p.584) characterises knowledge produced from a feminist standpoint as 'partial, locatable, critical'. This is not to say that feminist scholarship claims no truth but rather than it does so cautiously and advisedly, keeping in mind the diversity and situatedness of women's experiences. As Uma Narayan (1989,

2013, p.374) succinctly puts it, 'no point of view is "neutral" because no one exists unembedded in the world.'

Hartsock's conceptualization of the feminist standpoint has been criticized for being essentialist and relativist (Walby 2001). However, it is important to assert that Hartsock's ideas are not based on deterministic understandings based on female biology but rather how capitalist societies organise gender roles along a strictly delimited binary which values male labour and perspectives while invisibilising women's contributions and experiences. Hence, standpoint refers to how women are *positioned* and *addressed* in these regimes rather than to any distinct female 'essence'. Utilising a feminist standpoint enables scholars to develop *located knowledges* which can, in turn, challenge inequalities women face by paying close attention to how power structures society and the self. It is the question of power which also informs the work of poststructuralist feminism.

As mentioned, Harding's conceptualisation of the female subject as an agent of knowledge helpfully positions women as *active subjects*. This evokes poststructuralist understandings of subjectivity/being which regard it as always *in process*, thereby continually producing moments when power can be challenged or negotiated. Poststructuralist thinking has had a major impact on feminist theorizing, as evidenced by the important work of Susan Bordo (1992, 1993), Sandra Lee Bartky (1990, 2002) and Judith Butler (1990, 1993) among others. However, the embrace of poststructuralism by feminist thinkers is not without its detractors who query the usefulness of poststructuralist thought for the political and social aims of the feminist project (Alcoff 1988, Nicholson 1992, Fraser & Nicholson 1989). These criticisms typically centre on poststructuralism's radical reimagining of the human subject.

Poststructuralism, as Margaret A. McLaren (2002, p.20) outlines, subscribes to an ontology that challenges the Enlightenment presumption of 'the rational man' who is 'based on the exclusion of those who are not viewed as rational', including women. This presumption, poststructuralist theorists argue, is exclusionary, creating a category of 'other' against the humanist ideal of the rational, self-determining individual who is inevitably male, asserts itself (McLaren 2002, p.20). Such assumptions also insist on a version of the self which is coherent and pre-existing, as opposed to one which is continually *brought into being* via discipline and discourse as poststructuralism proposes.

Thus the subject of poststructuralism is always contingent and *in process*, created through language, determined by power relations, 'inscribed and re-inscribed with

discourses that the subject did not produce and that always remains, at least in part, opaque.' (Davies et al.2006, p.88) It is this formulation of the subject that feminist critics of poststructuralism see as a serious stumbling block. By emphasizing the historical, contextual situatedness and fluidity of subjectivity (what Chris Weedon (1987, 1997, p.32) terms the 'precarious'), thereby calling into question any movement that seeks to define and speak for a singular group, poststructuralism emphasizes how feminism becomes limited to existing within the structures it opposes, rather than transcending them (Butler 1990, Gavey 1989).

To respond to these criticisms, and to illustrate the instances when poststructuralism has much to offer feminist theorizing, the work of Chris Weedon (1987, 1997) is indispensable. Echoing the principles of feminist standpoint theory, Weedon argues that for a theory to be 'politically useful' for feminists, it must acknowledge the foundational role subjective experiences play in shaping women's lives. She acknowledges that not all poststructuralist approaches are suitable for feminism, given the degree to which some are detached from materiality. However, she emphasizes the usefulness of those which she argues are helpful, particularly the work of Michel Foucault on the nature of power. This point is echoed by Jana Sawicki (1991, p.95) who sees Foucault's insights on power's productive nature, along with bodily and psychic discipline, as valuable analytical tools for excavating, 'the power of internalised oppression, and the seemingly intractability of gender as a key to personal identity.' As Sawicki indicates, the entrenchment of gender norms remains a critical concern for feminism despite the movement's gains and the comprehensive debunking of said norms by feminist academics. Consequently, as Weedon (1987, 1997, p.12) argues, feminist theory must grapple with 'why women tolerate social relations which subordinate their interests to those of men.' She writes:

> Theory must be able to address women's experience by showing where it comes from and how it relates to material and social practices and the power relations which structure them. It must be able to recognise and account for competing subjective realities and demonstrate the social interests on behalf of which they work. This involves understanding how particular social structures and processes create the conditions of existence which are at one and the same time both material and discursive. (Weedon 1987, 1997, pp.8-9)

Hence, rather than leaving labels like 'woman' uninterrogated, a poststructuralist approach (as advocated by Weedon) explores the contexts and experiences from which such categories arise, specifically how women are situated and addressed by social

structures which attempt to 'fix' certain meanings to the individual based on their biology. Such subject positions produce different kinds of subjectivities, which are delimited by factors such as gender, race and class. For example, as Weedon (1987, 1997, p.18) notes, multiple strands of feminism are 'critical of the family to varying degrees, but none of them really account for its appeal'. Therefore, she argues, feminist theorists must, 'grasp the range of possible normal subject positions open to women, and the power and powerlessness invested in them.' (Ibid)

Weedon (1987, 1997, p.40) defines feminist poststructuralism as, 'a mode of knowledge production which uses poststructuralist theories of language, subjectivity, social processes and institutions to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and strategies for change.' Critical to this is an approach to language which, far from regarding it as transparent and an honest account of what is 'real' as humanism posits, instead emphasizes its political nature. Language or 'discourse' is 'a structuring principle of society' (Weedon, 1987, 1997, p.40), bound within power relations locked in struggle in which certain, favoured discourses dominate while others fight for expression. What is at stake in this struggle is of critical significance for feminist scholarship, as Weedon (1987, 1997, p.40) writes: 'The site of this battle for power is the subjectivity of the individual and it is a battle in which the individual is an active but not sovereign protagonist.'

Like standpoint theory, poststructuralist feminism problematizes universalizing notions of truth in favour of interrogating meaning and exploring how subjectivities are created and situated. Both standpoint and feminist poststructuralism regard women's experiences not as naturally produced but *actively constructed* through power dynamics which are patriarchal and always in flux. It is for these reasons, I argue, that poststructuralist feminism and feminist standpoint are compatible. Bringing them together enables me to defend my choice to focus on the experiences of a group of young women, who are addressed and positioned in explicit and highly gendered ways by discourses which attempt to 'fix' certain meanings about the selfie as a practice and about selfie-takers as a category. As a consequence of this positioning, as later chapters explore, these young women have particular insights into the phenomenon which those positioned and addressed differently will likely not have. Thus, this epistemological and ontological outlook enables this study to explore how feminine subjectivities are reproduced and expressed through selfie-practices, creating understandings which are nuanced and specific.

4.4. Analysis Framework: Feminist & Foucauldian

As this and earlier chapters outline, the theoretical bedrock of this study owes much to insights developed from the work of Michel Foucault, particularly in relation to feminist appropriations of his work on power and subjectivity, and Alice Marwick's (2013) use of governmentality to explain the structure and logics of social media. These insights pay particular attention to the workings of power and discourse in subject-formation. Given that this study is concerned with subjective experiences of the selfie phenomenon, utilising an analytical framework closely attuned to issues of subjectivity was critical. To that end, discourse analysis as a method, particularly the kind aligned with Foucauldian thought, was an obvious and productive approach to interpreting the interview data.

To begin, it is important to assert that there are many types of discourse analyses, so much so that researching them sometimes felt like an overwhelming task. Thankfully, Michelle Lazar's (2005) immensely helpful outline of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) provided a valuable initial methodological grounding. While Lazar outlines a generalised *approach* to discourse analysis which centres gender, Carla Willig's (2008) Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) provides a clear, six-step *framework* for systematically 'doing' a data analysis informed by Foucault's insights on discourse. Channelling the FCDA perspective through the framework Willig develops, brings a critical feminist lens to the data in a structured way, enabling me to develop a methodical and rigorous exploration of my interview data.

At this juncture, it is necessarily to briefly reflect on the methodological characteristics underpinning the discourse analysis tools used in this study and their political implications. Critical discourse analysis (CDA), from which FCDA develops, is an interrogative perspective that explores 'unequal social arrangements sustained through language use.' (Lazar 2005, p.1) It aims to transform society and liberate those affected by inequality and exclusion. To this end, CDA seeks to challenge norms and orthodoxies of 'common sense' by interrogating and unpacking the ways in which power dynamics are reproduced, sustained and resisted/defied discursively. While it is focused on discursive practices, it is not necessary concerned with studying a singular 'linguistic unit' as Wodak and Meyer (2009, p.2) put it; it is focused instead on, 'social phenomena which are necessarily complex and thus require a multidisciplinary and multi-methodical approach.' (Ibid) These phenomena are produced and sustained through language, which CDA characterises as a social practice (Wodak & Fairclough 1997). In this sense, CDA

regards language, or more specifically *discourse*, as 'serving the organization and structuring of social life' (Wodak & Meyer 2009, p.6).

According to Wodak and Meyer (2009), although there are different types of CDA, they broadly share the following physiognomies:

1. They are *interdisciplinary*, drawing on a variety of scholarly tools and theories, thereby enabling them to explore social trends in multifarious ways which acknowledge their intricacies and contexts.
2. They aim to *reveal* the workings of power and ideology in a range of discursive texts and practices.
3. CDA practitioners follow specific models of enquiry. However, they also make clear their own position and, like feminist researchers, strive for *self-reflexivity* during their work.
4. CDA practitioners are attentive to the ways in which language *reproduces* inequalities, specifically those inequalities which allow one group to dominate another through an abusive use of power

CDA is fundamentally a political project; it is this characteristic that, as Lazar (2005 p.4) writes, gives rise to an 'overlap' with the goals of feminist research. Both are concerned with highlighting social injustices and creating forms of emancipatory knowledge to address them. In this respect, CDA offers feminist researchers a, 'sophisticated theorization of the relationship between social practices and discourse structures… and a wide range of tools and strategies for close analysis of actual, contextualised uses of language.' (Lazar 2005, p.4)

According to Lazar (2005, p.5), FCDA, as an analytical approach, takes 'a political perspective on gender' which is 'concerned with demystifying the interrelationships of gender, power and ideology in discourse.' Lazar views FCDA as applicable to 'texts as well as talk', meaning it can be applied to a wide range of discursive materials, including interview data as collected in this study. Critically, FCDA practitioners engage with the discursive formations of patriarchy in order to reveal how language empowers and disempowers subjects through the functioning of gender. Key to this is treating gender not as innate or natural but as a social phenomenon which is policed, coerced and reproduced stylistically to give an impression of coherence that is 'culturally intelligible' and therefore, acceptable (Butler 1990). Thus, as Van Zoonen (1994, p.33) proposes, gender should be understood, 'not as a fixed property of individuals, but as part of an

ongoing process by which subjects are constituted, often in paradoxical ways. The identity that emerges is therefore fragmented and dynamic; gender does not determine or exhaust identity.'

A unifying focus of feminist research and CDA is the issue of power. From a feminist perspective, women's oppression is no accident; patriarchal power emerges as a consequence of 'the social meanings given to biological sexual difference' (Weedon 1987, 1997, p.2). In contemporary societies, power is organised in 'subtle and seemingly innocuous' ways which are 'substantively discursive in nature' (Lazar 2005, p.9). It is dispersed through networks and is productive, meaning it endeavours to call certain types of subjects into being while prohibiting others. The would-be subject's gender, along with their race, sexuality, class and so on, will influence and delimit the types of subjecthood available to them. In this sense, subjectivity becomes not something that is *outside* of society or culture. Rather, it is *determined* by society and culture. It is, as Weedon writes, (1987, 1997, p.32) 'produced historically' and liable to 'change with shifts in the wide range of discursive fields' which institute it. These kinds of constitutive practices are, by their nature, unstable, unfixed and influx. We only have to look at the changing modes of femininity throughout the twentieth century to see how idealised forms of 'the same thing' can shift over time and in different contexts.

Foucauldian discourse analysis, as devised by Willig (2008), originates from poststructuralist approaches in the field of psychology, exploring how language shapes subjectivity and society. To reiterate the definition of discourse used in the Introduction of this study, discourses are, 'ways of referring to or constructing knowledge about a particular topic or practice' which include 'a cluster (or *formation*) of ideas, images and practices [emphasis Hall's]' which allow the individual to talk about a topic (Hall 1997, p.6). Crucially, discourses are imbued with the power to define, a process which is bound, as Van Zoonen (1994, p.39) observes, 'to other power relations in society, such as economic, ethnic, gender and international relations.' Always existing within relations of power, discourses endeavour to 'fix' or 'attach' certain ideas about institutions, practices and ways of being, while excluding and prohibiting others. In doing so, discourses exert influential effects, enabling and constraining speech, thereby promoting 'certain ways-of-seeing the world and certain ways-of-being' and offering subject positions 'which, when taken up, have implications for subjectivity and experience' (Willig 2008, p.113). In Foucauldian discourse analysis, there is a particular emphasis on how institutional practices relating to the control and organization of social and psychological life support

and are in turn supported by discourses which legitimate and bolster their authority (Willig 2008, p.113). This corresponds with the focus of this study, which identifies and explores the way in which the selfie, as a new cultural and technological practice, is supported by the discourses of postfeminist-neoliberalism.

According to Willig, Foucauldian discourse analysis explores 'the relationship between discourse and how people think or feel (subjectivity), what they may do (practices) and the material conditions within which such experiences may take place.' (Willig 2008, p.113) To do this, practitioners select a suitable corpus of materials for analysis, based on the research question they are working with. As this study is concerned with young women's subjective, everyday experiences of selfie-use, it utilises the semi-structured qualitative interview as its corpus, a proven tool in the field of feminist audience studies as previously discussed.

Willig (2008) helpfully sets out six stages to be undertaken when conducting a discourse analysis of this kind:

1. **Discursive constructions**: this first stage explores how discursive objects are constructed in the data. In the case of this study, it meant identifying how selfie-practices, as a discursive object, were constructed by participants, and how this in turn relates to the manner in which participants construct notions of femininity.
2. **Discourses:** here, how the discursive object is constructed is explored in relation to broader discourses. In this study, this meant tracing the various discourses used by participants to construct selfie-practices back to the overarching, dominant ideologies of postfeminist-neoliberalism and the surveillant, neoliberal cultures of social media. It also meant being attuned to discourses which resisted, disrupted or diverged from accepted narratives.
3. **Action-Orientation:** this stage requires that analysts explore the contexts within the data in which variant constructions of the object are used in order to consider the significance of such disparities. For example, participants regularly used 'distancing talk' when discussing selfie-behaviours they found unbecoming or guilt-inducing thereby attempting to disassociate themselves. Elsewhere, when describing aspects of the selfie they enjoy or feel unconflicted about, this need for distance is diminished.

These divergences helped illuminate the kinds of ideas, tensions and contradictions around 'correct' personhood which ran throughout the data.

4. **Positionings:** with the various constructions of the object within the text identified, and with these identifications then linked back to wider discourses, this stage explores the subject positions offered by the discourses at play. Discourses, as Willig writes, 'make available positions within networks of meaning that speakers can take up (as well as place others within).' (Willig 2008, p.116) As the findings and analysis chapters in the next section explore, by taking up or rejecting the subject positions available to them, participants in this study reveal a great deal about the functions and limitations of postfeminist-neoliberal discourses.
5. **Practice:** this stage explores how discourses, and the subject positions they offer, open up and shut down specific types of actions. This is very notable in participants' accounts when they try to hold positions which are critical of selfie-practices, and by extension, the postfeminist-neoliberal discourses within which they are situated. Trying to sustain a critical position typically proves so difficult, participants end up redirecting their unease back at themselves, leaving the very real limitations of postfeminist-neoliberal discourse and surveillant social media cultures unchallenged.
6. **Subjectivity**: this final stage, explores 'the consequences' as Willig terms it, when 'taking up various subject positions for the participants' subjective experience.' (Willig 2008, p.117) What is at stake here is how participants feel, think and experience subject positions and how these factors shape their subjectivity. To return to the example offered in the previous stage, participants' inability to sustain a critical position produces subjectivities which are notable for their ambivalence, insecurity and the degree to which they are shaped by issues of surveillance, both of self and others. In such an instance, being unable to reconcile their experiences with the discourses on offer is not only discomforting it is *productive*, producing perspectives from which participants attempt to understand themselves as subjects.

Willig (2008, pp.123-124) notes that critics of discourse analysis question its ability to explain why people make an 'emotional investment' in certain subject positions and their attraction to these positions. However, a feminist – and Foucauldian – perspective on

discourse analysis emphasizes its value in the way it creates intellectual space to query *why* certain subject positions are legitimated in the first place, while others are prohibited or actively discouraged. As participants' accounts illustrate, an emotional investment in a particular subject position is not necessarily a coherent or straightforward affair; nor are subject positions necessarily stable categories. In terms of certain subject positions being more 'attractive' than others, in the context of this study, it is less about an uncomplicated attraction and more about negotiation between the subject positions on offer and their limitations. Hence, discourse analysis helps researchers problematize the very origins of subject positions and, by extension, the emotional and psychological attachments they elicit rather than accepting subject positions as stable categories that are apolitical.

4.5. Data Collection

After securing ethical approval from the university's ethics committee in March 2017 (Appendix 6), participant recruitment commenced in April 2017, continuing until January 2018. Twenty participants were interviewed in total, surpassing my baseline (fifteen interviews), reaching my top line (set at twenty interviews). The top line was set provisionally and would have been raised if the saturation point had not been reached. The number of interviews was also guided by the audience studies tradition which often involves working with relatively small sample sizes (Hermes 2000, p.352). In addition to interviews, the study's submission to the ethics committee sought approval for a group interview. This request was included lest the interview data fail to produce a sufficiently rich corpus, an issue which thankfully did not arise.

As previous chapters discussed, the demographic most often associated both in cultural and statistical terms with the selfie phenomenon is young women. For this reason, participants were sought from this category, an age range for which was set at 18 to 30. As a university context provides access to populations which meet this age-range, with undergrads typically being in their late teens and postgrads in their mid-to-late twenties, recruitment efforts focused their energies there. To protect the anonymity of participants, the geographical location and academic institutions from which they were recruited are not named in this thesis, except to say they are located in Ireland. All participants were students, studying at either undergrad or postgrad level (Appendix 4). They came from a range of countries: Ireland, Iran, Austria, Mexico, France and North America, and all were proficient English speakers. The interviews took place in an office

on my campus. In summary, the inclusion/exclusion criteria for participants was organised as follows:

Inclusion Criteria

- Competent adult women between the ages of 18-30.
- Participants will be familiar with and engaged in selfie-taking.
- Participants must be able to present for interview at NUI Galway.
- While English need not be their first language, participants will need a high degree of proficiency to take part.

Exclusion Criteria

- Adult men and children under the ages of 18.
- Adult women over the age of 30.
- Adult women unfamiliar with and not engaged in selfie-taking.
- Those unable to present themselves for interview at NUI Galway.
- Participants who refuse, on any grounds, to give informed, voluntary consent to take part in the study.

Recruitment took place through a number of channels. Student email networks were utilized as was student media (radio and newspapers). The local media was also engaged as were online platforms. A simple Wordpress.com website was set-up to provide details of the study and to exhibit the study. Would-be participants could also express interest through the website. Social media users were then able to read and share the website, allowing news of the study to be spread easily. To identify the project across digital

platforms, the hashtag[24] #SelfieStudyNUIG was used. Physical posters were displayed at key sites on campus's selected, such as in the Student Union. They were also be displayed around urban areas in community centres, arts centres and other venues popular with the age-range sought for this study.

When potential participants emailed expressions of interest, they received a standard email with the study information sheet and consent form attached (Appendix 1 and Appendix 2). Potential participants were encouraged to ask questions about the interview process, if desired. Once participants agreed to take part, an interview time and date was scheduled. Prior to this, as per the study details contained on the information sheet provided to participants, each submitted a selfie of their choosing ahead of the interview. The only criteria for these selfies was that they had to be an image of the participant taken by the participant.

To 'draw out' discursive intricacies at play when interviewing, DeVault and Gross (2006,) recommend that researchers engage in active listening which goes beyond merely hearing the data to experiencing it on an affective level. Further to this point, DeVault's (1990, p.101) insight that listening encompasses the myriad ways 'we work at interpreting respondents' accounts' proved insightful. For me, this meant initially listening closely during the interview process. This was followed by intense periods of note-making and listening to the data during transcription and afterwards, relistening in tandem with the transcripts. This kind of active, recurrent listening and writing added depth and colour to my understanding of the data, allowing me to discern tensions, contrasts and emotionality I might otherwise have missed. Central to this process was making detailed notes as I listened, notes which then enabled me to 'map' each account and then, in turn, the data as a set. I found this process very helpful for developing an understanding of the 'universe' of my data.

Through transcription, repeated listening and extensive notetaking which took place over a period of months, I mapped out the most prominent discursive threads which ran through the transcripts. This immersive process enabled me to distil the core discourses explored in the next section. With these categories established, I broke down each transcript further, selecting all passages which corresponded with the core discourses I identified, copying and pasting them into a master document. I did this for

[24] To note, on social media hashtags indicate a topic or a trend. They allow users to follow and to engage with communities and conversations across social media.

each core discourse in turn. The process of transcribing and analysing the data was ongoing from April 2017 when participant recruitment began to March 2018 when drafting of the initial findings commenced. This was a very intensive phase of the research but ultimately also a highly productive and satisfying one.

4.6. Ethical Considerations

Protecting participants' anonymity, conducting the interviews in a sensitive manner and handling the data with due care were key concerns for this study, concerns that applying to my institution's ethics committee helped me think through. This was a demanding process but one which was ultimately very rewarding in terms of refining the study and developing its ethical approach.

A number of steps were taken to ensure participants cannot be directly identified from any of the data when findings are reported. The transcripts were anonymised with all identifying detailed being carefully removed. Each participant was given a pseudonym which corresponded with their image. All data was securely stored on a password protected laptop accessible only to me. Given this study's use of visual materials during the interview process, there are specific ethical issues at stake around issues of confidentiality and anonymity. This, and the awareness this study will eventually be available for download online, guided the decision to not include the selfies submitted in the final thesis and to instead use stock photos to represent the type of images submitted (see Appendix 5). The study was approved to include the selfies in the final thesis once they had been anonymised. However, after conferring with senior academics on my Graduate Research Committee, it was recommended that the use of stock photos to represent the selfies submitted would suffice and also provide an additional later of anonymity for participants.

During the data collection phase, the following protocol was put in place to ensure due care was taken with participants' images:

1. Participants were asked to submit one selfie only via email.
2. Each selfie was referred to by the pseudonym assigned to its taker.
3. Images were securely stored and used only within the terms set out on the consent form.

Had I included the selfies in the final thesis, they would have anonymized using Photoshop software (supplied by my institution) after the interview and prior to their inclusion in the thesis. The deliberation over how best to handle the visual data collected during this study reflects current debates taking place in the field of visual research ethics, prompted by the rise of digital technologies (Pauwels 2006, 2008; Papademas 2009). In short, those working in the field of visual research have differing perspectives on how visual data should be handled. This is particularly acute in relation to the anonymization of visual data, with some practitioners seeing it as 'dehumanising and thus disrespectful' (Rose 2016, p.360). Indeed, critics of compulsory anonymization argue it removes a participant's agency and is excessively paternalistic. As Gillian Rose (2016, p.361) outlines, 'some research projects are precisely designed to allow their participants articulate some aspect of their identity; it might then be very important to the participants themselves that they are clearly identified with the images made with or by them.'

These points are well-made. However, after careful reflection and drawing on previous research experience, the use of stock photos in the context of this study is preferable for a number of reasons I will now outline. In 2014, I completed an MA thesis entitled *Young Women, Self-Representation and Gender Identity: A critical analysis of 'gender performativity', the 'male gaze' and the selfie phenomenon.* Its data set used selfie images drawn from Instagram, a popular social networking site. Part of this process involved approaching potential participants to secure their informed consent. Even though all potential participants had public Instagram profiles and could be said to be very active on social media in general, their disparate reactions to being approached for the study were striking. Some were enthusiastic to take part, to the point where consent was a non-issue for them, although I insisted all participants provide informed consent. Others, however, did not seem to realise how public their profiles were. They were taken aback to hear from a researcher.

This experience informed the data collection phase of this project. It made me aware that participants' attitudes to the use of their image was likely to vary, along with the possibility that their attitudes to their inclusion in this study may change overtime and that the inclusion of their anonymised images may have unintended consequences. For example, an image they are happy sharing now may not be one they are happy sharing five years from now, anonymised or not. This point is further underscored by a factor highlighted by Wiles et al. (2012) regarding studies using personal visual data.

Simply put, participants may be unhappy with the conclusions I reach. This discomfort could be intensified if their images were included. Hence, using stock photos is a reasonable, sensible way to both represent the images submitted and protect the participants' privacy.

In the transcripts, each participant was given a pseudonym while any other kinds of identifying information were carefully anonymized. A Master Code List was developed, which included participants' names and contact details alongside the pseudonym used in the transcripts and used to identify their selfie. This was carefully stored on a password protected computer accessible only to me in case I needed to contact participants after the data collection process. After each interview, the recording and selfie associated with it was transferred onto my password protected laptop. The original recordings and hard copies of the transcripts were stored in a locked cabinet in my office at my institution. As per the stipulations of my ethics approval, these materials will be destroyed in January 2023, five years after the submission of my thesis.

Each participant was required to sign consent forms prior to commencing the one-on-one interview. To ensure participants were properly informed about their role, prior to giving their consent, each participant was furnished with a detailed information sheet (Appendix 1) which explained what the study was about, how it would be recorded, and what the interview process would entail. It also provided contact details the primary researcher and the university ethics committee. Participants were strongly encouraged to read this document closely and to raise any questions they might have. Participants were also invited to seek clarity about the interview process both prior to the interview over email and during the interview. At the interview, participants were provided with a hard copy of the information sheet for their own records, along with a hard copy of the signed consent form.

Although the interview process was not focused on obviously difficult/emotional subject matter, nevertheless it was possible that some participants may become distressed by issues in relation to body image and/or beauty practices. Anticipating this, participants were reminded that they were free to end the interview at any time. As part of the interview materials, contact details for on-campus counselling services and information about *Bodywhys*, the Irish organisation for eating disorders and related issues, were kept close at hand. I also reflected on the possibility that it may be troubling for participants if the findings of the research challenge/complicate their personal account/perception of selfie-taking. To mitigate this potentiality and to provide space for

participant reactions, each participant was asked to indicate on the consent form if they wished to receive a copy of the findings prior to publication. Those who answered 'yes' received a summary of the analysis prior to publication. I felt this was an important way to respect the pivotal role of participants in this research, allowing them express their perceptions of the final analysis, be they positive, negative or ambiguous.

4.7. Limitations

As participants elected to take part in the study, the sample used can be understood as *self-selecting*. The positive side of this approach is that it enabled participants to choose to take part, thereby recognising and respecting their agency. The negative is that self-selecting samples may produce a bias in that individuals with certain perspectives may be more inclined to put themselves forward for interview (Lavrakas 2008). Accepting this point, it is important to reiterate that this study is concerned with exploring the selfie phenomenon at a subjective level. It does not claim to be representational in a statistical sense but it does aim to contribute insights into how selfie-practices are negotiated in particular contexts which orientate around the logics of postfeminist-neoliberalism. Additionally, following a poststructuralist epistemology, it emphasizes the plurality of women's experiences. It is also important to highlight that although the participant group was relatively diverse in terms of nationality, given that it was drawn from a university context in which certain economic demographics tend to be overly-represented, participants could be regarded as prioritizing middle class perspectives. While such perspectives are valid and worthy of study, it is nevertheless important that scholars be cognizant of factors like class in shaping women's relationships to social media in order to be attuned to the diversity of women's experiences.

Collecting and transcribing the twenty interviews was a particularly onerous task. Given the amount of data amassed, transcription proved to be a labour intensive and time intensive process. If funding had been available to employ transcription services, this study would likely have availed of them. However, as a researcher, I feel the process of transcription brought me much closer to my data than if I had handed transcription over to someone else. Reflecting on this issue now, although challenging, I regard transcription as an integral stage of my analysis which laid the early foundations for how I ultimately thought through my data. It also ensured that my participants' confidentiality was not compromised by their data being handled by a third party.

A final part of the process which may have been undertaken differently had additional resources been available is the interviews, which took place in my university in a room provided to me for this purpose. While I was delighted to have this room, which was perfectly equipped for the interviews, it meant that would-be participants had to be willing to come to me as opposed to me travelling to them. A significant positive of this arrangement was that I was able to confirm the age and identity of participants 'in the flesh' rather than through digital platforms were identities can be readily obscured and fabricated. Using an online communication tool like Skype was also an option but I knew that sound and broadband quality could be an issue. The design of my interviews also made using Skype tricky as I could not discuss and observe the selfies submitted by participants as easily as I could when we were both looking at the same screen. There was also the issue of ensuring that consent forms were understood and signed at the beginning of the interview. Rather than simply doing this in-person, it would have required would-be participants to print-out, sign and then post the consent forms to me ahead of time. However, given the quality of the data I gathered, I do not feel that this restriction in terms of location impeded the project in the way I had thought it might early in the process.

4.8. Summary

This chapter explored the methodological, epistemological and ethical approaches utilised in this study. In doing so, it outlines the ways in which this project consciously incorporated feminist approaches from its choice of method, to its perspectives on the role of participants', to how the data was analysed. Utilising such an approach proved fruitful and beneficial to realising the core objectives of this study, which centre around exploring and giving voice to young women's experiences and perspectives of selfie-practices. In the interests of reflexivity, a key tenet of feminist research scholarship, and to chart my own development as a researcher, this chapter includes reflections on the research process and the thought-processes which influenced its structure and evolvement. It also illustrates how this study utilises and updates the traditions of feminist scholarship, most particularly feminist audience studies, to study women's lives in the social media age, and the value of such an undertaking. This point will be further underscored and explored in the next three chapters which comprise this thesis' findings and analysis section.

Section Two: Findings & Analysis

Chapter 5: "I don't know who that girl is" – Exploring 'looking talk' in participants' accounts of selfie-practices

5.1. Introduction

This chapter, the first of three findings and analysis chapters in this section, explores participants 'looking talk' (Riley et al. 2016) through the framework of selfie surveillance. As outlined earlier, this framework interweaves insights on postfeminist-neoliberal discourses with scholarship on social media surveillance to unpack and denaturalise the gendered modes of looking which characterise the contexts explored. Selfie surveillance refers to a mode of postfeminist-neoliberal visibility which is conducted through and determined by the types of interactivity supported by social media. This process is productive and disciplining, re-inscribing notions of idealised personhood while prohibiting others through the active structuring of the visual field. As the chapters in this section make clear, this arrangement has particular implications for the types of feminine subjectivities which selfie-practices call into being.

In selfie surveillance, the linguistic and the technological work together to prioritize the reproduction of culturally and economically valuable types of specular femininity. Combined, this creates a buttressing, co-constitutive process where the feminine subjectivities produced are deeply shaped by surveillance. This technologically-enabled and discursively supported surveillance serves, as other forms of mediated surveillance have done previously, to promote conformity. Critical to this is the production and restatement of normative femininities, the circulation of which are vital to the economic and cultural fundamentals which social media relies on for commercial success. However, as this chapter makes clear, the coherence of this endeavour is never fully assured.

The conformity encouraged by selfie-practices is shaped by the language of anticipation and individualised empowerment emblematic of discourses of postfeminism and neoliberalism which depict practices like the selfie as enabling rather than constraining. This produces inconsistencies which participants experience as a form of *dissonance*, where the demands and expectations of selfie-practices cannot be reconciled to their experiences of being, simultaneously, the watcher and the watched. This produces a return to femininity to which the individual must subscribe in order to achieve the desired

coherence between self and image, a process which typifies the new traditionalism (McRobbie 2009) of postfeminist culture. This new traditionalism is reinscribed via selfie surveillance which encourages competitiveness, judgement and notions of complicity that render the individual accountable for the failures and successes of her image, thereby eliding the wider technological and cultural factors at play. Hence, it falls to the individual rather than social media to manage increasing demands for visibility, thereby eliding the critical role of practices like the selfie in this intensification.

Selfie surveillance produces dissonance in two ways: firstly, through the disjointedness between the embodied self and the image that is supposed to represent it and secondly, through the inconsistencies of postfeminist, neoliberal subjecthood which it promotes. Although this dual-dissonance arises from the postfeminist, neoliberal expectations within which selfie-practices are entangled, it nonetheless produces a reinvestment in them as a means to achieve unity. This investment is directed through surveillant practices that are depicted by discourses of empowerment, control and celebrity as a means to achieve visibility, a process which the following chapters explore. This visibility is locked into to the reproduction of normative and hyper femininities, whereby the possibility for selfie-practices to create room for alternative femininities is controlled while new traditionalism is reasserted.

Following the discourse analysis methodology utilised to analyse the interview transcripts, this chapter, like the rest of this section, is structured to illustrate the richness of participants' accounts and the insights which emerge from them. Following David Silverman's advice (2013) on reporting discourse analysis material, it is also structured to reflect the context and integrity of the interviews themselves, indicating the questions and/or discussions which participants' responses are excerpted from. In particular, this chapter explores how core discourses distilled from this corpus reveal the intersections of postfeminist-neoliberal discourses and emerging technological norms which work to emphasize a gendered subjecthood that places a high premium on visibility. The term 'looking talk' is borrowed from Riley et al.'s (2016) work on the postfeminist gaze. In the context of this chapter, it refers to the types of narratives and descriptions participants apply to selfie-use, which illuminate the degree to which such practices enshrine logics that cast certain types of visibility as a desirable and necessary part of 'doing' contemporary femininity. These discourses have been developed into the following chapter subsections: *self-surveillance*, *homosocial surveillance* and *negotiating with surveillance*.

Participants' accounts reveal the presence and function of a multidirectional gaze which is adept at shifting from self-gazing to peer-gazing. This gaze, and the emotional responses it produces, show participants' relations to selfie-practices to be characterised by contradiction, ambivalence and, most strikingly, dissonance. What participants term 'good' or 'proper' selfies can be understood as those which subscribe as closely as possible to the kinds of specular, normative femininity so prized by postfeminist-neoliberalism. These kinds of images require a high degree of aesthetic labour which is both traditional – make-up, hair styling and so on – and technological, involving the astute use of filters, angles and editing software. Here, echoing the insights of Wajcman (2010) and Cartensen (2009) on how gender and technology co-construct one another, femininity and selfie-practices become co-constitutive, whereby selfie-practices become part of 'doing' contemporary femininity which is itself shaped by the technological affordances such practices offer.

These technological affordances reassert dominant cultural expectations of femininity and 'the good life' while also structuring how users 'see' themselves through the provision of platforms which are highly visual in nature, along with techniques which fragment and 'zoom in' on aspects of the face and body, producing endless opportunities for self and peer surveillance. This produces selfies that embody hegemonic ideals of femininity but leave participants feeling that they do not reflect who they actually are in a physical and emotional sense. This creates a powerful sense of dissonance, intensified further by social media's surveillant architecture, which encourages participants to routinely scrutinise their image, even those which they are (relatively) happy with. This causes a sense of alienation from the self which moves participants to ponder who, exactly, the person in their selfie is. It also serves as a reminder of the distance between participants *as they are* and as their selfie *depicts them to be*, underscoring the aesthetic labour they must undertake to fill this gap and achieve coherence. There is also a strong aspirational component to this effect, with participants reporting posting heavily curated selfies which do not reflect reality but act as a substitute for what the individual wishes their life was like.

In this sense, participants' selfie-practices are used to 'paper over the cracks' of postfeminist-neoliberal identity, revealing both the limits of such discourse and its compelling nature. This stimulates the desire to achieve normative femininity which selfie-practices offer the 'solution' to – that is, the means to make oneself visible in the 'correct' way - while concurrently rendering any such achievement tenuous at best, given

its emphasis on judgement of self and others. This enticement to judge is something that participants struggle with greatly, feeling compelled to judge self and others when they would rather not. However, their participation in selfie-practices makes rejecting judgement difficult as participation itself is premised on the willingness to judge and be judged and is enshrined in a highly visible and technical way via social media ranking systems. In this arrangement, the demands of increased surveillance in everyday life are individualised and presented as part of contemporary femininity's day-to-day repertoire. This process makes the collective impact of this change difficult for participants to articulate beyond their own discomfort or by projecting their misgivings onto younger women and girls, who are regularly positioned by participants as particularly vulnerable.

While the selfie is commonly understood as a photograph centred on the self, participants' accounts depict selfie-practices as conformist rather than an expression of an individual's uniqueness. In keeping with the ethos of both postfeminist-neoliberalism and social media's surveillant architecture, this conformity centres the reproduction of normative femininity through systems of self and mutual surveillance. However, participants find ways to resist this demand, by turning to what they see as more 'natural' iterations of femininity, utilising humour to deflect judgement or making the focus of their selfies an activity or event rather than their appearance. While such manoeuvring cannot transcend or rewire the nomenclature cultivated by postfeminist-neoliberal logic or social media surveillance, it suggests that the success of such discourses and structures is neither fixed nor guaranteed. Rather, they represent sites of contestation.

5.2. Self-Surveillance

A selfie, by popular definition, is focused on the self. However, as participants repeatedly illustrated, the relationship between the self as represented by one's selfie and one's actual, physical self is often disharmonious. This echoes Rosemary Betterton's (1985, 1987) assertion that dissonance is an inherent aspect of looking as a woman in androcentric societies. While Betterton's remarks were focused on women looking at images of other women, participants' accounts also underscore dissonance as a powerful element of self-gazing. This mode of gazing is heavily shaped by the kinds of surveillant looking social media attempts to structure. "I feel that person is a stranger," said Jenny as we discussed the selfie she had submitted for the interview, "I look at myself and I go, "oh, is that me?"." As participants wonder what other people think of their selfie, this critical self-surveillance shifts from an internal policing gaze to an external policing gaze. This corresponds

previously discussed analyses of selfie-taking and postfeminist/female gazing which underline issues of subjectivity-shifting and liminality, as interviewee Megan describes: "It's kinda like, you look at them and you're like, "oh my God, is that the way other people look at me? (laughs) Cos I didn't think I looked like that"." Discussing the impact of the selfie phenomenon, interviewee Melissa remarks, "there's like, your airbrushed version of yourself that you know (pause) you know you don't look like that in real life." Melissa makes this observation when recounting a story in which her friend, when showing Melissa the selfies on her online dating profiles, says, "I don't know who that girl is". This leads Melissa to conclude, "it almost feels like a different person."

The 'different person' that manifests in participants' accounts is heavily shaped by cultural ideals of femininity, provoking an uncomfortable sense of distance from the self and an increased awareness of being looked at, producing subjectivities which are deeply surveillant in nature. These ideals motivate participants to undertake varying degrees of aesthetic labour focusing not only on beauty but projecting the right kind of postfeminist-neoliberal outlook and lifestyle. Critical to this is what participants regard as the control selfie-practices gifts them when it comes to their image. This is a key point which the next chapter considers in detail. For now, it is important to say that the control participants exercise over their selfie is largely directed at creating images that can be read as normatively feminine, thereby representing what they regard as the 'best version' of the selfie-taker. However, while such imagery may satisfy cultural norms, it also entrenches a highly stylised feminine aesthetic which is often at odds with participants' actual physical appearance. As a form of performative accomplishment (Butler 1990) this aesthetic requires endless reiteration and work; it is also volatile and subject to slippage as Alison outlines in her account of bad selfies:

> Personally for me, it would be one that wouldn't capture my best side, so, like, obviously, I find that if someone takes a photo of me, and I take a selfie with myself, it is two completely different people because when I'm taking it myself, I can get my angle right, I can get the lighting right, I can fix contour[25], I can make myself look skinnier or taller or shorter or whatever way I want and so, I suppose, a bad selfie would be one that wouldn't capture myself in the light that I would want to be captured, a bad angle or bad lighting or something like that, em, or else just one that (pause) it doesn't really capture what I'm about like, I know selfies are kind of a (pause) what would be the word, like they're not really true life, they're like, you are putting out the best version of you, em, and I don't particularly like being extremely fake, like, I know we're gonna put up the best ones, the lovely ones, but I don't want it to look nothing like me.

[25] Contouring is a make-up technique popularised by the Kardashians which involves using cosmetics to reshape/sculpt the face. It is typically associated with the kinds of beauty imagery seen on Instagram.

Alison articulates a key source of dissonance and tension for participants: by endeavouring to capture the "best version" of herself, she resorts to the use of lighting, make-up, filters and so on, which contribute to the creation of an idealised image rather than what could be read as an authentic one. Her repeated use of the first person 'I' places her in a position of control. It can also be read as signalling how, as a neoliberal subject, Alison has assumed responsibility for the production of 'successful' selfies, a positioning that elides how subject such imagery is to judgement, something she has little control over. The use of the tools she outlines opens up the possibility that her selfie might be construed as "extremely fake", a judgement she wishes to avoid given the premium placed on authenticity. Hence, while she is keen to "capture" herself, as opposed to someone else taking her picture (which also produces an image that provokes dissonance), her ability to do that in a way she is happy with is both enabled and delimited by the tools available to her. What Alison's account reveals is a process whereby the subject walks the very fine line of producing an image that she regards as authentically *her* within a context where manipulation of one's image and judgemental surveillance of one's image, and the images of others, is the *lingua franca*.

That selfie practices produce images which their creators feel separate from, that is 'different' or 'unreal', is perhaps not surprising. The proliferation of self-editing technologies like beauty apps, alongside the dissemination via the likes of YouTube of increasingly sophisticated makeup techniques, enable selfie-makers to produce highly manipulated images. However, the use of such tools produces effects which could be best described as ambivalent. By utilising them, participants describe creating selfies which are a success in that they conform to, and reassert, contemporary norms of femininity. This success can produce positive feelings, a 'boost' as one participant termed it, but it also serves a disciplinary purpose, encouraging an embrace of normative femininity as a means to quell the dissonance participants feel between their physical selves and their image. For example, in this extract, Emma discusses using filters on selfies and their effects:

> I literally see pictures of people and then I see them in-person and I can't believe that it's the same person like, like, you can make your eyes bigger, you can make your teeth whiter, you can make your skin just absolutely flawless, it's just like, "but you don't actually look like that!" (laughing) so. I mean, it's incredible but do you realise that people are going to know you don't actually look like that in person.

In her account, Emma fragments the face into eyes (made larger), teeth (made whiter) and skin (perfected). This approach to female beauty has long been utilised by advertisers and cosmetics companies who develop products for what they construct as 'problems' relating to specific parts of the female body (Wolf 1991, Kilbourne 2000). To illustrate and diagnose these 'problems', the body is split into parts as if under the clinical gaze of a doctor, a technique which is also used to objectify and fetishize the female body. Emma's use of the word "flawless" in this context implies an absence of wrinkles, spots and pores, the kinds of blemishes the beauty industry has long created 'solutions' for. Using a filter, as Emma notes, produces results which are "incredible" - but there is a catch, as she also acknowledges. Ultimately, the corporeal self does not correspond with its image, something that people, including Emma herself, can see.

In her account, Emma slips into liminality, shifting from "I" to "you" when discussing the dissonant effect produced by filters, marking a shift in subjectivity during which self-surveillance is conducted through the lens of the filters applied. This follows Rettberg's (2014) assertion that while filters are technological, they are also cultural. This means they reflect and embody the norms and expectations of the societies in which they are designed. As Emma describes, filters provide the means to create a selfie which meets the demands of contemporary femininity. Yet, in doing so, it serves as a constant reminder of the distance that exists between the corporeal self and the image, emphasizing the work one must undertake to achieve coherence.

In the context Emma describes, filters incorporate standards previously set by advertisers and cosmetics companies to reproduce a specific kind of beauty which has high cultural visibility and commercial value. Digital technologies make it possible for women to attempt to recreate and publish images of themselves which conform to coveted forms of visibility rather than experiencing them at a remove through, for example, the pages of a glossy magazine. Participants accounts suggest that this democratization of representation does not offer respite from self-monitoring; rather, it intensifies the effects of dissonance online and offline. When discussing make-up trends in the selfie, Alison recalls an occasion which illustrates this point. In the following passage, she describes creating a selfie she ended up using for her college identification card, and the embarrassment that followed:

> I suppose, like, for me, I probably wouldn't take a selfie unless I had a little bit of concealer and mascara on, but, then the filters will always make your skin look more, tanned or glowy or flawless than the original photo, I mean (laughs) there was one photo that I took, I was just messing with the setting on my phone, and the one I came out with at the end looked absolutely nothing like what the original photo was and I ended up using that photo on my college I.D.. I was going up to a bouncer before and they said "I.D." and I showed it to him and he went, (makes face), he like lifted the photo, looked at me and I was like, "yeah, I know it doesn't look anything like me"' he went, "well, one piece of advice is, if you go missing, don't use that photo" (laughs), I was like "thanks"(laughs). But like, I suppose, like, I was just messing around with it and that was kinda the pressure, you had to look so airbrushed and tanned and glowy skin and everything, and, that's not how people look in real life, so.

Although the selfie Alison produced whilst "messing around" with filters looked nothing like her, nevertheless she chose it for her college identification card, something she is likely to use on a daily basis. She recalls the bouncer's remarks with laughter but acknowledges that although she was "just messing around" (phrasing she repeats, perhaps to deflect from her desire to be seen as her selfie depicts) she nevertheless felt pressure to present herself in a highly edited fashion. Like Emma, Alison uses the word "flawless" to conjure culturally venerated forms of beauty which are distinctly feminine and centred on the production of an aesthetic which is doll-like or ornamental in its perfection. Airbrushing, which she mentions, is a well-known technique that has been used by the fashion and beauty industries for decades; it is regularly criticised for producing effects which are misleading and unachievable for the average woman. However, thanks to digital technology and the popularity of self-editing apps like Facetune, airbrushing is now available to anyone who can afford a smartphone. As with Emma's account, Alison's ability to edit her image to conform to cultural norms does not translate into satisfaction or coherence. Instead, Alison's stylised appearance in her selfie is undone in the cold light of reality, producing a dissonant effect. Despite professing "that's not how people look in real life", Alison nevertheless feels pressure to produce - and use - a selfie that so heavily edited as to be unrecognisable.

The final stage of the interview process involved the participant discussing a selfie of theirs with the interviewer. Each participant submitted a selfie of their choosing before the interview, the only stipulation being that it was an image of them

alone taken by them[26]. This point had to be stressed as, counter to the dictionary definition of the term, 'selfie' can also be understood as an image taken of oneself *with other people* as participants regularly highlighted. Each participant was asked a variation on the question "what do you hope people see when they look at your selfie?" and "why did you choose this selfie?". While the responses were mixed, participants typically emphasized attractiveness, recognition and image-management or, as participant Melissa put it, selfies represent, "a highlight reel of your life". "I just hope that they think I look nice," Aine responded, "or that they think about it or that it starts a conversation". Echoing her, Jane answered, "the best side of me. The best. I'm putting forward the best image, like, of myself." Sarah puts it succinctly, "See that you look good." She continues:

> It's like, "oh like, oh look at me I'm going out, I'm having fun, I've a great life...", it's all about portraying this life that you have, it's great, you wouldn't put a selfie up of yourself crying like, that would be strange, maybe, I don't know (laughs). Attention-seeking, like. . . it's all about portraying this great life that you have, "look at me, I look great, my extensions are on-point, my make-up looks really good, I'm heading out for the night with the girls, I've a great life", y'know, you don't see the last week me pulling my hair out crying over my exams like.

For participants like Sarah, the "great life" she depicts in her selfie centres visibility that comes with performing femininity in the right way, consciously avoiding anything that might appear "strange". Sarah anticipates a gaze very reminiscent of both the girlfriend gaze and the postfeminist gaze, which is orientated to notice the achievements of aesthetic labour; she wants recognition for "looking great", as evidenced by her hair, make-up and popularity. The more difficult aspects of her life, like exam stress, are strategically excluded so as not to disrupt the personal narrative or brand she is consciously cultivating. In this sense, she is attempting to reproduce the positive, can-do narratives of postfeminist-neoliberal subjecthood by selectively including and excluding the different parts of her life she submits for surveillance. Sarah aspires to appear attractive and happy, even when the reality is more complicated. Her choice of selfie[27] for the interview sees her posing with her hair curled and make-up applied,

[26] In theory, this open policy could have produced a set of selfies that were very disparate. Instead, the selfies submitted were quite uniform in composition, a point reflected in Appendix 5 which uses stock photos to illustrate the types of selfies submitted by participants. This uniformity speaks to the conformist nature of the selfie-practices participants describe, which centre the reproduction of normative femininity which is highly standardised.

[27] For an example of the type of selfie submitted by Sarah, see Image 4, Appendix 5.

her eyes turned to the side, eyebrows arched. She is wearing a black dress, posing in her bedroom. The aesthetic labour she has undertaken to create the image is clear. When asked why she chose this selfie, she explains:

> I chose that em, because, it was me more in like my natural habitat like I didn't want to send you one where I was like done up to the nines because I don't feel like it's a true portrayal of me, I think like, me in that picture is me on a day where I've made an effort like but, it looks like me, y'know, whereas if I, if I'd sent you one of the other ones I have, it's mostly nights out, red lipstick, loads of eye make-up, heaps of blusher, stuff like that and like some kind of a revealing dress, and then you'd have been looking around the library going, "where is this girl?" (laughs). Em, yeah, it's just that one, it's just cos it's, I feel like that, that's me, whereas a lot of selfies I send I wouldn't really think it's me so much, I'm more like, in other selfies I'm more, what society says I should be whereas there, y'know, yeah, I think that that's just me in that picture (laughs).

Sarah's anticipation that that I may not be able to recognise her from an overly styled selfie is perceptive. The exact scenario she describes happened many times during the interview process. I would enter the library lobby, waiting a few minutes for a participant only to realise they were already there, barely recognising them despite having received a selfie of theirs ahead of the interview. This can be attributed to how edited selfies are but also to the limits of the format; typically focused on the face or the body, stripped of the energy and physicality of the corporeal self, selfies often give an inaccurate impression of the person they are supposed to represent. Although her selfie does involve a noticeable degree of aesthetic labour, to Sarah this is not as extreme as that which she does for a night out. She feels distance from those kinds of selfies – "I wouldn't really think it's me so much" – whereas she regards the selfie she selected as a truer portrayal, one more reflective of herself, rather than society's demands. While Sarah is invested in creating a selfie she regards as truer to herself, other participants were motivated to do the opposite. For example, in the following passage, Annette describes how she uses her selfie as a type of 'cover':

> I hope they'll see – whether it's true or not – that I'm happy or that I look pretty or that they'll think I'm beautiful or something . . . that they'll see, like make-up, cos I'm like trying to get better at doing make-up (laughs) so that they'll see that I'm improving or something like that... I hope that they'll look at it and go like "wow she looks amazing" or something like that and that they'll see, it's like, it's always a cover but that they'll see like the cover rather than seeing like, if I'm having a really bad week and I post a selfie and I look really nice or I look really happy, it kinda like, it's just a cover to make them think that everything is fine and then hopefully (laughs) like, convince myself that everything is fine or something y'know that kind of way, it's kinda like a coping mechanism I guess.

Annette's intense sense of being looked at is foregrounded in this passage. Like Sarah, she hopes that those watching will find her selfie attractive, noting her "improving" make-up application skills. Her depiction of her image as a "cover" is illustrative of how she uses it to mask her true feelings, indicating the presence of dissonance and a desire for coherence. The function of this masking is twofold: on the one hand, she hopes it leads people to believe that she is enjoying life while on the other, it helps to convince Annette herself, "that everything is fine". Here, Annette articulates a distinctly postfeminist-neoliberal position, in which bodily and psychic discipline merge through her use of the selfie. Like Sarah, she consciously excludes anything that might complicate the kind of positive narrative she is trying to create. Hence, she is actively managing, in emotional and visual terms, both her image and the reaction of others, putting an idealised image of herself ahead of being honest about how she is feeling to appease the surveillance she is subject to. Her description of her use of the selfie as a form of coping mechanism is also notable. By constructing a picture she is happy with, one in which she "looks amazing" and showcases her skill with make-up, she hopes to manage more difficult aspects of her life. This point is echoed by Melissa, who, when discussing a selfie she took and shared with friends in the aftermath of a break-up says, "I think like when you are [in] a kinda low mood I do think it's extra important to look well, or to look like, or to look like you're looking well".

These accounts suggest that, for participants, the cultivation of 'positive' selfies during difficult times serves an individualised if therapeutic purpose, a literal 'putting on' of a happy face. However, this kind of therapy also keeps participants' attention directed toward their image and the awareness and/or expectation of being looked at, thus channelling their energies into the reproduction of femininity which will hopefully produce the recognition, and approval, they feel they need. Hence, these responses can be understood as exemplifying the new traditionalism of postfeminism (McRobbie 2009) in which an individualized return to femininity – rather than collectivized, politicized change – is presented as the solution to women's problems. It also evokes Janice Radway's (1991) finding that relief from the demands of femininity is often sought through cultural outlets which ultimately reassert dominant gender norms. As Radway observed in relation to romance novels, these books, while problematic from a feminist perspective, offered her participants a way to resist the demands of

motherhood and domesticity. In a similar way, selfie-practices enable Annette and Melissa to represent positive images of themselves as a way of dealing with difficult emotions and the expectations of postfeminist-neoliberal subjecthood. However, this positivity remains locked within, and dependent on, the embodiment of femininity and securing peer approval.

In her account of trying to take a successful selfie, Annette, like other participants, illustrates how the excess associated with selfie-taking – that is, the taking of tens or even hundreds of images in pursuit of the best one – serves as a type of discipline which functions through a surveillant self-gaze motivated by dissonance. Participants attempt to manage their dissatisfaction with their image by producing multiple takes of a single selfie. However, rather than reducing dissonance, creating multiples of the same image can have the opposite effect. Here, when discussing the impact of the selfie phenomenon, Annette describes her experience of creating multiples of the same selfie as a form of self-editing:

> Like I used to edit myself (laughs) where I would spend like ages taking so much selfies to get the perfect one but then, in that mindset, you're thinking like, "that one was ugly", and then sometimes you can get like confused into, "I'm ugly", you know that kind of way, so if you think the selfie looks bad sometimes you can think that you look bad. So, if you take like twenty just to try and get a good one then you've said that nineteen looked bad, and that can get into your own mind that you didn't look good enough or that you weren't good enough or, instead of going like "oh you know the camera was just off angle or it was bad lighting", you can put it on yourself sometimes.

In trying to produce "the perfect one", Annette explains how her sense of self becomes collapsed into her image causing a change in subjectivity whereby "that one was ugly" becomes "I'm ugly". What she interprets as shortcomings in her selfie becomes reinterpreted as shortcomings in her own physical appearance. She spends significant time and energy to produce a "perfect" selfie, a process which is quantified/made visible by social media which enables her to count and record her 'unsuccessful' selfies. This investment, something she feels the need to do to make up for the perceived shortcomings of her image, may ultimately produce a selfie she is happy with. However, the effort she expends nevertheless contributes to her unease; it serves as a reminder that in order to produce a "perfect" selfie, she must work on her appearance and her selfie skills. For Annette, the 'bad' selfies she takes in pursuit of the 'perfect' one do not disappear once success has been achieved. Rather, they "get into your own mind", where, "you didn't look good enough" becomes "you weren't good

enough". Even though, in a rational sense, Annette is aware of the role lighting and technology play in the production of selfies, her account reveals a tendency to internalise rather than externalise these negative effects.

A final aspect of the kinds of critical self-surveillance revealed in participants' accounts was discursive shifting between positive and negative assessments of the selfie they submitted for the interview. Such shifting reveals a fluidity of subject position, motivated by the fine-grained, surveillance-style assessment participants carry out on their image. Illustrating this point, Aine took the selfie she submitted for interview quickly in the everyday setting of the university library. In the following excerpt, she discusses how 'normal' her selfie is, moving between positions which are positive and critical:

> Yeah, it was just, I mean, it's just the normal selfie I was sending except I would've fixed my hair like, that one piece that's annoying me (indicates to picture) but it doesn't even bother me that much, it just doesn't matter, it's just a wee selfie... Yeah, um, basically now that would be a good, normal, everyday selfie, like, just a quick, it's only when I really want to look good you would do the proper, and that would be different cos you would try more with that and take more than one, that's just the normal selfie.

Even as Aine speaks positively about her selfie, criticism creeps in. She acknowledges it is a "normal" selfie, taken on Snapchat. However, if she had taken it for her friends as opposed for the interview, a point which indicates the presence of girlfriend culture, she says, "I would've fixed my hair like". Pointing at the image and the offending hair (the flaw in question is not clear to me, as interviewer) she admits that it is "annoying" but this is downplayed by her subsequent remarks "it doesn't even bother me that much". She classifies the selfie as an example of a "good, normal, everyday" one, acknowledging that wanting to look good, as in a "proper" selfie, would require more work. As she further discusses her image, Aine continues to shift between a critical gaze and a more positive one:

> My skin doesn't look very spotty but then you can still see I'm not a hundred percent spot free on my chin, I still look the same (laughs)... I think I look pretty in it, so I feel like, "hey I took a nice selfie with no effort" … y'know the way the more you see a photo the more it annoys you? Like there's still those little niggling things that annoy me but overall, I really don't mind that photo at all. I would save that photo or just write "hey" and sent it to anyone like, a lad, a girl, a crush, or anyone.

Again, the flaw Aine identifies, in this case spots on her chin, is not visible to me as interviewer, indicating how closely she herself has learned to monitor her image. Shifting to a more positive mode, she takes pride in taking a "pretty" selfie with little effort, although she has used a filter, which, at the very least, has smoothed her skin and enlarged her eyes. Then she shifts again, asking rhetorically, "y'know the way you see a photo the more it annoys you?". She describes what annoys her as "little niggling things" before returning to a more neutral stance, saying, "I don't really mind that photo at all", something she illustrates by listing those who she would be happy to send it to. Like Aine, Julia has similarly ambivalent, shifting feelings about the selfie she chose for the interview. According to her, the selfie was taken to show-off a new hair style. This was something of a dramatic reveal as it was the first-time her followers saw that she had changed from black hair to blonde. She also applied a filter to the image, making it look like she was wearing bright blue lipstick. The lipstick drew criticism from her father and her aunt. In the following passage, she reflects on their reactions and her feelings about the selfie while responding to the question, "Why did you choose this selfie for the interview?":

> I like it. I'm very pale but that's me, I like the lipstick. I thought it was cool but, I dunno. Maybe it'd only be cool with a certain generation (laughs) of people or something, I don't know. No but like, that would be something I would wear normally. I was just not bothered to do it on that particular day, so it was like, "oh, a filter will do it for me, great!" Em, and I like, I like that picture. I don't know why, I just do but I'm very pale.

Julia is initially positive about her image before switching to a more critical stance, saying, 'I'm very pale". She asserts her enjoyment of the lipstick but this is undercut with a sense of ambivalence - "I dunno" - in response to the reactions of her father and aunt. Using a filter enabled her to sidestep having to actually apply the lipstick, lipstick which she says, "I would wear normally". Her response ends on shifting ground; her assertion that she likes the image, her loss to explain why this is so, and her repeated reference to being "very pale". As she continues to discuss her image, Julia, like Aine, indicates to what she considers to be flaws, one of which the filter erases (her freckles) the other, the filter creates. Again, these effects are not immediately visible to me as interviewer. Pointing to what she identifies as a slight misalignment between the filter and her lips, she says, "when I took it, I knew it wouldn't match up perfectly but em, yeah, no one will really notice it unless you

really stare at the image for ages." Her use of "you" here can be read as Julia putting herself in the position of someone who is criticising the image, who has spent time forensically analysing it for defects. As with Aine, Julia highlights the degree to which intensely looking at one's image can change a participant's relationship to it. This kind of fragmented, penetrative looking is enabled by the surveillant architecture selfie-practices are enmeshed within, which enable images to be stored, scrutinized, and monitored in myriad ways. Like Aine, she too uses a filter to reduce the amount of effort required to take a selfie she is (somewhat) happy with. Yet, the use of filters produces an effect which is only partially successful, with both Aine and Julia oscillating between accepting and critiquing their image. Further, while using filters helps reduce the work associated with visibility through selfie-practices (saving time on having to do make-up etc.), their use intensifies the dissonance which is its hallmark by repeatedly drawing participants' attention to the ways their image and their embodied selves fail to cohere.

5.3. Homosocial-Surveillance

Participants' accounts revealed the presence and functioning of a 'surveillant sisterhood' (Elias & Gill 2018), shaped by the logics of girlfriend culture (Winch 2012, 2013) and postfeminist modes of looking (Riley et al. 2016). In this context, a multidirectional, surveillant female gaze is foregrounded, which emphasizes and closely monitors feminine performativity through the functionality of selfie-practices. Taking the previous section's findings into account in relation to dissonance and self-gazing, this section further explores the role of dissonance in homosocial-gazing and how this is facilitated by social media's surveillant architectures. To begin, let's consider the following passage from Alison, which she provided in response to the question, "what do you think the impact of the selfie phenomenon has been?":

> There's some girls that I follow and the only image they will put up is when they have their full face of make-up on and their hair perfectly done and you can tell that they've a light up here that's shining down on them at the right angle… and then I follow other girls that are taking selfies with their friends just laughing, sand in their hair, no make-up on, and, they seem to be having the better life, I have to say, so, I mean, there's pressures but, if there was a way to encourage girls to actually share their actual life, and not the fabricated life, social media would be such a happy, like, a, happier and healthier place.

Alison draws a clear demarcation between what she construes as two forms of selfie-practice; one that centres on artifice, the other on naturalness, both of which retain

rather than reject the logic of visibility through social media. It is important to stress that it is Alison's own familiarity with selfie-practices which enables her to draw this distinction. Artifice in this case refers to images which she judges to focus too much on aesthetic labour in the attempt to create a less-than-real representation of one's life. Naturalness, on the other hand, is positioned by Alison as having "the better life", one characterised by no make-up and a relaxed approach, to the point where young women have "sand in their hair". It is interesting to note that the selfies she considers "better", even "healthier", are ones where there is, by her account, less emphasis on the reproduction of the highly polished femininity prioritized by postfeminist-neoliberalism.

Like Alison, many participants spoke of observing moments when their peers presented a version of themselves in their selfies which they knew to be at odds with their offline selves, an incoherence for which they are judged. These kinds of narratives reveal how the kinds of homosocial, mutually-monitoring dynamics Winch identifies (2012, 2013) along with the peer approval so central to postfeminist gazing (Riley et al. 2016) are supported, intensified and encouraged through selfie surveillance. In the following excerpt, Julia reflects critically on the amount of time her peers spend on their selfies:

> So, I don't know how people do it all the time and I think, I dunno, it is a way of like showing off, like, "oh look at me this is what I'm doing", or like, just presenting an image of yourself that maybe not be true. Like all the videos on YouTube of like the gym selfie when really they just spray themselves with water to make it look like they went to the gym, I think like, I dunno, it's just, it is a way of like portraying a different person, [a] persona of yourself I think, but it's, I dunno, it very much feeds into our view of what's perfect and what's y'know beautiful and stuff like that.

Julia is critical of the desire to be looked at in ways which she regards as untruthful and "showing off". As in the previous section on self-gazing, she frames the gym selfies she describes as portraying "a different person" compared to the person taking the photograph. She regards this practice as stemming from trying to conform what she terms "our view" of perfection and beauty. Further to this point, Emma discusses the selfies she sees young women taking in the gym:

> I see people, like, after they train just take pictures of themselves. But, like, I've had situations where I've seen girls tear themselves apart going, "oh I'm so fat, I look disgusting", and then ten minutes later, they're taking selfies (surprised tone) and then they're putting it on Instagram being like, "oh great work out", and I'm just like, (pause) "why?". So, it's like a total recognition thing like, if you yourself think you're not attractive but you put a picture of yourself on Instagram, people like it and they think

> you're attractive then it's kind of making-up for something that you're probably lacking yourself. So, I think that that's a huge part of it. Like, if you have your Snapchat open and you don't think you look nice but you swipe and you find a filter that makes you look nice then why wouldn't you, like, it's going to make-up for something you don't think is in yourself.

In the situation Emma outlines, the selfie is used to assuage feelings of body-hatred and inadequacy by inviting external validation to compensate for something which the individual feels they lack. This can be interpreted as the individual seeking coherence between self and image through the approval of others, a desire likely to produce a dissonant effect if approval is not forthcoming. However, despite the positive connotation of being liked, by Emma's estimation this kind of practice is an indicator of a neediness that is unbecoming. To explain the appeal of such practices, she switches from the third person to the first person, recounting her use of Snapchat. When confronted with her reflection which doesn't "look nice" it is easy and effective to use the app's filters to produce the same effect as wearing make-up. This arrangement enables the individual to compensate for "something you don't think is in yourself" as Emma puts it. However, this compensation is dependent on external validation from one's peer group and the manipulation of one's image, rather than a questioning of where such feelings of inadequacy stem from in the first instance. This harkens back to girlfriend culture, in which the critique of women's bodies becomes something which women bond over, thereby re-inscribing the female body as a site for judgement and surveillance (Winch 2012, 2013).

Participants regularly express frustration with what they regard as obsessive and excessive selfie-taking by other females, including their friend group. This kind of behaviour is construed variously as boring, pointless, annoying, and needlessly competitive. Interestingly, aspects of such discourse draw upon the kinds of gendered, disparaging rhetoric Burns (2015) identifies as heavily invested in controlling women's behaviour by casting the selfie as a particularly abject form of photography. For example, Magda recalls her friends visiting her in Ireland. The number of selfies they took as they travelled around was "too much" she says, remarking"I don't like taking too much pictures all the time. Rather than enjoying the moment." Like Magda, Emma is critical of her friends' need to document social events with selfies. Discussing the impact act of the phenomenon, she says:

> You see girls just taking pictures, like, I hate going anywhere with my friends because (laughs) like, you'll take a picture of them like, "alright, yeah", and then, they'll be like, "no, don't like that one", and it's just like, (exasperated) "what are you waiting for?"

Emma is critical of her friends' dissatisfaction with the initial image, which triggers the need for more images, something she professes to finding baffling and intrusive. This sentiment is echoed by other participants when recounting taking selfies on nights out with their friends, as the following passage from Claire illustrates. Here, when discussing the differences between good and bad selfies, she describes her frustrations with her college friends' selfie expectations:

> It's like a five minute photoshoot with a lot of people, especially on night's out and stuff, you'd see them like, if l ran in, just say I could be out with a few of my friends, and then someone in the [college] course could run up to me and they'd be like, "oh take a picture" and I'd be like "aw!" and they'd be like, "oh no it's awful, take it again" and I'd be like "ugh, who cares like?" (laughs) You're going to look at all the pictures in the morning anyways to be like "'oh God, I'm never going to go anywhere" but a lot of people it just, it's, selfies are a way to show off, I think.

For Claire, taking selfies on a night out with her college friends is time-consuming and demanding. Their need for repeated images in order to get the right one is a pointless endeavour because, according to Claire who positions herself at a remove from such behaviour, viewed in the cold light of morning these photographs will inevitably be found wanting. Although Claire asks "who cares like?" nevertheless she feels uneasy at the prospect of being confronted by such imagery. She jokes, "oh God, I'm never going to go anywhere". Although said light-heartedly, Claire's reaction helps explain why her friends are so preoccupied with creating the right kind of selfie, the success of which will hopefully avoid these kinds of self-critical feelings by crafting desired types of specular femininity. Her contention that selfies are a way to "show off" raises another theme articulated by participants when discussing their peers' selfie-practices: competitiveness. In the following passage for example, Aine outlines how taking selfies inspires comparisons amongst her friends:

> If you're on a night out… it would always have to be who is the best looking, whose got the best angles, all like, and then posting like, taking a video of yourself in the nightclub or at the bar or just doing something really interesting to make people think you live an interesting life when that's the first thing you've done in about a week that hasn't involved sleeping or eating. So, they just, you can get a little bit from it but you can't get, the big picture.

Aine regards the selfies she describes as carefully created to give the impression that their subjects are leading "interesting" lives. Central to this motivation for image-management is comparison and monitoring. Selfies are compared to see "who is the best looking" and who utilises "the best angles", positioning technological nous as part of 'doing' femininity and selfie-practices as an element of one's social life. The irony, as Aine sees it, is how unrepresentative these images are. The "big picture" of someone's life as she terms it, is reduced to a series of highly constructed images which reveals "a little bit", not a lot, functioning very like the 'cover' Annette described in the previous section. In this context, self-surveillance in the form of the comparison of the self with others through homosocial gazing forms the foundations of self-management.

The kinds of critical looking Aine outlines place a strong emphasis on the monitoring of female friends and peers. To further illustrate this point, in the following passage Megan discusses competitive looking in reference to her experiences of selfie-practices. She provides this response when asked if she is aware of how she looks at other girls' selfies:

> Definitely, like, you don't wanna be like, you wouldn't be as shallow to think, "aw they're not good enough because they don't have as many 'likes'" or whatever but like, you kind of self-consciously do look towards it, I don't know why. Like a lot of people can see, there's like an indicator for people, I know it sounds so shallow to say but like, (sighs), but like how popular they'd be and then, it's like other people find them pretty, it does sound so shallow I know but.

Megan adopts conflicting positions, rejecting what she perceives as the shallow judgement of those with less 'likes' before admitting to engaging in this kind of judgement. This dynamic is symptomatic of Winch's (2012, 2013) girlfriend culture, whereby the desire to engage with a friend group makes one complicit in the 'loving meanness' which characterises such interactions. Conveniently, in keeping with the tenets of postfeminist-neoliberalism, it is a dynamic which redirects criticism towards the self, rather than at the wider environment or the logics which govern it, even when it is social media's surveillant architecture which makes possible and strongly encourages the kinds of looking and quantification Megan describes. Megan depicts this type of monitoring as something she does "self-consciously", noting the number of likes an image gets, laying the blame on herself rather than the technology which enables and entices such behaviour. She points out that people can see how well (or not) an image has

been received, illustrating how selfie-practices make visible systems of approval/disapproval and the tension this produces. As one of the most powerful elements of social media's ranking system, 'likes' function as "an indicator for people" as Megan puts it, illustrating the popularity of the selfie-taker and their level of attractiveness. Later in her interview, Megan characterises this kind of competitiveness as "sad". When asked why she feels this way, she explains:

> Cos like, you're trying to compete with this, perfection society made but, it's not real, it's fake, and then you're always gonna try and like, you can get all these pictures and then you could try and make your lips look really big and that, tiny wee waist and all of that, but at the end of the day, it isn't real, it's just really fake and like you're just trying to like get to the next best level but it's non-stop and then, you just don't look like that, y'know, it's really sad now.

Megan's account captures the ambivalence participants feel about selfie-practices, an ambivalence that remains even when they understand how deeply unreal many of these images are. No matter how many selfies she takes, or how well she devises them, Megan feels she cannot escape the awareness that they are "fake", created to appease the "perfection" prescribed by society. Megan characterizes the pressure to reach what she terms "the next best level" as "non-stop", destined for failure because "you just don't look like that", emphasizing once again the effect and presence of dissonance and the difficulty of achieving coherence. Like Megan, Paula also feels intense pressure when looking at selfies of her peers. Comparing the current era with a not-too-distant past, where idealised versions of femininity were found "in the magazines or on TV" as she puts it, Paula says, "now it's different because your brain is like "these are real girls, real people, it's not like TV celebrities"." Looking at these images makes Paula feel "depressed", resulting in thinking, ""oh God, I'm just going to stop looking at these, they all seem so perfect"."

The intense surveillant gaze Megan and Paula describe is characterised by its disciplining nature. In the contexts this study explores, this mode of gazing is adept at distinguishing between what is 'real' and what is 'fake'. It is also adept at determining what makes a successful selfie versus an unsuccessful selfie. Key to this is a mode of looking which, in keeping with girlfriend culture and postfeminist looking, is informed by a deep understanding of aesthetic labour. This kind of gaze can be supportive, but it can also be highly critical. In the following passage, Aine responds when asked if she is ever critical of other girls' selfies:

> I'm not really critical of them. I don't, I just think, cos I think all my friends are pretty in their own ways. It sounds a bit, I know my cousin would say I'm making that up, but I just, all my friends are good people so, they can't be ugly.

Aine claims not be critical of her friends' selfies, which she attributes to her friends being "pretty in their own ways", implying that once 'pretty' as a benchmark has been reached, criticism becomes unnecessary. As her friends are "good people", Aine states, "they can't be ugly." However, for her peers who she does not construe as "good", Aine adjusts her approach by assuming a position of judgement which centres on the critical evaluation of their femininity. In the following passage, a continuation from the previous excerpt, she explains why:

> It's just, I really wouldn't judge them but if it was someone I hated you have that, "look at what she's wearing in that selfie" or "did she even brush her hair this week?", you do that like with your friends, it can turn into a total bitch fest but only [with] someone you really hate, like otherwise, I don't think people are very critical of selfies.

Hatred, then, as a strong, motivating emotion, becomes for Aine a reason, or perhaps an excuse, for harsh treatment. The kind of judgmental gazing Aine and her friends partake in is focused on appearance, specifically clothing and hair styling. She admits that such behaviour "can turn into a total bitch-fest". She asserts that overall "I don't think people are very critical of selfies" a point undermined somewhat by her own account. Like Aine, Edie contrasts supportive looking with the punitive variety. When discussing the impact of the phenomenon, she describes the pressure her friends' feel to get the right kind of selfie:

> My friends would get really stressed, like we have a separate group chat on Facebook to discuss this kind of stuff like, "will I upload this one? Or will I upload this one?" and em, it just gets really, they get really into it.

When asked if her friends in this Facebook group are male or female, Edie responds, "It's every woman I know." The group Edie describes enables her female friends to get feedback on their selfies in what might be considered a more supportive environment before they are posted to social media, thereby pre-empting public judgment. In this context, one which is private with a small, more select viewership, the surveillant, homosocial gaze serves a supportive function, appraising and advising, pointing out possible pitfalls and awarding praise. This is a softer approach to some modes of gazing described by participants but it is no less normative or disciplining, enshrining image-based judgement as an everyday, technologically enabled and sanctioned part of 'doing'

femininity. Asked how she approaches the feedback she gives to her female friends, Edie replies:

> I kind of don't really tolerate it and sort of say, "they're all nice. The composition" - and I go into my thing of – "well actually the colours are nicer on this one but you look nice in both of them", em, but yeah, everyone is pretty honest in saying "no, this one's nicer, you look taller" or "your hair looks more blonde" or whatever, yeah, so whereas I kind of, kind of chime in and sort of, critique it, the others are sort of saying "well, this one will draw more attention to you or your eyes or your body" or whatever.

Edie is keen to stress that her critical focus is on the composition of the image, rather than her friends' looks, a point she asserts twice in the passage, a rhetorical move that can be read as indicating her resistance to the enticement to judge and/or her distancing herself from judgemental behaviour. She characterises the feedback offered as "pretty honest"; however, it is heavily focused on appearance. Hence, while this gaze serves an empathetic purpose in this context - helping young women navigate public judgement - its focus on appearance inevitably reasserts, using the intimacy and networks of female friendship, normative femininity's dominance. It also leaves the source of the anticipated judgement unchallenged, further positioning submitting oneself and others to critique as an inevitable, unquestioned part of 'doing' femininity. Jane illustrates this point further when asked how she reacts to selfies of other young women:

> Like, I know this sounds bad but like, I'd be kind of one to not 'like' pictures so much, only of close friends I would because, it's like I hold a grudge against people who don't 'like' my pictures. I won't 'like' theirs. Even if I do like their picture, I won't 'like' it but I would be quite judgemental - it sounds so bad - but I would be quite judgemental and like, look at what they're wearing, look at what they're doing, how they look, their make-up and stuff. It sounds really bad, but I would go and like, bitch about it. Like "what was she doing, did you see her selfie?" and it is very judgemental and I know the same thing happens to my selfies as well but I wouldn't be one to write like a comment, I wouldn't show the negativity to her, I'd just kind of keep it personal, and to close friends, unless it was a close friend, I'd say, "what are you doing in that, take it down".

Jane strategically withholds her likes in a display of power and as a way of retaliating against those who have not liked her selfie. She repeatedly describes her judgmental behaviour as "bad", yet also expresses the expectation that the same critical lens she applies to her peers' selfies is also being applied to hers. Jane does not share her distaste publicly or with the target (unless they are a close friend); rather, she discusses it privately, in what might be termed a whisper network of judgement. Here, we can observe the kinds of dynamics Winch (2012, 2013) articulates in the girlfriend gaze and the isolating impact of postfeminist-neoliberal logics which encourage modes of

homosocial gazing that toxifies relationships between women through an emphasis on competitive, female-policed femininity.

Just as Jane feels conflicted about her judgemental behaviour so does Fiona as the passage below illustrates. Both articulate an awareness that what they are doing - monitoring the selfies of other young women in bad faith - is not admirable. Nevertheless, neither raise the possibility of outright rejecting such behaviour. In the following passage Fiona discusses the tension she feels around the way she judges others selfie-practices, in particular her brother's new girlfriend:

> And she's very pretty. She seems very nice, I haven't met her… but of course I stalked her (laughs) on social media as a normal sister does and I looked at her Instagram, and she has a bunch of selfies and I said to my brother, "she looks really nice and she's very pretty", I, I, hate myself for thinking this but she has a ton of selfies (laughs) and I can't help but noticing that, but I'm trying not to judge her based on that, that's a terrible thing to judge someone that you haven't even met.

Fiona's account casts her as her struggling between not judging her brother's new girlfriend for her selfie-use and judging her, enabled by the surveillance Instagram facilitates. She characterises her stalking behaviour as within "normal" bounds, a perspective which does not take into account the degree to which social media has attempted to normalise such surveillant behaviours. Although she gave a positive reaction to her brother, Fiona's personal feelings about his girlfriend's selfies are more complex, skirting outright disapproval. She characterises her impulse to judge this girl as "a terrible thing" but equally states "I can't help but noticing", echoing a recurrent pattern of tension in participants' accounts in which the enticement to judge is struggled against but ultimately capitulated to. Later in the interview, she describes the girlfriend's selfies as "very conscious, like her make-up is done and her hair is done, and like, she looks really great". She wonders why it is she feels the need to be so critical, saying, "that's part of my internal conflict, like why was I so concerned about that when I went through her lnstagram? I don't know."

This urge towards intense criticism of their peers' selfies can be attributed, at least in part, to the intimate knowledge of femininity shared by participants and their friend groups. This knowledge, teamed with a sense of ambivalence about selfie-practices and their effects, contribute to an environment in which the replication of normative femininity in the selfie is at once highly prized, carefully monitored but also treated with suspicion. As Edie explains, "I think it's cos you spend so long on your own one, that you,

feel like, if someone else doesn't put in that same effort, not saying I would or anything, but just, you realise that".

The presence of a critical female gaze in participants' accounts does not elide the presence of a male gaze. At certain points, the two gazes work concurrently, producing a double-effect. In the following extract, for example, Greta interweaves the female gaze with the male gaze (a concept she is familiar with from her studies) in response to a question about gender difference in the selfie:

> I think it's (pause) oh, that's a really good question because um, I think that it's not gendered as in both men and women would judge female selfies but, the women would do this through the male gaze, so they would still kind of y'know, "how hot is she?", they only look at [that] because we live in a society that puts so much emphasis on how hot a woman is.

For Greta, women's selfies are subject to judgement that is two-fold, coming from both men *and* women. She interprets this critical female gaze as stemming from an internalisation of the male gaze, an explanation also proposed by scholars like Berger (1972) and Mulvey (1989). According to Greta's account, a woman, even in the eyes of other women, is evaluated by her "hotness", corresponding with the norms of girlfriend culture and postfeminist modes of looking. What she describes is not a desiring female gaze nor a supportive one; it is an iteration based on longstanding forms of judgement which evaluate women in terms of their appearance. To further illustrate this double-effect, in the following excerpt, Claire discusses gender differences in the selfie, referencing a selfie taken at a recent student ball which she attended:

> Boys will look at that and they'd be like, "she looks unreal like, great bod" whereas the girls will be like, "her dress, her shoes, her, her earrings, her hair - I wonder if she got her hair done? Her nails?" - like girls notice everything, everything, in these pictures, girls look at these pictures and they critique them, they like, you can zoom in on everything now, you can like, get right up close to it whereas, to please a boy a lot of girls would take kind of like, the Kim [Kardashian] pictures so they'd be kinda like sticking their ass out and stuff to get the likes from the boys but like, they'd still make sure that they could see, like, that their dress was like fixed perfectly and their hair and all this just so like, because girls will look at it.

In Claire's account, the male gaze functions at a broadscale view which is focused on the body, while the female gaze is, by comparison, microscopic, focused on the minutiae of aesthetic labour. By fragmenting the body, as enabled by selfie surveillance, the female gaze she describes echoes participants' accounts of self-gazing by breaking the body down

into elements which are pored over, discussed by other women who "zoom in" and "get right up close". This mode of looking is reminiscent of the manner in which objectifying practices fragment the female body, a visual process filters, beauty apps and the affordances of social media platforms repackage for their predominately female users. As a consequence of this double-judgement, Claire suggests that girls construct selfies in anticipation of this kind mixed-gender scrutiny. They do this by creating selfies that appeal to the male gaze - "sticking their ass out and stuff' - and the female gaze, "their dress was like fixed perfectly". In this context, both gazes, although functioning in different ways, emphasize and evaluate the reproduction of a reassuringly specular, heteronormative femininity.

5.4. Negotiating Surveillance

The previous sections explored contexts in which participants described, in varying ways, the dynamics governing the reproduction of normative femininity in selfie-practices, focusing on self-gazing and homosocial gazing. This section explores accounts in which participants reject or attempt to negotiate with this reproduction by 'doing visibility' in ways which will reduce their exposure to judgement and offset the effects of selfie surveillance. This approach can be construed as strategic, one informed by participants' interpretation of different types of selfies and the kinds of judgement they invite. These selfie-types fall into two, loosely defined camps. The first are 'normal' selfies which require little effort as the anticipated audience participants produce them for are considered likely to be less or non-judgemental, for example, close family members or close friends. Participants use 'normal' selfies in a variety of ways such as a form of quick, everyday text message for Snapchat or uploading them as part of a holiday photograph album to be shared with friends and family on Facebook. These selfies often have a novelty factor to them like a comedy filter or a jokey pose or a pantomime-esque reaction; they are also likely to show the selfie-taker doing something they deem interesting, sometimes with other people in tow. The role of humour in such accounts echoes points made by Emma Maguire (2015) and Akane Kanai (2017), whose explorations of young women's use of humour online shows how it can be used to negotiate visibility. Such negotiation enables the young women Maguire and Kanai describe to claim a level of visibility they are comfortable with while contending with the specific, gendered demands placed by online culture.

The second kind of selfie described by participants is usually posted to/taken for Instagram and is considered as a 'proper' and/or a 'serious' selfie, which involves a heightened degree of aesthetic labour, where the individual's face and body are the focal point of the image. In the following excerpt, Jessica, who rows competitively, contrasts these two selfie types when discussing what she hopes people see in her image:

> When I take a selfie like, I want them to think that "she's pretty" or a good few of the selfies I've taken it would be with no make-up, just to show I don't really need make-up either, that I'm just comfortable with myself. Like, I have a selfie that I put up on Instagram last summer and I just have a tub of ice-cream in my hand, I'm not wearing make-up and I'm wearing the one-piece I was racing in and I just look, I'm happy out. And I like that photo cos it's just me, like that's what I look like every day.

While being judged as attractive is important to Jessica, so too is appearing natural and confident, without relying on cosmetics. She construes this kind of image as specifically her *sans* artifice - "it's just me" - in which she looks as she does in everyday life. She also draws attention to her interests and achievements beyond the image; the one-piece she refers to is a swim suit she wears as a competitive rower. Choosing not to wear make-up is, according to Jessica, a way of illustrating that she does not require it. Rather than rejecting the demands of the gaze then, her selfie serves to prove that she meets them without the need for what she regards as excessive interventions.

Jessica desires to be been seen as "pretty" while also being seen for who she is. Her repeated reference to not wearing make-up can be interpreted as a way of trying to signal her comfort in herself, being "happy out", rather than beholding to the expectations of others. It also parallels the perspectives of other participants who avoid the harsh effects of selfie judgement by refusing to take selfies seriously, a strategy they deploy to cultivate a level of visibility where they feel comfortable. To illustrate, in Emma's selfie[28] she is standing in front of what looks like some kind of large, electronic reactor, pulling a face into the camera. She is on holiday. Discussing her selfie, she says, laughing:

[28] For an example of the type of selfie submitted by Emma, see Image 1 and Image 2, Appendix 5.

I haven't got any of myself by myself like, just a selfie online anywhere, em, at the most it's me and my boyfriend on holidays like with something in the background or whatever but, no, I wouldn't go out of my way to publish a picture of my face.

Emma does not seek the kind of attention she associates with 'proper' or 'serious' selfies which focus on the face. She avoids taking these kinds of images and keeps the selfies she does share to holiday snaps of her and her boyfriend. Asked why she selected this particular image to discuss during the interview, she responds:

I just, I just (laughing) it's kinda me like I don't really care, I don't really em, I'm obviously not trying to look my best or anything. Em, I definitely could've had a nicer or good selfie but I don't really care what I look like, so, that's me. Acting the fool.

By adopting a comedic pose and emphasizing the background, Emma attempts to make it clear to the viewer that she is not seeking approval based their evaluation of her appearance. Her repeated "I don't really care" is in reference to her not endeavouring or perhaps refusing to look her best, making it clear this is not an Instagram-type of selfie. She acknowledges that the image could have been "nicer or good" but she was not motivated to produce this kind of selfie. Instead, the focus is her "acting the fool". Emma says that this persona is *her* but it could also be understood as a strategic move to deflect judgement. Through her rejection of the 'serious' selfie, Emma also seeks to avoid the kind of surveillance that accompanies it.

Like Emma, Fiona's selfie is of her on holiday, sticking her tongue out to match a mural on the wall behind her. Her boyfriend has been cropped out of the image because, like Emma, Fiona's selfies typically involve her boyfriend or an interesting background taken while on holiday; she also often pulls faces. During our interview, as mentioned earlier, Fiona expressed her displeasure at her brother's new girlfriend posting selfies on Instagram. As we begin to discuss her own selfie, she observes:

I really like this selfie actually, mostly because of the picture in the background and like I think it's funny, but also, I have a tendency to make goofy faces in my selfies and I know that's, like I've thought about that, I feel like that's significant in like, being critical of people taking serious selfies of themselves and then, not wanting to do that myself or like, yeah, so um, yeah, I do tend to like stick my tongue out or like make a dumb face in the selfies, um, I want to feel like this made more sense doing it because the dog is sticking his tongue out in the background also (laughs).

Through her use of humour and "goofy faces", Fiona avoids taking selfies that might be interpreted as "serious" and therefore liable to judgement. She realises that this is "significant", relating back to her criticisms of people, like her brother's girlfriend, who do take these types of images. Unlike the aesthetic labour characteristic of serious selfies, Fiona's selfie was spontaneous. "I didn't even fix my hair or anything like that," she says, "like I just spur of the moment, like, yeah, it was just one and done." As with Emma, Fiona's selfie was taken on holiday, shared on Facebook as part of an album on her travels. As with other participants, Fiona construes distinctly different cultures on Facebook and Instagram, which in turn shapes the kinds of visibility participants regard as typical to each:

> I feel like when I'm putting them on Facebook I'm showing more of an experience, like if I'm putting up a group of pictures from my travelling, like a trip, they're seeing a tonne of different places I went whereas on Instagram, it's just one specific time and one place like you have to be very particular about what you choose and you want it to look good (laughs) ... I think that's why- now I'm thinking- maybe that made me more critical of my brother's girlfriend because she had all these selfies on Instagram. I probably wouldn't have cared as much if it was on another social media outlet.

Returning to the issue of her brother's girlfriend and her selfies, Fiona re-evaluates her position. On Facebook, her selfies are posted as part of an album showcasing her travels; the attention, as she sees it, is focused on her experiences, rather than herself. Instagram does not allow album postings like this; images are generally posted one or two at a time, with a maximum of ten permitted in one posting. Instagram's design, as Fiona notes, places a much more intense focus on the individual images that are posted, and by extension, the individual themselves. This, she feels, means you have to be "very particular" about what you share because, "you want it to look good". Contrasting how she uses Facebook versus how she uses Instagram causes her to wonder if her judgement of her brother's girlfriend's selfies is based on her own knowledge of how carefully Instagram is curated and edited. The distinctions Fiona draws between different social media suggests that selfie surveillance is particularly acute on sites like Instagram which emphasize the reproduction of individualised, highly specular forms of femininity.

Like Emma and Fiona, Claire chooses to discuss a selfie of hers in which she is not taking herself seriously. Her selfie is also one of her on holiday, this time at a

border crossing between Mexico and the United States[29]. The background is emphasized while Claire's face is convened to the bottom left-hand corner. She is smiling broadly with her hair tied off her face, make-up free, and wearing sunglasses. When asked what she hopes people see in this selfie, she responds:

> I think you can kind of tell from that picture like, that I'm not taking myself seriously, like not too seriously, like it's not a great angle, you can't see all of my face… you can't even see the bottom of my face, it's not even a nice, it's kind of like a, it's a smile like, that [says], "I'm good fun" like "look at me, I'm having fun in Mexico, and you're not", (laughs), "just don't take me seriously", cos like if a lot of people, I think if someone was to put up a selfie like that was just on its own, like not with the Mexico thing like, literally just a square like, that everyone would be like, "jeez, that's an awful selfie, like the state of your one". I'd probably be like, "no, don't do that now", but like you can just tell, "oh look at this one, she's having a good time".

Claire shifts subject positions when discussing her selfie. She critically analyses the image, pointing out what she perceives as the poor angle it is taken at, how her face is obscured. She feels that the image's narrative - she is having fun on holiday, which the viewer is likely not - deflects judgement that would apply if the image was just of her. Two readings of the selfie emerge: one which addresses the viewer enthusiastically – "I'm having fun in Mexico and you're not" - and another in which the gaze is refracted, "jeez, that's an awful selfie, like the state of your one". Claire asserts, repeatedly, that the latter interpretation is unlikely as it is clear she is "having a good time" and therefore not looking for approval based on appearance. Nevertheless, looking at the selfie she becomes conflicted, saying, "it's a nice picture, it's probably, that's probably constitutes a bad selfie (laughs) like, it's not great, I'm like, eee (embarrassed sound)."

In avoiding selfies that might be construed as 'serious', and judged accordingly, Claire tries to anticipate and manage reactions to her image. Refusing to take her selfie seriously serves as a form of self-preservation, allowing her visibility while seeking to reduce the likelihood of judgement. Nevertheless, the potential for judgement, and the tenor that judgement might take, is something Claire is keenly aware of, as the following extract shows:

> I don't take it seriously at all, because I, I definitely, I'd probably lose my brain if I did take it seriously, you can't, you can't. I have fun with it, it's definitely good fun, yeah I think social media is good fun, I definitely see where the negatives come from and stuff but I don't think they affect me but then again I don't let myself be effected by it because I don't put up selfies and I don't document everything because, it's not worth it… I do

[29] For an example of the type of selfie submitted by Claire, see Image 5 in Appendix 5.

> get kind of bad social anxiety sometimes so, I would over think it more than anything, probably people don't say these things but in my brain I'm like "oh my God, oh my God like", it's just not worth, it's not good for me so I just avoid [it].

Claire's account here is notable for the contrasts she articulates. Selfies and social media are "good fun" but taking them too seriously risks severe emotional distress. Acknowledging the negatives, Claire insists these don't affect her, not because she is immune to them put because she actively avoids them by not posting serious, Instagram-type selfies. This can be read as an attempt to reduce the surveillance directed at her image. It is not only the prospect of people commenting negatively on her image that upsets her, it is a fear of a wider, more nebulous form of judgement. Although she tells herself that these fears are unfounded - "probably people don't say these things" - the prospect still provokes anxiety. Unsurprisingly, she seeks to avoid this kind of scenario. Hence, her "don't take me serious" selfie is not as light-hearted as it may first appear. It has been developed in response to selfie surveillance, to claim a level of visibility Claire feels comfortable with, one which she hopes will enable her to share something of life with her followers while avoiding the kinds of judgements that distress her.

5.5. Summary

Analysing participants 'looking talk' reveals a number of insights which underscore how selfie surveillance functions as an exercise in conformity. Firstly, the role of dissonance as a disciplinary effect of the self-surveillance and homosocial surveillance. Surveillant self-gazing draws participants' attention in fine-grained ways to discrepancies between their physical selves and their image, producing subjectivities heavily shaped by logics which re-inscribe normative femininity as a means to quell the dissonance they experience. This effect is *productive* in that it motivates participants to undertake the aesthetic labour - of which selfie-practices represent an additional, technological aspect – presented as integral to achieving coherence between self and image. This repetition and investment in selfie-practices normalizes their presence and the mechanics of judgement which characterise them, eliding the ways in which such practices themselves exacerbate the demands of postfeminist-neoliberal visibility. Hence, the logics of postfeminist-neoliberalism position the individual, rather than technology, as responsible for dealing with the pressures that accompany increasing demands for visibility.

The quest for coherence via selfie-practices relies on attaining the 'right kind' of visibility. This hinges on the individual's ability to successfully reproduce the normative femininity so prized by postfeminist-neoliberalism and social media's entrepreneurial,

individualised cultures. Yet, the type of coherence offered by selfie-practices is limited, as evidenced by participants' forensic ability to still find fault in selfies that had been edited and their propensity to create images that end up looking little like their creator. While participants describe how using filters and apps cuts down on the amount of effort they have to put into their selfie, they also relay how these technologies re-instate hegemonic notions of femininity and undercut claims to authenticity, thereby contributing to the dissonance they experience. This is particularly acute when they discuss the selfie they have submitted for interview, where their ability to keep a positive assessment is challenged by surveillant self-gazing which picks apart the image. Thus, the use of selfie-practices to achieve the elusive coherence and visibility proffered by narratives of postfeminist-neoliberalism instead reveals their limits and consistencies.

The kinds of girlfriend and postfeminist gazing theorized by Winch (2012, 2013) and Riley et al. (2016) found expression in participants' accounts of homosocial surveillance, which provide insights into how such modes of competitive looking function in selfie-practices. Most notably, participants 'looking talk' reveals the presence of a powerful multidirectional surveillant female gaze which is heavily structured by technological enticements to judgement and the logics of postfeminist-neoliberal femininity. It is particularly adept at observing the ways in which the selfies of their peers do not cohere, producing an outcome and image that is read as a failure. This gaze requires a deep understanding of aesthetic labour and the intricacies of selfie-production, which are depicted by participants as skills young women in particular should master. This assumption reflects Frosh's (2015) insights on the demands of selfie-taking as they intersect with the expectations of postfeminist-neoliberal visibility, a point the next chapter considers in detail. Again, these expectations and the culture of mutually-assured judgement participants describe, centres the reproduction of normative femininity through the deployment of aesthetic labour and, in addition, technological knowhow which prioritizes the visual.

Participants' attempts to resist the enticement to judge are complicated and often defeated by their presence in contexts which make judgement of self and others a condition of participation. Hence, through participation they are rendered complicit, making criticisms of the culture difficult to sustain as they inevitability implicate the self. However, a number of participants illustrated how they avoid, or at least reduce, judgement directed at their selfie by producing images which centre activity, travel or humour, as opposed to normative femininity which is read as inviting a critical,

surveillant and noticeably female gaze. Here, refusing to take 'serious' or 'proper' selfies provides a way of deflecting attention away from one's appearance, thereby pre-empting and (hopefully) defusing judgement. Overall, exploring participants' 'looking talk' indicates how nascent technological norms, which themselves are drenched in neoliberalism, are becoming enmeshed with the 'doing' of postfeminist-neoliberal femininity, whether in the bedroom, at the gym or on nights out. Participants' accounts illustrate how these elements co-constitute and reinforce one another, demanding visibility whilst structuring and restraining it, a point which will be further explored in the next chapter which analyses two core discourses from the transcripts: control and empowerment.

Chapter 6: "You have the control to be like, "okay, these are things I want to ignore about myself"" – negotiating visibility through narratives of control and empowerment

6.1. Introduction

Building on the previous chapter's findings, this chapter explores how narratives of control and empowerment are 'put to work' to cultivate the kinds of specular gendered subjecthood prized by postfeminist-neoliberalism; it also examines how such narratives are supported in turn by technological norms which promote visibility through self-branding and entrepreneurial thinking. In essence, these narratives work in tandem with social media's ethos and design to normalize and support selfie surveillance, with notions of control in particular functioning as a means to achieve coherence and quell dissonance. Three subheadings, distilled from the interview data structure the discussion: *control as visibility management*, *control as discipline* and finally, *empowerment/disempowerment*.

A key characteristic of selfie surveillance - the theoretical basis for which draws on the work of Rottenberg (2018), McRobbie (2015) and Oksala (2011) regarding neoliberal femininity - is the manner in which it renders the individual uniquely responsible for the success or failure of her image. This is manifested in the ways in which participants draw on narratives of control that position them as having *more control* over their image today than in the past. They attribute this increased control to the rise of digital technologies of which selfie-practices are representative. This heightened control is depicted by participants as enabling them to respond to the gaze *on their own terms*, a premise with distinctly feminist undertones regarding the importance and power of representation. However, such logic does not interrogate why it is women continue to be subject to disciplining gazes nor does it consider how this scrutiny has intensified in recent times via the same technologies that participants credit with giving them increased control over their image. Rather, control discourse emphasizes how participants can now *respond to* the increasing demands of the gaze (principally through self and peer surveillance), a development which is depicted as positive and progressive even as it intensifies the very dynamics surveillance is offered as a salve for. It is a logic which, on the one hand, draws on feminist notions of autonomy, self-expression and independence, while on the other, lending itself as the 'solution' to problems relating to the increased surveillance of women's bodies and lives under neoliberalism without naming those problems. In this dynamic, the augmented surveillance of women enabled by digital technologies and the

neoliberal outlook they embody, a level of surveillance which has as Gill (2008 no pagination) points out 'no historical precedent', goes uninterrogated.

This is a critical point for, as participants' accounts of selfie-practices markedly show, control is not only experienced in positive terms. By 'taking control' participants must concurrently submit themselves - through their selfie - to surveillance and judgement. This results in moments in which *control is lost.* It also produces moments in which participants describe *being controlled* by the expectations associated with selfie-practices. It is also noteworthy that in the transcripts these darker aspects of control do not cohere into a narrative to the degree that *being in control* does, despite appearing at multiple points in participants' accounts.

In accordance with the logics of selfie surveillance, when an image fails to perform as expected – that is, when the image is not 'perfect' or is found wanting for another reason - this failing reflects not just on the image itself but also on the selfie-taker. As participants' accounts repeatedly suggest, young women in particular are presumed to be skilled at the art of selfie-production, something which is expected to be reflected in the quality of the image they produce. Achieving a quality image is dependent on making the right kinds of choices about the composition of the image, with 'right' implying the embracing of normative femininity. Following this perspective, it is down to the individual young woman to make sure her selfie is as good as it can be. In typical postfeminist-neoliberal fashion, this focus conveniently elides the impossible standards of beauty, lifestyle and self-branding young women are increasingly expected to embody in the pursuit of visibility. The focus is instead on *the quality of her choices* rather than *the contexts and constraints* which those choices are subject to. This mirrors Oksala's (2011) insights into how neoliberal governmentality has colonised the feminist notion of choice, rerouting it away from its political origins towards an individualised, consumer-orientated 'self-fulfilment' which is held up as a sacrosanct indicator of women's progress. Under this arrangement, women may not criticise this reworked concept of choice; rather, they are expected to achieve success through the cultivation of 'good' choices – which is presented as a type of freedom – while also assuming responsibility for the outcome. As participants' accounts illustrates, this leaves little discursive room to articulate the inconsistencies and inevitable failures of postfeminist-neoliberal visibility.

In the transcripts, selfie-practices are frequently positioned as a means to empowerment through visibility. Yet, far from being progressive, this notion of

empowerment presented is routed through normative femininity which is depicted as both its site and its source. This dynamic speaks to the kinds of looking talk explored in the previous chapter, whereby normative femininity is re-inscribed through the intensification of critical self-gazing and competitive peer-surveillance. Participants' accounts also underscore the close relation between empowerment and disempowerment, illustrating how actions that are discursively positioned as 'empowering' can also be read as a means to cope with demands of postfeminist-neoliberal visibility which are inherently disempowering. In the transcripts, this kind of empowerment rhetoric is characterised by a contradiction which emphasises the sovereignty – and by extension, *responsibility* - of the individual while simultaneously requiring that the individual submit themselves to evaluation and judgement by others. Thus, rather than paving a route to a fully realised, fully secure 'empowerment', participants instead vacillate between two polls, underpinning how *empowerment and disempowerment co-constitute each other* in the contexts described. In order to act, which is foundational to becoming empowered, one must feel disempowered. Therefore, we can say that disempowerment is a necessary condition, otherwise narratives of empowerment have little to appeal to. Underscoring the precarity of this situation further, as participants' accounts illustrate, is that even if empowerment is achieved through selfie-practices, it is an empowerment characterised by its temporality and contingency rather any politicized transformation. Ultimately, participants use of control and empowerment discourses articulates a highly individualised strategy for coping with the demands of postfeminist-neoliberal visibility while eliding the source of such demands and deflecting potential criticisms of the pervasiveness of surveillant digital technologies.

6.2. Control as Visibility Management

Asked when they first began taking selfies, participants often recounted attempting to take them before the advent of front-facing cameras. Such attempts are treated humorously and the technology utilised is presented as passé compared to the techniques available today. Central to this is the notion that current technologies give participants *more control* over their image than they have had in the past. Helen explains this trajectory in the following excerpt, reflecting on the differences between the iPad she currently uses and the webcam she first took selfies with:

> The camera is so, so much better and also, cos you can actually hold it y'know, so you can get a few angles if you wanted to, y'know, that kind of thing, so you'd [have] a bit

> more control over how you would frame it or (laughs) cos with most of my selfies it's basically me peering in, if you get my meaning.

For Helen, the technological advances of the iPad allow her to "get a few angles" should she want to, enabling her to select the one she deems most flattering. It also grants her "a bit more control" over the type of image she creates. She emphasizes this point again later in relation to what she enjoys about the increasing sophistication of the technology she uses, saying, "I think a large part of it is being able to control and being able to define what your selfie can be", casting the selfie as a site of potential. Helen enjoys "making changes" to her image, something facilitated by the kinds of editing software typical to selfie technologies; she also enjoys being able, as she sees it, to represent herself. Reflecting on what she likes and dislikes about the selfie, Helen recalls discomfort at being photographed at a recent wedding:

> I was never going to go into modelling but, I was just like, "where am I supposed to go?" like, "where's my face supposed to go?" like, "is this okay?" like "how do I look?" like, I've no sense of that whatsoever… when I see one of those pictures of myself that's been taken by somebody else and I don't like it, obviously I wouldn't say that to, well, I might just make a joke like, kind of like, "what is going on with my face?" (laughs) y'know, but not in terms of, "oh take it down" like some people would be because, those sorts of wedding photos, why would you do that?

Helen's discomfort is characterised as a lack of control over her image which produces a strong emotional response. When faced with the prospect of having her photograph taken, she expresses a barrage of questions on how she should pose, centring on her discomfort that "I've no sense of that whatsoever" which she attributes to being "not a naturally photogenic person". When confronted by an image of herself online that she dislikes, Helen does not feel able to express her dislike directly, preferring instead to jokingly refer to her displeasure, "what is going on with my face?". She also does not feel it is right to request that such images be taken down. Yet, the circulation of these kinds of images causes Helen to reflect negatively on the images she has taken of herself, a circulation heavily intensified by social media. In following passage, she describes her reactions to compliments on photographs from the wedding in question:

> People were like "you know it's a great photo"' and I'm like, in my head I'm like, "no I look fucking ugly"…I'll go back to my selfie and be like, "I'm actually just not, I'm really actually just lying to myself, do I actually look like that? And then when people meet me in person does that line-up or is that just a fiction?" Cos that's one thing that I think about on days when I'm actually feeling good about myself, I don't really think about that, but on days when I'm not feeling good at all, not feeling good about how I look, I go back to that.

Helen's internal voice is deeply critical of her image: "no I look fucking ugly". Seeing an image of herself taken by someone other than herself prompts her to return to and revaluate her selfie, a process notable for the dissonance it provokes. This produces a negative line of reasoning in which she questions how she is viewed by others and if the image presented in her selfie is "just a fiction". Helen links this line of thought to positive and negative emotions, saying that she is more inclined to question her selfie-image "on days when I'm not feeling good at all" a feeling she then links to "not feeling good about how I look". Control then, is depicted by Helen as something which is deeply felt but is contingent and subject to revaluation, where the positive sense of self it can help produce remains subject to forces which Helen cannot control.

As accounts like Helen make clear, control is desired because of moments when participants have felt a loss of control over their image. This 'loss' follows the trajectory of:

1. Someone other than the participant takes a picture of them, with or without their knowledge.
2. The image then appears online or elsewhere.
3. The participant feels embarrassed and/or upset by the image which they feel does not portray them in an aesthetically pleasing way, whereby the dissonance between self and image produces a sense of shame.

Comparing themselves to an image someone else has taken of them – an occurrence social media has significantly increased the likelihood of – provokes dissonance for which selfie-practices provide a means of relief. Hence, participants position selfie-practices as *granting them* the control they need to meet the demands of the gaze. They can take multiple pictures and select the best one. They can edit the image, choose the lighting, style themselves. They can select where and when to share the image, if at all. This kind of logic presents selfie-practices as a salve without confronting how social media itself is intensifying the very dissonance participants describe, including the self-management work they feel they must undertake to subdue it. Nevertheless, narratives of control were compelling for participants. Aine, for example, is enthusiastic about what she construes as selfie-practices enabling her ability to create images of herself she finds pleasing. When asked if control of her image is important to her, she responds:

> [It's] one of the best things about taking a selfie cos you control how you look and it can make you feel so good when you get this nice photo and you took it and it was you and it's just, it's a nice feeling. Whereas, if somebody is taking a photo of you and you

> looked and you didn't know it and you looked a state, you would go around for days thinking "is that what I look like all the time? Is that the real me, where I look like a big slob or just" (pause) it does, it does make a difference.

Aine construes control as something which helps her navigate the demands of visibility, enabling her to produce images of herself she likes, which in turn makes her feel good. Tied to this is a sense of personal accomplishment, "you took it and it was you and it's just, it's a nice feeling." She contrasts this with loss of control, i.e. being photographed looking "a state" as she terms it, and the impact this has not just on her mood but on her sense of self. This impact is not inconsiderable, rather, the dissonance it causes shapes her sense of self-worth "for days" and draws harsh self-criticism. In a similar vein, Greta highlights control as a critical factor for women engaging in selfie-practices, given that they have traditionally been the object rather than the subject of photography:

> The thought just occurred to me that many women in selfies don't smile, y'know, they look, different and in a way that's also their way of expressing themselves on their own terms and not kinda whole, like having a photographer telling them "smile!" so they can decide how they want to, what kind of image they want to put out into the world of themselves.

The language Greta utilises here draws on postfeminist rhetoric of the agentic, assertive young woman who lives life, as she describes, "on her own terms". Key to this, as she outlines, is the notion of choice, exercised through control of one's image and the claiming of visibility. When asked if she regards this control as a good thing, Greta responds:

> You are your own photographer, so you have the control and if you take a selfie that you don't like, you can just delete it. Whereas if someone else takes the selfie well, if it's with your camera you could still delete it but if it's with someone else's camera then, it's out there.

Greta describes the loss of control that comes with being the object of the gaze, rather than the subject. She sees the effects of this arrangement as now being mitigated by digital technologies which enable women to photograph themselves and to destroy images of themselves that they are unhappy with. However, her account also captures the precariousness of this arrangement, namely how images may disappoint and become detached from the individual to circulate "out there" in a digital context which is beyond their control.

6.3. Control as Discipline

While selfie-practices certainly do enable participants to create highly stylized images compared to earlier forms of photography and to return the gaze femininity has traditionally been subject to, this enabling also brings its own demands and a logic that is often contradictory. As a consequence, participants endeavour to respond to anticipated judgement and the expectation that they produce 'good' selfies by exercising control 'in the right way', that is, by producing selfies that can be read as normatively feminine. Thus, rather than offering a reprieve from the demands of femininity or the gaze, control narratives cast these as a given, emphasizing instead the need to meet rather than reject such demands. In the following passage, the beginning of which also featured in the previous chapter, Edie responds to a question on judgement and the selfie:

> I think it's cos you spend so long on your own one, that you, feel like, if someone else doesn't put in that same effort, not saying I would or anything but just you realise that, I think, it's always kind of said like with boys they just pop up a photograph - their profile picture is just a photograph of a football game or something like that - whereas girls know, they have the knowledge about editing and, d'yknow, what angles are nice and what lighting is nice that you feel like, "come on, use this to your advantage and you've got every opportunity with your fancy phone and all this to be able to edit well enough that it should be good."

Edie describes expectations drawn along explicitly gender lines. Where boys can "pop up a photograph", girls are held to a much higher standard. The reason Edie provides for this double-standard is the presumption that girls have or are expected to have a high degree of expertise in selfie-production. This assumption positions the ability to produce good selfies as being distinctly feminine and hence, in the control of young women, something they are *responsible* for producing. Edie adopts the position of a critic or a business mentor, urging young women to put their supposed superior knowledge to work, "use this to your advantage". This expectation is cast as an "opportunity" to produce an image that is "good".

Control discourse refers to both structuring the image in a way that is appealing but also excluding that which participants consider to be unappealing. Such exclusions are not happenstance but culturally and politically informed. In this sense, control refers to a strategic and anticipatory form of self-editing or self-discipline motivated by narratives which presume young women's adeptness and willingness to produce the 'right' kind of selfie. These points are further underscored in Melissa's response regarding what makes a good selfie:

> I suppose I do like the control cos, I suppose you're using the same technology that like, anyone else has, like, you're kind of on a level playing field, and, so if you don't like photos other people take of you, you've got the time and the control and you can just like, post it like, when you said, " how long does it take you to take a selfie?", I was thinking of like, "oh, I actually like, there's some where I'm not going to include that [part] because, say with the angle you can like see blonde hairs on my face or whatever like"… I don't know that a friend would think of that, if they were like, if they're posting a photo of you. So, you do have the control to be like, "okay, these are things I want to ignore about myself" (laughs).

Echoing Edie, Melissa views technology as "leveling the playing field", providing young women with the means to represent themselves. The idea that the individual – in this case herself - is *responsible* for the production of images they and others approve of is highlighted in her repeated use of the first person 'you' in relation to time, control, and publishing of images. When friends take your photograph, Melissa suggests that they wouldn't necessarily be aware of, as she puts it, "things I want to ignore about myself". Having control over her image enables her to edit these 'things', specifically "blonde hairs on my face". Hence, the type of control Melissa describes functions in much the same way that technological filters do, enabling participants to edit their image on a forensic level, within carefully delimited cultural parameters tied to normative notions of femininity.

Participants characterise control not only as something they assume through selfie-practices but also as something they submit to through selfie-practices. In following excerpt, Jane discusses the phenomenon of creeping, whereby people secretly trawl through others' social media profiles to glean information about their lives. Jane, who has a relatively large following online, says of people who she catches 'creeping' on her social media:

> They like to keep tabs on what you're doing so with selfies and social media you're always kinda putting your best foot forward, you can control what people are seeing and how great you're doing, even if you are not doing so great at all… like I'd never post a selfie I'm not happy with. So, I'm letting people see what I look like if I'm happy with how I look like. It's not like now. I can't control how I look now. I can try my best by putting make-up on but if I take a selfie, it's about the angle, it's the light, it's fake. Yeah. It's all fake.

Control, as Jane describes it, is not about truthfulness but about self-management, specifically the production of images which support the idea of her having a particular kind of life. In this instance, Jane interprets control as something she is not free to use in whatever direction she chooses. Rather, it is something she deploys in order to meet the expectations of those she anticipates will be judging her image. By exercising control in

this way, using her selfie as a 'cover' for her true emotions (as discussed in the previous chapter), Jane becomes situated in positions which are in tension, producing an image which she uses to "let people see what I look like if I'm happy" even when she is "not doing so great at all". She notes that offline she does not have the level of control over her image afforded to her by selfie-practices. However, in outlining how she exercises such control, Jane ultimately concludes "it's fake", a pronouncement that can be read as referring to the image she produces but also, in an indirect way, to the limits of her control in the practices she outlines.

For Jane, as for other participants, the spectre of the loss of control over one's image is ever-present. This fear is understandable in an online landscape where content can be easily repurposed beyond its original intention and context (Marwick and boyd 2011), a fact which has particular implications for women and girls (Jane 2017, Banet-Weiser 2018). In the following passage, Jane, echoing earlier points made by Helen, discusses how the control offered by selfie-practices allows her to pre-empt moments when she is confronted by images of herself taken by others:

> The majority of the time if I'm somewhere, I'd prefer to take a selfie than get my picture taken because I can control the way I look and I know it's going to be a nice photograph whereas if someone is taking a photograph of me, I can't see what it looks like and if it's going to be horrible, d'yknow, and I don't want to be one of those girls, (in a demanding voice) "take it again! Take it again! Take it again!"

By taking a selfie, Jane describes avoiding the loss of control she feels when someone else takes her picture. Such images prompt her to ask disappointedly, "Do I really look like that?", as she puts it later in our discussion, highlighting once again the critical role of dissonance. Exercising control enables her to produce what she considers to be a "nice photograph" as opposed to one which is "horrible". It also means that she does not have to make demands of the photographer, thus avoiding becoming "one of those girls" who vocalises her dissatisfaction and is judged for it, a point which resonates with Helen's account. Emphasizing why a sense of control is important to her, she explains:

> It makes me feel good then as well because it's hard to see a bad picture of yourself. Whereas if you take a selfie, you're in complete control and you have that memory but it's actually a nice picture of you, you actually look nice in it, it's gonna, it makes me feel better whenever I look back, "oh I looked good", whereas I see a picture my friend took, I have like one eye closed, and an eyelash hanging off (laughing).

By her account, Jane's feelings are a key motivator for how she directs her control. Describing seeing a bad picture of herself as "hard", she links feeling "good" with producing

"a nice picture". This control is lost when, as she describes, her friend takes a picture which Jane is unhappy with. She laughs when describing what such an image might look like – "one eye closed" – displaying a light-heartedness which contrasts which her previous assertion that, "it's hard to see a bad picture of yourself." As much as Jane depicts control as positive with regard to her ability to produce the right kind of image, she also refers to control as something exercised over her through the dynamics of selfie-practices. When discussing her followers and how some have begun to not 'like' her pictures anymore, she says:

> I think it's very controlling and it's probably like making a mountain out of a mole hill but, it's something significant that would make you think differently of a person if they just suddenly stopped liking your pictures, because they're suddenly not accepting your pictures and it's like they're not accepting you, d'yknow?

Here, Jane's depiction of control is as something which others have *over her*. By refusing, as she interprets it, to 'like' her selfies, her followers are rejecting not just the image but her as person. Hence, her sense of self becomes synonymous with the treatment of her image. Her own sense of control is challenged by what she feels are the attempts of others to control her by withholding their approval. This produces uncertainty, even paranoia, leading Jane to "think differently" about the persons concerned. The idea of control being exercised over the individual through selfie-practices is also described by Fiona. When discussing the motivations behind people's use of the selfie, she says:

> I just think with social media, a lot of the time you're worried about how people are seeing you and if that's, if you're putting up selfies in the way that is for other people, I have a lot of trouble saying that's empowering to that individual because that to me feels like other people have more control over your experience than you do. So, like I, I'm even guilty of that like, if I put up a picture and like people don't like it or whatever like I still like, "why aren't people liking this?" you know, like, but I'm not like "oh it's cos I look bad", you know, but I'm still worried about, like I'm still putting it [up] for other people… I have to say most of the time it's not empowering in my opinion, that's yeah, that's probably how I feel.

Fiona links empowerment to the notion of control, problematizing both. Her remarks are specific to the type of selfies which she regards as being "for other people". Echoing Jane, she recounts the effect of posting a selfie that people do not like, explaining how it makes her wonder what is wrong with the image, asking herself, "why aren't people liking this?". Her criticism, however, is self-directed; she feels "guilty" for submitting herself to this process. Unlike Jane, Fiona is not a regular selfie taker and positions herself as somewhat removed from the phenomenon. Nevertheless, both experience similar feelings centring

on what they depict as, on the one hand, a *loss of control* which occurs when producing an image for others and, on the other hand, a sense of *control being exercised on the self* when their image does not receive positive reactions. This loss and exercising of control are co-constituted; by exercising control, the individual enters a context in which control may also be lost and where they may become subject to the control of others through the disciplining gazes and ranking mechanisms inherent to social media.

6.4. Empowerment/Disempowerment

Participants repeatedly link empowerment to "feeling good" which is in turn linked to "looking good" through their use of the selfie. This "looking good" is experienced by participants when they feel they have embodied femininity in the right way. Femininity is therefore positioned as the site and source of empowerment; itself the accomplishment selfie-practices capture and share. However, many participants express ambivalence about the idea that selfie-practices are empowering but struggle to articulate clearly why they feel this way. Other participants reject selfie-practices as a site of empowerment altogether, emphasizing instead empowerment as a force which is internally experienced and realised in individualised ways rather than one which is contingent on the approval of others. In the transcripts, empowerment is often linked to a sense of achievement. This achievement centres on the production of selfies which are favourably received by one's peers. When asked what she thinks about the idea that selfies are empowering, Helen is initially enthusiastic in her response:

> I agree, I absolutely agree… , it's almost like a little victory sometimes because you spend, again like, in this society where we're made to feel bad about feeling good, like, feeling good about our appearance or taking care of it or made to feel bad about not taking care of it or whatever that may mean, taking care of our appearance means something different to everybody.

For Helen, empowerment is experienced emotionally by feeling good, specifically feeling good "about how you look", which she describes as "a little victory". This victory is won, she suggests, in the face of a society in which "we're made to feel bad about feeling good", linking feeling good with looking good once again. She also articulates a contradiction with regard to appearance, saying that women are made to feel bad for both taking care of and not taking care of theirs, noting the highly individualised nature of such criticisms, "taking care of our appearance means something different to everybody." Yet the victory Helen describes is characterised by ambivalence, as she explains in response to a question regarding what she hopes people will see when they look at her selfie:

> This is going to sound really pathetic but (pause), that I'm pretty (laughs), that they'll say, "that's pretty", that's really it… That's it, that's really it, and y'know, it's really funny, for all of me saying that, y'know, it's all about being empowering and feeling good about yourself, but for me to say, "I want people to see that I'm pretty", I feel this guilt and I feel this weird (sighs) it's almost kind of a bit of shame to be honest… I mean that's why we make those jokes about "validate me please" (laughs) that kind of thing, and there's truth to them as well isn't there, but yeah, and I hate saying that but that's the truth.

Helen cites what she presents as a contradiction in her response, namely that despite her claims of empowerment ultimately, she wants her selfie to be regarded as "pretty". This suggests that for her, needing to be regarded as pretty is not in and of itself empowering; rather, it is the antithesis, reducing her sense of self to something derived from other people's perceptions of her image. Awareness of this contradiction produces uncomfortable emotions. Helen describes feeling "guilty" and a "weird kind of shame". She struggles to temper these emotions with the awareness that "appearance does not determine happiness of course it doesn't" but nevertheless she presents herself and her peers as acknowledging, through humour, their need for validation of their image from others. Helen depicts this disclosure as hard to admit but also truthful, "I hate saying that but that's the truth".

While Helen characterises this need for validation through peer approval as a negative, as a handing over of control of her sense of self-worth for others to determine, participants like Jeanne interpret such a drive more positively. When asked about selfie-practices and empowerment, she responds with the following:

> I mean it's empowering me to see what I can do with make-up, to see like, there's this thing on Twitter that's called the Glow Up[30] where you put pictures of your younger selves and then [pictures of] how you grow-up to be, so usually people are like, when you hit puberty like (laughs) "oh, wow!" So, I feel like it's a good thing to look back upon yourself and to see what you've become and to see what your friends look like now, and to like, remember all the good times and yeah, I feel like it was very empowering.

Jeanne locates her source of empowerment directly with the surveillance of self and others. She contrasts the awkwardness of her teenage years with "what you've become", a becoming which relies on the approval of one's peers and the embodiment of normative,

[30] 'Glow Up' refers to a physical transformation whereby the individual goes from unattractive to beautiful. On social media sites, as Jeanne describes, the Glow Up movement refers to people comparing pictures of their younger selves with how the 'glow-up' to be. Such images typically reflect their embrace of normative femininity and mastery of aesthetic labour. Thus, they embody the 'transformation' aspect of the postfeminist sensibility (Gill 2007) often found in 'makeover' television shows like The Swan and How to Look Good Naked.

specular femininity. Central to this for Jeanne is being able to 'see' herself through the mechanism of the selfie which enables comparisons (including feedback) between her current and former image and also her ability to see her friends' images and they hers, a surveillant activity that is presented as positive and empowering. Jeanne depicts this 'becoming' as a type of achievement, one which is produced by her developing beauty skills under the guise of self-acceptance. It is also characterised by ranking and approval, as her account of the Glow Up phenomenon reveals, in which embracing femininity and leaving the awkwardness of childhood behind are celebrated through the homosocial looking Winch describes in her conceptualisation of girlfriend culture. Hence, in typical postfeminist-neoliberal style, Jeanne positions embracing specular femininity as both the source and site of empowerment, as enabled by the technological affordances of selfie-practices.

Discourses of empowerment in participants' accounts are frequently shown to be complex and contradictory. While supporting notions of individualised choice – "each to their own" as Jessica puts it – they are often sceptical as to how empowering selfies can be. This positioning leads to a discursive tension or impasse which reveals the limits and constraints of postfeminist-neoliberal discourse; participants cannot fully critique self-practices because to do so would be to condemn the actions of their peer group and themselves. Given the premium postfeminist-neoliberalist rhetoric places on personal choice, it would also mean articulating a perspective which goes against current postfeminist and neoliberal orthodoxies in which the exercising of choice is seen as an inherently progressive (and therefore beyond reproach) act, particularly for women. Reflecting on the issue of empowerment and selfie-practices, Greta responds with the following, drawing out the complexities at play:

> I think it depends on the why you're doing a selfie. So if you're, it can be very empowering if you, y'know, because you're the one who decides how to look and how to look at the camera and what you're wearing and everything so you really have a lot of (pause) power over the image of yourself that you create but, at the same time, um, in some cases that whole question of y'know, "why are you doing it? Are you doing it because you think it's your job to be beautiful because it's the only way a woman can be valuable?", or something, so yeah, it probably depends.

Initially, Greta links empowerment to control, specifically the ability to create an image of yourself which is bestowed by selfie-practices and their attendant technologies. As discussed in the previous section, exercising control is presented as tantamount to personal responsibility as evidenced by Greta's repeated reference to 'you' as the unit

through which selfie-practices are enacted. Yet, as she continues, this sovereign notion of the individual and individual action becomes problematized. In asking "why are you doing it?" she uses phrasing which can be construed as feminist in that it questions women's role in society – "you think it's your job" – and infers that female worth is tied to the body, "it's the only way a woman can be valuable." Ultimately, she decides "it probably depends" a conclusion that is non-committal, erring away from outright critique.

This backwards-forwards dance between a positive analysis of empowerment through selfie-practices and a more neutral or critical one is a common theme across participants' accounts of selfie-practices. For example, Amy's response when asked about empowerment and the selfie succinctly captures this tension: "I would be more leaning towards saying "sure, it can be empowering" but I don't know if it actually is or not". It's a sentiment echoed by Sarah, who responds to the same question, "I want to say "yes" (laughs) but I don't know why they're empowering." This ambiguity is further reflected in narratives which depict empowerment as a highly individualised endeavour, the outcome of which is reliant on the approval of others. The individualised nature of empowerment is further underscored by participants' accounts which depict it as something that is experienced emotionally, creating a deep affective resonance. The following passage from Alison illustrates these points:

> I think it does give more empowerment because, it's letting people capture what they feel is their best side of themselves, like I'd say you're not going to post something that you don't think you look good in and you are going to get a good feeling out of the 'likes' that you get and like, it all seems so vain but if you are having a bad day and you post a selfie and you get like fifty 'likes' or something, for me that's a lot (laughs)… you do actually feel good because you're like, "oh, I look good in that photo, everyone else thinks I look good in that photo"…. but then I suppose there's bit of a downside to it as well in that you see like the likes of the Kardashians or Victoria Secrets models and everything taking their selfies and you're like, "ugh, I've never gonna look as good as those" but at the same time, they all have personal trainers and chefs to make them all these amazing foods to make them look good and, they're probably all airbrushed and photoshopped and have their own glam-teams….

In Alison's account, taking selfies enables the individual to "capture what they feel is their best side of themselves". This "best side" is one in which they "look good" and are therefore most likely to receive 'likes' which produce what Alison describes as a "good feeling". Critical to this is the awareness that, as she puts it, "everyone else thinks I look good in that photo". In this depiction, empowerment is a positive sense of self brought about by creating an image which wins the approval of others. As such, empowerment is position as *contingent* on the reception the image receives. Empowerment is also

contingent on Alison's relationship to the selfies of other women, indicating the degree to which surveillance structures this process. As she describes, confronted with images of the Kardashians and models, she feels, "ugh, I'm never gonna look as good as those". She qualifies this by acknowledging the professional help these women have – "glam teams", as she terms them - and the level of manipulation at play in their selfies. The contrasts Alison draws depicts empowerment and disempowerment as points which the subject vacillates between. In such a context, attempting to become empowered means engaging with narratives and sites which may in fact be *disempowering*, thereby producing ambiguous emotional responses in participants and revealing the limits of postfeminist-neoliberal rhetoric. As Edie points out in the following excerpt, empowerment routed through selfie-practices is a precarious business. She makes these remarks after explaining why she does not find selfies empowering but understands how others might:

> Definitely those people would be so concerned about it, if it does really well and they've gotten a lot of 'likes' or some boy they like 'liked' it or the girl they like 'liked' it, then they're bopping for the rest of the day, they're super happy and they're like, "did you see that?" and you go, "yeah, that picture was great" or whatever and they're like, "I know!"… I do think that it for some people, it would make them feel very good, but the, it's the same type of people, who would easily feel as in like, I think you're either consistent or you feel really empowered but then when it doesn't do well you feel really, really kind of disheartened, so the same people who are feeling empowered are feeling disheartened when it doesn't do well.

In her account, Edie connects empowerment to disempowerment, again emphasizing the contingent nature of selfie approval. In order for someone to experience the emotional high of approval or 'likes', they must, firstly, feel the need for validation and be willing to risk submitting to surveillance, potentially receiving feedback which is unfavourable or non-existent. These affects are, according to Edie, deeply felt. Positive feedback results in individuals "bopping" and "feeling super happy". Negative or no feedback leads to the individual being "disheartened". For Edie, it is the people who are most invested in selfie-practices who are the likeliest to be empowerment by them, but they are also, she proposes, the ones must likely to be disappointed by them too. Here again, empowerment through selfie-practices is constructed as contingent, temporary and locked in tension between enabling and disabling feelings of self-worth.

6.5. Summary

Analysing participants' accounts reveals how narratives of control and empowerment are 'put to work' to address tensions arising from the increased surveillance of everyday life and the expectations of postfeminist-neoliberal visibility. This process fundamentally

elides how selfie-practices contribute to and intensify the surveillance they are presented as a solution to while reasserting norms of postfeminist-neoliberalism which emphasize specular femininity. Participants characterise selfie-practices as empowering them to 'return the gaze' as they see fit - but not as the source of the dissonance which makes the ability to control one's image in the current moment evermore desirable. This individualised and constrained return, mired in social media's judgemental architecture, does not trouble in any meaningful sense the structures which uphold and intensify the effects of surveillant gazing. This point is particularly significant in the light of the previous chapter, which explored the multiplicity of gazes participants recount navigating. Instead of permitting questions regarding the expectations and origins of these gazes, narratives of control and empowerment attempt to ensure that the focus remains on finding the means to appease rather than transcend them.

As participants show, narratives of control are highly compelling but deeply contradictory. They describe being moved to seek control over their image after experiencing a sense of loss of control over their image, which can be understood as a quest for coherence through assuming power over their representation. While participants view selfie-practices in a favourable light for enabling them to construct images they are happy with, their accounts also illustrate how easily this sense of control is compromised. This is unsurprising, given that it is contingent on the approval of others and takes place in digital contexts where surveillance is omnipresent and images can be interpreted, critiqued and circulated in ways their creators had not anticipated. Here again the issue of dissonance arises when participants are moved to compare their selfie with images taken of them by others (beyond their control) after encountering said images on social media. Participants also describe the sense of *being controlled* by responses to their selfie, which induces feelings of paranoia and shame as they question peer responses to their image. Control also infers a form of responsibility; as part of 'doing femininity', participants describe the expectation that they and others are expected to be astute selfie-takers who understand how to manage their image. Failure to create the right kind of image or retreating from posting images is read as a personal failing whereby the individual has not worked hard enough or made the most of the tools available to her, bringing with it the threat of invisibility.

Like control, narratives of empowerment are also notable for their contradictory nature and the strong emotional responses they inspire in participants. Although presented as a highly individualised endeavour, participants' accounts also depict

empowerment via selfie-practices as heavily reliant on the approval of others. This produces a tension in which empowerment is presented as an individual project, yet one that can only be secured through external validation. Even when participants reject a notion of empowerment that relies on external approval, they still retain a neoliberal understanding of it as a highly individualized project requiring work upon the self, as opposed to a collective movement for political and social change. Central to participants' accounts of empowerment is disempowerment, which provides the necessary motivation required to seek empowerment through selfie-practices. This relation between empowerment and disempowerment is productive and purposefully unsecured, producing an endless return to normative femininity as a path to an empowerment which is never fully realised. It also leaves unasked wider questions of why participants feel disempowered in the first place and the role of selfie-practices and increased surveillance in the production of such experiences.

Collectively, narratives of control and empowerment utilised by participants create a discursive climate in which criticisms of postfeminist-neoliberal visibility and rising surveillance are difficult to make and sustain. Couched in notions of choice and progress, the tensions participants experience in navigating selfie-practices become individualized, as do the strategies they take to address them. The lack of (and the need for) an accessible but politicized counter discourse, one which both names and explains in a critical feminist fashion the tensions participants experience, is strongly apparent. Without it, participants are left at a discursive stalemate where their attempts at critique fail to ignite and are redirected back towards the self. This arrangement is further explored in the next chapter, which examines the presence and purposes of postfeminist-neoliberal celebrity in participants' accounts.

Chapter 7: "Now you can literally see what Beyoncé is eating for dinner" – exploring narratives of postfeminist-neoliberal celebrity in selfie-practices

7.1. Introduction

This final findings and analysis chapter explores celebrity-surveillance, a key aspect of participants' accounts of selfie-practices. The discussion is organised under two subheadings: *disciplining pleasure* and *assessing authenticity*. Participants' accounts of postfeminist-neoliberal celebrity show it to be a highly compelling discourse, if also highly contradictory one. The glamourous lives of the Kardashians (the celebrities most frequently mentioned by participants) are a showcase for the potential economic power of melding of aesthetic labour with entrepreneurial endeavour. However, the publicness of their image – something which they present as a means to empowerment - is an indicator of the degree to which women are now expected to perform visibility and submit themselves to be surveyed and monitored. With its unquestioning embrace of surveillance and self-disclosure across a multiplicity of platforms, the Kardashian phenomenon casts visibility as the *raison d'être* of contemporary femininity. In doing so, the family act as powerful exemplars and role models whose embrace of surveillance depict it as desirable, aspirational and normal.

Participants' perspectives on postfeminist-neoliberal celebrity selfies reveal a high degree of awareness of how manipulated such images are, despite their creators' claims of realness and authenticity. Nevertheless, this awareness does not immunize participants against comparing themselves, often unfavourably, with celebrity selfies, nor does it stop or reduce feelings of inadequacy. This dynamic again raises the dissonance that Betterton (1985, 1987) identifies as a critical characteristic of looking as a woman in androcentric societies, whereby looking at images of other women can be at once pleasurable but also disciplining, a reminder of how one fails to meet culturally prescribed notions of idealised femininity. This is further complicated by the types of intimacy implied by the celebrity selfie, which, as Jerslev and Mortensen (2016) propose, makes the celebrity appear 'closer' to their followers (thanks to the immediacy of social media), when in fact the opposite is true. By performing intimacy in a captivating but highly strategic way, utilising a distinctly female address, celebrities like the Kardashians bolster their personal brand by presenting the impression of accessibility and authenticity. As participants' accounts illustrate, this claim to realness intensifies feelings of pressure and self-comparison, while

also further entrenching the norms of postfeminist-neoliberal celebrity in everyday life as the desired standard for female achievement. This finding is indicative of the ways in which social media, as Khamis, Ang and Welling (2017) argue, bring modes of behaviour once reserved for celebrity into everyday contexts, turning self-branding and hyper-visibility into 'normal' activities.

Many participants describe the pleasure they take in looking at images of female celebrities. However, this pleasure is often curtailed and interrupted by the presence of surveillant architecture which encourages judgement by circulating and making visible criticisms directed at celebrities which participants encounter when they view their selfies. This structuring and the postfeminist-neoliberal outlook it is channelled through also serves to delimit the expression of feelings which fall outside the heteronormative by emphasizing femininity as something to be *judged* as opposed to *desired*. Thus, celebrity-surveillance becomes foregrounded as a critical exercise rather than one grounded in desire or connection.

As Chapter One discusses, the figure of the female celebrity serves a number of important purposes in the cultural field, acting as a gender exemplar, as a site where tensions around gender roles are played out and as a force which 'threatens' normative understandings of femininity while ushering in new ones (Holmes & Negra 2011, Fairclough 2012, Evans & Riley 2013, Hearn & Schoenhoff 2015). In the current era, female celebrities are still treated very differently than their male counterparts, a point illuminated in the transcripts when participants describe witnessing the public disciplining of high-profile women which takes place online. This is illustrative of Fisher's (2011) argument that social media magnifies female celebrities' failures. Such witnessing is not a passive event. As Trottier (2012, 2017) cautions, surveying others online can prompt individuals to increase self-surveillance. Hence, witnessing the judgement meted out to female celebrities online is disciplining in that it asserts and reaffirms femininity as something to be judged by the self and others, an effect not even the most successful women can escape. This point is encapsulated by moments in the transcripts when participants link the treatment of high-profile women online with the treatment of women as a whole.

A vital part of the Kardashian's appeal is their adeptness at mixing traditional aspects of femininity such as motherhood and domesticity with the entrepreneurial, go-getting nous of the idealised neoliberal subject (Leppert 2015, Pramaggiore & Negra

2014, Sastre 2014, Harvey 2018). Central to this is their embrace of visibility and self-disclosure through a multitude of platforms, particularly online. The Kardashians cast the increased surveillance of the female body as not only desirable but economically sensible, a 'new normal' (Elias, Gill & Scharff 2017) for which they offer a myriad of products to their followers. Following Oksala's (2011) account of the contemporary neoliberal subject, in this arrangement, femininity becomes an economic imperative whereby one invests in the self to better meet the demands of visibility. However, it is an imperative which is mired in incongruity, as participants' transcripts show, in which celebrity claims to 'realness' reassert normative femininity while attempting to elide the very real limitations and precariousness of postfeminist-neoliberalism.

7.2. Disciplining Pleasure

Participants cast celebrity selfie-practices as sites of complex emotional and psychic engagement, spanning enthusiastic identification to critiques reminiscent of second wave analyses of objectification. While participants describe monitoring celebrity selfies as a form of pleasure, inspiration and voyeurism, they also describe discomfort when monitoring online reaction to such selfies, most particularly the harsh judgement meted out to female celebrities. When asked why she enjoys the selfies of Irish social influencer and model Roz Purcell, Paula responds, "Well it's just that she's gorgeous… I just think she is really beautiful." Paula goes on to say that she finds Purcell's beauty admirable and appreciates the ways she frames her selfies with "funny stuff" which she feels showcases her sense of humour. Discussing "regular girls" she follows who have gained social influencer status as "Instagram models" Paula wonders why they receive what she characterises as "really, really rude and really hurtful" comments. She continues:

> I'm like, "why? Why do they feel the right to attack someone else just because they are posting pictures of them[selves]?" I feel like, I dunno if they think they are super you know confident and that they're super, just sure of how gorgeous they are so they [the critics] think, "oh if I say something bad to them, they won't even read it, they won't even care". I think they do. Sometimes [I think,] "Why do people do that? I don't understand. Why they feel the need to attack somebody?" Yeah, and that happens a lot.

As per Gill's (2007) conceptualisation of the postfeminist sensibility, confidence, visibility, and physical perfection are given a high premium by postfeminism. Following this logic, Paula regards the young women she highlights in this excerpt as achieving these ideals yet they receive criticism, a point she characterises as unfair and puzzling. As she attempts to put herself in the mindset of those who would be critical of their behaviour, she articulates confusion and discomfort at the idea that young women face being

attacked for embodying femininity which she terms "gorgeous", that is, culturally sanctioned and prized. Adopting the position of the critic, she suggests that those commenting do not think their unkind remarks will be read, a point she then refutes by stating in reference to the young women they criticise, "I think they do". She adds that this kind of criticism "happens a lot", complicating the aspirational promise of such imagery and raising questions about the repercussions for young women who choose visibility on the likes of Instagram. In a similar vein, Melissa recounts the following when asked about the selfies of the women she follows online:

> I would follow like Rihanna and Nicki Minaj…what upsets me a lot is when people like, I do check the comments cos like, it's sort of in a masochistic sort of way because, like, I think Rihanna looks great, obviously, but, yeah like, I was like, "oh, she looks like she's put on weight, like she still looks good" but yeah, I'm masochistically looking through the comments to see people calling her fat or whatever (laughs)… I'd be like, "yep, this is the world" (laughs). Em, and like, I think with weight Rihanna looks better than ever … I suppose I'm glorifying youth then because she actually looks younger (laughs) em, with weight, but, I don't know, this sounds very like, very superficial.

Despite asserting that Rihanna, "looks great… obviously", Melissa is nevertheless drawn to survey the changes in Rihanna's figure and the negative comments she receives about her weight. Although, as with Paula, these comments are not directed at her, Melissa describes them as upsetting and her compulsion to read them as "masochistic". She tempers her own awareness of Rihanna's weight gain by insisting "she still looks good", a move that can be read as a way to distance herself discursively from the position of the critic. This assertion seems to carry little weight however, as reading through the comments leads her to conclude "yep, this is the world", suggesting that women's bodies – in the broadest sense - inevitably face censure. This conclusion does not name or challenge the wider social forces which make such judgement seem inevitable or how social media's surveillant architecture facilitates and intensifies it. She again underscores Rihanna's attractiveness – "I think with weight Rihanna looks better than ever" – but is concerned that she is "glorifying youth" by suggesting that her weight gain makes Rihanna look "younger". Ultimately, Melissa struggles to articulate a coherent position, saying "I don't know", describing what she is saying as sounding "superficial", a criticism directed at herself. Here again is the presence of a discursive stalemate where Melissa's misgivings do not cohere with the discourses on offer. In trying to reconcile negative discourses on women's bodies with arguably more positive ones – by tying a youthful appearance to weight gain, for example – she illustrates the limits and pitfalls of this rhetorical endeavour. Ultimately, all paths lead back to the surveillance of Rihanna's body

which Melissa feels implicated in but also affected by, as evidenced by her repeated reference to masochism.

Participants' accounts like Melissa's describe disciplinary discourses and effects directed at female celebrities but, crucially, they illustrate too how such discourses also discipline those observing. The discourses used by participants to depict these dynamics show how what might have been an enjoyable experience – looking at images of other women whom a subject admires, desires or both – is disrupted by the invitation to judgement and their own sense of complicity in this judgement. When asked about gender differences in selfie-practices, Annette responded with the following, articulating what she construes as a double-standard:

> I think that sometimes guys can just take whatever they want to and show it and everyone will say they look cool or whatever but with girls, they get kind of torn down a lot or, there could be one thing wrong, like you see it all on Instagram especially with like celebrities, there will be one thing wrong with the selfie and then, everyone will comment on it and pull that out and make the girl feel bad… so I think it's harder for girls to get like appreciation for what they've taken or like to get good comments on what they've done. Whereas for guys, they just kinda always seem to do good, y'know, that kind of way.

According to Annette, young men are afforded a greater degree of freedom when it comes to their selfie-taking compared to their female peers, a point repeatedly made by participants. She suggests that without much effort, young men's selfies will nevertheless be considered "cool". By contrast, girls are "torn down", a point she illustrates by referencing the treatment of female celebrities on Instagram. All it takes, in her estimation, is "one thing wrong" for a female celebrity to be heavily criticised. According to Annette, this criticism takes the form of intense scrutiny, whereby critics – who she terms "everyone" - "comment" and emphasize the offending flaw with the intention of making the girl in question "feel bad". She concludes that these kinds of dynamics make it much harder for young women to find appreciation for their selfie-practices, whereas young men "always seem to do good", underscoring once again how young women in particular are expected to master the selfie as a specific, feminized skill which the can expect to be judged for. Hence, for Annette, observing how female celebrities are treated becomes a proxy for how young women are treated as a whole.

Accounts like Melissa's and Annette's illustrate the conflicted feelings participants feel when observing how female celebrities' selfies are treated online. Other participants assume positions which appear less fraught but which are no less centred on the issue of

'doing femininity' correctly. Such positioning, and the subjectivities they inspire, illustrates the appeal and promise of postfeminist-neoliberal visibility and how celebrities like the Kardashians are interpreted as role models to be followed. For example, in discussing the Kardashian's impact on the selfie phenomenon, Alison positions herself as someone who positively embraces their ethos:

> I'll admit, so if we're talking about the Kardashians I'll admit I'm a fan of the Kardashians, some people hate them, some people love them, I think they're marketing geniuses and at the end of the day, that's what I'm striving to be, so, you know, if I could make the money that they're making by posting a few posts on Instagram, I'd be doing it (laughs), so I'm not going to give out[31] about them.

By depicting her admiration of the Kardashians as something she must "admit" to, Alison evokes notions of guilt only to firmly reject them. This 'guilt' suggests that she is aware of the criticism directed at the Kardashians – "some people hate them, some people love them" - a point which will be discussed in more detail shortly. Nevertheless, drawing on the logic of entrepreneurialism, she describes the Kardashian's as "marketing geniuses", something she expresses the desire to become. This desire is matched by action; she describes herself "striving to be" what the Kardashian's have come to represent. For Alison, they have managed to create a system which appears ideal; for what she construes as "a few posts of Instagram" they are making a fortune. She regards her desire to emulate this success as incompatible with any critique of the Kardashian's, saying simply, "I'm not going to give out about them." Alison then, positions herself as well aware of the business-focused motivations behind the Kardashian's personas. Where others might see fake-ness, Alison sees a model to aspire to, emphasizing endeavour, intelligence and self-branding as a means of securing financial success. This evokes the economic logic which Oksala (2011) sees as critical to the kind of feminine subjectivities supported by neoliberalism, where femininity is cast as a savvy investment in one's self rather than something the individual is compelled to perform.

While participants like Alison regard the ethos of the Kardashians favourably, others position such techniques as indicative of what they regard, often negatively, as other women's attempts to monetize their own image which in turn harms women as a whole. Asked about the impact of the selfie phenomenon, Jenny responds with the following, referencing how the Kardashians utilise the selfie:

[31] 'Give out' is an Irish colloquialism meaning to complain or to be angry about something.

> I think it links into the female body being attached to capitalism and the economy. It's a way of making money for people, the female body is a business, it always has been but now it's becoming a new form of business through the selfie. So, then you have people like my little sister who are looking at it and they think that this is authentic and real and maybe not understand that no, these are business people, you know, this is a business for them and they're exploiting their image to make money for themselves and for the others. So, and then, my sister and her friends, sort of would like look up to that image, like copy the way they dress, copy their make-up, but then that's all part of the business as well because you're selling that image.

Jenny positions selfie-practices as closely aligned to commerce, "the female body is a business". She acknowledges that this is a tradition with longstanding roots but regards it as taking on new dimensions in the digital age. Again, as with other participants, Jenny articulates a sense that a shift has occurred in the cultural landscape. What she describes here can be understood as a blurring of boundaries between what is 'real' – that is, not an advertisement – and that which is business. Like other participants, she cites younger women – in this case, her little sister – as particularly vulnerable to not being able to discern what is 'real' and what isn't. Not being able to make this discernment has, as Jenny sees it, significant repercussions. Girls like her sister seek to emulate these images, thereby becoming drawn into a system she depicts as being fuelled by women "selling" and "exploiting" their image for profit. Rather than depicting such behaviour as aspirational, Jenny characterizes it as troubling, both in and of itself, and for those who would emulate it. In these environments, Jenny depicts one's image as a commodity, as something to be sold. Yet, in keeping with the discursive stalemate participants encounter when they endeavour to launch what might be term a politicized, feminist critique or reach the limits/contradictions of postfeminist-neoliberalism, she finds this position difficult to hold. On the subject of the Kardashians, she says:

> Personally, I don't like what they do with the selfie. And some people, some girls feel that, I dunno, that the Kardashians are like so empowered and successful and for me it's, I, I, I dunno, I feel I might be anti-feminist by saying that they're not because, because what they do, I feel like, they have to like, exploit their bodies (pause) and promote this sort of image of what it is to be a girl.

Rather than position her criticisms of the Kardashians as a feminist critique, using postfeminist-neoliberal logic that venerates personal choice and 'empowerment', Jenny suspects that she is in fact "anti-feminist", emphasizing that her perspective is a personal one, rather than one rooted in a wider political movement. This kind of discursive impasse echoes the discourses used by participants throughout this study in which the rhetoric of personal choice sees them concede more critical positions, particularly

positions which call into question the embodiment of femininity and the demands for increased visibility. In doing so, this discourse performs a delimiting function in which a more robust, politicised form of criticism is, as Jenny indicates, cast as anti-feminist or anti-choice. Illustrating how celebrity functions as a social text and site were femininity is tested and reproduced, she links what she construes as the Kardashians' exploitation of the body to the wider issue of "what it is to be a girl". She continues:

> And then I feel so horribly judgemental of them but it's that whole selfie culture that they've created (pause) it's just really disgusts me and just, but then it just all feeds in to how they monetize their image and it's (pause), yeah, how you're reduced just to (pause) to how many 'likes' you can get.

Rather than positioning her judgement as legitimate, Jenny characterises it as something horrible that is experienced by her emotionally. She attributes "that whole selfie culture" to the Kardashians; this culture is something that "disgusts" Jenny, based on the commercial practices involved and how it, as she terms it, reduces the individual to "how many likes you get". This is in stark contrast to discourses which present the acquisition of 'likes' as a marker of status. She vacillates between two discourses here, one which positions her as being 'horrible' for being judgemental, the other which positions her as 'disgusted' at what she construes as the norms of selfie culture. These two discourses are clearly in tension, producing a rhetorical dead-end in which Jenny cannot hold space in one or the other, giving rise to a subjectivity which is troubled and self-berating, unable to secure intellectual purchase.

7.3. Assessing Authenticity

Scholars such as Banet-Weiser (2012) and Duffy (2013) have explored 'authenticity' as a concept and a narrative which has become central to self-branding and to performing prescriptive notions of 'real' femininity with high commercial appeal. Often, this 'realness' is presented as progressive, emphasizing the idea of 'real women', a category which is nebulous and notoriously difficult to define (Butler 1990, Duffy 2013). What 'realness' discourse tends to ignore is how complex, contradictory and labour-intensive claims to authenticity can be (Duffy & Wissinger 2017; Scolere, Pruchniewska & Duffy 2017). Given how celebrity selfie-practices capitalize on the immediacy of social media to cast themselves as an intimate form of communication between the celebrity and their followers, it is not surprising that participants draw on narratives of authenticity in their accounts of such practices. What is striking however, it the degree to which participants critically access the claims to authenticity which are on display, illustrating that such

claims are not necessarily taken at face value. Nevertheless, a critical awareness of how constructed celebrity selfies are does not stop participants from comparing themselves to the lifestyles on display and finding their own wanting in contrast, a process which illustrates the compelling and disciplining appeal of postfeminist-neoliberal celebrity.

Discussing social influencers, Emma pronounces, "they're just girls on the internet and everyone lies on the internet." This comment at once diminishes the role of influencers – "they're just girls on the internet" - and positions everyone online as inherently untrustworthy. While Emma presents this knowledge as commonly accepted, participants' accounts of celebrity selfie-practices show clear tensions around issues of what is 'true', what is not and how one should regard claims to realness. In discussing the impact of the selfie phenomenon, Jane refers to what she characterises as increasing pressure on young women. When asked where she thinks this pressure comes from, she replies "social media" which she then links to "famous people" specifically "famous influencers" whose images make her "feel down". This results in her first, comparing herself to them and then, in response, unfollowing them: "I see them and how good they look and what they're doing and I'm like "I don't need that – unfollow"." Jane notes that these celebrities have access to cameras far more sophisticated than her own – in this case, she mentions DSLR cameras noted for their high-quality images – allowing them to produce images which to look at, she says again, "could make you feel down". Hence, although she situates herself as understanding that celebrities are much better equipped to produce highly stylised images than an average person, this knowledge does not diminish the impact of these images on her mood. On the subject of the Kardashians, she says:

> Like the Kardashians - I don't even bother with them anymore. I unfollowed all of them because you look at their pictures, and like Kylie is younger than me, and like, how come I don't look like that but she does? (laughs) After what she used to look like. And it makes you want to go and get your plastic surgery done, your lips done, your jaw done, whatever, but yeah, there is an awful lot of pressure, but I think it is all from famous people. Because before when people were famous, they were in the movies, or they were in music or magazines but now you can literally see what Beyoncé is eating for dinner.

Jane's use of the word "bother" here implies a form of effort or labour. However, endeavouring not to bother with the Kardashians elicits a response from Jane which can also be understood as a form of effort, namely unfollowing their social media accounts which renders them invisible, at least in her timeline, effectively putting them beyond her gaze. Hence, 'unfollowing' can be read as an action Jane becomes motivated to undertake

in response to the troubled subjectivity that develops from comparing herself to the Kardashians. In reflecting on her relationship to the Kardashian phenomenon, Jane is moved to ask why she doesn't look like the youngest sister, Kylie. Her displeasure that she, who is older than Kylie, has not reached a similar level of aesthetic achievement is articulated in the question, "Kylie is younger than me, and like, how come I don't look like that but she does?". To answer, Jane draws on the role of plastic surgery in Kylie's well-documented 'transformation' from shy teenager to beauty mogul. Rather than rejecting this route as excessive or drawing solace or critical awareness from the knowledge of the degree to which Kylie's image has been manipulated, instead Jane says "it makes you want to go and get your plastic surgery done, your lips done, your jaw done". Hence, while Jane is very aware of the manipulation of Kylie's image, this lack of realness does not relieve her desire to emulate her. Returning to the source of the pressure she describes, Jane refers to a time "before" social media, during which she positions celebrities as being kept at a greater distance compared to now when, as she puts it, "you can literally see what Beyoncé is eating for dinner."

Continuing her account of the Kardashian phenomenon, Jane situates the online activity of the sisters firmly in the realm of commerce. "It's not just a picture of Kim," she says, referring to their selfies. "Underneath it… it'll be Kylie's lipstick and her contour make-up, they're constantly promoting something, even if it looks like a simple selfie." This includes attaching links to selfies which enable young women to buy the products used in the image which typically come from the Kardashian's own cosmetics lines. Jane continues:

> I know what their life is like, with their TV programmes as well, like you're trying to get an insight in their life and with social media and their selfies it feels like you're nearly their best friend. But it's also that pressure, "why don't I look like that? Why can't I do my make-up like that? What would I look like if I got my make-up done by one of their make-up artists?"

In this passage, Jane equates the Kardashian's cultural omnipresence – which she reads as rendering their lives *accessible* – with the pressure she feels to alter her appearance. From this, she asserts "I know what their life is like", a position which runs counter to her previous criticisms of the Kardashians' blatant self-branding, suggesting that what is understood in an intellectual sense does not automatically dictate how one feels when confronted with such imagery. She reads this closeness as akin to feeling as though "you're nearly their best friend", an intimacy which exerts a powerful effect which is both alluring and disciplining, illustrating the presence of the kinds of girlfriend dynamics

Winch (2012, 2013) describes. Jane positions the intimacy of this quasi-friendship as the source of the pressure she feels, which is further articulated in the criticism she directs at herself. This criticism is centred on her body and her inability to match what she construes as the aesthetic achievements of the Kardashians.

Echoing Jane, in the following passage, Paula reflects on how social media has altered her relationship to images of other women:

> Sometimes I feel bad like for the young girls cos when I was that age, when I was fourteen, fifteen like, we didn't have that, not like that, obviously you would want to look like the people in the magazines and on TV or whatever but I think now it's different because your brain is like, "these are real girls, real people, it's not like TV celebrities" and I think the pressure is really higher. Like I feel the pressure too… I get depressed and I'm like, "oh God, I'm just going to stop looking at these, they all seem so perfect."

Identifying younger women as a category of particular concern (a category emphasized by participants as being especially vulnerable, a move which is perhaps designed to help distance themselves from the effects they describe), Paula says that while image-based expectations were also the norm for her as a teenager, now the terrain has shifted. What she construes as the *realness* of the women she compares herself to online – "these are real girls" – produces feelings of pressure which classifies as "much higher" than when she was younger despite her acknowledging that what she regards as 'real' is questionable. "You don't know their lives," she says, "you don't know how long they took to get ready." Nevertheless, the pressure she describes is so intense it moves her, as it did Jane, to stop looking at such images because "they all seem so perfect", which results in her feeling "depressed". In this sense, this notion of realness of the women she compares herself to (via the surveillance selfie-practices enable and encourage), inspire in Paula what she describes as a deeper sense of comparison precisely because these women are not famous in the traditional way. This reflects the manner in which social media has altered the nature of fame and the sense of distance between celebrities and their followers, an effect which, participants report, intensifies feelings of inadequacy and the inclination for comparison.

Enabled by social media's circuits of surveillance and new forms of notoriety and commerce, norms of celebrity (both established and emergent) are presented by participants as bleeding into the everyday. To further explore this point, in the following passage Alison describes her friends' reactions to unedited images of Kim Kardashian:

> Recently there was photos [that] came out with Kim [Kardashian], of her cellulite and everyone was going crazy about them saying, "oh it made me feel so good to see her like that" and I was just kind of like, "but look at the size of her bum, she's obviously going to have cellulite, any woman would, she's had two kids, that's a normal thing for a woman to have." Like I think people are just a bit naïve in what celebrities do and don't do and they give out about the Kardashian's putting up all these selfies all the time but we're doing exactly the same thing and you know, Kim has said before that she takes a selfie at a certain hour of the day cos, y'know, you get the best lighting and it makes you look tanner and everything, and like, some of my friends were saying, "oh, how vain is that?" and I was like, "we do the exact same thing and we've just moved around the room five times trying to find which lighting is best", so just because they have the name, like, people kinda, they separate both of them but I don't think there is a separation.

Alison depicts her friends' reactions as excessive – "going crazy" - and lacking in insight regarding celebrity behaviour. Her ire is not directed at Kim Kardashian's use of airbrushing or the surveillant, likely intrusive nature of the images in question. Rather, her ire is focused at her friends for appearing to not understand the dynamics at play yet drawing solace from Kardashian's 'imperfections'. In what could be read as attempt to 'call out' their hypocrisy and to absorb the criticism directed at the Kardashians, she parallels their use of the selfie with Kardashian's arguing, "we're doing exactly the same thing". Here again, the notion of complicity is used to neutralise legitimate criticism, making everyone guilty by participation, a rhetorical move which negates the huge power differentials at play. Echoing Paula's point about how selfie-practices bring celebrity norms closer in the context of the everyday, Alison asserts, rejecting the distinctions her friends draw between themselves and Kardashian, "they separate both of them but I don't think there is a separation." She continues:

> Yeah, I mean everyone's just putting their best foot forward, fair enough, the Kardashians have a glam team and what not, and sometimes I'd say the selfie angle is probably faked… but it's still is giving the same message, whether she's had her make-up done professionally, like I get my make-up done in MAC sometimes, I always take a selfie, like, what's the difference, d'yknow that kind of way? Just because she gets it done every day but (laughs). I don't see the difference there and yeah like, I think a lot of it is, you have that 'fake book' now, [I]think people need to remember that social media again is the best and worst parts of life. You're not gonna share a photo saying, "oh, today was alright" (laughs) like, you know, and so I think people kinda get too hung up on everything that's on social media and take it so literally and, they just need to take it with a little bit more of a pinch of salt like.

Alison again positions the Kardashian's behaviour as emblematic, not removed, from her own. Selfie-practices are depicted as a context in which "everyone is putting their best foot forward"; hence, manipulation and fakery is to be expected as people endeavour to brand themselves. Celebrities and non-celebrities are collapsed into the concept of

'everyone'; in keeping with the logics of postfeminist-neoliberalism, the individual, whether famous or not, engages in practices of manipulation and management of one's corporeal self and of one's image. Reiterating her earlier point, Alison says "I don't see the difference" comparing her use of professional make-up artists – "I get my make-up done in MAC sometimes" – with the Kardashian's "glam squad". For Alison, engaging in aesthetic labour is a condition or a *logic* of selfie-practices for women whether famous or not. However, rather than being an imposition, she construes this labour and its outputs as not to be taken seriously, underscored by her assertion that people need to take what they see on social media, "with a little bit more of a pinch of salt." From this position, Alison depicts getting upset or annoyed about what one encounters on social media as misguided and as something the individual should hold themselves to account over, a highly individualized position which absolves wider cultural and technological factors from critique.

While Alison positions herself as knowing and dispassionate on the questionable nature of celebrity 'realness', other participants articulated negative and emotionally knotty perspectives. Asked to elaborate on the issue of competition in selfie-practices, Megan responds:

> I think a lot of it has to do with like, y'know celebrities nowadays too, like, Kim Kardashian like, and like Kylie Jenner and all that… you see the actual footage of them and like, they look completely different to the way they look in pictures, but I think it's like, really detrimental like, it isn't, it isn't good, cos it's so unrealistic but then, a lot of young girls be trying to compete with that but, the thing is, they've got like, these plastic surgeons and then they've got these people that like, regulate their pictures and they have managers for their Facebook accounts and like, the best photoshop wizards ever and all the rest…and like some of the pictures they do are natural, they're still beautiful looking and all the rest, but, a lot aren't, a lot are really, really fake like, especially they're body proportions, I think that's really bad.

Megan positions celebrities, particularly Kim Kardashian and her younger sibling Kylie Jenner, as having central role to play in driving competitive selfie-practices. In contrast to Alison, she describes their impact in patently negative terms. She views young girls as being especially in thrall to these images, which she characterises as "detrimental" given how "unrealistic" selfies taken by such celebrities tend to be. This produces a context in which she sees girls trying to compete with images which are unrealistic. She then cites a range of methods whereby the Kardashian's produce selfies which look very different from "actual footage of them", although she is quick to point out that "they're still beautiful looking". Megan refers to their body proportions as a specific and concerning

site of fake-ness. Asked to elaborate on what she refers to as "the Kylie Jenner look", she explains:

> It's really, really like, provocative… back ten years ago like, the reality stars would've been, it wouldn't be as sexual if you know what I mean, but, Kylie Jenner is like the big huge arse and like teeny, weeny little, little waist and then like, these big boobs and like, this here face that like, like really, unrealistic y'know, like you know it's unrealistic but you're still kind of drawn to into it, you don't mean to be but, it happens like, it's kinda sad (laughs).

Like Paula and Jane, Megan describes a shift in the cultural landscape with regard to celebrity. She depicts this shift as an increased sexualisation and exposure of reality stars, saying "it wouldn't be as sexual" in reference to an earlier time. For Megan, the aforementioned 'look' is characterised by what she suggests is an excessive sexuality. This sexuality is centred on and expressed through the dimensions of Jenner's body with its "huge arse", "teeny, weeny little, little waist" and "big boobs". What is striking about Megan's description of these aspects of Jenner's physique is the manner in which she stresses their either excessive smallness or excessive largeness. Her position echoes criticisms of the Kardashian 'look' which, while centring a more curvaceous female form, is arguably no more realistic or attainable than the waif-look for most women. She acknowledges, repeatedly, that this kind of anatomy is "unrealistic" yet admits, "like you know it's unrealistic but you're still kind of drawn to it, you don't mean to be but, it happens". Again, like previous participants, her ability to read such imagery critically does not remove issues of comparison or desire or negative emotional responses. Megan then characterises this impulse as "sad". Asked why she labels her behaviour in this way, Megan replies:

> Cos like, you're trying to compete with this, perfection society made but, it's not real, it's fake, and then you're always gonna try and like, you can get all these pictures and then you could try and make your lips look really big and that, tiny wee waist and all of that, but at the end of the day, it isn't real, then, it's just, it's just really fake and like you're just trying to like get to the next best level but it's non-stop and then, you just don't look like that, y'know, it's really sad.

Although she sees the concept of "perfection" as constructed rather than natural or achievable, asserting "it's not real, it's fake", Megan still feels compelled to compete and compare herself to images she knows are manipulated. However, instead of placing the blame for this squarely onto an unequal society or social media's design, Megan absorbs it, hence her description of her behaviour as "sad". The sadness she describes is rooted in this compulsion, which is stimulated by, as she puts it, "all these pictures". Echoing her

earlier description of 'the Kylie Jenner look', the action she undertakes to emulate these pictures centres on achieving the same big lips and a "tiny wee waist". But undertaking this labour – which characterised as "non-stop" - is no good because what it produces, as Megan puts it, "isn't real". This lack of realness confirms "you just don't look like that", a realisation she again describes as "sad". Hence, although Megan understands in an intellectual sense the fakery at play in celebrity selfies, this awareness it not enough to immunise her in an emotional and psychic sense from the promise these images embody or from the dissonance that arises when she compares herself to them. Her efforts to create an image that can be read as whole, and therefore real, instead produce an affect in which her inability to attain the ideal image is emphasized to her.

7.4. Summary

Participants' accounts of celebrity-surveillance are notable for their contrasts and inconsistencies, ranging from casting such practices as inspiring to finding them pressurising and exploitative. Such multifarious characterisations also underscore the deep and enduring elusiveness of femininity itself, echoing the insights of classic feminist texts from scholars such as De Beauvoir (2011), Brownmiller (1986) and Butler (1990). This elusiveness contributes to the appeal of postfeminist-neoliberal celebrity, which offers exemplars and instructions on how to achieve highly-prized forms of contemporary femininity. Although compelling, this appeal conveniently glosses over the limits of postfeminist-neoliberalism while reasserting its promises, most particularly when it comes to the issue of visibility, the rising demand for which it casts as inherently positive. It is a highly strategic endeavour, interwoven with social media's technological affordances to exploit what is presented as increased intimacy between celebrity and followers. However, as participants' accounts make clear, claims to realness and authenticity by celebrities are critically assessed rather than automatically accepted and often fail to cohere. For some participants, the dubious nature of such claims is simply part and parcel of self-branding through selfie-practices whether one is an ordinary person or a celebrity. For others, although they take a more critical position, this awareness cannot inoculate them from the impulse to compare themselves – unfavourably - with celebrities, resulting negative emotional responses.

Participants' accounts indicate that observing the online critiques directed at selfies taken by high profile women produces a doubly disciplining effect, directed at both the woman who has produced the image and those watching. By noticing this treatment

and engaging with it through the surveillant gaze facilitated by social media, participants feel implicated in this disciplinary dynamic which runs counter to modes of looking which could be read as desiring or pleasurable. Feeling implicated makes it difficult to effectively challenge what they are seeing, although it makes them uncomfortable. In this context, celebrity-surveillance occurs within a logic of gendered judgement which disciplines not only the textual representation of the celebrity in question, but also those watching and notions of femininity more broadly. In the context participants describe, subjectivities are shaped not only by self-monitoring and the monitoring of self by others but also through the individual's observations of responses to other women's performances. Hence, the disciplining of high-profile women in these spaces can be read as *instructive* by drawing attention to their 'failures' and positioning judgement as an inevitable if not necessarily valid response to such 'failures'. What female celebrities are failing at is the ability to produce flawless representations of femininity, a point which further underscores the intangibility and futility of such endeavours, endeavours which even the most privileged, genetically blessed and technologically savvy celebrity women are depicted as struggling to get right.

When discussing the effects of the selfie phenomenon, participants regularly positioned celebrity selfie-practices of high-profile women as the 'source' of what they construe as increased pressure on girls and women to be beautiful. They also link this increased pressure to changes in the wider cultural field in terms of how celebrity femininity is performed and consumed. However, such discourse also serves another purpose, one which displaces from view the role of surveillance creep in everyday life and its gendered effects. The technological structuring of selfie-practices, for example, encourages and facilitates the increased surveillance and judgement of the female body, a formulation which has proven hugely profitable. Hence, from a feminist perspective, this apportioning of blame needs to be carefully unpacked. On the one hand, as Winch (2012, 2013) argues in relation to the girlfriend gaze, homosocial looking between women is becoming an increasingly influential locus of gender discipline. This dynamic is also highly effective in absorbing critique as participants' accounts show, whereby one's participation in selfie-practices is interpreted as complicity which is in turn interpreted as delegitimizing any urge to express criticism. However, it is also important to emphasize how contemporary gender norms originate from a patriarchal system that has a long history. Rhetorical devices which apportion blame solely on the shoulders of female celebrities elide from view the longstanding structural issues which continue to shape

positive and negative connotations of femininity by emphasizing female culpability. Nevertheless, such rhetoric does hit on the critical role female celebrities play in perpetuating gendered doubled-standards, double-standards they are often in the privileged position of benefiting from in financial and cultural capital terms. Consequently, such rhetoric needs to be treated delicately as, one the one hand, naming an aspect of the selfie phenomenon which has real effects, raising uncomfortable but necessary questions about complicity, and, on the other hand, displacing from view the pernicious, patriarchal and capitalistic roots of gender inequality, including how social media itself benefits from these dynamics.

Conclusion

This thesis began with the story of Kylie Jenner's success as the first 'selfie-made' billionaire. At the time of writing the conclusion, Jenner has just been named the most highly paid influencer on Instagram for the second year in a row, reportedly charging up to $1.2 million per post (BBC). Her older sister, Kim, is also in the top five highest earning celebrities on the site, charging an equally eyewatering $910,000 per post (BBC). The sisters' popularity, like that of social media itself, shows little signs of waning. Rather, the staggering wealth generated by the modes of visibility exemplified by Brand Kardashian continues to climb in tandem with growing concerns about the role of digital surveillance in modern societies. As this study makes clear, selfie surveillance marks a key cultural site where these phenomena intersect, producing distinctly disciplining results for the kinds of femininity which are granted legitimacy – which is rendered through visibility – and those which are denied it.

In responding to its primary and secondary research questions, (firstly, *what do young women's perspectives and experiences of selfie-practices reveal about the nature of contemporary femininities?* Secondly, *what discourses govern these femininities?* Thirdly, *what types of subjectivities do they produce?* Lastly, *what does the interplay between these discourses and the emerging technological norms which the selfie represents suggest about femininity and visibility in the current moment?*) this thesis developed *selfie surveillance* as an analytic to help unpack and denaturalise the gendered modes of looking which characterise young women's selfie-practices in the contexts explored. In doing so, it identifies and defines selfie surveillance as a mode of postfeminist, neoliberal visibility which is supported and shaped by social media interactivity, a finding which underscores how important deepening engagements between the fields of gender studies and surveillance studies are in the current moment. It is an engagement this study contributes to, highlighting how the postfeminist, neoliberal logics of visibility support and help to normalise the drive towards evermore intense surveillance of the individual that is the hallmark of social media.

The interplay between discourses of postfeminism and neoliberalism and the entrepreneurial logics of social media casts increasing demands for visibility as inherently positive. Thus, the pressures such demands inevitably give rise to are actively elided, pressures for which technology is offered as a solution rather than social change or alterations to said technologies or to wider society. In this arrangement, the individual is rendered responsible for the success or failure of their image, a move which masks the

powerful ways in which the discursive and the technological govern visibility that are beyond individual control. This emphasis on responsibilization and individuality indicates the deepening entanglement of postfeminism with neoliberalism – as reflected in the hyphenation of the two throughout this work – in digital environments which are themselves intensely neoliberal in nature.

Most fundamentally, selfie surveillance refers to new 'ways of seeing' (Berger 1972) the self and others which are notable for the manner in which they inscribe judgement through ranking, quantification and self-editing, mechanisms designed to promote conformity. In identifying and exploring three aspects of selfie surveillance – self-surveillance, homosocial-surveillance, and celebrity-surveillance – this thesis has shown how these 'ways of seeing' actively structure participants' use of the selfie, curtailing looking which is desiring or supportive by emphasizing the female body and lifestyle as, first and foremost, entities to be surveyed and judged. This process produces a return to normative, heterosexual femininity as a way to anticipate and stave off the judgement inherent to selfie surveillance, a ritual in which the individual themselves is implicated by virtue of their participation in such practices and spaces. This return is also underpinned by an economic rationale, informed by the tenets of neoliberal subjecthood and compellingly modelled by female celebrities like the Kardashians, in which performing specular femininity is framed as a savvy investment in one's self. Under these new conditions of visibility (Trottier 2012), participants recount responding to both the male gaze and the female gaze, but it is the female gaze which is most dominantly foregrounded. As such, selfie surveillance can be seen to act most forcefully through a gaze which is critical, penetratingly focused and female, one which pays forensic attention to the intricacies of aesthetic labour (Elias, Gill & Scharff 2017).

This thesis finds that the motivations driving selfie-use in the contexts explored are heavily shaped by the logics of postfeminist-neoliberal visibility, which equates successful femininity with the creation of the 'right kind' of image. In doing so, it draws on feminist language regarding the value of representation, while voiding it of its political intent. Hence, instead of questioning the demands of rising social media surveillance, feminist-lite rhetoric is put to work in support of it, whereby visibility through selfie-practices is touted as a positive rather than a negative. As a consequence, instead of threatening the established visual order, the type of imagery granted visibility inevitably subscribes to normative and hyper iterations of femininity. However, in doing so, it also reveals the elusiveness of such ideals.

Crucially, instead of producing much-desired coherence between self and image, participants' accounts of selfie-practices reveal the high prevalence of dissonance as an effect of looking at their own selfies and those of other women. Not only does this trouble popular assumptions which link the selfie phenomenon, and the female gaze itself, to narcissism, it also illuminates dissonance as a longstanding facet of looking as a woman in androcentric societies. (Betterton 1985, 1987) It also indicates how social media now intensifies this dynamic in contexts which concurrently provide visibility but also demand it as a condition of participation. Working in tandem with the logics of postfeminist-neoliberalism to encourage visibility, social media's technological capacities actively reassert hegemonic ideals of femininity through the likes of filters and beauty apps (technologies which participants see as helping to reduce the work associated with increased visibility), illustrating the degree to which the individual's actual, physical self does not correspond with their doctored image. It is this 'gap' which provokes dissonance, moving the individual to re-invest in femininity as a means to quell it and achieve coherence, a highly precarious endeavour that is never fully secured.

Participants' accounts reveal how the limits of postfeminist-neoliberal subjecthood themselves produce dissonant effects, failing to deliver on their promises while leaving participants without the necessary (read: politicized) tools to mount an effective critique of their inconsistencies. This dual-dissonance is doubly disciplining, positioning young women as individually responsible for the success and/or failure of their image within environments which are saturated with enticements to judge. This positioning is further bolstered by the entrepreneurial logics underpinning social media by design and by culture, whereby its tools are presented with 'gifting' people the ability to control their image as never before. Such logics conveniently elide the myriad ways control can be lost as easily as it is asserted online, a reality which has particular implications for women and girls whose behaviour in the public sphere has long been held to a far higher degree of gendered scrutiny. This study finds that this arrangement, whereby the discourses of postfeminist-neoliberalism dovetail with the neoliberal interests of social media, produces a co-constituting dynamic which profoundly shapes the kinds of femininity permitted visibility.

Selfie surveillance echoes research on the selfie phenomenon discussed in the first section of this thesis, which emphasizes that such practices occur within economic and cultural value systems that powerfully shape their capacities. Consequently, the selfie's alignment with femininity is not politically innocent; rather, it has its origins in

longstanding, disapproving social attitudes regarding women's entry into the public sphere. This history is mirrored in the manner in which participants recount negotiating visibility, trying to pre-empt how to achieve the online presence they feel is expected of them while avoiding judgement, a tricky endeavour that is not easily achieved. However, this negotiation is also a site of contestation. Through the use of humour or by making something other than themselves the focus of their selfie, be it travel or achievement or another theme they regard as of interest, participants endeavour to deflect the judgement they feel is particularly acute when an image focuses solely on the self. These, and other approaches to managing visibility, are used to escape or diminish the threat of judgement. Such endeavours are highly strategic, designed to protect the individual from the harsh glare of selfie surveillance while securing a degree of visibility they feel comfortable with.

In concluding this work, it is important to highlight that while dissonance is certainly a concerning effect of selfie surveillance from a feminist perspective, it also marks a potential site of disruption. Occurring in moments when femininity fails to cohere, dissonance troubles the authority of normative gender, drawing attention to its performativity and its construction. However, when understood through the prism of postfeminist-neoliberalism, this incoherence becomes, as participants' accounts show, something which the individual absorbs as a failing on their part. Their lack of access to a politicized, collectivized counter-discourse in these moments is notable, one which names the dynamic they are experiencing, interpreting it through full-bodied (rather than diminished) feminist analyses of representation. This lack is all the more striking precisely because a more politicized feminism has become resurgent in the last few years, yet in the contexts this study explores, it does not make its presence felt to the degree one might expect. Thus, to challenge selfie surveillance and its consequences more effectively, what is required is a reinvigorated, popularized feminist discourse on beauty and the body designed to address the specificity of the current moment. In emphasizing the ways in which the notion of choice has become perverted for economic ends, this type of discourse should also provide women with the tools to name and understand the factors shaping the new visibility demanded of them. Developing and disseminating this language should be of urgent concern for feminist media scholarship, for without it, participants' struggle to hold the critical positions so necessary to troubling what is being presented to them as a non-negotiable 'new normal' (Elias, Gill & Scharff 2017).

This thesis' exploration of selfie-practices highlights their richness, their complexities and their critical relationship to contemporary femininities. Hence, although

necessarily limited in its scope and concerned with the subjective rather than the representative, it echoes wider scholarship in underscoring how the selfie has become, in a relatively short space of time, one of the primary disseminators of ideals of femininity on a local and global scale. As a practice that is heavily shaped by the contexts it is created within, there is much we have yet to learn about how women's identities, location and perspectives inform their selfie-use. Similarly, we have much to uncover about what occurs 'behind-the-scenes' of selfie-production, for example, in the private groups where women rate and evaluate each other's images before posting. Accessing such spaces may prove a challenge to researchers but it is one that, when taken with the necessary ethical due care, will undoubtedly prove valuable. There is also much to learn about the pedological function of the selfie as a tool for the dissemination of certain norms and the prohibition of others, most particularly when it comes to celebrity selfies and how women relate to them. The Kardashians, for example, have online followings that number in the tens of millions yet little empirical research exists which explores women's engagement with the phenomenon. Similarly, online movements like #GlowUp (mentioned by a participant in Chapter Six when discussing homosocial-gazing) require scholarly attention for the manner in which they repackage the increased surveillance of self and others as 'empowering' and aspirational. Such attention should also be directed at gazes beyond the male and the female, such as the parental and the employer, to further understand how young women negotiate visibility in the current moment on digital platforms where aspects of their lives once kept separate now often collide. As the influence of digital technologies continues to grow, such undertakings, amongst which this study is numbered, are vital to the expansion of feminist knowledge at a time when the challenges of its insights remain as urgent and essential as ever.

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Appendix 1: Participant Information Sheet

Project Title: Postfeminist Femininities & the Selfie Phenomenon: A Cultural Analysis

Participant Information Sheet

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research study. Before you make your decision, it is important that you understand why this research is being carried out and what it will involve. This information sheet will tell you about the purpose and benefits of this research study. Please feel free to take as much time as you need to read the following information carefully and ask if there is anything that is unclear or if you would like more information. You should only decide to take part in the research study when you feel you understand what is being asked of you. Thank you for reading this.

What is this research about?
My name is Mary McGill and I am a PhD candidate at the National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG). The aim of my research is to learn more about young women's experiences of the selfie phenomenon. I would like to gain a deeper understanding of how young women use the selfie to express certain aspects of themselves, particularly their gender.

What will my responsibilities be if I take part?
I will conduct a one-on-one interview with you lasting approximately 1 hour. This interview will be recorded and will take place in NUI Galway. I will ask questions focused on your perspective as a young woman actively engaged with the selfie phenomenon. After the interview, you may be invited to take part in a focus group. As part of the study, you will be asked to submit a selfie of yours. This will form part of the interview process and will analysed as part of the study. All selfies submitted will be anonymised before the research is published.

Do I have to take part?
If you decide not to take part, that's OK. If you do decide to take part and later change your mind, you can withdraw any time up until June 1st 2019. You do not have to give a reason. Should you withdraw, any information that you have provided will be destroyed.

What are the benefits of taking part?
This is an opportunity for you to express your views and experiences of the selfie phenomenon. I am confident this research will contribute to a better understanding of young women's lives today. I greatly appreciate any time and information you may be willing to offer.

What are the risks of taking part?
Participants should be aware that the interview may touch on issues which some people may find distressful. In such instances, participants are under no obligation to continue and support will be provided. Sometimes analyses of the data collected as part of a study may not correspond with participant's experiences which may cause distress. Therefore, participants in this study have the option of giving feedback on the findings.

What will happen to the information I provide?
I will personally record and transcribe our interview. All audio and digital files relating to the study will be securely stored, anonymised and kept strictly confidential. You will have the opportunity to withdraw and/or provide feedback (if desired) on findings until 1st June 2019. The project will be published as a PhD thesis in September 2019.

Your participation in the study will be greatly valued. Thank you for taking the time to read this participant information sheet.

Mary McGill
School of Languages, Literatures and Culture, National University of Ireland, Galway
086 155 2496/m.mcgill4@nuigalway.ie

Appendix 2: Participant Consent Form

Project Title: Postfeminist Femininities & the Selfie Phenomenon: A Cultural Analysis

Participant Consent Form: One-on-one Interview

This form is for you to give your consent to take part in this research project. Please read each statement and respond by checking yes or no. If there is anything you do not understand, or if you want more information, please do not hesitate to ask.

I have read and understood the project information sheet, and have had the opportunity to ask questions. Yes ❒ No ❒

I agree to the audio recording of this interview. Yes ❒ No ❒

I agree that my participation is voluntary and I am free to withdraw at any time during the interview, without giving any reason or having my legal or ethical rights affected. Yes ❒ No ❒

I understand that if I become emotionally distressed at any point during the interview and wish to seek professional help, the principal researcher will assist me in accessing local counselling services. Yes ❒ No ❒

I understand that I will remain anonymous in all aspects of this research study. Yes ❒ No ❒

I understand that copyright of my selfie remains with me, the participant, while authorising the principal researcher of this study to use an anonymized version of it ***in the following ways only***: as part of the published thesis; reprinted in written work arising from the thesis which may include books, academic papers, and other publications; to be exhibited as part of presentations and conference talks based on the research. Yes ❒ No ❒

I give my full and voluntary consent to take part in this interview. Yes ❒ No ❒

I wish to provide feedback on the findings of this research prior to its publication Yes ❒ No ❒

Name of Participant: _____
Date: _____
Signature: _____

Name of Researcher: _____
Date: _____
Signature: _____

If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent and in confidence, you may contact the Chairperson of the NUI Galway Research Ethics Committee, c/o Office of the Vice President for Research, NUI Galway, ethics@nuigalway.ie

Principal Researchers: Mary McGill
School of Languages, Literatures and Culture, National University of Ireland, Galway
086 155 2496/m.mcgill4@nuigalway.ie

Appendix 3: Interview Protocol

Postfeminist Femininities & the Selfie Phenomenon: A Cultural Analysis

One-On-One Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Name of Interview:

Name of Interviewee:

Place of Interview:

Date of Interview:

Opening

- Welcome participant.
- Ask if they have read and understood the information sheet and the consent form.
- Address any questions.
- Confirm their age and their occupation.
- Briefly outline the interview process.
- Explain that the participant's selfie is stored on the laptop on the desk and will be discussed later in the interview.

Note: The following questions/ prompts are indicative and will be used as needed over the course of the interview.

Personal Perspectives & Experiences

- How long have you been taking selfies?
- How many selfies do you take in a day, on average?
- Do you share or publish all of your selfies? Are there criteria for which ones get published and which don't?
- Can you describe how you go about taking a selfie?
- What do you enjoy/dislike about taking selfies?
- When are you most likely/least to take a selfie?
- Where are you most likely/least to take a selfie?
- What is your favourite selfie of yourself?

Looking at the Phenomenon

- Why do you think people take selfies?
- What effect do you think selfie-taking has on those who take them?
- What constitutes a 'good'/ 'bad' selfie, in your opinion?

Gender in the Selfie

- What do you think when people say 'oh selfies are all about narcissism' or 'selfies are all about vanity?'.
- Some people argue that selfie culture puts young women under pressure to look a certain way - what do you think of that idea?
- If you feel pressure when taking a selfie, can you explain to me what it feels like and how it affects you?
- Where does that pressure come from, do you think?
- When you take a selfie, are you thinking about what other people will see?
- If so, what are you hoping they'll see? Why is it important to you that they see you in this way, do you think?
- Are selfies taken by young women treated differently than those taken by young men? If so, can you tell me 1) how and 2) why you think that is?
- Some people see selfies as empowering, meaning they can help young women feel confident about themselves. What do you think of that idea? Has that been your experience?
- Are there things about the way young women take selfies or relate to selfies that you would like to see changed? If so, can you give examples?

Looking at the Selfie

- Tell me about this selfie. What do feel when you look at it?
- How much thought did you put into deciding how to present yourself?
- What inspired you to take it?
- Did you share it on social media?
- Why did you pick this particular selfie for today?

Closing

- Is there anything we haven't touched on in this interview that you feel is significant?
- Is there anything you would like to clarify or any questions you would like to ask?

Debrief

Appendix 4: List of Interviewees

Students	Age	Nationality	Degree
Aine	19	Irish	BA
Alison	22	Irish	MA
Amy	24	American	MA
Annette	19	Irish	BA
Edie	19	Irish	BA
Helen	28	Irish	PhD
Emma	23	Irish	MA
Greta	26	Austrian	MA
Jane	22	Irish	BA
Jeanne	20	French	Erasmus
Jenny	27	Irish	PhD
Jessica	19	Irish	BA
Julia	19	Irish	BA
Fiona	25	American	MA
Magda	30	Iranian	PhD
Megan	19	Irish	BA
Melissa	27	Irish	PhD
Claire	22	Irish	BA
Paula	27	Mexican	PhD
Sarah	27	Irish	MA

Appendix 5: Selfie Examples

Image 1

Examination Purposes Only

Image 2

Examination Purposes Only

Image 3

Examination Purposes Only

Image 4

Examination Purposes Only

Image 5

Examination Purposes Only

Appendix 6: Ethical Approval

OÉ Gaillimh
NUI Galway

Leas-Uachtarán um Thaighde
Vice President for Research

20 March 2017

Ref: **17-Mar-24**

Mary McGill
20 Fern Hill
Athenry
Galway

Dear Mary,

Re: 'Post feminists and The Selfie'.

I write to you regarding the above proposal which was submitted for ethical review. I am pleased to inform you that at the meeting of the Research Ethics Committee, held on 16 March 2017, your proposal was granted **APPROVAL.**

When the decision was taken I was chairing the meeting and the following members were also present:

Dr Kevin Davison	Dr Cormac Forkan	Ms Marcella Kelly
Dr Martina Kelly	Ms Michele McDarby	Dr Kiran Sarma
Dr Jane Walsh		

All NUI Galway Research Ethic Committee approval is given subject to the Principal Investigator submitting annual and final statements of compliance. The first statement is due on or before 20th March 2018.

See annual and final statement of compliance forms below. Section 7 of the REC's Standard Operating Procedures gives further details, and also outlines other instances where you are required to report to the REC.

Yours sincerely

Allyn Fives

Chair, Research Ethics Committee

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