# How gender-stereotypical are selfies? A content analysis and comparison with magazine adverts

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ABSTRACT

Selfies (self-portrait photographs often taken with a camera phone) are popularly used for self-presentation in social media like Facebook and Instagram. These modern user-generated self-portraits have the potential to draw a more versatile picture of the genders instead of reproducing traditional gender stereotypes often presented in mainstream media and advertising. To investigate the degree of gender stereotyping in selfies, a random sample of 500 selfies uploaded on Instagram (50% representing females, 50% males) was drawn and subjected to quantitative content analysis. The degree of gender stereotyping in the selfies was measured using Goffman's (1979) and Kang's (1997) gender display categories (e.g. feminine touch, lying posture, withdrawing gaze, sparse clothing) plus three social media-related categories (kissing pout, muscle presentation, faceless portrayal). Additionally, gender stereotyping in selfies was directly compared to the degree of gender stereotyping in magazine adverts measured in the same way (Döring & Pöschl, 2006). Results reveal that male and female Instagram users' selfies not only reflect traditional gender stereotypes, but are even more stereotypical than magazine adverts.

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## 1. Introduction

Selfies – self-portrait photographs, usually taken with a smartphone or webcam and shared via social media websites (Oxford Dictionaries, 2013) – are a modern form of self-presentation (Hunt, Lin, & Atkin, 2014). Selfies have become an important part of the visual communication in social media and are a growing trend. So-called *social media* (Carr & Hayes, 2015), e.g. social networking sites (SNS) like Facebook and photo sharing websites like Instagram – give everybody the opportunity to present themselves with their selfies to a wider Internet audience. There are many different types of self-presentation in selfies depending on the photographic angle and perspective, photo filters, situations etc. In public discourse more and more subgenres of selfies are pronounced: selfies taken while working out are referred to as fitness-selfies (Fausing, 2013), welfies (work-out selfies; Oxford Dictionaries, 2013) or healthies

(Bennett & Burke, 2014). Other word creations are the belfie (back side selfie), the prelfie (pregnant selfie, Bennett & Burke, 2014) and the drelfie (drunken selfie; Oxford Dictionaries, 2013).

The fact that selfies as user-generated content are a very popular new form of visual communication, that they are on public display via different types of social media and are subject of public debates make them a relevant topic of *research on human-computer interactions*, *communication and media research, media psychology,* as well as *gender research*. Selfies inevitably deal with gender expressions on two levels: the persons producing the selfies a) bring certain gender expressions with them (e.g. through their styling and attire) and they b) create gender expressions while taking the selfies (e.g. through choice of posture, facial expression or gaze in the photo). Focusing on gender expressions, the question arises how gender-stereotypical selfies are. For example, do females display themselves in selfies more often in postures suggesting weakness, subordination, and seduction (e.g. by lying down and/or making a kissing pout) and even self-objectification (de Vries & Peter, 2013) while males more often demonstrate their physical strength (e.g. by standing solidly and/or showing off their muscles)?

Gender stereotypes are ubiquitous in our culture as they – like other stereotypes – are cognitively useful: they help to simplify complex life experiences by categorizing (Taylor, Peplau, & Sears, 2003). Gender stereotypes are often strategically used in professionally produced media content (e.g. advertising) as well as in user-generated content (e.g. selfies) in order to create pictures and messages which are easy to decode and positively evaluated by the recipients (e.g. appreciation for representations of people that can be recognized as a typical and attractive female or male at first glance, Tortajada, Araüna, & Martínez, 2013; Wu, Chang, & Yuan, 2015). Stereotypes, on the other hand, have the disadvantage that by drastically simplifying the social world they reproduce social norms and social hierarchies (Taylor et al., 2003). There is primary evidence that the style of a peer's profile picture on Facebook is imitated if the users think of it as attractive (Wu et al., 2015), which can further the reproduction of gender stereotypes. The use and overuse of gender stereotypes in visual communication is therefore met with criticism both in gender research and public debates (e.g. protests against gender-stereotypical adverts and products through campaigns like pinkstinks.org.uk).

Social media platforms with their user-generated content are intensely used by young people and therefore play a crucial role in their socialization (Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2011) and identity development (Zarghooni, 2007), including gender identities. Selfies offer young people new opportunities of experimenting with both stereotypical and non-stereotypical gender representations. Investigating gender stereotyping in selfies is therefore especially relevant in the context of gender socialization of youth.

The goal of this study was to examine the extent to which visual gender stereotypes can be observed in selfies on Instagram. Furthermore, the degree of gender stereotyping in selfies was directly compared to gender stereotyping in magazine adverts.

## 2. Theory and state of research

### 2.1. Gender display in advertising

Advertising and media in general are a source of information and social learning (Taylor et al., 2003). Advertising can reflect values, beliefs, or norms and therefore affirm fundamental features of the social structure (Goffman, 1979; Kim & Lowry, 2005). Gender representations in specific give guidance and frame ideals of femininity and masculinity, of male and female attractiveness and gender-role behaviors (Myers & Biocca, 1992). For this reason, gender stereotypes in adverts were frequently studied over the past decades (Zotos & Tsichla, 2014). Many scholars report that advertising reflects traditional gender stereotypes, thereby ignoring their actual diversity (Kim & Lowry, 2005). The most obvious gender differences common in advertising are the depicted characters' outward appearance. According to Nassif and Gunter (2008), women in television commercials are younger than male models. Furthermore, men and women still differ referring to their roles performed in adverts: female characters in the media seem to only have limited authority and often appear in assisting roles while men are more often in executive roles in TV commercials (Davis, 2003; Nassif & Gunter, 2008). The typical stereotypes of the mother and housewife and the man as bread-winner are still predominant. Women are more likely than men to be portrayed inside the home (Farris, 2014; Kaufman, 1999). In contrast to this, male advertising characters are more likely to be depicted in occupational settings than females (Davis, 2003; Nassif & Gunter, 2008).

Going beyond gender role stereotypes (Furnham & Mak, 1999), the most commonly used conceptual framework of gender display in the media are the five categories defined by Erving Goffman (1979). According to these categories, females are stereotypically depicted as the weaker gender. The first category (1) *relative size* regards the gender difference in height and picture posing with women being predominantly depicted as smaller and in lower positions than men. Another prominent category is (2) the *feminine touch*. "Women, more than men, are pictured using their fingers and hands to trace the outlines of an object or to cradle it or to caress its surface" (Goffman, 1988, p. 29). This category furthermore involves self-touching (e.g. of one's own face or hair). The third category (3) *function ranking* denotes the depiction in traditional male roles and settings, with men having the executive role and women assisting them. (4) *Ritualization of subordination* is the tendency of women being located in lower positions in adverts than men in order to symbolise the men's higher social place and the subordination of women. Women are in particular more often portrayed lying down (*posture*) or canting their heads or body (*imbalance*). (5) The fifth category is *licensed withdrawal* stating that "women, more than men, appear to withdraw themselves from the social situation at hand" (Goffman, 1988, p. 68), firstly by *withdrawing their gaze* from the camera or closing their eyes, and secondly by depictions that suggest *loss of control* over emotions (showing for example expansive smiles, hiding behind objects).

Enhancing Goffman's categories, Kang (1997) added the category (6) *body display*. It denotes that in adverts women are "wearing revealing, hardly any, or no clothes at all, which is often associated with sexualized images of women" (Lindner, 2004).

Many social scientists used Goffman's (1979) categories to examine the depiction of the genders in advertisements and revealed that Goffman's categories mainly still prove their existence in adverts (Belknap & Leonard, 1991; Browne, 1998; Döring & Pöschl, 2006; Lindner, 2004) and other media such as music videos (Wallis, 2011).

Given that media and advertising not only reflect, but also provide guidance for gender roles, this can lead to distorted views. As cultivation theory suggests, exposure to media content creates a worldview or a specific portrait of reality (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Kim & Lowry, 2005). Kim and Lowry (2005) state that, "as viewers see more and more images, they gradually come to cultivate or adopt attitudes and expectations about the world that coincide with the images they see" (p. 902). Therefore, distorted gender representations in advertising can shape how gender roles are seen in society.

### 2.2. Gender display in selfies

By the widespread use of smartphones with integrated high-resolution cameras, the extensive upload of selfies on social media websites is a recent phenomenon that is intensely used by adolescents (Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2011). Online communities on the basis of social media websites (for example Instagram) play an important part in their identity development (Zarghooni, 2007). They provide young people with an opportunity for actively creating self-representations or a projection of their self socially and emotionally as real people (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). This allows for the creation of a social identity within the community. Such social identities provide "information about the social group, what is typical for that group and the expected norms it demands" (Caspi & Blau, 2008, p. 326). This works even for selfies that offer minimal social cues for interaction: Spears and Lea (1992) state that social cues exist as cognitive representations, even if they are missing in an interaction. Therefore, according to the authors, a feeling of belongingness to a group, or identification with a group, can still occur even if minimal social cues are provided in the environment. Against this background, online communities can be highly