Celebrity and the Self(ie):
Exploring Young Women's Uses of Celebrity on Instagram

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Abstract

This thesis examines young women's engagements with celebrity selfies on the social media platform Instagram. In recent years, concerns have been raised about the perceived negative 'effects' of the platform and its encouragement of 'Instagrammable' (normative) beauty ideals in popular discourse. Celebrity content in particular has been implicated in these debates, with celebrity selfies displaying 'impossible' standards positioned as responsible for negative social comparison and body image anxieties among young women and girls.

A wealth of academic work has sought to complicate popular framings that position the selfie in relation to pathologised constructions of femininity, as tied to ideas of narcissism and low self-esteem. While such research has highlighted the complexities of people's selfie and Instagram practices, the intersecting role of celebrity has not been met with the same urgency or nuance. There is a tendency for academic work on the celebrity selfie, which is largely comprised of textual and visual analyses, to echo popular debates that limit young women's engagements with celebrity content in terms of imitation – i.e., it is assumed they want be(come) like celebrities in their own selfies.

This research is both a response to popular debates and a necessary empirical contribution to existing academic work on the celebrity selfie. It draws on interview data from a sample of 18 young people (predominantly young women) in the UK to explore how they navigate and use celebrity selfies on Instagram. Adopting a feminist Foucauldian approach, it seeks to hold in tension the disciplinary power of celebrity selfies and participants' resistance to these images. Overall, this thesis highlights the complex and myriad functions of celebrities and their selfies on Instagram, as well as it disrupts the 'obviousness' assumed in textual readings and wider public debates.

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Acknowledgements

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Chapter 1: Introduction

> Major social media stars including Kim Kardashian, Justin Bieber and Charli D'Amelio are among celebrities whose Instagram followers experience more negative feelings about their self-image […] raising questions about the impact of celebrity culture online.
>
> (Dang, 2021: para 1)

> [Consuming celebrity] can have an impact on how you see your own body, how you view other people's bodies, and what you find attractive in general. That's not to say you should stop following celebs completely, but being armed with the knowledge of how celebrity social media culture may affect you—consciously and subconsciously—is key.
>
> (Malacoff, 2019: para 6)

The quotes that open this thesis are indicative of the concern in popular discourse about the influence and impact of celebrity images on social media. These concerns are often about the perceived negative effects of celebrity content for girls and young women specifically, with reports citing Photoshopped and Facetuned images as responsible for an increase in negative social comparison and body image anxieties (Malacoff, 2019; Dang, 2021; Gayle, 2021). A central theme across popular debates is the way young women feel about and respond to the depiction of celebrity bodies that portray an unrealistic beauty standard (young, white, thin, normatively attractive). On the one hand, popular discourse actively endorses these ideals – for example, plentiful articles exist that seek to 'teach' women how to achieve the 'perfect' selfie (Valenti, 2016; Kim, Olsen and Rosa, 2021). These articles often draw on celebrity images as the inspiration, positioning them as the standard one should strive to achieve; 'we're decoding the science of the Kim K selfie/collecting all her tips in one place so you too can get all the likes', promises one article (Valenti, 2016). Yet, simultaneously, these very same ideals of physical perfection and the ways they are reinforced by celebrities on social media are the subject of great concern. Namely, popular discourse often cautions against how celebrity images leave girls and young women 'who are not able to achieve this truly impossible level of perfection secretly

(or not-so-secretly) feel[ing] shamed and defective' (Malacoff, 2019). Articles thus warn (female) readers that they need to be armed with adequate 'knowledge' of how celebrity may affect them to be able to protect themselves against their various effects – including mental distress and depression (Parveen, 2018), low self-esteem and eating disorders (Malacoff, 2019).

My issue with popular debates about the influence of celebrity images on social media is two-fold. Firstly, they limit celebrity identification to one of straightforward imitation; that is, it is assumed that audiences feel somewhat compelled to be(come) like celebrity images, including in their own selfies. Indeed, the popularity of selfie-taking in recent years has even been directly attributed to the influence of celebrity – for example, it has been framed as 'a product of our age of celebrity-obsessed narcissism' (Ryan, 2013), with the 'cult of celebrity' – specifically 'trashy TV stars' such as the Kardashians – behind the popularity of the practice among young women (Wallop, 2013). Secondly, popular debates often put forward an image of the female audience as unassuming or unsuspecting – i.e., as at 'risk', particularly if not armed with adequate 'knowledge' of how celebrity may affect them. Then, the focus here is about the harms and disciplinary nature of celebrity images/social media for girls and young women – particularly from a psychological perspective. It is both significant and unsurprising that popular debates about the 'risks' of celebrity images on social media are often based on research in the field of psychology. As feminist media scholar Rosalind Gill notes,

> these [types of] studies get news coverage, with rarely a week going by without media reports of the negative effects that Instagram or TikTok are having on girls' and young women's mental health and wellbeing, and highlighting rapidly increasing rates of eating disorders, anxiety and depression (2023: xiii)

The same is true for the news articles that open this thesis (Dang, 2021; Malacoff, 2019; Gayle, 2021): they prioritise only a specific pool of academic literature to drive home the disciplinary power of celebrity images on social media. For example, despite writing an article for publication in 2019, Malacoff cites Murnen et al.'s (2003) study on the ways elementary-school children 'internalise' objectified media images. Malacoff brings in a psychological expert to explain the results in lay terms; '"The

boys were very jokey about what they would have to do in order to look like the pictures, but the girls said things like 'You would have to not eat' or 'You would have to eat and then throw up,'" explains Taryn A. Myers, Ph.D., chair of the department of psychology at Virginia Wesleyan University' (2019). This paints an alarming, catchy but somewhat simple picture regarding the relations between girls and media images – i.e., as causes which have serious negative effects. To reiterate, these types of correlational arguments (and journalistic practices) are not uncommon. A quick Google search about celebrity selfies presents articles such as 'Here's how Instagram harms young women according to research' (Elsesser, 2021) and 'Social media and celebrity culture harming young people' (Parveen, 2018). The latter Guardian article quotes expert Dr Bernadka Dubicka from the Royal College of Psychiatrists to stress how platforms such as Instagram 'can be damaging and even destructive' to *girls' and young women's* mental wellbeing, specifically (Parveen, 2018). It is again airbrushed images of celebrities 'with perfectly preened bodies staged in exotic locations' that are seen to pressure them to meet impossible beauty and body standards (Parveen, 2018).

Together, popular debates about celebrity 'influence' constitute the production of a discourse which reduces the viewer into a vulnerable audience member. The emphasis on the ideological imperatives of celebrity images as they now circulate on social media is especially problematic in the way it continues to pathologise *female audiences* (i.e., as 'at risk'). I say 'continue' because the debates outlined above are not evidence of anything 'new'; they follow a general devaluation of celebrity culture and echo longstanding debates about the 'effects' of media images for girls and young women. Indeed, celebrity figures have long been marketed as role models and as benchmarks for bodily representation. The general societal concern around idealised celebrity images is that they endorse problematic ways of being – notably, celebrities are seen to act as an appeal to women and girls to evaluate, objectify and discipline their own bodies to meet impossible standards (e.g., Bordo, 1993; Grogan and Wainwright, 1996; Murnen, et al., 2003). A prominent concern is the extent to which 'perfect' celebrity images have been subject to digital manipulation – be it through the likes of filters on social media platforms or photoshop in magazines. These unrealistic images are often seen to 'normalise desirable bodies that are […] intrinsically illusions because they represent bodies that are not possible in reality, but which may be reacted

to by members of the public as if they are real' (Barron, 2015: 159). This is particularly resonant in the context of Instagram's widely debated face and body-altering filters. The issue of Instagram potentially 'warping people's perspective of reality' has led to new legislation in the UK which requires influencers to use warning labels on sponsored images that have been digitally altered in an attempt to 'address unrealistic portrayals of beauty' (BBC, 2020). I do not necessarily disagree with such arguments (or approaches to combat these issues) but take issue with the way that young women's engagement with celebrity is often couched in a language of passivity. Indeed, the popular debates outlined above give little space to how celebrity 'influence' is multidimensional, nor do they put forward a consideration of female audiences as engaged, active or critical in their negotiations of celebrity images on social media.

This thesis seeks to put forward a 'textured' understanding of the role of celebrity images on social media in young women's lives. It does so by drawing on interview data with a sample of young women about how they navigate and negotiate celebrity selfies on Instagram. Beyond offering a contemporary and contextually specific addition to existing academic debates, I have chosen Instagram and celebrity selfies as my focus for two reasons: firstly, both have garnered increasing – often negative – attention in popular discourse in recent years. Indeed, the image and video sharing platform Instagram has been particularly prominent in popular selfie debates since its inception in 2010 – it is not only seen to be a key driving force behind the popularity of the practice but is also seen to have established a set of conventions and aesthetics that help to define whom and what is now considered photographable (Caldeira, Bauwel and Ridder, 2021). Namely, Instagram has become a platform notorious for its encouragement of an 'Instagrammable' (normative, highly glamorised, highly idealised) beauty ideal (Gill, 2023; Caldeira, Bauwel and Ridder 2021). Indeed, 'rarely a week goes by without media reports of its negative effects' (Gill, 2023: xiii), particularly in relation to how celebrity images are endorsing unrealistic ideals of femininity. Given the extreme visibility of young women in these popular debates, attending to how young women navigate and negotiate celebrity images on Instagram is thus a timely and necessary endeavour.

Secondly, the celebrity selfie is currently unexplored from an empirical perspective in the academic literature. It is important to note that psychological perspectives

permeate discussions of young women's 'own' selfies in popular discourse. That is, selfie-taking is heavily gendered and often framed in relation to pathologised constructions of femininity, as tied to ideas of narcissism, loneliness, passivity, low self-esteem and body dysmorphic disorder (see Wallop, 2013; Ryan, 2013; Hunt, 2019; Britton, 2017). As I explore in detail in the following Literature Review, academic work on selfies has sought to trouble these dominant strands of popular discourse, illuminating the nuances of selfie practices across different sociocultural contexts (e.g., Caldeira, Ridder and Bauwel, 2018, 2020; Murray, 2018, 2020; Tembeck, 2016; Holmes and Atkins, 2023). Yet, the role of celebrity in young women's Instagram and selfie practices is lacking in the same nuance. The existing scholarship on the celebrity selfie is predominantly textual and tends to echo popular debates in their assumptions that Instagram users want be(come) like celebrities in their own selfies (Abidin, 2016; Duguay, 2016; Jerslev and Mortensen, 2016; Marwick, 2015). Across these works, it is assumed that 'ordinary' users find the lifestyles of the rich and famous aspirational and are encouraged to emulate or imitate the conventions and aesthetics of celebrity images in their own selfies, such as their styles, locations, and poses. While such arguments do not position audiences as at 'risk' in the same way as popular discourse on the topic, it nevertheless reduces their identification with celebrity to one of (straightforward) imitation, constructing an image of the audience as passive in the process.

Feminist approaches to devalued forms of popular culture, as well as audience studies on celebrity-audience relations, have continually highlighted that how women negotiate and make use of celebrity and norms of femininity is a critical and contradictory process (e.g., Stacey, 1994; Ang, 1985; Coleman, 2009; Feasey, 2008; Evans and Riley, 2013; Jackson and Vares, 2015; Mendick, et al. 2018). Further, these studies have given space to the *pleasures* female audiences derive from popular media culture and how this can act as a positive resistance or counterattack to gendered norms. This thesis draws on, contributes to, and advances these debates, with the aim of highlighting the complex potential of celebrity selfies on Instagram for young women – despite their 'obvious' limitations at a textual level. The following Literature Review situates this thesis in greater detail within the relevant scholarship – including feminist approaches to popular culture, celebrity audience studies and existing work on the selfie. It also outlines my feminist Foucauldian theoretical approach. As I

explore in a moment, I have adopted this approach to enable me to hold in tension the disciplinary power of celebrity selfies and participants' resistance to these images.

Research Questions

This thesis is guided by the following research questions and sub-questions:

1. Do celebrity selfies shape young women's selfie practices, and if so, how?
   - What other factors shape their selfie practices on Instagram?

2. What do young women want from celebrities and their selfies on Instagram?
   - How do they curate celebrity content – i.e., who do they follow, unfollow or mute, and why?

3. How do young women experience their bodies through celebrity selfies on Instagram?

In attending to these questions, and prioritising the experiences and knowledge of celebrity audiences, this research ultimately seeks to highlight the positive value of young women's uses of celebrity on Instagram.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Theoretical Approach

The focus of this PhD – women's negotiation of celebrity images on Instagram and their 'influence', as well as narratives about their own selfie practices – necessitates engagement with long-standing feminist debates about power, gender, and agency. This thesis draws on a feminist Foucauldian approach to power and contributes to longstanding feminist debates about structure versus agency/resistance (e.g., from Bartky, 1990 to Gill, 2023). Such an approach will assist in analysing the complexities of gendered power relations, including the ways women's bodies are disciplined (i.e., by 'technologies' such as Instagram and celebrity culture) and the potential for resistance to these. The following review will set out how Michel Foucault's philosophies on power have been taken up by feminist theorists to interrogate its disciplinary effects on the (gendered) body and subjectivities. It will also discuss the feminist critiques levelled at Foucault's early account of power, as well as Foucauldian inspired feminist work on the body, in the way it constitutes individuals as passive or 'docile' bodies (Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993). It will then set out the ways this thesis aligns with – and contributes to – debates on power as a productive phenomenon and individuals as capable of resisting and challenging power relations (Butler, 1990; Sawicki, 1996; hooks, 1992; Tiidenberg and Gómez-Cruz, 2015). It is also in this section that I will socially and culturally locate this work within its western neoliberal postfeminist context.

Foucauldian feminist approach

> [T]here is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against himself.
>
> (Foucault, 1977: 155)

In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault famously introduces the concept of power that disciplines the (docile) body through self-regulation. He draws on the design of

the metaphorical panopticon prison to illustrate how disciplinary power functions not through force or violence, but rather through perpetual (self-)surveillance; the prisoner submits to a 'inspecting gaze' and consequently 'becomes the principle of his own subjection' (1977: 203). This crude summary captures the notion of a surveillance society and how institutions (such as prisons and schools) act like machines or 'technologies of domination' which arrange and produce the body – from its behaviours and movements to its gestures and habits. Discipline in this sense produces subjected and practiced, 'docile' bodies (Foucault, 1977: 138-9). It is important to note that Foucault's work has been criticised for its inattention to intersecting axes of identity – i.e., despite attempting to illuminate how power relations operate, systematically unequal power relations are not explored (Hartsock, 1989). Despite these limitations, an important corpus of feminist work has long since taken up his concept of disciplinary power to interrogate both gendered and racialised power relations (Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993; Butler, 1990; hooks, 1992; Sawicki, 1996). I set out some of this work below – but particularly those which discuss the disciplinary effects of popular media images.

In *Femininity and Domination* (1990), Sandra Lee Bartky explores how women's bodies are subject to patriarchal (disciplinary) norms and practices, such as dieting and exercise. Bartky introduces the concept of a 'panoptical male connoisseur' that 'resides within the consciousness of most women' to illustrate how they are subject to constant self-surveillance and policing (1990: 34). Her analysis extends to western beauty standards and the ways women are encouraged to evaluate themselves against 'images of perfect female beauty' (Bartky, 1990: 28). While meeting such standards is an impossible feat, she argues that the problem is internalised by women as an individual failure. Subsequently, as Barkty notes, 'a measure of shame is added to [a woman's] sense that the body she inhabits is deficient' (1990: 81). These disciplinary technologies in turn produce – and encourage the impossible but constant maintenance of – a form of embodiment that conforms to a narrow approximation of 'acceptable' femininity. In her book *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (1993), Susan Bordo similarly analyses how popular images which depict idealised versions of femininity – specifically as thin and submissive – act as 'normalising' (disciplinary) forms. It is against these images or standards that 'the self continually measures, judges, 'disciplines' and 'corrects' itself' through body and beauty practices

such as dieting, exercise, and cosmetic surgery (1993: 25). Although Bordo does explore the polysemic nature of the thin body, she too contends that these disciplinary technologies train women's bodies in docility and obedience; power is internalised by individuals who 'voluntarily' subject themselves to self-surveillance and regulation to norms/forms of femininity. Writing about the effects of popular media images, she argues that '[f]iltered, smoothed, polished, softened, re-arranged' bodies begin to shift the expectations of 'real' bodies (Bordo, 2003: xviii). Barkty and Bordo thus similarly argue that a woman's embodiment is subject to self-discipline, surveillance, and regulation – even when body and beauty practices are seemingly 'freely' chosen.

We can see in these works how power does not function through force or violence. Rather, disciplinary practices of femininity produce a subjected and practiced, an 'inferiorized', body (Bartky, 1990). While I certainly agree that power is insidious in this regard, such accounts do not give space to the ways women can positively resist such practices. Indeed, Foucault's concept of disciplinary power has been criticised for reducing individuals to docile bodies – i.e., effects or 'objects' of power relations (Hartsock, 1990; Sawicki, 1996). Similar critiques have also been levelled at Bordo and Barkty's applications of Foucault; disciplinary power (i.e., patriarchal in this context) is painted as inescapable, with little mention of effective forms of resistance or the nuances of how agency operates in this context. For example, Jana Sawicki notes that these works 'have portrayed forms of patriarchal power that insinuate themselves within subjects so profoundly that it is difficult to imagine how they (we) might escape' (1996: 163). This is despite Foucault's later work (which I explore below) positing power as relational and productive, as well as individuals as capable of resisting and challenging power relations (e.g., through pleasure). It is this understanding of power, and particularly the ways it has been taken up by feminist and queer scholars, that this thesis is inspired by. As I explore below, such works recognise that there is necessarily the possibility of resistance in all power relations.

In Foucault's later works, power is clearly theorised as productive, rather than something one possesses (i.e., as exercised from the top down) and thus repressive. This is particularly clear in *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1*, for example, where Foucault develops an explicitly anti-essentialist account of the sexual body (1978). As in his earlier works, Foucault does not deny the materiality of the body but is

concerned with how the body is arranged – from its behaviours and movements to its gestures and habits. However, in this work, Foucault details how power is realised when knowledge becomes understood as 'truth'. He uses the example of sexuality to illustrate this: the 1800s marked the proliferation of a series of discourses surrounding sex and sexuality (e.g., across medicine, psychiatry, and criminal punishment) which constituted homosexuality as a peripheral and 'perverse' sexuality (Foucault, 1978). In being an object of discussion across powerful discourses, sexuality came to be ascribed with certain 'truths'. Power understood in this way does not oppress or constrain a 'natural' force (sexuality) but actively *constructs* it. Power here is understood as decentralised – it is in this understanding that we can begin to understand the possibility of modes of resistance. This is no simple feat; as Foucault argues, '[w]here there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power' (1978: 95). This means that modes of resistance are reactive and responsive to dominant constellations of power, knowledge, and truth – and cannot exist outside them. In other words, individuals exercise agency and engage in tactics of resistance *within* the constraints of power.

Feminist and queer scholars have drawn on this understanding of power to call into question the reliability and stability of gender itself. For example, in *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler moves past 'woman' as a self-evident category that exists prior to culture. Drawing on Foucault (among other scholars), they explore gender as *performative*, rather than something one is. Like sexuality, there is no pre-existing 'truth' to gender, rather it becomes tangible through re-iteration or the 'performance' of recognisable cisgender and heterosexual norms. Butler details how the 'heterosexual matrix' (the compulsory practice of heterosexuality) requires that the categories of masculinity and femininity be defined in binary terms and in hierarchical opposition (1990). Thus, power here is understood in Foucauldian terms as productive; it does not oppress a 'natural' force (gender/sex) but actively produces it as 'pre-discursive, prior to culture' (Butler, 1990: 7). In their later work *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler further explores gender as a productive force that renders certain bodies culturally (un)intelligible. Gender understood in this way allows one to move beyond identity as 'essence' (biologically deterministic thinking) and look at its possibilities,

including how one may 'trouble' gender norms by engaging in acts of performativity that challenge traditional gender roles and expectations.

Another inspiring use of Foucault's theory of knowledge and power can be found in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992), wherein author bell hooks explores the black female gaze as a site of resistance – a reclamation of the right to look and look critically. She posits the history of 'the gaze' within the context of slavery and racialised power relations: just as 'slaves were denied their right to gaze' (2014: 115), that prohibition re-materialises in visual culture in which black bodies are objectified and othered. It is in this respect that hooks views mass media as a gendered and sexualised space, as its own 'system of knowledge and power' wherein white supremacy is reproduced and maintained (2014: 117). Yet, she identifies the critical black female gaze as a site of resistance which can counter this reproduction. Namely, the black female gaze becomes politicised 'when individual black women actively resist the imposition of dominant ways of knowing and looking', such as through the acts of contestation and interrogation, as well as the production of alternative texts (2014: 128). hooks thus contends that visual culture can 'hurt' black subjectivities while cultivating the possibility for resistance and critique.

I have outlined Butler and hooks' works here as they are both particularly compelling examples of a feminist Foucauldian approach to power and resistance. Namely, their respective works recognise that power is not solely repressive, as earlier feminist appropriations of Foucault's work seemed to suggest (see Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993). This thesis is inspired by and engages in a similar feminist Foucauldian theoretical approach; that is, power is understood as something disciplinary *and* productive. This will enable me to explore how young women negotiate (conform to or challenge) idealised versions of femininity perpetuated by celebrity selfies on Instagram. As I discuss in a moment, viewing such images/norms as simply 'training' women's bodies in docility and obedience would only reinforce the patriarchal positioning of women as passive viewers at risk of the damaging 'effects' of media texts. This thesis seeks to hold in tension the ideological imperatives of media texts with the need to do justice to audiences' investments in and negotiation with these texts. This means foregrounding the disciplinary power of normative femininities in relation to young women's experiences of Instagram, celebrity and selfies, whilst simultaneously giving

space to participants' 'mobile and transitory points of resistance' (Foucault, 1978: 96) to cultural influence.

As I hope to have made clear above, this thesis recognises that individuals' actions (agency) are embedded *within* power relations, not external to them. It is in this respect that arguments about agency and resistance must acknowledge the cultural context in which people's 'choices' are constrained, shaped and made. Below I outline the sociocultural context of this research, which is neoliberal postfeminism.

The disciplinary project of neoliberal postfeminism

Debates about women's agency over the past 25 years have explored their entanglement with neoliberal, postfeminist ideologies (Gill, 2007; Budgeon, 2011, 2015; Rich, 2005; Riley and Scharff, 2012; Holmes, 2018). Postfeminism is a contested term but broadly it has been employed by scholars as a critical lens through which to explore the production of gendered subjects within a western neoliberal political economy. Within this context, 'women are interpellated as active, autonomous and self-reinventing subjects, whose lives are the outcome of individual choice and agency' (Elias and Gill, 2018: 64). In placing the emphasis on self-enterprising and 'freely choosing' subjects, women and girls are positioned in media, educational and political discourses as in control of (and responsible for) all aspects of their lives. These discourses thus in turn produce a context in which women's lives are seemingly independent of state or structural (e.g., patriarchal) oppression, which has led some scholars to posit postfeminism as a 'backlash' against second-wave feminism (Faludi, 1991), as an epistemological break with second-wave feminism (Brooks, 1997), and as a historical shift within feminism (Dow, 1996).

This thesis adopts Rosalind Gill's widely cited definition, which posits postfeminism as a *sensibility* underscored by a set of neoliberal cultural ideals (2007). Postfeminism here is not understood as a theoretical orientation or a 'backlash' but is used an analytic tool to identify and analyse the 'patterned articulation' of postfeminist ideals as they circulate in the media (Gill, 2007). The ideals characterising postfeminism as a sensibility include: the shift from objectification to subjectification in the way that some women are represented; an emphasis of femininity as a bodily property; a focus

on individualism, free choice, and empowerment; an emphasis upon self-improvement through self-surveillance and self-discipline; a renewed interest in ideas about 'sexual difference'; and the dominance of a 'makeover paradigm' (Gill, 2007: 147). This thesis is attentive to how these ideals circulate on Instagram and through celebrity selfies, as well as it explores how young women's own selfie practices reveal elements of a postfeminist sensibility. Here, it is significant to note that these ideals are seen to repackage the demand for bodily 'transformation' from the physical (looking better) to the affective (feeling better about the body) (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2006; McRobbie, 2009; Gill and Elias, 2014). This is most often through a 'love your body' discourse, which invites transformation (self-surveillance) framed as a personal choice that women can and should make. I return to this point later in relation to body positive content on Instagram.

Feminist scholars have analysed how postfeminist ideals (i.e., representations of femininity) circulate across television, film, celebrity culture, advertising, fashion photography and social media (e.g., Dobson, 2015a, Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004; Elias and Gill, 2014; Evans and Riley, 2013). I discuss the specifics of some of these works later in relation to the literature relevant to this thesis; here, I want to more broadly outline how, across these works, women are often depicted as confident, fun, 'desiring sexual subjects' who use their agency to present themselves in an objectified manner and take advantage of the 'free choices' available to them (Gill, 2007: 258; McRobbie, 2004, 2009). Yet, although discourses of 'choice' and 'agency' underpin the imagery of postfeminist femininities, it is significant that women are nevertheless encouraged to endorse values associated with traditional femininity (McRobbie, 2009). Angela McRobbie refers to this paradox as the 'post-feminist masquerade', which she considers to be a new device or 'strategy' of governmentality that re-stabilises gender hierarchies and renews interest in sexual difference. That is, the postfeminist masquerade is seen as 'interpellating women repeatedly and ritualistically into the knowing and self-reflexive terms of highly-stylised femininity' (McRobbie, 2007: 726). Patriarchal authority (power) here is thus understood to be internalised to form a new disciplinary regime in which women are encouraged to strive for a narrow approximation of feminine 'perfection' through their consumption habits and under the guise of 'empowerment'.

While the female body is presented as a source of power in postfeminist media culture, it is also 'always unruly, requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodelling' (Gill, 2007: 149). Gill notes how these disciplinary practices are most prevalent in celebrity culture, wherein celebrity women's bodies are positioned as 'always at risk of 'failing'' (2007: 149). It is in this respect that Gill views gendered media forms (notably celebrity gossip magazines and makeover reality television shows) as forms of governmentality that 'teach' both the subject and the viewer how to achieve 'appropriate' femininities (Gill, 2007: 156). This draws similarities with the works of Barkty (1990) and Bordo (1993) discussed earlier – it against popular media images (western beauty standards) that the self is seen to measure, judge, discipline and 'correct' itself. In line with my own Foucauldian approach to power, I do not necessarily agree that women simply internalise the 'lessons' on display in media texts. This view is also informed by feminist audience work (of which I discuss in a moment) that has continually highlighted the ways women actively negotiate, rather than passively consume, media texts. However, this standpoint is not to dismiss the ideological imperatives of celebrity selfies completely. Indeed, this thesis employs Gill's understanding of postfeminism in recognition that celebrity selfies (and the discourses around them) do offer 'teaching' about the body – whether this is taken up or not.

It is important to note that some scholars have called into question the continued dominance and relevance of postfeminism as a critical lens – particularly given the various feminisms now circulating in popular culture (Negra, 2014; Keller and Ryan, 2018; Hamad and Taylor, 2015; Banet-Weiser, 2018; Holmes and Clayton, 2018). In contrast to prominent feminist media scholars such as Gill, not all research agrees that contemporary feminisms are reducible to neoliberal paradigms and are keen to explore signs of change in this regard. For example, Keller and Ryan argue that postfeminism has been overwhelmingly taken up by 'scholars with disregard for historical and geographic specificity, production contexts, and audience engagement, assuming that postfeminism functions as a widespread consciousness amongst all young women' (2018: 5). This thesis recognises (and agrees with) such critiques; in terms of audience engagement, it is significant that textual analyses of postfeminism comprise much of the existing literature. The lack of work on women's negotiations of this paradigm minimises the various and diverse ways different audiences actively negotiate

postfeminist ideals. This thesis therefore attends to this gap in the literature through exploring the ways young women negotiate (take up, debate, contest) postfeminist ideals as they circulate on Instagram and through the celebrity selfie.

I have provided an overview of the cultural context of this research to make clear that the participants in this study are not 'autonomous, freely choosing individuals […] socially and culturally dislocated' from cultural influence (Gill, 2007: 73). While this research seeks to highlight the positive value of young women's Instagram and celebrity use, it is nevertheless attentive to the ways its postfeminist context shapes their 'choices', including their experiences of taking selfies and engaging with celebrity content on Instagram. I will now situate this thesis within the relevant literature, including feminist approaches to popular culture and celebrity audience work, particularly that which has focused on female audiences. I also discuss the existing work on selfies that this thesis draws on, contributes to and advances. The chapter finishes with an exploration of how authenticity has been theorised within the field of Celebrity Studies and how this thesis offers a contemporary and contextually specific analysis of the concept to this area of work.

Feminist Approaches to Popular Culture

Cultural studies work has long sought to complicate the popular assumption that audiences are simply victims of their interaction with media – namely, by demonstrating that meaning is not located exclusively in media texts but in the active *negotiation* between texts and audiences (Hall, 1980; Morley, 1980). However, feminist work has been 'doubly motivated to reclaim the audience' from psychological and popular debates, both of which work to reinforce the patriarchal positioning of women as passive viewers at risk of the damaging 'effects' of media texts (Stacey, 1994: 38). In broad terms, this thesis contributes to feminist work on female audiences of popular media texts – particularly those criticised as 'trivial', such as soap operas, romance fiction and women's magazines (Hobson, 1982; Ang, 1985, 1991; Stacey, 1994; Hermes, 1995; Radway, 1991). These works – like this thesis – have sought to explore the interpretive strategies of female audiences and why and how they derive pleasure from popular (typically normative and 'low value') media texts. In doing so, they promoted a reconsideration of the popular culture 'audience' which had

predominantly been viewed from an institutional point of view as an object to be controlled (Ang, 1991; McRobbie, 1990). Ien Ang makes this point particularly well in *Desperately Seeking the Audience* (1991), in which she stresses the need to prioritise 'actual audiences' as active social subjects engaging with television[1] 'in a myriad of creative yet tactic ways, whose details elude and escape the formal structures set up by the institutions' (1991: 2). While focusing on a different media form, this thesis similarly seeks to develop a revaluation of young women as active social subjects engaging with celebrity on Instagram in creative and diverse ways. I outline below the specific studies and arguments that this thesis draws on.

One of the earliest contributions to this area of scholarship is Ien Ang's *Watching Dallas* (1985), which explored the ways a group of Dutch women read and found pleasure in the respective soap opera. She notes that 'popular pleasure is first and foremost a pleasure of recognition' (1985: 20), as female *Dallas* fans noted enjoying the show's 'realism'. However, it is not the literal content of the show (at a denotative level) that is viewed as realistic, but rather its *emotional* realism (at a connotative level). In other words, Ang found that viewers of *Dallas* did not read the show in its entirety but found 'only certain elements of the whole text relevant, striking – pleasurable' (Ang, 1985: 43). For example, viewers looked through the characters' wealth/conservative/masochistic representations to locate the 'real' values in their general living experiences: rows, marital trouble, family conflicts, happiness. It was the recognition of the self in these situations that resulted in the show being experienced (felt) as real, and thus pleasurable. Significantly, Ang's analysis troubled the idea that identification with the show's characters, particularly the powerlessness of the female leads, was inherently or politically 'bad' for viewers. Rather, she argued that fantasy (occupying a position of powerlessness) was a source of pleasure for women precisely because it put ''reality' in parentheses'; it offered women the space and comfort to be 'pessimistic, sentimental or despairing with impunity - feelings

[1] Drawing on Foucault, Ang argues that audience measurements (such as ratings) act as a disciplinary or 'panoptic' technology in the way they constitute 'the production of a discourse which 'formalizes' and reduces the viewer into a calculable audience member, someone whose behaviour can be objectively determined and neatly categorized' (1991: 70).

which we can scarcely allow ourselves in the battlefield of actual social, political and personal struggles' (Ang, 1985: 134). This work thus began to highlight how one's 'identification' with a media text/figure is a multifaceted and unpredictable process.

Jackie Stacey's *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (1994) was one of the first major texts to prioritise and take seriously the accounts of female spectators and their relations to Hollywood stars. Stacey's study is based on an analysis of responses she received from a group of predominantly working class white British women aged over 60 who had engaged with cinema in the 1940s and 1950s. Similar to Ang (1985), and what is particularly relevant to this thesis, is Stacey's exploration of the respondent's 'identification' with Hollywood stars who embodied idealised femininity. Taking issue with psychoanalytic theories of identification that position female spectators in the interests of patriarchal forms of identity, – i.e., as passive victims of masculine desire – Stacey sought to highlight the contradictory processes of identification at play in celebrity-audience relations. For example, she explored how Hollywood stars offered women 'fantasies of transformed identities' (Stacey, 1994: 152) that functioned in both normative and transgressive ways. Respondents often positioned stars as 'role models' of feminine attractiveness (white, slim, young) and heterosexuality (attachment to a man) in comparison to which they felt inadequate. At the same time, however, respondents took pleasure in escaping into the world of the cinema and taking on Hollywood stars' 'independent' and 'confident' identities. Stars in this respect offered respondents fantasies of power that were outside of their own lived experiences (i.e., their actual social, political, and personal conditions).

Stacey also defined 'identificatory practices' as forms of identification that extend beyond fantasy or imagination into *practice* (their everyday lives beyond the viewing context). This involves the transformation of identities in a physical way. Relevant to this thesis is the respondents' pleasure in 'imitating' or 'copying' some aspects of a Hollywood stars identity – from their fashion styles, gestures and poses to their personalities. Stacey notes how these were the most common forms of identification – particularly regarding stars who were associated with 'powerful' femininities, such as Bette Davies and Joan Crawford. By copying their styles, shoes, suits or cosmetics, 'the star's identity is selectively reworked and incorporated into the spectator's new

identity' (Stacey, 1994: 171). This reading emphasises that existing cultural feminine ideals are not passively reproduced in the context of cinema; rather, identification with its stars involves 'an active engagement and production of changing identities' (171-172). For the British women in Stacey's study, Hollywood stars facilitated a space to rework restrictive norms of femininity and construct an alternative to the 'typically bourgeois image of respectability' in post-war Britain (1994: 238).

We can compare this early audience research to contemporary feminist work on popular culture, particularly reality television (Skeggs, Thumim and Wood, 2008; Skeggs and Wood, 2012; Hill, 2002). For example, Skeggs, Thumim and Wood's research (2008) similarly highlights how women locate themselves *within* the drama of reality television. Specifically, their working-class participants directly inserted themselves into the lives on display; 'they generate[d] a fantasy of not struggling to provide for their families, projecting themselves into the comfort of the subject position of successful participant as a fantasy of a life lived without poverty and difficulty' (2008: 19). The working-class participants also used reality television to appraise their own life choices – namely their maternal and domestic sacrifices. For example, giving time to children over social mobility was considered 'good parenting', a moral position that the authors note was 'in conflict' with British government initiatives at the time, of which 'encourage[d] mothers to return to the labour market as fast as possible' (Skeggs, Thumim and Wood, 2008: 13). It is in this respect that the authors contend reality television viewing is as a space through which women can resist contemporary pressures on motherhood. This reinforces Ang's argument that fantasy is a source of pleasure because it allows one to experience 'imaginary solutions for real contradictions which in their fictional simplicity […] step outside the tedious complexity of the existing social relations of dominance and subordination' (1985: 135).

Skeggs and Wood's (2012) later work on reality television audiences has also highlighted the ways in which participants 'look through' the negatively coded elements of reality television to analyse the 'real' relationships on display. This is done through viewers conjuring up a 'presence' within the text and finding a point of connection to 'reality', despite (class) differences between the viewer and reality television participants. It is significant to note that this work (and the audience work

outlined above) contrasts textual critiques of reality television as a form of governmentality. For example, Rosalind Gill, applying a postfeminist lens, has sought to highlight how makeover shows work to humiliate the subject and their 'lacking or flawed' body, before teaching them (and the viewer) how to achieve an 'appropriate' (white, middle-class) aesthetic through consumption, self-scrutiny and body work (2007: 156). However, in speaking to 'actual audiences', the work above highlights that women do not simply internalise the 'lessons' on display in reality television or legitimate the stereotypical characterisations of its participants; rather, they reach for moments of connection, 'bring their lives into play and assess the 'teaching' accordingly' (Skeggs and Wood, 2012: 155). Indeed, the idea that media texts can 'teach' women how to behave (or in Foucauldian terms, re-arrange their bodies) suggests somewhat simply that women are 'trained' in docility and disobedience. The work outlined in this section has not only given space to the pleasure women derive from 'low value' popular media forms but has highlighted how this can act as a positive resistance or counterattack to gendered norms.

To conclude, whilst not effacing the power of normative gender ideologies, feminist approaches have highlighted that the ways female audiences negotiate and use popular culture is anything but predictable or passive. This thesis similarly recognises that audience engagement with celebrity selfies may evoke surprising responses and affective connections. An understanding of the relations between women and celebrity selfies as uncertain and precarious will enable me to explore with nuance how women negotiate celebrity selfies on Instagram, as well as the pleasures they derive from these images. Do idealised celebrity selfies teach participants what is an 'appropriate' selfie/femininity? Is this teaching straightforwardly taken up by participants, or do they 'look through' a celebrity's construction in the search for something 'real'? If so, what elements do they find 'real' and affectively connect to? What does this mean in a neoliberal postfeminist context? This thesis seeks to answer these questions, using the work above as an interpretive framework for understanding women's identifications with celebrity selfies.

Celebrity Audiences

> A turn to the 'empirical audience' is not just a matter of methodology. It is epistemologically significant. Attending to how people use (and do not use) celebrity shifts our understanding of how and to what extent it intervenes into social life. This troubles the obviousness assumed within theories based on textual readings of celebrity, and unsettles easy answers about what celebrity is and does. It is perhaps because of this disruptive potential that the audience remains a desired but largely denied object of inquiry within the field.
>
> (Mendick, Allen and Harvey, 2015: 376)

There have been several pleas like the one above from scholars studying celebrity over the past two decades. Jackie Stacey (1994), Chris Rojek (2001), Graeme Turner (2010), Martin Barker, Su Holmes and Sarah Ralph (2016) have all flagged how textual readings dominate the field, with the 'real, or empirical audience' marginalised (Holmes, 2004: 169). While empirical work exploring people's relationships with celebrity texts/figures does exist, such work has 'often tended to be sporadic or small-scale' (Barker, Holmes and Ralph, 2016: 1).[2] In broad terms, much of the existing empirical work seeks to complicate stereotypical and/or psychological constructions of celebrity 'fans' (of which are historically gendered) by looking at their 'everyday' engagements. This section provides an overview of some of this work (i.e., beyond Jackie Stacey's seminal text *Star Gazing,* explored above) and how it informs the orientation of this thesis.

One of the earliest celebrity audience studies is Richard Dyer's exploration of Judy Garland and her appeal among gay men, which argues that celebrity-audience relations involve a diverse and complex set of practices (1986). For example, Dyer notes how 'Garland was the image of heterosexual family normality', yet it was the 'story of difference' (e.g., her suicide attempts, divorces and struggles with alcohol, drugs and depression) beneath her glossy image that was central to her appeal among gay men (Dyer, 1986: 153-54). This population were shown to relate to Garland's 'authentic' combination of strength and suffering; notably, her resilience in the face of her struggles was seen to speak to the experience of living in a homophobic society. What

[2] There are very limited sociological and film industry commissioned studies that predate the academic work discussed here (see Mayer, 1948; Tudor, 1974).

is significant here (and indeed, shares many similarities with the feminist approaches to popular culture explored above) is that what could be read on the surface of Garland's image did not account for the complexity and diversity of meanings at stake – specifically in the ways that audiences used her celebrity to make sense of their lived experiences. This illustrates particularly well Dyer's conceptualisation of celebrity figures as useful and accessible symbols (or signs) that epitomise the ideological tensions of their time (Dyer, 1979). I have explored the functions of Garland above as I want to foreground the relevant audience work in this section, however, it is worth noting that Dyer's other works include an analysis of Marilyn Monroe – e.g., in *Heavenly Bodies* (1986), he illustrates how her image became a reference point for female sexuality, which was felt to matter so much in the 1950s and early 1960s (Dyer, 1986). This thesis is indebted to such works, but particularly the idea that celebrity is a socially and culturally productive phenomenon through which norms are debated and contested. Celebrity in this regard is understood as a distinct social status and a product of media representation, rather than an inherent quality or 'property' of specific individuals. That is, how and why a celebrity attains a greater public presence (over others) and discursively comes into being at a particular moment is seen to speak to their historical, ideological and cultural context (Dyer, 1979, 1986). As explored above, the ideological context of this thesis is neoliberal postfeminism – a point I return to throughout this thesis to help make sense of how and why certain celebrity figures are foregrounded in the interviews.

Joshua Gamson's *Claims to Fame* (1994) was one of the first academic texts to put forward an empirically informed framework for conceptualising audience-celebrity relations more widely. Gamson spoke to (predominantly middle-class) 'celebrity watchers', a term he used to define 'everyday' celebrity audiences who 'consistently but casually paid attention to a range of celebrities' (1994: 145). In this work, he illustrates how audiences read – and derive pleasure from – celebrity differently depending on their level of awareness of the celebrity production system. For instance, 'traditionalist' audiences are defined as uncritical in their reading strategy; they posit fame a result of a celebrity's 'natural' or internal gifts, such as their accomplishments, skill or talent (also see Rojek, 2001). In contrast, 'postmodern' celebrity watchers have a high awareness of the production techniques that 'make' a celebrity, including money and marketing management. For these types of watchers, the 'true' or 'real'

self of a celebrity becomes impossible to discern – celebrity is completely fictional. Gamson explains that postmodern celebrity watchers continue to derive pleasure from deconstructing celebrity texts even though, or precisely because, "it's all bullshit" (1994: 156). In between these two reading positions are identification-driven audiences who, while critical of celebrity manufacture, believe in – and find pleasure in seeking out – the 'real' or 'ordinary' person behind the (manufactured) celebrity image. Indeed, Gamson notes how for most celebrity watchers, 'the overall backdrop of authenticity and specific truths are essential to [their] pleasure' (1994: 171). This framework acts as a useful starting point, and important reminder, that celebrity texts do not simply assert their meanings on 'unsuspecting' audiences. Instead, it highlights that they are critical and engaged – particularly in the way they deconstruct a celebrity's authenticity. I return to this concept – i.e., how authenticity is a structuring force in the construction of celebrity – later in this review.

It is women and girls that 'have historically been conceived as the primary audience for stars and celebrities' in popular discourse (Barker, Holmes and Ralph, 2016: 2). It is for this reason that, beyond the early texts discussed above, most of the work on celebrity audiences has been conducted with these populations (e.g., Lowe, 2003; Jackson and Vares, 2015; Duits and van Romondt, 2009; Renold and Ringrose, 2008; Projansky, 2014; Jackson, Goddard and Cossens, 2016; Mendick, Allen and Harvey, 2015). Like the feminist approaches to popular culture outlined earlier, scholars have sought to trouble the idea that young women and girls are victims of celebrity consumption through highlighting the ways they actively use/refuse it in their everyday lives. In broad terms, celebrity emerges as both a disciplinary technology and valuable resource in the existing empirical literature – i.e., a productive phenomenon through which audiences (both women and girls) debate, contest, resist and rework social and cultural norms. It is important to note that there is comparably *much* less contemporary audience work on adult women in comparison to girls, which is likely because the latter are often caught up in 'moral panics' about the influence 'sexualised' media and female celebrity role models (see Jackson, Goddard and Cossens, 2016). As I explore in a moment, while this thesis is concerned with young women, contemporary audience work on girls serve as inspiration for my approach in that they too have sought to problematise the notion that girls are straightforwardly

'impressionable' when it comes to celebrity influence. I discuss the works relevant to this thesis below.

Much of the empirical work focusing on women has sought to explore their use of celebrity trivia and gossip magazines (e.g., Hermes, 1995; Feasey, 2008; Johansson, 2006). For example, Joke Hermes (1995), Rebecca Feasey (2008) and Sofia Johansson (2006) have all shown how celebrity trivia and gossip act as a point of connection for women that can enrich their social lives; being able to ignite a topic of conversation regarding a particular celebrity is as a safe, reassuring and comforting way into social encounters. In these works, such social encounters are not painted as trivial but rather an important and meaningful everyday activity – notably, celebrities (their sex scandals and beauty regimes, for example) act as sites through which audiences debate and contest norms of femininity and construct their social and cultural identities. Rebecca Feasey's work with readers of British *heat* magazine illustrates particularly well how celebrity gossip operates in surprising and contradictory ways. For example, the participants in her study spoke of their enjoyment in seeing a celebrity's physical and fashionable 'imperfections' on display. Feasey notes how seeing these 'imperfections' invoked empathy among readers, as well as such images became 'a useful route to accepting their own imperfections' (2008: 695). This reading contrasts with textual work on gossip magazines and paparazzi images that are seen to 'incite disgust reactions' and encourage a process of judging women for their bodily 'failures' (see Hirdman, 2017: 374). Feasey's work (2008) thus shares many similarities with the research on reality television explored earlier – i.e., her participants arguably 'look through' the negatively coded elements of *heat* magazine to find a point of connection to their reality (Skeggs and Wood, 2012). Further, their interpretations arguably act as a counterattack to the idea that women should engage in critical forms of looking (surveilling) 'flawed' bodies, as the participants instead use celebrity images in the magazine to accept their own bodies as they are. I return to these ideas throughout this thesis; indeed, I find this work to be a particularly useful starting point in understanding how non-normative bodies on Instagram are negotiated, as well as what they can elicit and do for young women.

The aforementioned studies have shown that middle-class women routinely position celebrity gossip and magazines as a form of low culture, likening it to a 'guilty

pleasure' or 'toilet reading' (Hermes 1997; Johansson 2006; Feasey, 2008). This is also a recurring theme across work on other gendered media forms, including soap opera (Ang, 1985) and reality television (Skeggs and Wood, 2012). Across these studies, audiences take up a reflexive and ironic viewer position, creating distance between themselves and the 'object' of discussion. As Ang notes, taking up a considered and mocking perspective is a 'necessary condition for experiencing pleasure' for middle-class viewers in that it allows them to occupy a superior position to the supposedly 'bad object' (Ang, 1985: 97-99 drawing on Foucault, 1971). In other words, women's discussions of popular culture are often mediated by an awareness of the structures into which they are judged and must operate and negotiate. For example, Skeggs and Wood (2012) note how reality television is positioned as a 'waste of time' by their middle-class participants, in line with the need to put forward an image of oneself as a 'productive' citizen. This of course has implications for this thesis and my approach to data collection, which comprises interviews with a pool of predominantly white middle-class women. I discuss this further in my Methodology; however, I note these findings here to make clear the work and arguments that this thesis draws on and contributes to. Indeed, the celebrity selfie sits the intersection of two denigrated media forms – celebrity culture and the selfie. Thus, this thesis is similarly attentive to the ways the participants in this research may take up an ironic viewer position to legitimate their interests. More than this, it seeks to explore how such discussions (i.e., ironic distancing) can work to reproduce gendered, racialised and classed popular narratives about celebrity culture.

Another contemporary audience study is Evans and Riley's (2013) research, which provides an analysis of women's negotiations of celebrity in more general terms (i.e., beyond magazines/trivia/gossip). Drawing on focus group and interview data from 28 white heterosexual women aged between 23 and 58 living in the UK, the authors detail how a neoliberal, postfeminist rhetoric of 'choice' underpins women's negotiations of celebrity women. That is, their participants celebrated celebrities' entrepreneurial careers and often tied their success to personal effort and beautification practices (self-transformation), rather than structural circumstance. Significantly, the authors note how their participants' 'negotiations of celebrity created a context in which [they] were only ever able to position themselves as somehow failing' (2013: 278), as they reflected on their lack of access to the time, motivation, or money to engage in similar

beauty/body work. Their 'anger' was often directed at themselves (for their inability to engage in similar beauty/body work) and the celebrity women, rather than patriarchal social structures (2013). It is in this respect that Evans and Riley note that the participants' critiques are not straightforward evidence of their resistance to postfeminist ideals; rather, their critiques can be seen as a form of disciplinary 'horizontal violence' (Duffy, 1995), as they are more often directed *laterally* at the character of specific individuals and not capitalist patriarchy (i.e., the wider power structures responsible for the ubiquity of idealised femininity). Yet, Evans and Riley note that postfeminist celebrity – as self-made and money-making – was simultaneously *rejected* by the participants as an unfulfilling experience. As a result, their participants actively sought out and more often derived pleasure from 'ordinary' celebrity women who they perceived as accessible and already like themselves. We can thus see here how celebrity emerges as both a disciplinary technology *and* productive resource through which audiences can contest, resist and rework norms. However, while the authors stress that the women in their study do not 'uncritically incorporate images of celebrity into their own psyche' (2013: 277), they do not explain in any detail how their participants live with and through 'impossible' celebrity images. The focus in this work is primarily on the disciplinary force of these types of images – i.e., as limiting or making 'impossible' ways of being, as the women are 'only ever able to position themselves as somehow failing' in response (2013: 278). This is reminiscent of Barkty (1990) and Bordo's (1993) works discussed earlier, wherein popular images which depict idealised versions of femininity act as 'normalising' forms against which women continually measure themselves. This thesis provides further nuance to this argument by exploring in greater detail how female audiences live with and through 'impossible' media images (using the case study of celebrity selfies), rather than viewing 'impossibility' as an endpoint to how a body can become.

As noted above, a significant amount of contemporary audience work addresses the relationship between celebrity and girls (Lowe, 2003; Jackson and Vares, 2015; Duits and van Romondt, 2009; Renold and Ringrose, 2008; Projansky, 2014; Jackson, Goddard and Cossens, 2016; Mendick, Allen and Harvey, 2015). These works are, of course, studying a different population to this thesis. However, their approaches are still notable – and certainly serve as inspiration – for this research. Broadly speaking,

this body of work has coalesced around particular celebrity women such as Britney Spears (Lowe, 2003) and Miley Cyrus (Jackson, Goddard and Cossens, 2016; Jackson and Vares, 2015; Vares and Jackson, 2015; Ouvrein, et al. 2018). Jackson and Vares' (2015) focus group research with preteen girls is noteworthy in that it highlights the contradictory negotiations inherent in girls' talk about postfeminist celebrity. The girls in their study distance themselves from and reject sexualised celebrity performances – from their clothing styles to their poses and behaviours. For example, they discuss and position Miley Cyrus as a 'bad' role model owing to her semi-nude *Vanity Fair* cover in 2008. The authors note how rather than reading her sexualised representations 'within a postfeminist discourse of fun-loving, sexually empowered freedom (Gill, 2007), girls, to the contrary, rejected such meaning through evoking the 'slut'' (2015: 559). The girls' negotiation of Cyrus and other hypersexualised celebrities as 'sluts' is contradictory in the way it operates as a form of resistance (a rejection of sexualised femininity) and regulation (reproduction of restrictive norms/girlhood/femininity). Cyrus in this sense acts as a boundary marker around which 'appropriate' or 'proper' (white middle-class) femininity is constructed and negotiated.

Jackson, Goddard, and Cossens' work on Miley Cyrus (2016) and Melanie Lowe's work on Britney Spears (2003) make similar arguments – i.e., girls reject these 'hypersexualised' celebrities, yet their rejection is 'fractured' by moments of appreciation. Then, what is significant across these studies on girls' use of celebrity is how popular discourses about the 'sexualisation of culture' are echoed in their talk (Lowe, 2003; Jackson, Goddard, and Cossens, 2016; Vares and Jackson, 2015, Jackson and Vares, 2015). As Jackson and Vares notes, the moralistic tone of the media 'compels [girls] to warily monitor their participation in sexually saturated pop music culture in order to avoid its sexually corrupting potential' (Jackson and Vares, 2015: 495). In this respect, straightforwardly liking Cyrus after her 'failed' performances of femininity (notably, her 2008 *Vanity Fair* cover) has become associated with 'bad taste' (low-class). This impacts on the ways girls feel they must explain their interest – for example, by invoking other elements of her image that are 'good' (i.e., that adhere to the parameters of white, middle-class respectability), girls are able to justify their interest. As explored above, this reflexive process is not limited to girls but is a prominent theme across audience work on gendered media forms, from

reality television to tabloid magazines. This thesis contributes to this body of literature in that it provides a contemporary example of how young women both reject and reproduce popular discursive formations in their talk about celebrity selfies. Specifically, it highlights how through these discussions a white middle-class standard of femininity is negotiated and (re)produced.

Finally, it is worth mentioning Mendick, Allen, Harvey and Ahmad's *Celebrity, Aspiration and Contemporary Youth: Education and Inequality in an Era of Austerity* (2018), as it is the largest empirical exploration of how young audiences negotiate celebrity culture since the turn of the century. While this research focuses on 'youth' more generally, it nevertheless highlights the wider importance of celebrity as a space through which political projects are negotiated. The analysis in this research is based on focus groups and interviews with 148 young people (aged 14-18) and posits celebrity 'as mediating how young people think about their future and take actions towards it' (Mendick, et al. 2018: 13). The researchers identify participants' distinctions between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' celebrities, as well as rags-to-riches narratives of hard work, as indicative of a 'cruel optimism' governing young people's own aspirations (Berlant, 2011). In other words, their attachments to particular fantasises of success (what they desire) are what hinders their success. Thus, discussions of celebrity – understood through a Foucauldian lens of discourse and truth – are seen here to maintain and obscure structural inequalities. However, the researchers also identified a 'messiness' in their participants' negotiations of celebrity success, which is illustrated particularly well in their analysis of Beyoncé. The authors note how Beyoncé's mainstream image fits with the 'strong', 'independent' rhetoric of neoliberalism and yet – like Dyer's work on gay men's identification with Judy Garland – her image was used in ways that inspired young people who struggled against adversity in terms of their race, class and gender. Thus, the authors argue that 'despite the limitations and contradictions of the (post)feminist sensibilities she embodies, [Beyoncé] still opens up spaces for young people to mobile a language of gender equality' (Mendick, Allen and Harvey, 2015: 376). I have included this example here for two reasons: 1) it shows particularly well that celebrity figures are an informative part of how young people negotiate and rework their (social) identities, and 2) it highlights the value of audience work exploring how postfeminist ideals are

negotiated in specific contexts and by specific audiences. As noted earlier, there is a significant lack of empirical work on people's negotiations of this paradigm; it is for this reason that postfeminism is often understood to function as a widespread consciousness among young women. Like Mendick, Allen and Harvey (2015), this thesis offers a contextually specific empirical contribution to the predominantly textual work on postfeminist media culture; specifically, it highlights the various ways young women negotiate (reject *and* reinforce) postfeminist ideals in their discussions of celebrity selfies on Instagram.

To conclude this section, the existing audience work on celebrity-audience relations (across different decades, demographics and media forms) has frequently highlighted the complex, contradictory and transformative potential of celebrity figures – despite their 'obvious' limitations at a textual level (Mendick, Allen and Harvey, 2015). This review of the literature also highlights that there is very little contemporary work exploring 'everyday' audiences of celebrity (or their selfies) on Instagram. As I return to in a moment, much of the work focusing on the celebrity selfie on Instagram comprises textual and visual analyses. Attending to how young women use celebrity on Instagram is therefore a timely and necessary endeavour. The following sections provide an overview of the scholarly work on Instagram and selfies (both celebrity and 'ordinary') and a discussion of how the existing work informs this thesis.

Instagram and Intensified Surveillance

The image and video sharing platform Instagram has been particularly prominent in popular selfie debates since its inception in 2010. Instagram is a social media platform that encourages the dissemination of images and videos which can be accompanied by a textual description. The platform launched in 2010 and currently has over one billion users worldwide (Statista, 2022a). The majority of Instagram users are under 35 years old, with 25-34-year-olds making up the most active users (Statista, 2022b). As of January 2022, the gender breakdown of Instagram users found an almost even split between women (49.3%) and men (50.7%) (Statista, 2022c). The binary and limited nature of this data is a reflection on the platform; its registration process currently offers only three 'gender' categories ('male', 'female' or 'not specified'), meaning users cannot define themselves in a more inclusive way. The platform does not ask

new users for any other information, so there is little data available to provide a breakdown of Instagram's user demographics beyond what is offered here.

A platform's architecture is shaped by its 'technological affordances' – a term 'generally used to describe what material artefacts such as media technologies allow people do to' (Bucher and Helmond, 2018: 234). Given the fast-paced, changing nature of social media, this thesis follows Bucher and Helmond (2018: 244) in advocating for 'a platform-sensitive approach to the affordances of social media'; in other words, an understanding that Instagram is quite distinct from – while often evolving alongside – other platforms (Facebook, YouTube or TikTok, for example) at the time of writing. As Bucher and Helmond note (2018), the theoretical concept of 'affordances' is not a new one but emerged in scholarly work as early as the 1990s. For example, Gaver's (1991: 97) definition highlighted the usefulness of affordances in generating 'user-centered analyses' of particular technologies. This evolved in Hutchby's notion of 'communicative affordances' as 'the possibilities for action that emerge from […] given technological forms' (2001a: 30). Both conceptualisations apply to this thesis, in the way they open up possibilities for analysing the participants' lived experiences in the context of Instagram (with reference to Gaver), as well as how Instagram's affordances generate and shape behaviour among participants (extending Hutchby's thought).

In the context of Instagram, affordances include the 'scrolling' home feed, stories, images, captions, and hashtags, all of which shape how users communicate and interact (Hurley, 2019; boyd, 2010; Gibbs, et al. 2015). Instagram's affordances have gone through various interactions since its inception – the platform originally allowed users to share only photos to their main 'feed', however, following the likes of Vine, YouTube and Snapchat, video-sharing in the form of 'stories' and 'IGTV' (Instagram TV) has since been introduced. 'Stories' is most relevant to this research and allows users to post (pre-prepared, immediate or 'live') content, which will then disappear after 24 hours unless pinned permanently on a user's page in the 'highlights' section. At the time of writing, users can therefore post images and videos to their main 'feed' where they will remain permanently (or until removed by the user/Instagram), or to their 'stories' (which offers a more ephemeral experience). Further, Instagram allows users to have a public or private account. If public, users can 'hashtag' their posts (e.g.,

#selfie) which will categorise them and make them visible to wider publics – notably, to anyone who clicks on or searches the particular hashtag. A private account means that users have to request to follow the account, with only those who are granted access able to view and engage with a private user's posts. These specifics are important to note as they impact on the ways users, including the participants in this research, choose to share their selfies.

The above captures the affordances of Instagram at the time of writing. These are the 'material artefacts' (Bucher and Helmond, 2018) that may constrain or enable certain behaviours and actions for the participants in this research. While 'affordances can best be observed in the course of agential actions' (Bucher and Helmond, 2018: 239), myriad factors contribute to content consumption and production on Instagram. In other words, affordances only account for a portion of Instagram's *vernacular*. As Gibbs et al. note, social media platforms have their 'own unique combination of styles, grammars, and logics, which can be considered as constituting a 'platform vernacular', or a popular (as in 'of the people') genre of communication' (2015: 257). In the context of this research, Instagram has specific styles and 'rules' that shape content production and consumption, such as posting frequency or specific selfie formats/context. Instagram's vernacular has been shown to privilege certain embodiments or ways of being over others. Notably, the platform is seen to have established a set of conventions and aesthetics – popularly known as 'Instagrammable' ideals – that help to define whom and what is now considered photographable (Caldeira, Bauwel and Ridder, 2021). These ideals reinforce norms of feminine appearance; namely, they privilege a racist, ageist, ableist, hetero- and body-normative beauty ideal. Indeed, Instagram is not a (politically) neutral platform but is shaped by certain ideologies and commercial interests. Instagram's censorship and algorithmic bias, for example, is often critiqued for being racist and fatphobic (Dazed Digital, 2020; Christie, 2020), as

well for the ways it echoes (and contributes to) iterations of offline social inequalities (Lux, 2017; Stryker, 2018)[3].

It would be amiss to suggest that Instagram – through its affordances or vernacular – straightforwardly makes certain actions (im)possible for its users. It is prudent to explore the extent to which Instagram users shape the platform through their use, navigation, and behaviours. Indeed, as Helmond and Bucher (2018: 249) highlight, it is because of *algorithms* that this 'unidirectionality does not hold'. Algorithms can be understood, most broadly, as 'a documented series of steps which leads to the transformation of some data' (Oxford Reference, 2024). While Kelley Cotter (2019: 896) notes that 'Instagram shares few details about the platform's algorithmic architecture or how it works', their exploration of influencers primarily demonstrates how users' interactions with the platform are influenced by *awareness* of the algorithm itself. This is namely, through their understanding of algorithms as determining 'who and what gains visibility' (Cotter, 2019: 896). This awareness leads influencers to research and gather information on how best to respond to this constantly evolving algorithm and 'pursue visibility as if playing a game' (Cotter, 2019: 908). This echoes Taina Bucher's argument that social media algorithms, despite their intangible quality, 'have the power to enact material realities' for their users (2016: 40). This is because, for example, a user's perception about Instagram's algorithm and 'how it works shape[s] their orientation towards it' (Bucher, 2016: 40). These arguments chime with Bucher's earlier work on algorithms and visibility through a Foucauldian lens, where she suggests that the 'possibility of constantly disappearing' (Bucher, 2012: 1171) on social media acts as a disciplinary technology that shapes users' content. While this thesis focuses on everyday users' navigation of (celebrity) selfies on Instagram, the same arguments carry; as I will explore in Chapter 5, participants' awareness of the

[3] Instagram's increasingly ambiguous but strict community guidelines have been shown to impact marginalised users in terms of being antithetical to their safety and well-being. For example, changes in December 2020 to guidelines had an immediate effect on sex workers, 'isolating people who depended on [the platform] for advice, safety information, and community' (Stryker, 2018). The platform has also been criticised for discriminating against fat bodies and for allowing fatphobic abuse to be directed at its users (Baska, 2021).

algorithm (regardless of its elusive qualities) actively influences how they navigate and prioritise celebrity images on Instagram.

'Ordinary' selfies

In a broad sense, I understand the practice of selfie-taking as a form of self-expression; as a way of experiencing our bodies and communicating and understanding ourselves (Tiidenberg, 2018). In a practical sense, the selfie as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary is a 'photograph that one has taken of oneself, *esp.* one taken with a smartphone or webcam and shared via social media' (2013). Despite its relatively new uptake in our vernacular – being voted 'word of the year' in 2013 – the selfie as a practice is not 'new'; Katie Warfield notes how 'like much new media, the selfie can be conceived of as a multimodal convergence of older and newer technologies' (2014: 1). Indeed, forms of self-representation or self-portraiture have long been used as tools of visual communication, such as pictographs and ideographs (Tiidenberg, 2018). However, unlike these forms of self-representation, as well as contemporary forms such as sculptures and paintings, the selfie as it is understood today is distinguished by its ubiquity on social media platforms and the way it has become embedded in people's everyday lives (Rettberg, 2014; Tifentale and Manovich, 2015).

In terms of the selfie, Instagram has popularised candid-looking yet highly stylised shots, or what Caldeira, Ridder and Bauwel call the 'Instagrammable staging of an aestheticized everyday life' (2020: 8). This staging of one's everyday life is effortful and strategic, involving a process of styling, framing, lighting, editing and filtering. Elias and Gill note how a racialised sub-text informs the features offered by beauty apps and filters on platforms such as Instagram; notably, in that they allow users to 'brighten', 'lighten' or 'whiten' the skin and reshape the nose and eyes (2018). Informed by a feminist Foucauldian framework, the authors argue that platforms such as Instagram *intensify* aesthetic surveillance in the way they encourage women to 'engage in intensive regimes of selfie-taking labour' (Elias and Gill, 2018: 68). This labour is seen to reproduce an 'appropriate' femininity that maps to a white, middle-class aesthetic and is, paradoxically, a practice that is constructed as 'freely' chosen and pleasurable. In this regard, platforms such as Instagram and the selfie practices they encourage can be seen as reinforcing the (postfeminist) shift from objectification

to subjectification in contemporary culture, wherein the self is a project to be worked on and 'controlled' through constant comparison and monitoring.

Rosalind Gill explores this phenomenon from an empirical perspective in *Perfect* (2023). In this work, she explores the pressure for young women to live up to a 'perfect' standard in their selfies and on social media platforms. She details the amount of labour involved in the self-surveillance and self-presentation practices employed by her participants. Notably, how their selfies are relentlessly considered – from the camera angle to the filters used. However, being 'perfect' also extends beyond physical appearance; performing in the 'correct' way is also about displaying the 'right' kind of attitude (Gill, 2021; Kanai, 2018). Relevant to this thesis is how the performance of authenticity is understood as central to the ecology of Instagram; that is, Gill illustrates how her participants' selfie practices are 'shaped by a set of moral judgements around fraudulence, and ethical orientations towards authenticity' (Gill, 2023: 148). For example, not only did her participants describe needing to look 'perfect', they also expressed needing to look 'real'. They did this by hiding the labour involved in their selfies, e.g., through carefully crafted captions. This thesis provides an empirically informed analysis of how young women's selfie and Instagram practices require a great deal of labour and management to look 'perfect' *and* 'real'. Chapter 4 explores how it is only through meeting this contradictory requirement (through self-regulation) that participants feel they can post their selfies and not be subject to judgement from others.

As noted in the Introduction, selfie-taking is heavily gendered in popular discourse and often framed in relation to pathologised constructions of femininity, as tied to ideas of narcissism, loneliness, passivity, low self-esteem and body dysmorphic disorder (see Wallop, 2013; Ryan, 2013; Hunt, 2019; Britton, 2017). Scholar Anne Burns (2014, 2015) has explored how selfie practices are denigrated using homogenising gendered stereotypes and associations with pathologised constructions of femininity which work to incite and legitimise the discipline of women's behaviors and identities. Burns argues that repeated criticism of selfies and selfie-takers has naturalised certain 'truths' – that selfies and selfie-takers are narcissistic, sexualised, attention-seeking (2015). Burns draws on popular media reports and art works to highlight how the seemingly inconsequential details of selfie taking (when, where and

how to take them) are problematised. This devaluation, coupled with their association with femininity, devalues selfies and frames self-takers (young women) as requiring discipline. It is in this respect that Burns (2015) views the popular discussion of selfies as illustrative of Foucault's 'capillary' conception of power (1977) in how it maintains gendered power relations. This thesis offers an empirical contribution to this argument and how such discourses get under the skin of young women. Significantly, Chapter 4 illustrates the fear of being seen as a narcissistic selfie-taker (that thus requires discipline) has more explicit or obvious 'influence' than celebrity in terms of how the participants in this research take and post selfies.

Many academics have looked at the textual construction of selfies to speak back to popular debates and highlight the complexities of the practice, specifically in terms of their political potential (Caldeira, Ridder and Bauwel, 2018, 2020; Murray, 2018, 2020; Tembeck, 2016). This optimism can be seen in Caldeira, Ridder and Bauwel's (2020) analysis of women's selfies on Instagram. The authors contend that Instagram blurs the boundaries between the seemingly mundane (the practice of selfie-taking) and the political (hegemonic power structures and hierarchies of visibility). Despite Instagram privileging normative embodiments, the individual diversity of the women's selfies in their study are seen to speak back to these dominant visual discourses. Stereotypical, 'hyper-feminine' ideals and the (obvious) use of filters appeared less frequently in their sample than selfies that subverted normative expectations, including plus-size bodies, wrinkles, ageing lines and blemishes. In displaying diverse femininities underserved in mainstream media, as well as attributes typically dismissed as 'flaws' to be corrected, women's selfies on Instagram are seen to 'broaden the scope of who and what is considered *photographable'* (Caldeira, Ridder and Bauwel, 2020: 1, original emphasis). Women's selfies are thus considered tangentially political in the sense that they can help to shift cultural attitudes towards moments and identities otherwise unseen and afford women a sense of personal agency and control in how they represent themselves (Caldeira, Ridder and Bauwel, 2020: 11-12).

This thesis follows and builds on Caldeira, Ridder and Bauwel's approach to non-normative selfies as a tangentially political project (2020). Namely, I understand that these types of selfies may act as a counterattack to the idea that women should engage

in critical forms of looking (surveilling) their bodies to live up to narrow ideals of femininity. As noted earlier, a neoliberal rhetoric is seen to have ushered in new discourses of femininity, or a 'postfeminist' media culture (Gill, 2007), which encourages a greater emphasis upon self-surveillance and self-discipline to 'better' oneself. This manifests not only in terms of looking better through bodily work but feeling better about the body (see Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2006; McRobbie, 2009; Gill and Scharff, 2011). This underpins the academic critiques of body positive media, which cautions that 'self-love' and 'positivity' discourse can work to frame one's affective relationship to their body as a matter of choice, as well as it re-emphasises that women's value lies in their appearance. For example, Gill and Elias argue that, 'far from representing a liberation from harmful beauty standards, [love your body] discourses are implicated in a deeper and more pernicious regulation of women that has shifted from bodily to psychic regulation' (2014: 179). In this respect, feeling 'better' through such images is seen as interpellating women as active, autonomous and self-reinventing subjects, divorced from the regulatory (fatphobic) context of gendered power relations/normativities. This thesis seeks to provide nuance to these arguments in the context of how young women experience body positive discourses as circulated by celebrity on Instagram – i.e., it considers how young women are moved by non-normative/body positive selfies and what these images can elicit and do for participants. Do they broaden the scope of who and what is considered photographable and/or encourage participants to change their affective relationship to their body? Are these affects evidence of a new disciplinary regime in which women are taught that loving their bodies is a simple matter of choice?

It is significant that audience research and/or explorations that centre marginalised or stigmatised experiences of selfie use are typically nuanced in their conclusions about the practice. For example, several works give space to the ways self-imaging practices across Tumblr, YouTube and Instagram offer women, girls, non-binary, gender non-conforming and trans people a space to resist erasure and misrepresentation, and/or speak back to dominant discourses on gender, sexuality, racism, disability, appearance and selfhood (Vivienne, 2017; Tiidenberg, 2017; Tiidenberg and Gómez-Cruz, 2015; Holmes, 2017; Wargo, 2015; Hill, 2017; Olszanowski, 2014). Tiidenberg and Gómez-Cruz's exploration of women's NSFW (Not Safe For Work, or sexy) selfies on the

social networking site Tumblr is particularly useful to this thesis. Drawing on interviews with nine 'self-shooters' and bloggers, the researchers explore how taking and sharing NSFW selfies can help the women in the study internalise 'corporeal truths' and in turn, reject body shaming discourses (Tiidenberg and Gómez-Cruz, 2015; also see Tiidenberg, 2017). They explore how 'alternations to one's agency, power and political intent' happen through taking and sharing NSFW selfies, as their beliefs about what is photographable change (2015: 83). It is for this reason that they view selfies as 'knowledge devices' (a positive resistance) through which women can 'unfix' their bodies and become something more than unfinished projects (Tiidenberg and Gómez-Cruz, 2015: 88). The authors caution against seeing this process as having only a personal and no social impact given the relational context of the community on Tumblr – participation in this community is seen as socially reinforcing 'ways of looking and experiencing bodies in a new, body-positive, feminist and queer-friendly way' (2015: 84). This thesis extends this argument to Instagram – specifically, it seeks to explore whether *viewing* celebrity selfies in this context can act as a 'knowledge device' (i.e., an awareness-raising practice) through which young women internalise corporeal 'truths' and reject body shaming discourses.

Mary McGill takes issue with popular accounts of self-taking which position the practice as either 'empowering' or 'disempowering' (2023). Her study with twenty women about their selfie-taking practices highlights the prominence of 'discourses of control' and, particularly, how 'empowerment-through-control' of one's image is not as straightforward as popular accounts suggest. The participants in her study 'described the increased control [selfie-taking] offers them over their image, enabling them to shoot, edit and share photographs of themselves they are happy with' (McGill, 2023: 4113). They use this control to produce selfies that adhere to Instagrammable aesthetics and meet normative beauty standards, a process they describe as labour intensive but pleasurable. In this respect, McGill argues control discourse speaks to a language of postfeminist, neoliberal 'empowerment' where women are encouraged to 'choose' to adhere to normative femininities (thus sharing similarities with Elias and Gill, 2018). At the same time, the participants view the sense of agency over their selfies as 'a fiction', as complete control over their image is never secured. While selfies enable women to create images of themselves that meet a standard they are happy with, this very process incites a reflection that the 'standard' achieved is

culturally and technologically determined. The participants in this study thus experience discursive and visual dissonance between 'self' and their idealised image, and 'these dissonant effects produce shifting subjectivities where a desire for control can be realised only to be undone' (2023: 4118).

As well as providing nuance to (postfeminist) discourses of control-as-empowerment, McGill's study (2023) is interesting in that is highlights how an idealised image of *oneself* can incite a process of comparison against which women feel inadequate. This is typically how idealised celebrity figures and popular images have been conceptualised – i.e., as 'a fiction' and impossible to live up to. In bringing together an analysis of women's own selfies and celebrity selfies, this thesis will explore further how knowledge about one's own selfie practices (as a labour-intensive process) extends to, and impacts on, their negotiation of celebrity selfies. It also argues that being able to shoot, edit and share photographs one is 'happy' with can speak to more than how participants look (selfies as representation). In this regard, I argue that the sense of 'empowerment' participants feel (through control of their image) cannot be reduced to a postfeminist paradigm; the purpose of young women's selfies and the 'control' they offer must be considered within the context of their lived experiences. As I explore in Chapter 4, what appears outwardly 'normative' may still have a transgressive function in terms of altering how the participants feel about themselves.

To conclude, there is a growing pool of research attempting to understand the ambivalences, contradictions, and complexities of the selfie phenomenon, specifically on Instagram. This thesis contributes to and advances this growing field of research, with a focus on how young women use – and how their selfie practices are shaped by – celebrity. Namely, it attends to how young women experience Instagram and its algorithmic privileging of certain celebrity bodies, how they negotiate, refuse, or adopt 'Instagrammable' aesthetics in their own selfies, and how their knowledge of what is granted visibility informs their curation tactics. I now turn to the final section of this review, which outlines how this thesis contributes to the existing work exploring celebrity on social media and celebrity selfies.

Celebrity and Social Media

Historically, broadcast media and cultural intermediaries (for instance, agents and publicists) were seen to be behind the ways celebrity was managed, constructed and performed (Rojek, 2001). However, in the past fifteen years, celebrity culture has become increasingly diversified and decentralised, in part owing to the rise of social media platforms and user-generated content. Alice Marwick and danah boyd note how the 'fragmented media landscape has created a shift in traditional understanding of 'celebrity management' from a highly controlled and regulated institutional model to one which performers and personalities actively address and interact with [audiences]' (2011: 139-40). This describes how the contemporary digital environment is marked by a notable shift from a broadcast to a presentational or 'participatory model' of communication (Marshall, 2010). The implications of this shift are seen most clearly in the ways celebrities now (appear to) represent themselves through producing and disseminating their own content on social media platforms. There is plentiful academic work about how this plays out in terms of celebrities' Twitter use (see Muntean and Peterson, 2009; Marwick and boyd, 2011; Alexander, 2013; Thomas, 2014), but much less on the topic of Instagram. As explored earlier, Instagram is significantly different to Twitter in that it has a unique set of affordances, styles and 'rules'. Namely, it is a platform focused on visuality rather than written text. Below I provide an overview of the existing scholarly debates about the celebrity selfie on Instagram and set out how this thesis contributes an empirical perspective to this area of work. This section also illustrates how the construction of celebrity on social media is organised around questions of what is 'real' (authentic) and what is not. Finally, I set how this thesis provides a contextually specific and empirically informed addition to explorations of authenticity in the field of Celebrity Studies.

Celebrity selfies on Instagram

As detailed in the Introduction, much of the work focusing on the celebrity selfie on Instagram comprises textual and visual analyses (Marwick, 2015; Duguay, 2016; Jerslev and Mortensen, 2016). These works are similar in their observations that celebrity selfies (as isolated digital texts) reinforce traditional hierarchies of fame and narrow standards of appearance, from whiteness, through heteronormativity to thinness. For instance, Alice Marwick draws on a textual and visual analysis of various microcelebrity selfies to highlight how the visual iconography of traditional celebrity

culture – 'thin but buxom bodies, sports cars, and designer clothes' – is encouraged and replicated on Instagram (2015: 157). It is assumed that 'ordinary' users find the lifestyles of the rich and famous aspirational and are encouraged to emulate or 'imitate' the conventions and aesthetics of celebrity images in their own selfies, such as their styles, locations, and poses. For example, Marwick notes that the 'luxury' selfies posted by microcelebrities document 'what many young people dream of having and the lifestyle they dream of living' (2015: 155). While such an argument does not position audiences as at 'risk' in the same way as popular discourse on the topic, it nevertheless reduces their identification with celebrity images to one of imitation – specifically, imitation of a narrow 'ideal'.

Stephanie Duguay (2016) employs a textual analysis of LGBTQ+ celebrity Ruby Rose's Instagram selfies and Vine videos to illustrate how different platforms mediate how selfies are produced and distributed. Duguay coins the term 'conversational capacity' to define the ways social media platforms (e.g., through their affordances and user guidelines) can influence selfies in terms of their 'range, the variety of discourses addressed within a selfie; reach, the circulation of selfies within and across publics; and salience, the strength and clarity of discourses communicated through a selfie' (2016: 2). Using Rose as a case study, Duguay concludes that Instagram works to limit their selfies' conversational capacity and minimise their LGBTQ+ visibility (2016). Rose's selfies 'mute discourses of alternative gender identity and sexuality through desexualized, proper, and aesthetically appealing self-representations' (Duguay, 2016: 10). I do not contest that social media, and particularly Instagram, can work to reinforce dominant normative gender and sexuality discourses. However, Duguay's analysis is problematic in the way it mutes the affective complexities of LGBTQ+ celebrity selfies and what they can *elicit and do* for people. Regardless of how normative or binary an LGBTQ+ celebrity's gender presentation may appear to some, it would be amiss to assume that they are not capable of mobilising meaningful discussions about identity among audiences, as evidenced in Dyer's work on Judy

Garland (1986; also see Vivienne, 2017[4]). This thesis is attentive to this reality – that is, it seeks to prioritise the perhaps surprising ways audiences use celebrity images that on the surface promote 'normative' gender and sexuality discourses.

Existing work also explores microcelebrity or 'influencer' selfies as a subversive, commercial endeavour (Abidin, 2016). Crystal Abidin argues that Instagram features the most stylised and 'overtly commercial' selfies compared to other platforms (2016: 6). She explores how influencers in Singapore use selfies on the platform to monetise their following, noting how the frivolous framing of selfies in popular discourse (particularly those taken by girls and young women) has led to the labour involved in their selfies to be overlooked (Abidin, 2016: 2). Abidin defines this tactical labour as 'quietly subversive' in that it reclaims the selfie for monetary and self-actualising purposes, yet appears effortless, subconscious and goes 'unnoticed to the untrained eye' (2016: 10-11). As explored earlier, celebrity audience work has shown that exposing public-relations techniques and the logics of the celebrity production system is a common (and enjoyable) audience practice (Gamson, 1994). Furthermore, given that non-celebrity audiences engage in similar (intensive regimes of) selfie-taking labour and negotiate the same user expectations on Instagram (Elias and Gill, 2018; Gill, 2023), I question to what extent, and to whom, this labour goes unnoticed. Indeed, research looking at anti-fan responses to female influencers (on hateblogs) has shown that their Instagram practices are heavily policed and critiqued; 'their requisite career visibility opens them up to intensified public scrutiny and—more pointedly—networked hate and harassment' (Duffy, Miltner and Wahlstedt, 2022: 1657). This thesis similarly contributes an empirical analysis of how celebrity selfies on Instagram

[4] Son Vivienne's audience research on gender-diverse selfies on Tumblr draws attention to some of the discourses around celebrity trans self-representation (2017). Contrarily to Duguay (2016), they note that 'celebrities like Ruby Rose and Laverne Cox, regardless of how normative or binary their gender presentations may appear to some, use digital self (re)presentation to catalyze discussion of gender diversity in popular mainstream media' (Vivienne, 2017: 137). Importantly, this research highlights that despite the (textual) limitations of an image – i.e., their seemingly 'heteronormative' presentation – they are still capable of mobilising meaningful discussions about identity.

are policed (and what 'truths' this discursively reproduces), although focusing on 'everyday' audiences of celebrity rather than anti-fans.

From an empirical perspective, very little research exists to account for young women's experiences of engaging with celebrity selfies on Instagram. One exception in the existing literature is Sofia Caldeira, Sofie Van Bauwel and Sander De Ridder's (2021) research on the selfie practices of young women on Instagram. While not about celebrity specifically, the participants in this study briefly discuss how beauty standards are reified by popular accounts such as influencers, fashion bloggers and 'the Instagram model', ideals which are negotiated as unrealistic, potentially harmful to their own and others' mental health and influential in the construction of their own self-representations. It is not possible to elaborate on the specific ways, or the extent to which, unrealistic ideals impact on the mental health of their participants because the authors provide no further detail. Indeed, this is typically where popular arguments about the 'effects' of celebrity culture/idealised media images end – i.e., they are seen to constitute an impossible 'destination' or 'standard' which make girls and young women feel 'bad'. This thesis provides nuance to this argument; namely, it offers an in-depth analysis of how and why celebrity comparisons (i.e., the exact feelings or pressures evoked by idealised celebrity selfies) are often hard to explore, articulate or quantify. In the context of this thesis, I argue that that the ambiguity or broad terms in which the 'negative effects' of celebrity are spoken about speaks to young women's attempts to distance themselves from popular narratives of 'risk' by instead occupying a position of power – a stance they are so regularly denied in popular debates.

The participants in Caldeira, Bauwel and Ridder's (2021) research note how Instagrammable conventions are 'tried and tested' by influencers and bloggers and thus serve as inspiration for their own selfies. The authors note how this speaks to the participants' awareness that posting on Instagram opens one up to public scrutiny – highly idealised selfies that conform to what is expected therefore 'feel more comfortable' to post (2021: 1087). I find this reading particularly pertinent (and useful) because it provides nuance to arguments that posit ordinary Instagram users as wanting to emulate or 'imitate' the conventions and aesthetics of celebrity images in their own selfies (Abidin, 2016; Jerslev and Mortensen, 2016; Marwick, 2015). Caldeira, Bauwel and Ridder's analysis begins to highlight how identification with

celebrity selfies is not a straightforward process of 'I want to look like X celebrity'. Rather, the ways idealised celebrity selfies are used here shares similarities with Feasey's (2008) focus group study with readers of *heat* magazine. For example, Feasey's participants spoke of copying celebrity styles in the magazines not because they were thought to be imbued with 'star' qualities but because the 'everyday' context (e.g., in paparazzi shots) made the styles feel 'safe'. I return to this argument in my analysis of how the participants in this research similarly 'copy' particular poses and styles used in celebrity selfies – not simply because they want to be(come) like a celebrity, but because doing so offers them reassurance in the context of a platform that encourages the surveillance of self and others.

Finally, Rosalind Gill's *Perfect* (2023) dedicates a discussion to Instagram and the power 'perfect' images circulating on the platform. She notes how, among her participants, 'celebrities and influencers were frequently indicted as 'too perfect', always looking beautiful, photographed in stunning locations, with incredible food and drinks, and alongside other 'shiny, happy people' who appeared effortlessly cool and good-looking' (2023: 48). Gill's participants were critical of such images and analysed their construction – including their 'authenticity'. However, they also noted feeling like they had to live up to images of idealised femininity; '*they may be angry about it, but they also have to live up to it'* (2023: 50, original emphasis). For this reason, Gill contends that the young women in her study are not 'passively subjugated by images of female perfection' but are rather 'critical but caught' (2023: 50). This is reminiscent of Foucault's understanding of resistance as operating *within* the constraints of power – that is, Gill acknowledges that her participants 'critiques do not facilitate the ability to escape the tyranny of the perfect' (2023: 50). In the concluding chapter of this work, Gill dedicates a brief discussion to her participants' ambivalence towards body positivity trends. She notes how her participants, although they wanted to 'break free of crushing and punitive norms of feminine appearance' could not do so (2023: 186). Instead, she notes how her participants engaged in strategies of cultivating sources of pleasure *outside* of social media. The primary focus in this work is thus ultimately on the *pressures* of celebrity content/norms of femininity on platforms such as Instagram and how this impacts young women. This thesis builds on these important debates – for instance, it provides an analysis of how young women experience idealised celebrity images as 'impossible'. However, in contrast to Gill,

this thesis presents a greater focus on the *pleasures* afforded by celebrity images on Instagram. Notably, it is interested in offering a detailed analysis of young women's strategies of cultivating sources of pleasure *on* the platform – which includes giving space to how they curate celebrity images (including body positive celebrity) and the affective potential of the figures/images they seek to prioritise.

To say that the existing work on the celebrity selfie privileges their representational power is a fair assessment. We can see here how the marginalisation of the 'real' or empirical audience in the field of Celebrity Studies extends to contemporary media forms, including the celebrity selfie on Instagram. Much of the work set out in this section prioritises the text (celebrity selfies) and/or the technology (Instagram) to explore how celebrity is constructed and performed in the contemporary digital environment. From an audience perspective, the role of the celebrity selfie in young women's Instagram and selfie practices is currently underexplored. This thesis attends to this gap in the literature.

'Authentic' celebrity performances

As alluded to throughout this review, a significant aspect of 'doing' celebrity in the contemporary digital environment entails the performance of 'authenticity' (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Franssen, 2019; Giles, 2018a). I describe authenticity as a performance deliberately here, as authenticity is understood in this thesis as a communicative practice (something one does) rather than a fixed concept or innate quality (something one is). This understanding contrasts its traditional conceptualisation in academia; for example, the likes of Roussea to Marx to Thoreau understood the 'authentic' as residing in the 'inner' self, whereas the 'outer' self was understood as a performance 'often corrupted by material things', i.e., capitalism (Banet-Weiser, 2012: 10). However, in contemporary culture, Sarah Banet-Weiser posits that authenticity can no longer be seen to exist 'outside' of consumer capitalism or as a space that is not material (2012). Rather, she suggests that there has been a shift from 'authentic' culture to the *branding of authenticity* (2012). This is not to ignore the ways that individuals continue to invest in the notion that authentic spaces are distinct from the realm of the market – a point I return to in Chapter 5 where I explore how brand sponsorships/partnerships can disrupt a celebrity's claims to authenticity. Rather,

Banet-Weiser's conceptualisation of authenticity describes particularly well how 'just being yourself' has become one of the central ways to market (or brand) oneself as a relatable commodity in contemporary consumer culture.

It is significant to highlight here that an understanding of authenticity as performance is not novel; it has long been a concept central to Celebrity Studies and, as Richard Dyer notes, 'a quality necessary to the star phenomenon to make it work' (1991: 137). For example, in *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (1986), Dyer noted how 'the whole media construction of stars encourages us to think in terms of "really"' (1986: 2); that is, what is the celebrity 'really' like? While Dyer was referring to film stardom, the construction of celebrity on social media continues to be organised through a 'rhetoric of authenticity' – that is, around questions of what is 'real' (truth) and what is not (artifice). In the context of social media platforms such as YouTube, Twitter and Instagram, scholars have explored how celebrity performances continue to be structured through this rhetoric (e.g., Berryman and Kavka, 2018; Avdeeff, 2016; Marwick, 2015; Bishop, 2018; Abidin, 2017, 2018; Duffy and Hund, 2019; Reade, 2020). Across these studies, there is a shared focus on how celebrities use authentic performances to foster relatability and cultivate intimate connections with their followers. For example, in her online ethnography of UK YouTube vloggers Zoella and Gabriella Rose, Sophie Bishop (2018) argues that videos in which 'anxiety struggles' are revealed function as affective strategic performances that aid in the construction of authenticity. These authentic performances are seen to reassure audiences that what is being said is 'real' – i.e., unscripted and not driven by brand collaborations (Bishop, 2018). Berryman and Kavka similarly argue that negative affect ('mediated tears, sobs and struggles') function as 'affirmations of authenticity' that can strengthen 'ties of intimacy' between YouTubers and their followers (2018: 85). Other markers of authenticity on YouTube include celebrities filming in their bedrooms, as well as fluctuating 'natural' lighting and blooper reels, all of which are seen to create an illusion of 'direct' and unmediated relationships with audiences.

Alice Marwick extends this analysis to Instagram, noting how traditional celebrities (such as pop stars) 'have embraced social media to create direct, unmediated relationships with fans, or at least the illusion of such' (2015: 138). That is, on Instagram celebrities (appear to) provide candid snapshots, which are seen to give

audiences the impression that they have greater access to what the celebrities are 'really' like (Marwick, 2015). Abidin's extensive research on influencers makes similar arguments about how authenticity operates as a strategic performance (2017, 2018); for example, she terms 'calibrated amateurism' to describe how influencers construct an authentic, spontaneous and relatable self through portraying the aesthetics of an amateur and 'porous authenticity' to describe how influencers strategically reveal elements of their 'private' or 'offline' lives (2017: 1; 2018). These performances are seen to encourage audiences to 'evaluate and validate' how genuine a celebrity 'really' is (Abidin, 2018). From a Celebrity Studies perspective, then, such a conceptualisation is not overtly distinct from the public-private and ordinary-extraordinary tensions that have fuelled and defined celebrity since the beginning of the twentieth century (Dyer, 1979; Rojek, 2001; Gamson, 1994). In fact, these explorations of authenticity begin to highlight how a preoccupation with what is 'real' and 'authentic' behind the public self remains a dominant structuring force in the context of the celebrity selfie.

These studies act a useful starting point for understanding what markers of authenticity can make celebrities (and their selfies) on Instagram feel 'real'. However, so far these works have only been able to *speculate* on how and why performances of authenticity arouse audience interest – for example, in terms of how they are assumed to foster 'relatability' and 'strengthen ties of intimacy' with audiences. I say speculate because, in keeping with the lack of audience work in the field of Celebrity Studies, there is an absence of research exploring how social media users engage with and negotiate authentic celebrity performances from an empirical perspective. Much of the existing research treats the audience as an abstract concept or examines 'online' audience reactions, such as replies to celebrity content, and thus 'yield only a partial (if not distorted) understanding of how celebrity is implicated in everyday life' (Mendick, Allen and Harvey, 2015: 374). This thesis attends to this gap by providing an empirically informed analysis of how (in)authenticity is negotiated in the context of Instagram – for example, Chapter 5 explores how the participants in this research prioritise and enjoy seeing displays of negative affect, posts that suggest a lack of premeditation, as well as 'natural' aesthetics. However, my analysis follows Banet-Weiser's argument that consumers (i.e., the participants in this research) are not simply 'tricked' or 'manipulated' by authentic branding strategies (2012: 12). That is,

I do not consider authentic performances on Instagram as necessarily able to create the 'illusion' of any direct or unmediated access to their 'real' lives.

Indeed, I explored earlier how authenticity is understood as central to the ecology of Instagram and how young women's 'own' selfie practices are shaped by ethical orientations towards authenticity (Gill, 2023: 148). Thus, I suspect that participants in this research may similarly understand, in the context of Instagram at least, that authenticity itself is a brand – i.e., a strategic performance that requires significant labour (Banet-Weiser, 2012: 11). This shares similarities with, and draws on, Beccy Collings' research, in which the celebrity selfie is understood as a boundary-blurring medium that displays an 'authentic inauthentic self' (2014: 512). This refers to how audiences see a posed or 'sanitized' view of the 'backstage' that draws upon 'aspects of the frontstage/public persona […] catering to viewer expectations, in effect' (Collings, 2014: 513). In other words, Collings argues that audiences are *aware* that they are seeing a highly constructed view of the 'private' arena, which caters to their viewer expectations (i.e., the celebrity's pre-existing 'brand'). Extending this to the context of Instagram, I argue that participants are also likely to be aware that they are seeing a carefully crafted view of the celebrity self(ie) which caters to both their viewer expectations *and* the visibility requirements of Instagram. Chapter 5 explores how authentic performances in this respect do not simply convince the participants in this research that anything is *actually* real (i.e., 'untinged' by brand sponsorships).

Finally, authenticity is generally used as a catch-all term in the field of Celebrity Studies. There is currently little discussion of how particular celebrities and their claims to authenticity are negotiated differently across different media forms and along gendered, racialised and classed lines (i.e., in contextually specific ways). Who is and is not considered authentic? How does this differ across media forms? What does this tell us about who is granted access to discourses of 'authentic' femininity? As explored earlier, one notable exception is Duffy, Miltner and Wahlstedt's research (2022) which has explored how influencers are particularly prominent targets of gendered authenticity policing on anti-fan blogs. This thesis likewise offers a contextually specific analysis of how authenticity is negotiated, although in the context of Instagram and in respect to the celebrity selfie. Further, it unpacks the participants' discussions of celebrity selfies through a Foucauldian perspective to

explore authenticity as a disciplinary and knowledge-making device that allows participants to *organise* certain celebrities along gendered, classed and racialised lines. In doing so, it highlights how authenticity is used to (de)construct and normalise certain embodiments as more or less human (Butler, 2004).

Before I proceed to the analysis of my interview material, the following chapter provides a more thorough overview of the research methodology and examines the rationale for its design. Below I provide an overview of my subsequent chapters.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the research methodology and examines the rationale for its design, from its conception and my own personal investment in the project through to the qualitative data analysis methods that were implemented. This chapter also sets out my feminist methodological approach and my attempts to critically reflect on and examine notions of subjectivity, power and epistemology, particularly in relation to hierarchies between myself and participants.

Chapter 4 explores how the participants in this research negotiate popular narratives about selfie-takers (e.g., as narcissistic) and celebrity culture (e.g., as low value) and how these impact on their selfie practices, Instagram use and discussions of celebrity. Specifically, it explores their attempts to distance themselves from narratives about the harmful 'influence' of idealised celebrity images – the participants in this research explicitly rebut the idea that their selfie practices follow the scripts of celebrity figures – they position celebrity selfies (specifically those that are normative) as content that they themselves do not have the resources, nor desire, to replicate. This chapter thus explores how issues of anticipated judgement, popular discourse on selfies and selfie-takers, and the popularity of Instagrammable conventions and aesthetics act as disciplinary forms that explicitly shape when, where and how participants' selfies are created and shared.

Chapter 5 attends to how the participants in this study curate celebrity content on Instagram, including who they follow, unfollow and mute, as well as how they qualitatively experience the algorithm. It illustrates the highly calculated nature of

their curation tactics; participants seek to minimise the prevalence of idealised images on the platform and prioritise celebrity content that has use-value, reflects their morals and ethics and is 'real'. Notably, they incorporate their knowledge of who and what is granted visibility on the platform (and wider visual economy) to curate, to their best of their ability, a digital space that makes them 'feel good'. Key to this feel-good space is the performance of 'authenticity', specifically celebrity selfies that disrupt Instagrammable ideals and expose what participants see as more 'realistic' qualities. Overall, this chapter highlights that both idealised and 'authentic' celebrity selfies on Instagram are negotiated in a similar way: critically and as a construction.

Chapter 6 explores the participants' affective investments in (and the productive possibilities of) non-normative celebrity selfies on Instagram. It extrapolates on the ways participants seek out celebrity content displaying 'real' aesthetics (Chapter 5) and highlights how the celebrity selfie can act as a vehicle through which to feel more comfortable in/better about their bodies. The chapter illustrates that participants find pleasure in the celebrity selfie when it re-imagines the non-normative body, framed not as something to be improved but something one does not need to care ('give a fuck') about. This chapter also discusses how idealised celebrity images/selfies can evoke comparisons to the self. It explores why, in comparison to the pleasurable aspects of celebrity on Instagram, the participants in this research found the negative 'effects' of celebrity more difficult to articulate and quantify. To explain this phenomenon, I return to the ways participants downplay and dismiss celebrity culture and their feelings about it as 'silly' (Chapter 4).

Chapter 7 summarises the key interventions of this thesis, reflects on its limitations and considers directions for future research looking at the relationship between young women and celebrity.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Overview

This is a small-scale qualitative study based on original data gathered through interviews with 17 women and one non-binary person aged 18-35 in the UK. Participants were invited to discuss their experiences of engaging with celebrity women on Instagram (specifically their selfies), as well as talk through their own selfie practices. It utilised a 'media go-along' method (Jørgensen, 2016) to actively encourage participants to reflect on their Instagram use/selfie practices and interrogate the 'act' of celebrity selfie consumption. This approach involved the participants looking at their personal Instagram accounts during the interview and discussing their encounters with celebrities and their selfies as they happened. The collection and interpretation of this material was guided by a self-reflexive feminist (Foucauldian) methodological framework – particularly in terms of rejecting positivist notions of objectivity and neutrality and critically examining how my own subjectivity and positionality was interwoven with the research process and the knowledge produced (Naples and Gurr, 2014; Oakley, 2016; Pillow, 2003).

The first section of this chapter attempts to 'situate' me as the researcher and make explicit my personal investment in this research area. It then provides an overview of the feminist and Foucauldian research considerations that underpinned the research design – specifically, how it explores young women's lived experiences of using celebrity on Instagram as forms of 'subjugated' knowledges and understands participants to be poststructuralist subjects that are both constituted by and constitutive of gendered celebrity/selfie discourse (Davies, 1997; Laws and Davies, 2000; Foucault, 1980). The focus of the chapter then turns to the specifics of the research process, including my approach to identifying and recruiting participants, type of interview schedule/questions and 'media go along' approach (Jørgensen, 2016), as well as my choice to analyse the data using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Throughout, it explores how my own subjectivity and positionality is interwoven with the research process and reflects on the advantages and limitations of

my approaches. The chapter also provides a demographic overview of the sample of participants.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of East Anglia's General Research Ethics Committee (Ref: HUM 19-010).

Instagram Made Me Gay

A 'positivist' approach to research and its tendency to 'silence the self' works to depersonalise research through keeping the subjectivity and positionality of the researcher (the intersecting axes of identity and their values, politics, motivations, and so on) 'out' of the research process. Such an approach works to uphold a subject/object binary between researcher and research participants, thereby reinforcing the power held by the researcher and obfuscating their subjective analysis. Feminist methods often adopt a more reflexive approach which recognises and aims to interrogate the power relations and imbalances within and throughout the research process (Wasserfall, 1993; Collins, 2009; DeVault and Gross, 2012; Oakley, 2016; Tang, 2002). Namely, in terms of critically reflecting on and examining how one's own personal history, subjectivity and positionality is *interwoven* with the research process and the knowledge that is produced (Pillow, 2003). To start, then, I want to first set out here how my own experiences with celebrity on Instagram inspired me to conduct this research. This section endeavours to 'situate' the researcher to make explicit my personal investment in this research area and integrate myself *within* the research process, thus complicating the subject/object binary upheld in positivist research (Jenkins, 1992).

I first downloaded Instagram in 2014; I was a 'closeted' lesbian at the time. I write this thesis in 2021 after seven years of Instagram use; I am now an out lesbian. In terms of my own personal narrative, such phenomena are intrinsically interlinked. This is to say that since 2014, Instagram has played an important part in the remaking of my subjectivity. Here I am informed by Rosi Braidotti's definition of subjectivity as a 'socially mediated process' and understand the 'emergence of new social subjects' as 'always a collective enterprise, 'external' to the self while it also mobilizes the self's

in-depth structures' (2002: 7). In other words, subjectivity comes at the point of meeting with the social world; while it might rely on certain innate desires/feelings, how one's own desires are understood and recognised by oneself depends on available language, discourse, other social subjects and so forth (Braidotti, 2002; Butler, 2004; Foucault, 1977). Thus, one can emerge as a 'new social subject' – with a new axis of identification in tow (lesbianism) – when external structures (e.g., queer celebrity figures and lesbian meme pages) facilitate and allow for such becoming. The process of recognising myself as a lesbian was tied up with my Instagram use, or in clickbait form, Instagram made me gay.

Figure 1. *Meme by Reductress, June 2021*

Since 2014, Instagram has operated as a social space through which to explore my subjectivity. Why I chose Instagram over other (more notably queer) platforms such as Tumblr simply comes down to issues of hype and ease: Instagram became increasingly popular among my social circles and it was – and continues to be – easy to navigate in comparison to my flings with Tumblr. Similar to how the participants in this research carefully curate content and navigate Instagram (Chapter 5), the platform has allowed me to create a personalised space. Notably, I found myself seeking out more queer content including sex positive pages, lesbian meme accounts

and gay celebrities when I moved to Norwich for university. Through such content, I gradually began to realise that to be gay was a viable, recognisable and liveable means of existence. The Reductress meme above (Figure 1) effectively sums up this journey, albeit in relation to social media platform TikTok. Further, the 59,000 likes it received on Instagram makes me think that I'm not alone in this becoming – namely, how such content allowed me to understand, mobilise and organise my innate desires in a new way. It is worth noting here that some might proffer that my lesbianism lay dormant (or 'closeted', as I refer to myself above for the drama) and that Instagram helped me to discover or unravel my homosexuality. This is not what I intend to suggest here; indeed, such musings would only lead me to invest in the idea that my sexuality has a kind of ontological reality. Adopting a Foucauldian analysis throughout this thesis, I argue instead that I have had 'to work at becoming' homosexual (Foucault, 2010 [1981]). Instagram has helped me to do exactly that, and 'lesbian' is something I have become.

It is perhaps unsurprising that I see Instagram as a valuable and dynamic space that allows for the broadening of one's spatial and social reality and thus the potential to become as a social subject. While all users may have differing experiences with the platform, the potentiality of Instagram is nevertheless noteworthy and currently understudied. As highlighted in the Introduction, popular debates have prioritised the potential negative effects of idealised norms on the platform. I encountered said debates during my undergraduate degree, specifically in a 'Celebrity Studies' module during my final year. Writing an essay on one of Kim Kardashian's many Instagram selfies that 'broke the internet' introduced me to some of the common themes in popular discourse (selfies as trivial, yet women as 'at risk' from viewing and taking them), as well as the methods (textual analyses) in the academic literature. My frustration with how such analyses clashed with my own lived experience – in that there was not much space given to the ways people actively engage with celebrity – never really went away. I note this all here to set out the beginnings of this research project and acknowledge that I have felt and experienced the potentiality of Instagram first-hand. Further, my lived-experience – and now academic journey – is what drove me towards conducting this research in the first instance. To follow a feminist methodological tradition is not just about denying my objectivity, but perhaps

recognising the value of my subjectivity. Indeed, if I had not had my own journey of becoming through Instagram and celebrity content, I doubt I would have been motivated to conduct this research.

Research Design: Qualitative Research Methods

As I acknowledge above, this research was motivated by the productive role Instagram played in my subject formation and how this experience clashed with popular discourse on the frivolity of the platform, celebrity, and the selfie. Popular discourse in the context of this thesis refers to content pedalled by popular news outlets that support the notion young women are passive victims of media influence. Through a Foucauldian lens, popular discourse as well as academic texts – as discursive outlets of knowledge production – have generated dominant understandings (truths) of the lived experience of young women. To speak back to these narratives in an academic setting, through the collection, presentation and analysis of empirical data, is a methodological attempt to disrupt the current episteme. Extending my Foucauldian approach, I will now explore the themes of epistemology and knowledge production that are key to this research.

Throughout Foucault's explorations of knowledge production (1978, 1983), he posited religion, the prison, 'sciences' such as psychology, and education as institutions intrinsic to the production of 'legitimate' knowledge. These explorations were in aid of creating a 'history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects' (Foucault, 1983: 208-209). At odds with legitimate knowledges, according to Foucault, sit 'subjugated knowledges', a term which refers to ideas and experiences often 'disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition' (Bacchi, 2018: para 10). In the context of this research, 'legitimate' knowledge on young women's experiences produced by popular discourse is explored against young women's *lived experiences* of using celebrity on Instagram (as a form of 'subjugated' knowledge). This approach to knowledge production is an attempt to disrupt current epistemological formations and provide a novel contribution to the field of Celebrity Studies. Indeed, there is tension in this proposition as I use an academic (read: more *legitimate*) discursive outlet to generate this 'subjugated

knowledge', the implications of which I explore in detail later. As in the tradition of a Foucauldian approach, though, I am not methodologically seeking an alternative truth (where truth does not fundamentally exist). Instead, this thesis aims to 'emancipate' participants' experiences from 'subjection' (Bacchi, 2018), making them 'capable of opposition and of struggle' and of being used 'tactically' (Foucault, 1980: 84). In doing so, this thesis contributes to a wider project in feminist media studies in that it seeks to develop a revaluation of young women as active social subjects through prioritising the experiences of 'actual audiences' (Ang, 1991: 2; Stacey, 1994; Radway, 1991).

This research adopts the qualitative interview method as key to the task of responding and disrupting popular assumptions about celebrity selfies, young women's selfie/Instagram practices and the relations between them. Theoretically speaking, qualitative interviews open-up the possibility to explore participants' experiences through a poststructuralist subject lens (Davies, 1997; Laws and Davies, 2000). This draws on the idea that the subject/self are not stable phenomena, but 'always in process, taking […] shape in and through the discursive possibilities which selves are made' (Davies, 1997: 274); an approach which again speaks to my own experiences with Instagram and queerness. Through this lens, notions of agency and performance can be used to 'make sense of the ways in which we are at the same time shaped by forces external to us, and yet through that very shaping, gain the possibility of power and agency' (Laws and Davies, 2000: 206). In this respect, the poststructuralist subject can therefore be read 'as both constituted and constitutive' (Davies, 1997: 276). What this means for this research is that the participants' thoughts, ideas, and responses have the potential to (re)produce and re-shape not only the participants themselves, but contemporary notions of the celebrity selfie and its value. This approach thus felt particularly appropriate given the context of my feminist Foucauldian theoretical framework, as well as the research questions guiding this thesis, which speak to issues of structure and agency in young women's negotiation of celebrity self(ies) and their own selfie practices.

Qualitative methods are of particular importance within feminist scholarship as they can uncover and illuminate the complexities of identities and nuances of lived

experiences. Indeed, the qualitative interview and focus group methods have been central to feminist methods in the attempt to understand women's engagements with gendered and devalued media texts, in particular (see Skeggs and Wood, 2009; Feasey, 2008). Importantly, these methods are able to illustrate how multiple meanings might be made at sites of consumption and, in the context of this research, unsettle 'easy answers about what celebrity is and does' (Mendick, Allen and Harvey, 2015: 376). It is important to caveat this argument with two points: firstly, as a small-scale research piece, any disruption to dominant narratives produced in the finished analysis is equally as small-scale. This point is not to diminish its usefulness; in fact, focusing on a small group of predominantly young women has allowed me to explore the nuances of their experiences in great depth and in turn speak back to homogenising popular narratives. My use of verbatim quotations and adoption of the participants' own words (be it their definitions of celebrity, selfies, or colloquial language in my analysis) throughout this thesis is an attempt at foregrounding their lived experience. Secondly, and relatedly, the interview method is not without its ethical dilemmas, limitations, and epistemological implications. Feminist scholars have historically highlighted issues of power between researcher/s and participant/s and the politics of analysing, interpreting, and representing the 'voices' – or knowledges – of participants (Rice, 2009; hooks, 1989; Fine 2002; Robinson, 2011). It is in this respect that this chapter aims to make visible the 'messiness' of the research process, specifically in regard to complicating positivist notions of objectivity and neutrality when it comes to knowledge production (Naples and Gurr, 2014; Oakley, 1981, 2016).

Returning to the nature of the knowledge being produced from this small-scale qualitative project, it is worth noting that a researcher's 'insider' subject position within the context of the research topic, as well as 'matching' positionalities between researcher and participant, is seen to be advantageous in qualitative work (Tang, 2002; Gair, 2012; hooks, 1989, Smith, 2008, Wasserfall, 1993). The insider/outsider position or 'matching' refers to the extent to which the researcher is part of the community or shares experiences with participants in terms of identity and/or the topic being researched. In terms of 'women' interviewing 'women', the insider position has been thought to be advantageous in terms of minimising hierarchies between researcher and participant (Oakley, 1981). Further, some scholars have argued that shared

experiences or an insider position is advantageous in terms of allowing for better understanding and thus representation of voice (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009; Gair, 2012). As I explore throughout this chapter, sharing a subject position with some of the participants – i.e., being a young femme researcher who uses Instagram and takes selfies – perhaps in some ways facilitated both my recruitment and interview method. For example, I have an adequate level of Instagram and celebrity knowledge and therefore felt there was some understanding between myself and participants in terms of our shared digital practices, interests and identities as Instagram users and selfie takers during the interviews.

However, I am careful not to situate myself as a complete 'insider' to the research topic. Indeed, such a simplistic – and in many ways violent – categorisation of 'insider' risks obscuring or minimising how factors such as class, ethnicity, race, sexuality, and educational capital contribute to hierarchies between researcher and participant and permeate the shared experience (Pillow, 2003; Tang, 2002). It would be problematic here to posit two intersecting axes of my subjectivity ('lesbian' and 'woman' at the time of the interviews) as a totalising account of my positionality. To do so would risk obscuring my status as a white, working-class postgraduate *academic researcher* using Instagram. This is significant given that I have access to educational and intellectual capital which facilitates an unavoidable gap between 'expert' and research participant. I am in the position, after all, to select who and what is granted visibility and alter the meaning of participants' experiences, which is intrinsic to the types of 'knowledge' this thesis contributes. This speaks to the ethical issues of 'giving voice' to participants and the politics of analysing, interpreting, and representing said voices as the researcher (Rice, 2009; hooks, 1989). Further, representing their 'voices' in any 'authentic' or faithful way is an unrealistic feat – writing this thesis has required me to critically engage with, critique and sometimes contest the participants' discussions. For example, while I give space to the transformative potential of celebrity (Chapter 6), I also critique the participants' 'own' selfie practices as pre-emptively limited in the context of patriarchal visual culture, in that they express reproducing normative and narrow standards of 'ideal' femininity (Chapter 4).

This point does not intend to suggest that participants are entirely powerless in the research context; insider/outsider are shifting positions (Naples, 2003) and power is similarly 'multifaceted, relational and interactional' (Reynolds, 2002: 307-8; also see Thapar-Biokert and Henry, 2004; Lawler, 2000). Indeed, work has questioned the notion of 'powerful researcher' and brought to light the mechanisms through which participants themselves exercise power, creating continual (re)negotiations of power between researcher and participant as 'a dynamic, fluid and two-way interactive process' (Reynolds, 2002: 303). As explored by Thapar-Biokert and Henry (2004), these shifts commonly revolve around structural differences pertaining to race, class, gender, generation, and age, as well as participant reciprocity. Further, Lawler notes how research subjects 'will often get what they can out of the researcher. This may just be time to talk about themselves and their preoccupations, or it may be the pleasure of participating in wider social processes – of being important enough to be the subjects of research' (2000: 8). Indeed, the participants in this research often expressed how interesting they found the interview process. Perhaps given the fact they are so embedded in a lot of young people's everyday lives (as well as they are devalued), their use of celebrity culture, their selfie practices and their Instagram use were not something the participants had reflected on in such depth before. For two participants, this was the very reason they wanted to be involved in the research.

To summarise, this thesis is an attempt to disrupt dominant ('legitimate') understandings of the relations between celebrity on social media and young women. This section has provided a brief overview of the key considerations underpinning a feminist (Foucauldian) methodological framework that guides my methodology. The remainder of this chapter reflects on these considerations in relation to the specifics of my research process (data collection, data analysis and interpretation).

Participant Identification and Recruitment

This research sought to interview young women (inclusive of trans women)[5] about their selfie practices and engagement with celebrity selfies on Instagram. The study's

[5] Women and trans women are only delineated here to suggest and ensure inclusivity. Otherwise, they are synonymous terms.

Participant Information Sheet (PIS) was sent to those who expressed an interest and outlined the inclusion criteria for taking part (see Appendix A). Participants were eligible to participate if they identified as a woman; had an active Instagram account; followed some 'celebrity' women; were 18-35 years old; and were available to conduct the interview in person. I limited the sample to those that were 18-35 as this thesis aimed to investigate popular narratives about 'young' women's selfie-taking practices. This age-range is not to suggest 'young' or 'youth' is a fixed category but was chosen because it aligns with social media usage trends; the majority of Instagram users are under 35 years old (Statista, 2022b). As I explore in further detail later, I limited the sample of participants to those in the UK as I decided to conduct all interviews face-to-face to facilitate my participant observation ('media go-along') approach (Jørgensen, 2016). Furthermore, it ensured consistency in the interview method across the sample, as different data collection methods have been shown to yield different results (Brennen, 2017).

While I made explicit the desire to recruit women who followed celebrity women on Instagram, I used 'celebrity' as a general term in the PIS as I was cognisant of the many and heterogenous terms used to define and talk about them. As noted in the Introduction, both traditional (film stars, musicians) and internet-specific celebrity figures (influencers, fashion bloggers, YouTubers) coexist on Instagram. Discourses of cultural value also underpin different forms of celebrity in terms of their attribution (especially the Instagram influencer). Utilising 'celebrity' as a general term in the context of my recruitment materials (as well as the interview context) was therefore an attempt to be somewhat 'neutral' and not suggestive of the discourses of cultural value underpinning the various terms in circulation. Indeed, the aim of this thesis is to prioritise (and produce) the knowledge of actual audiences – thus it felt important to avoid dominant understandings or 'truths' about particular brands of celebrity at this point in the research process. Significantly – and perhaps aided by this method – the participants' definitions proved to be wide-ranging, from fitness trainers and embroidery artists to dog groomers, as well as they are structured by mainstream (gendered and classed) value judgements (see Chapters 4 and 5).

The PIS was also intentionally 'broad' in its call for women who follow celebrity women, as it aimed to target everyday celebrity audiences and selfie takers. By

'everyday' celebrity audiences, I mean people who 'consistently but casually paid attention to a range of celebrities' (Gamson, 1994: 145), rather than solely 'fans' of particular celebrities. This is because this thesis is responding and contributing to popular discourse and the existing academic literature which is about 'everyday' celebrity audiences and Instagram users. Popular discourse on the selfie and celebrity 'influence' on Instagram is more often concerned with young women's general social media use and celebrity engagements. This is not to say I was not interested in the fan experience: I recognise that fandom has been somewhat integrated into general media consumption in the context of social media and is not necessarily a great source of cultural effort. However, I wanted to be sure in my call for participants to encourage everyday celebrity audiences in the first instance. As I discuss in Chapter 4, none of the participants in this research explicitly referred to themselves as 'fans', perhaps because of the connotations this label has: excessive, irrational, 'obsessed' narratives of avid celebrity consumers remain within contemporary popular culture (Jenson, 1992).

'Snowball' Sampling

In terms of recruitment methods, I advertised the research through word-of-mouth; namely, via personal friendships and familial relationships, as well as contacts within and outside of the university. This recruitment method not only aimed to reach the target population more directly but was also intended to facilitate 'snowball' sampling – i.e., identified participants could refer the project to others (Patton, 2002). It is argued that snowball sampling 'increases the likelihood of trusting the researcher by introduction through a trusted social network' (Cohen and Arieli, 2011: 423). Sixsmith, Boneham and Goldring (2003) similarly note how trust in the researcher is increased if the participants are referred to the study by previous participants. While recruitment was slow to begin with (data collection took place over 4 months), this method soon proved fruitful in that many of my initial participants then referred their own personal contacts to the research, including their friends, colleagues and in one instance, their dog groomer.

I originally planned to conduct 15 interviews as this was a sample size that was practical and manageable to recruit. Moreover, it was a sample size that provided a

realistic amount of data that I could analyse within the timeframe of the PhD, as well as being sufficient analytically in terms of identifying 'themes' across the sample of participants. Although my original target was 15 participants, I made the decision to interview 18 participants in total. This was owing to some interviews having yielded less data than others and because the additional interviews were manageable to fit in within the timeframe. No new participants expressed an interest after this point (and after I stopped mentioning to people that I was doing the research and was looking for people to take part). While this sample size allowed me to identify 'themes' across the sample, it is significant to note that the discussions prompted by the question schedule were distinctly personal; while there were repeated patterns of meaning across interviews, they nonetheless highlighted a plethora of experiences. I am therefore reluctant to say that this number of participants reached 'data saturation', even within the limits of an overwhelmingly white student population.

I planned to purposively sample in the case of more participants coming forward than manageable in order to illuminate the different intersectional power dynamics of identity construction. Purposively sampling was intended to facilitate an even mix of demographic characteristics and thus the inclusion of narratives that do not privilege a white (i.e., my own) or middle-class experience. This choice of method was rooted in a feminist methodological approach, specifically in terms of reflecting on and recognising my own subjectivity and positionality and how these shaped the research and impacted those being researched. Nevertheless, this sampling method did not come into fruition – despite 18 participants coming forward. Given that recruitment was slow to begin with, I made the decision to start data collection while recruitment was ongoing. This was primarily in order to meet my set PhD deadlines and because I was acutely aware of the rising number of COVID-19 cases (during recruitment in 2019/2020) and the impact this would have had if I had to change my method of data collection. In this respect, starting data collection early was advantageous in that participants recommended others to the research and I managed to complete all interviews prior to lockdown in the UK. However, it was also, on reflection, another key limitation of this thesis in that the research does not do well to reflect a hugely diverse sample of experiences.

Overview of Participants

The majority of the participants in this research are university students (two of whom were also PhD candidates) or professionals who have finished their university education. A third of participants also had affiliations with the University of East Anglia. My status as a young researcher at the university thus seemed to aid my ability to recruit participants. The average (mean and median) age of participants was 26. Seventeen participants self-identified as women and one participant as non-binary. In terms of describing their sexualities, thirteen participants referred to themselves as heterosexual, three as bisexual, one as bisexual/queer and one as gay. In terms of race and ethnicity, 13 participants explicitly referred to themselves as white (British, Irish and New Zealand). The remaining participants referred to themselves as – to quote verbatim – Indian, mixed-race Mexican, mixed Asian and white British, Latin American and North African. Social class was not captured explicitly, however, the majority of participants are university educated (16/18). Given the small-scale nature of this research, this overview seeks to capture the demographics of the participants involved who – together – form a specific case study on young women's uses of celebrity on Instagram. A detailed breakdown of the participants' demographics is provided in Appendix E.

It is important to stress here that, by responding to debates predominantly about 'women' with explorations predominantly about 'women', I have overlooked fruitful and meaningful intersections of identity that are key in the making of selfies and selfhood. This came to the fore most pressingly when interviewing one participant for the study. The participant, who as noted above is included in the thesis, identifies as non-binary (which was disclosed to me at the outset of our discussion). Given the fact this person expressed an interest in my research in the first instance, I have chosen to include them in my analysis. This decision was quite simple and yet one of moral conflict; namely, I did not want to flatten this person's experiences within a study which predominantly explores the experiences of 'women' and seeks to speak back to popular gendered assumptions about 'women'. However, I can assume that this research resonated with the participant in some way given the fact they took part and described the topic as 'really interesting' at the outset of the interview. Thus, not including them despite them not falling into the boundaries of my original eligibility

criteria would have meant that I was making a decision, as the researcher, that denied the significance of celebrity, the selfie and Instagram for people other than 'women'.

More broadly, the diversity of participants in this thesis has been a cause for great reflection, criticism and re-evaluation throughout this research. Indeed, I must acknowledge my capacity and responsibility as researcher to discursively (re)constitute (as more relevant) certain lived experiences over others. More specifically, the process of knowledge production – *who* gets to speak in this research and *how* meaning is interpreted and made by me as the researcher – is at stake here (Mehta, 2019). While I wanted to do justice to both the commonalities and diversities of the participants in this research, my overall recruitment process still invited (further) knowledge production about (predominantly) white, middle-class women. Structuring my PIS along the lines of gender as a defining characteristic for participants reflects the point I was at as researcher during 2018-19; less aware of how to promote inclusivity and not as far along in terms of my own personal gender journey. This kind of 'institutional whiteness' (Mehta, 2019) reaches far beyond this research and into the field of media and celebrity studies more generally, with the white woman's experience as central.

Data Collection: Semi-Structured Individual Interview

If participants were happy to take part after reading the PIS, we arranged a one-hour face-to-face interview at a location convenient to and chosen by the participants (on average the interviews lasted 1h 10m). All interviews took place in Norfolk and Suffolk, UK, over a period of 4 months in 2019/2020. The individual interview felt the most suitable method to promote relational knowledge and capture the nuances of the poststructuralist subject (Davies, 1997; Davies and Laws, 2000), who is both constituted by and constitutive of gendered celebrity/selfie discourse. The individual interview also felt the most appropriate in providing a confidential and safe space; indeed, participants spoke about familial conflicts relating to sharing images of their body online, cultural and societal expectations as informing how they used the app, as well as they discussed how body esteem issues and abusive relationships and shaped their selfie practices and uses of Instagram. Some participants also spoke openly about their dislike or shame around particular selfie practices, while others spoke freely

about their more uncomplicated enjoyment of these same practices. I can only infer that the participants may not have been as open to discussing these topics in a group setting. However, it remains that the individual interview method was successful in facilitating open discussions about their experiences.

In an attempt to establish rapport and develop a more mutually reciprocal relationship between myself and participants, I allowed for 10 minutes prior to the interviews starting to introduce myself and answer any questions they had about me or the research. This was intended (and appeared) to facilitate a more colloquial and relaxed flow of conversation, although I cannot claim that this was entirely successful from the perspective of participants. I also opted to disclose my own identity in the research relationship, including my age, sexuality, student status, ethnicity and pronouns (she/her at the time). This felt congruent and ethical to me as an interviewer, as at the start of the interviews I asked participants to disclose similar aspects about themselves for the purposes of describing the sample and contextualising their experiences during my analysis. This information included their occupation, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and pronouns. Providing this information was voluntary and I made clear that participants could provide as little or as much information as they wished. This choice intended to allow participants voice over how they described themselves (and how they were subsequently presented in this thesis), as well as space to lead with what *they* thought were their most salient axes of their identity.

Simultaneously, I wanted to reduce the power imbalance by sharing what I felt were my own most salient identity factors so that the participants would, if they were happy to, disclose similar information and reciprocate my vulnerability (Ribbens, 1989). While this information may have led the participants to provide similar information, I felt this method would offer more leeway in terms of how they expressed and positioned themselves. In relation to my identity as a white, western European researcher specifically, this method felt particularly important in that I did not want to restrict participants to essentialist or pre-determined identity categories which often miscategorise and erase particular identities (although, as I acknowledge above, my attempts certainly had limitations). All respondents provided similar information and more – for example, one participant noted that she was disabled and a few other participants told me their relationship status and relationship history. Other

participants discussed their nationalities and their moves to Norwich (from Algeria, Colombia, Ireland and Mexico) and one participant appeared more comfortable to share experiences of their own sexuality. I only infer this because the participant expressed explicit surprise in response to my 'coming out' and proceeded to disclose their own relationship history. I thus felt that this method was effective at capturing the heterogeneity of participants, as well as facilitating conversational discussions about both mine and their own identities that often extended into the interview itself and their responses to my research questions. I return to this point in a moment.

I recognise that disclosing information about one's identity is not necessarily easy, nor always desired. I therefore also gave participants the option to complete a voluntary demographic information form (Appendix D) which they could return after the interview. The information gathered via this form asked for the same information discussed above and, likewise, did not ask participants to share aspects of their identity in the form of pre-determined identity categories as these can work to flatten, erase or miscategorise particular identities (Baker et al. 2018). I instead opted to use open-ended questions so that participants could describe themselves in their own words (Schilt and Bratter, 2015). While all participants disclosed information about their social identities during the interview context, the majority of participants also opted to complete this form. Not all participants returned this to me, however, highlighting the flow of power between researcher and participants as two-way or 'shifting, multiple, intersecting' (Thapar-Bjorkert and Henry 2004: 364), specifically in terms of participants' reciprocity *after* the interviews. The contrast between the information provided in the returned forms and that provided in the interview context highlighted differences in the way participants described themselves. The interview itself acted as a context for the creation of their identities as a discursive *process*. This chimes with my Foucauldian, poststructuralist approach; as Butler comments, 'there is no self […] who maintains integrity prior to its entrance into this conflicted cultural field' (1990: 145) – with this particular cultural field being the research encounter. For example, during one interview a participant reflected, 'I always have trouble identifying my race. I think, I always put mixed, I'm mixed race'. One participant described herself as 'homosexual' in the interview context and as 'heterosexual' in the returned form. This illustrates how people's knowledges and accounts of themselves are contradictory and troubles feminist standpoints which posit that the interview method

can capture coherent, transparent or unitary subjectivities (Weedon, 1987; Hollway and Jefferson, 2013). As I explore in further detail later, these inconsistencies highlight that social realities are not simply 'there' to find in the interview context (DeVault and Gross, 2012); rather, the research process and design itself is a central aspect of knowledge production.

As a white, western European researcher, this self-articulation approach – in terms of how participants positioned and described themselves – facilitated more accurate descriptions, as well as a contextualised understanding of, their experiences. Throughout this thesis I have opted to use participants' descriptions of their identities in the interviews (where these align with the information provided in the form) in an attempt to foreground their voices in the ways they are represented. Where the information in the form contradicts the interview data – one instance where sexuality was represented differently – I have prioritised the information in the form. This is owing to the form being completed *after* the interviews, thus having given participants time to account for themselves and the ability to 'edit' and better organise their thoughts than what occurred face-to-face.

The open-ended approach to this research extended to the development of my semi-structured question schedule (Appendix C). The questions were informed by the central research questions guiding this thesis and my review of the current debates about celebrity selfies, young women's selfie practices and their Instagram use. While discussions were not restricted to pre-determined questions, any open-ended questions and follow-up prompts were structured in such a way as to ensure full coverage of my central research questions/aims. A semi-structured approach intended to allow for flexibility in the topic and direction of conversation whilst also ensuring some consistency across the sample (Hesse-Biber, 2014). In an attempt to avoid (as much as possible) assuming any shared understanding between myself and the participants, I also made sure to prompt them on all topics, even where I felt we shared similar experiences or certain knowledge felt 'obvious.' Indeed, the tendency to position and view oneself as an 'insider' to the research or as familiar with research participants can lead to researchers to take for granted participants' responses and experiences if assumed to be obvious or familiar (Hayfield and Huxley, 2015). This assumed

familiarity or understanding can also lead to researchers privileging or overlooking certain responses. While all participants were asked the same set of questions, I tried to let them steer the interview direction in attempt to give space to their own views and ideas – a methodological choice that was facilitated by using a participant observation approach (Jørgensen, 2016; Wood, 2009). I discuss this approach in further detail below.

Participant Observation ('Media Go-Along') Approach

This research has provided a methodological intervention into selfie/celebrity scholarship in that it utilised a 'media go-along' method (Jørgensen, 2016) to actively support participants to reflect on their Instagram use and selfie practices, as well as interrogate the 'act' of their celebrity consumption. This method 'involves research participants giving a verbal and kinetic "guided tour" of an app' (Møller and Robards, 2019: 96), as well as allowing:

> the researcher and participant to navigate and talk about media in that they have sensorial access together and simultaneously. As such, it is a method for access and of a particular scope: It is a process of access, of *entering* the media service at hand, while producing empirical material on the processes *within* it (Møller and Robards, 2016: 60, original emphasis).

This approach involved access into the participants' personal Instagram accounts. I asked that participants discussed their consumption of celebrity as it happened, while scrolling on their Instagram 'homepage' with me. In terms of their own selfie practices, I asked participants to describe their process of taking selfies using their own Instagram selfies as prompts. I chose this method as it encourages a processual approach to knowledge production between researcher and participant (in that they can physically look at and engage with the media being discussed). In many of the interviews, this seemed to aid in contextualising and situating the participants' experiences, as well as capturing moments of the self 'in process' (Davies, 1997: 274). For example, looking at Instagram together often unintentionally incited participants to invite me to see the selfies saved in their camera roll, on Snapchat and in their WhatsApp group chats and how these differed to the images on Instagram in terms of both their visuals and purpose. Thus, the participants often gave me a verbal and

kinetic ‘guided tour’ that extended beyond the Instagram app. This not only helped to contextualise their selfie practices and Instagram use (notably how the consumption of Instagram content is not linear process but one with multiple inputs and feedback loops) but often helped to offset any assumed familiarity or understanding on my part as participants unpredictably jumped between apps.

My questioning technique comprised ‘thematic touring invitations’ to facilitate critical reflection and a better understanding of participants’ motivations for using Instagram and celebrity content (Jørgensen, 2016). This approach encourages participants to explore and expand on specific topics and/or themes; for example, I used thematic touring invitations to explicitly invite discussion on Instagram’s technological affordances (who the participants ‘followed’, ‘unfollowed’ and ‘muted’ and how they ‘used’ the algorithm), their strategies for taking and posting selfies on the app (and how this differed to other social media platforms), as well as examples of what captions/hashtags they used when posting content and why. In contrast, ‘open touring invitations’ invite participants to ‘narrate a pathway through the app that is mostly of their choosing’ (Jørgensen, 2016: 60) and act as an attempt on the part of the researcher to ‘stay out’ of the research. Justifications for using this method are so as to not ‘contrive’ or disrupt the participant’s ‘natural’ experiences of using personal media (Kusenbach, 2003). However, striving to capture an ‘authentic’ or ‘natural’ experience in an interview context is a futile feat in that such methods are, as Jørgensen notes, ‘operating with a false notion of an undistorted reality existing ‘out there’’ (2016: 39). Thematic touring invitations were thus appropriate to support participants to reflect on their Instagram use and relationships with celebrity figures.

My presence as the researcher and the physical environment ‘wrapped around’ the interview – the questions asked of participants, the way we physically looked at and shared the phone screen together and their live-time media use actively shaped and *produced* the interview data. Indeed, as they leapt from app to app, the participants occasionally seemed self-conscious, often laughing at themselves – perhaps by way of circumventing my perceived judgement. During one interview, participant Nikki (she/her) turned her phone away from me to delete an ‘awful’ selfie. In this moment, Nikki was captured in process as a poststructuralist subject, ‘taking […] shape in and through the discursive possibilities’ (Davies, 1997: 274) of selfies and the interview

context. Specifically, the fact I was not privy to such content could be for myriad reasons: the general devaluation of selfie-taking, the protection of personal and technological boundaries, as well as my status as researcher. Nonetheless, that participants were made aware in advance that we would be discussing their selfies (and presumably also knew of my research aims from the PIS) suggests their laughter, at least, may be predominantly indicative of how 'trivial' yet 'narcissistic' the practice is seen to be. I discuss this theme in detail in Chapter 4. Here, it is significant to note that my 'power' as researcher may have also heightened feelings of judgement in that I was ultimately there to collect information about their Instagram and selfie practices to later analyse. Thus, while the media go-along method aided in encouraging participant-generated accounts of their Instagram experiences, researcher-participant power dynamics nevertheless mediated their talk and the production of the interview data.

In summary, a semi-structured question schedule and media go-along approach were effective in capturing in-depth and nuanced experiences, as well as providing consistency and highlighting 'themes' across the sample of participants. I outline my approach to analysing the data below, including what I actively identified to be 'key' themes within the data – or rather, what I interpreted as saying something important about the research questions guiding this thesis.

Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis

The interview transcripts were analysed using a combination of thematic analysis and constant comparison methods in order to identify and analyse the 'themes' within the data, as well as the similarities and contrasts between them (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Dey, 2007). This process involved searching across my data set – the 18 interview transcripts – to find 'repeated patterns of meaning' (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 86). Before I delve into the practicalities of how I coded for these patterns of meaning (themes), I will first outline the form of thematic analysis used here. This is necessary first step given the flexibility of this method has resulted in there being limited guidelines and thus vague reporting on its uses.

Thematic analysis encompasses a range of different meanings and uses (Braun and Clarke, 2006) but it is integrated, in this thesis specifically, with my feminist methodological approach. This is namely in terms of how the analysis was conducted within a *constructionist framework*, a perspective 'examin[ing] the ways in which events, realities, meanings, experiences and so on are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society' (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 81). This is therefore a useful method for contextualising data within broader power structures. In this instance, it was an appropriate choice to situate participants' experiences within wider debates about selfies and selfie-takers which – as highlighted in the Literature Review – have a disciplinary function (Burns, 2015). In this respect, my analysis utilised 'latent level' analysis in that it explicitly aimed to explore the power structures framing participants' discussions of celebrity, selfies and Instagram (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Latent level analysis is conducted with a constructionist paradigm and examines 'the *underlying* ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations – and ideologies – that are theorised as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data' (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 84, original emphasis). This approach can be seen most explicitly in Chapter 4, wherein I explore how participants denounce the 'influence' of celebrity in relation to their own selfie practices and downplay their interests in celebrity culture more generally as a 'guilty pleasure'. My analysis interprets such negotiations in relation to the pervasive devaluation of selfies and selfie-takers in popular discourse, as well as narratives of 'risk' that underpin debates about celebrity selfies.

The form of data analysis used here oscillates between what Braun and Clarke describe as 'deductive' and 'inductive' analysis (2006). My approach was informed by my review of popular debates, as well as academic literature and existing theoretical analyses, notably emerging work on young women's self-imaging practices, feminist approaches to popular culture and a feminist Foucauldian approach to power (structure/agency). As previously explored, my research questions and interests, as well as my approach to data collection and analysis, are also informed by my own experiences of using Instagram and my relationship with celebrity content on the platform. In this respect, my approach to data analysis is deductive in that a) theoretical arguments are used as analytical tools to analyse and construct my arguments, and b) I have sought to situate participants' responses within existing celebrity/selfie debates.

Thus, it is worth returning here to the notion of 'giving voice' to participants and my role as the researcher in selecting, editing or 'carving out' evidence to support my arguments (Fine, 2002: 218), factors of which impact the knowledge produced (episteme). I am not removed from the production of the interview data or its analysis – while using a largely 'inductive' process (discussed further below) provided a contextualised understanding of the most salient topics for participants and allowed my research interests to 'evolve throughout the coding process' (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 84), existing debates and my own experiences of using celebrity on Instagram inevitably informed the analysis.

The use of thematic analysis enabled a flexible and exploratory approach to categorising and analysing the interview data. Utilising a largely inductive or 'bottom-up' approach allowed the analysis to be guided by the data (the participants) during the analysis stage and, in turn, allowed the research interests to 'evolve' and become more refined as the project progressed (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 84). The themes I have identified and thus the arguments presented throughout this thesis are strongly linked to the data rather than mapped onto a pre-determined coding frame (i.e., the questions asked of participants during the interviews). This approach was useful in capturing data that resulted from participants' deviation from the questions asked of them and what thought was important or interesting to share. This flexibility during the analysis phase felt particularly important given this project is exploring and contributing to an under-researched (and contested) topic. Relatedly, I also had to consider whether I wanted to give space to specific aspects and/or 'prevalent' themes that were a reflection of the entire data set (i.e., common across the majority of the interviews). Initially, the latter seemed appropriate to provide an overall and robust picture of the sample of participants and speak back to popular assumptions about selfies and celebrity use on Instagram. However, I also wanted to provide a detailed and nuanced account of individual experiences regardless of their prevalence. Indeed, Braun and Clarke ask 'whether, if, and why prevalence is particularly important' (2006: 83) in some qualitative work beyond attempting to 'prove' that a theme really exists within the data. In a relatively small study of 18 people, the relevance or importance of repetition and the validity of themes that are not repeated so often is a valid question, as there is not a big enough sample in statistical terms to generalise

from. I thus opted for a combination of both approaches; I generated my themes based on the data (inductively) and selected themes to include in my thesis with the central research questions in mind.

The themes I have identified as 'key' are therefore not necessarily a reflection of the entire data set and included themes should not be taken as more quantifiably prevalent (in terms of measuring each individual occurrence of a code) than those not included. Overall, the themes that I have actively identified as being key to include in this research may be common across the data set (and will be described as such in my chapters) but are also those that I interpreted as saying something interesting or important about the central research questions and aims guiding this thesis. These questions and aims are informed by popular selfie debates and existing academic work on young women's selfie practices, celebrity selfies and the relations between them. Thus, I have inevitably identified some themes as key in that they speak to the existing debates that I wish to contribute to (either advance or contest). While some researchers may dispute this as 'narrowing' my analytical focus, 'not engaging with the literature in the early stages of analysis' (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 86) seems a somewhat futile and positivist feat given the extensive research that goes into the design of a PhD thesis.

The (Six-Step) Process

This thesis utilised Braun and Clarke's six-step guide to thematic analysis (2006) owing to its flexible yet focussed and deliberate approach. Following these steps helped me to acknowledge, reflect and understand how each active choice I made regarding my analysis contributed to the arguments (knowledge) put forward in this thesis.

I transcribed verbatim the interview recordings that were then anonymised and checked for accuracy (Phase 1). This included transcribing details or summary notes on *how* things were said, including participants' silences/pauses, laughter and (typically rhetorical) questions (Bird, 2005). This is not to suggest that the transcription process was a straightforward preservation of 'voice' – transcription itself is an interpretative act and involves (productive) choices on the part of the

researcher about what details to include (Roberts, 1997). Indeed, I have also shortened (indicated by my use of […]) and added points of clarification to some quotes during the write up of the thesis to aid clarification and readability. The process of transcription was by far the most time-consuming phase of my data analysis, owing in part to not using any transcription software but opting to playback the interviews and transcribe them on Microsoft (MS) Word. This was an active decision to aid my familiarisation with the data (Clarke, Braun and Hayfield, 2015). Furthermore, this process of transcribing meant I could begin interpreting the data in terms of starting to identify commonalities and disparities between participants and taking notes on coding ideas (Bird, 2005). It is also significant to report that I began transcribing my data while the interviews were ongoing, which made practical sense given that recruitment and data collection took place over 4 months (for reasons discussed previously).

Once all interviews were transcribed, I re-read the transcripts to familiarise myself with the entire data set. I initially read the transcripts with no aim to start generating concrete codes but to get a sense of interesting or reoccurring topics and to see if my initial notes (interpretations) felt relevant and appropriate to the research questions guiding the thesis. I then manually coded the data set (Phase 2). Examples of codes at this initial stage include 'celebrity definition (traditional versus internet)', 'motivation for posting selfie (event)', 'authenticity (natural versus fake)', and 'Instagram stories (transitory media)'. By 'manually' analysing the data, I mean I printed out and coded each interview transcript using highlighters and a pen, and simultaneously curated a master MS document where I typed up and (re)organised all codes into potential categories/themes. I opted to do my analysis manually rather than using qualitative data analysis software such as NVivo. I am aware of the strengths of such software packages in facilitating the management and organisation of large amounts of data. Indeed, I agree that the benefit of using such software is that it can facilitate researchers to be quicker and more consistent in their analysis (Weitzman, 1999). For instance, in comparison to using manual methods, Weitzman notes how you can more easily (re)organise and review all codes and categories/themes and thus check to see if they support the interpretation started out with, as well as if the overall conclusions reached are still supported by the data (1999: 1246). However, I had experience of

using analysis software for previous research projects and found that, despite being quicker, it drastically hindered my familiarity with the data. I thus personally felt that a manual method, especially given the relatively small scale of this research, would allow me to be more meticulous with the data.

I compared codes within transcripts and across the entire dataset at all times of the data analysis to ensure I was accurately reflecting shared and disparate views between participants. This process is a 'constant comparative' method (Glaser, 1965) and aided in the refinement of my codes as I 'identif[ed] and analys[ed] in detail their various properties and relations' (Dey, 2007: 168). I continuously refined the codes as I progressed with the analysis, as the coding of each new interview transcript fed back into the coding of previous transcripts and vice versa. Once I had finished this process across the entire data set, I inputted the hand-written codes into each interview transcript on MS Word. This was a practical decision and would allow me to revisit coded data extracts (utterances or quotes) more easily as I began writing my analysis chapters. Importantly, it also allowed me to – quite meticulously – re-read and (re)assign the codes against the data extracts, thus allowing for continuous comparison and refinement.

Once I had coded all interview data, I began to more thoroughly analyse and organise them into overarching themes (Phase 3). I wrote down the codes on post-it notes and used these to help me organise them into initial themes, and later translated this exercise to my master MS Word document (colour-coding the codes). At this stage I pasted the relevant data extracts under each code/theme, which aided in contextualising each theme and bringing me back to the original data. Initial themes were subsequently revised and/or combined to form my 'final' defined themes (Phase 4/5). For example, in my preliminary analysis I identified 'navigating Instagram's affordances' as an overarching theme which incorporated the sub-themes (or categories) 'preference for authenticity', 'the best self(ie)', 'circumventing judgement' and 'experience of the algorithm'. However, after re-reading the data extracts and trying to better understand the connection and significance of these sub-themes, I later separated 'circumventing judgement' into a new theme. This process is what Braun and Clarke call identifying the 'essence' of each theme and the importance

of not muddying the story by getting them to do 'too much' (2006: 92). Each defined theme became clearer as a result; for example, 'circumventing judgement' explores how participants navigate (and notably attempt to circumvent) popular discourse on selfies, selfie-takers and celebrity 'influence' (Chapter 4), whereas 'navigating Instagram's affordances' focuses on how participants curate flows of celebrity content on the platform, including what they *want* from celebrities and their selfies (Chapters 4 and 5).

The subsequent analysis chapters comprise 'Phase 6' of the data analysis – the write up of my central arguments. Before I move on, however, I want to reflect here on a key limitation of my approach to data analysis. From the outset of my research, I have been concerned with prioritising the lived experiences – or subjugated knowledges – of the participants in this research (whilst recognising that this process involves a subjective and critical analysis). Reflecting on this aim further, I recognise that I could have prioritised more collaborative approaches to the research design, data analysis and writing up phases of my research (Madden and Breny, 2016). In utilising such an approach, participants would have been able to provide feedback on my interpretations and had an active role in shaping the research findings *after* the interview. This feels particularly relevant to the nuanced and sensitive subjects discussed in this thesis – from identity construction and navigating fatphobic judgements (Chapter 6) through to self-esteem issues and coercive and controlling relationships (Chapter 4). I return to this point in the Conclusions chapter – specifically, in my discussion of possible directions for future research on selfies.

Chapter 4: Oh, That's Silly

Navigating Popular Discourse on Celebrity Culture, Selfies and Selfie-Takers

Introduction

The participants in this study often reported using Instagram to keep up to date with friends and access content related to their personal interests and life events. For instance, they use the platform to follow food/recipe accounts, artists (embroidery accounts, mental health comics), social justice and anti-racism accounts (e.g., @asiangirlsunited), meme accounts and local businesses. Only two participants — Monica and Nikki — stated without prompting that they use Instagram to follow celebrity content. The others only mentioned celebrity when asked directly about the subject, despite being aware this was the primary focus of the research. This finding perhaps speaks to the power dynamics of the interview context – participants may have been waiting for me to 'lead' the discussion and ask about celebrity explicitly. Yet, this trend across the interviews reveals more about how popular discourse about selfies and celebrity culture mediate young womens' talk, as well as their own selfie practices. As noted in the Introduction, there is very little room for nuance in the way that mainstream media narratives discuss selfies (i.e., as a denigrated gendered practice – see Burns, 2014, 2015) and celebrity culture is often devalued.

In relation to both their general Instagram use and their selfie practices, the participants' initial reluctance to discuss celebrity is at least partly attributable to popular narratives. This echoes Marshall's argument in *The Genealogy of Celebrity* that 'the prevalent discourse around celebrity is that it is insignificant' (2016: 16). Indeed, most participants showed an awareness of how celebrity culture and the practice of selfie-taking is devalued in popular discourse (as well as how the two intersect). This chapter thus explores the participants' attempts to project themselves as personally not influenced by celebrity culture and displays of bodily 'perfection' on Instagram. In doing so, this chapter attends to my first research question:

4. Do celebrity selfies shape young women's selfie practices, and if so, how?
    - What other factors shape their selfie practices on Instagram?

This chapter starts with an exploration of how and why the participants in this research dismiss and/or downplay their interest in – and the value of – celebrity content on Instagram (as a 'guilty pleasure'). It also explores how they define celebrity in the context of Instagram; these discussions illustrate how influencers and reality television stars are considered to lack value due to their 'attributed' celebrity (Rojek, 2001) and seemingly unconvincing attempts to 'do femininity' correctly (Skeggs, 2001). These discussions are explored as reproducing gendered and classed popular narratives, as coded working-class celebrities are perceived to be 'outside' the parameters of white, middle-class respectability (Sastre, 2014). At the same time, in line with my feminist Foucauldian approach, I highlight that the participants' talk about reality television star Kim Kardashian also has a productive (resistant) social function. Namely, in that she acts as a site of tension through which bodily transformation and self-surveillance practices (postfeminist sensibilities) are criticised and rejected. Finally, the first half of this chapter turns to the ways participants reject the role of the celebrity selfie in relation to their own selfie practices. I discuss how participants explicitly rebut the idea that their selfie practices follow the scripts of celebrity figures and position their selfies – specifically those that display normative and Instagrammable ideals – as content that they themselves do not have the resource nor desire to replicate.

The second half of this chapter considers what factors *do* 'influence' participants' selfie practices, if not celebrity selfies. It gives space to the various factors that mediate when, where and how they create and share their selfies, which is predominantly popular discourse (narratives of narcissism and anticipated judgement about selfies and selfie-takers) and Instagrammable aesthetics. I explore how the participants put a significant amount of labour into their selfie practices on Instagram in order to meet 'perfect' standards, yet also seek to hide this labour to appear 'real' (Gill, 2023). I also highlight how the participants in this study attempt to circumvent the perceived judgement of others through taking selfies in private, using witty/self-deprecating captions, taking selfies with others, and only posting when they have a 'valid excuse' to do so. It is only through adhering to these contradictory requirements (through self-regulation) that participants feel they can post to their main feed and not be subject to judgement from others. It is in this respect that I view popular discourse about selfie-

takers and Instagram as productive forms of disciplinary power (Burns, 2015; Elias and Gill, 2018).

Part 1. Navigating Popular Discourse

The initial reluctance from participants to discuss celebrity – both generally and in relation to their own selfie practices – can be read as demonstrating their ambivalence to the ways in which celebrity culture might be understood in relation to Instagram. During the interviews, for example, participants sometimes reflected on not remembering following or seeing certain celebrities on their home feeds until asked about them. As participant Froze (she/her) noted mid-interview, 'you don't realise until you look back at it who you follow, like really, I thought I had Pink and stuff on here, but I don't.' This reflection highlights how the interview context muddies participants' everyday Instagram practices, as well as it indicates that they may not be acutely aware of the extent of their celebrity content consumption on Instagram (as a platform that users can rapidly skim). Indeed, it is also important to remember that the participants in this research are not necessarily 'fans' (or at least did not identify themselves as such), but rather people who casually – and it seems inconsistently – engage with celebrity content on the platform. Yet, there is also much more to be said about their discussions of celebrity (and lack thereof), the significance and implications of which I discuss below.

'It's my guilty pleasure'

Existing ethnographic research tells us that audiences reflexively point to gendered and 'low-value' media forms as a 'guilty pleasure' (Ang, 1985; Hermes 1997; Johansson 2006; Skeggs, Thumim and Wood, 2008; Skeggs and Wood, 2012). This discursive framing extends to this research: as well as signalling a sense of ambivalence towards celebrity on Instagram, the participants' talk about who they follow (and why) highlights their attempts to distance themselves from – and pre-emptively deprecate their interests in – celebrity culture. Consider the following reflections:

> Layla (she/her): Part of what I look at is just gossiping [sic], cos they post things about like going for dinner with my husband and stuff like that, so

> I'm like where did they go? What did she wear? And stuff like that, that are actually not relevant to me [laughs].
>
> **B: But you enjoy it?**
>
> Layla: Yeah, sadly [laughs].

> Sophie (she/her): I'm someone who's not as interested in celebrity culture, I like to pretend I'm not.

> Dora (she/her): Kourtney [Kardashian], you know she has her new lifestyle blog called Poosh? You probably haven't heard of it cos it's ridiculous.

In the context of celebrity as a 'discursive formation' (Marshall, 2016), all three participants contribute to the idea of celebrity as vapid, 'ridiculous' or of generally low cultural value. Sophie noting that she likes to 'pretend' she's not interested in celebrity culture demonstrates a desire to hide her interests outside of the interview context. Further, her unwillingness to admit engaging with (let alone enjoying) celebrity suggests consuming such content is seen as trivial (and indeed, embarrassing). Dora and Layla also sought to proactively deprecate and devalue their interests as 'ridiculous' and 'just gossiping'. As I explore later, Dora's dismissal of 'Poosh', reality television star Kourtney Kardashian's lifestyle brand, is particularly significant and speaks to how gender and class intersect in the mainstream media and in participants' critiques of 'attributed' celebrity (Rojek, 2001). Here, it is significant to reiterate that the trivialisation of celebrity culture in mainstream media is typically gendered, with 'women's' genres and interests devalued in popular discourse. This framing of celebrity culture was at times explicitly negotiated by participants:

> Monica (she/her): I would say it's my guilty pleasure to have […] an Instagram stalk, it's definitely phrased in a way of guilty pleasure rather than just something I like to do without having to be defensive about it, whereas I guess men don't have to worry about that sort of thing […] it's almost like we're made to feel guilty about it but we have so many like magazines, Pinterest, Instagram, we have so many tools to be able to do that, so it's like what? I try not to feel guilty but if someone asks me what I'm doing I'm still like, oh, guilty pleasure.

Monica expresses a need to actively hide or deprecate her interests in celebrity culture outside of the interview context, notably by positioning them as a 'guilty pleasure'. She anticipates that she will be judged and is aware that utilising this phrase to describe her Instagram use works to pre-emptively circumvent judgement. While both Monica and Sophie's reflections emphasise an awareness that this is how celebrity consumption is popularly understood, it is not indicative of their agreement with this discursive framing. Monica specifically points out that this positioning is gendered ('I guess men don't have to worry about that sort of thing') and speaks of her attempts to combat feelings of guilt for enjoying an Instagram 'stalk' – a term that evokes other negative connotations of celebrity fandom as pathological (Jenson, 1992). These reflexive discursive strategies begin to highlight the participants' explicit awareness and navigation of popular discourse about celebrity culture – a resource that perhaps stems from their cultural capital as a group of predominantly university-educated young women. To 'emancipate' these accounts as 'subjugated knowledges', (Foucault, 1980; Bacchi, 2018) then, is to understand that the young women in this research understand the perceived low value of celebrity content and act to circumvent any perceived judgement.

Above, Monica and Sophie disclosed their 'need' to downplay their interests to others outside of the interview context. This breaking down of the 'fourth wall' was not ubiquitous across interviews; Dora and Layla's discussions arguably worked to deprecate their interests in celebrity culture to dissuade me (the researcher) of their interests. Dora stressing that I 'probably haven't heard of [Poosh] cos it's ridiculous' and Layla's laughter and dismissal of her interests as 'just gossiping', which she 'sadly' enjoys, can be seen to function as tactics to circumvent my judgment as the researcher in the interview context. In the same way Instagram audiences are often imagined as judgemental of selfies (explored later), my researcher positionality may have been deemed by participants as judgemental or evaluative of their interests; especially when it concerned their engagements with – and enjoyment of – 'gossip' and influencers on Instagram. Indeed, 'influencer' is coded as a feminine form of labour in mainstream media and is often characterised in pejorative terms — i.e., as having low cultural value in comparison to traditional or 'proper' celebrities (Duffy, Miltner and Wahlstedt, 2022). Some of the participants in this research acknowledge

this is the way the term is commonly understood; as Monica notes, 'I'm a bit of a podcast nut and everyone on there who is being interviewed is like 'I hate the term influencer''. Participant Alice similarly reflects on the denigrated framing of particular 'brands' of celebrity in popular discourse:

> Alice (she/her): if you're interested in big celebrities who have like, a big career in something specific like acting or singer or whatever, I feel like that's seen as more acceptable than having an interest in influencers or reality stars.
>
> **B: Why do you think that is?**
>
> Alice: I feel like other people might think that that's a bit trivial or like, why would you care what they think or they post? […] I think women are seen to be more interested in that stuff.

Alice noting that 'other people' might think an interest in influencers or reality stars 'is a bit trivial' and less acceptable than celebrities who have 'big' (read: legitimate) careers speaks to hierarchical celebrity categorisations. Her reflection displays an awareness that fame being the result of concentrated media exposure – rather than conforming to the myth of celebrity as 'merited by exceptional conduct or internal qualities' (Gamson, 1994: 144) – is considered lacking in cultural value. As I explore below and throughout this thesis, while participants show an awareness of this discursive framing, they also often reify it in their discussion of reality television stars. For instance, in that they often characterise this brand of celebrity in disparaging – classed – terms (Skeggs, 2004; Bennett and Holmes, 2010; Allen and Mendick, 2013; Sastre, 2014). I explore this further below.

'Famous just for being a Kardashian'

Permeating the data was the recognition of traditional markers of celebrity in informing participants' definitions of celebrity. For instance, Alice defines traditional celebrities as 'big' celebrities with 'big' careers like singing or acting. Other participants similarly acknowledge that celebrity in the traditional sense is someone who has a large following and is explicitly 'granted' celebrity status:

> Kristie (she/her): I follow a lot of reality stars, TOWIE [*The Only Way is Essex*], Love Island, a lot of actresses as well, but my definition is obviously

> someone who is really well known for being in the public eye, and they've got the little blue tick next to their names [laughs].

These extracts highlight how a person's celebrity status on Instagram can be recognised through the size of their following and 'the little blue tick next to their names', denoting a verified Instagram account. However, while these criteria of fame are certainly still commonplace, the sphere of celebrity is no longer confined to those with thousands of followers or traditional gatekeepers. On Instagram, the conditions of traditional celebrity act as a site from which participants negotiate (and produce) the widening terrain of celebrity culture. Indeed, Tayma's definition below explicitly departs from traditional notions of celebrity:

> Tayma (she/her): I follow a lot of famous trainers, they're not famous famous, but for me a celebrity is someone I follow all the time, they have a lot of followers, and it doesn't exclude trainers and fitness models and all that.

While someone may not be 'famous famous' (which can be read as a 'big' celebrity), her definition of celebrity 'doesn't exclude trainers and fitness models.' Participant Monica departs from this definition in that for her, celebrity status is not dependent on followers but simply admiration and respect:

> Monica (she/her): It doesn't have to be someone with thousands of followers, it could be someone with a couple of hundred, but if you admire and respect them then I guess they're a celebrity in your eyes.

'Celebrity' in this respect can best be understood as an ambiguous subject that remains in process; how participants define celebrity in the context of Instagram is various and subjective. In the context of this study, celebrities range from fitness trainers and embroidery artists to dog groomers. This understanding of celebrity thus reiterates Alice Marwick's conceptualisation of 'celebrity' as a range of practices and self-presentation techniques in the social media age (2016). Within this context, 'celebrity becomes something a person does, rather than something a person is, and exists as a continuum rather than a binary quality' (2016: 334). Indeed, academic categorisations of celebrity speak to the specific social, cultural and political conditions of the time. Through a discursive lens, the varying definitions offered by the participants thus

exemplify how ‘celebrity identifies a very elaborate and expanding discourse of visibility’ (Marshall, 2016: 17). Specifically, how in the contemporary moment, celebrity – and who is granted celebrity status – is particularly changeable and volatile. Here, participants’ individual and ambiguous criteria of what and who constitutes a celebrity speaks to the changes in celebrity’s attainability. Notably, how platforms such as Instagram allow access to a means of representation, in that ‘anyone’ who can access the platform may ‘perform’ a celebrity subjectivity.

However, this analysis is not to suggest that celebrity culture on platforms such as Instagram constitutes any kind of ‘social levelling’ (Tyler and Bennett, 2010). It was further into the interviews and participants’ discussions of specific celebrities wherein more unstructured and intuitive discussions of celebrity emerged (as opposed to answering my direct question). While it became clear that ‘celebrity’ as encompassing the likes of influencers, fitness trainers, and fashion bloggers was the norm, where participants did make explicit distinctions between categories of celebrity (namely influencers, television celebrities and traditional or ‘proper’ celebrities), these reflected, and were underpinned by, gendered and classed mainstream media narratives. Consider the following reflections on the Kardashians, a reality television family involved in advertising and branding on Instagram:

> Stella (she/her): I know I definitely don't follow any of the Kardashians because they annoy the hell out of me.
> **B: Why?**
> Stella: They just do, they're famous just for being a Kardashian and I just, I don't, I don't understand it really.
>
> Nikki (she/her): There’s people laughing at Kim Kardashian for having a book that is literally just selfies, I’d say to me that’s a fail like [laughs] I don’t think anyone bought that book in admiration.
>
> Ani (she/her): I don’t follow any of the Kardashians, I don’t know, I don’t see why they got so famous, for what? Yeah, you made a reality show showing off your life but like you’re not doing some kind of art that you could spread with the world and you’re not doing some kind of social work that you should be spreading with the world […] in the end it’s like you’re

> spreading the message that to be beautiful all women should have to look like you.

Stella and Ani's belief that the Kardashians are famous owing to their reality television show (which has rendered them a brand name) compounds Alice's earlier reflection that 'big' celebrities are seen as more acceptable than reality stars. Here, Kim Kardashian is seen as lacking in value due to her 'attributed' celebrity (Rojek, 2001) and for not adhering to 'proper' (read: middle-class) manifestations of fame. For instance, she's not seen as a productive citizen (which Ani defines as engaging in art or social work); instead, she is just 'showing off [her] life' – most embarrassingly, through the medium of selfies. Nikki refers to Kim Kardashian's book *Selfish*[6] (2015) – a collection of selfies – to position her celebrity status as undeserving, lacking in cultural value and as achieved through illegitimate means ('I don't think anyone bought that book in admiration'). Such discussions mirror a wider social discourse about the Kardashians and their brand of celebrity in that they are often construed as being outside the parameters of 'natural', white middle-class respectability (Sastre, 2014; Mendick, et al. 2018). For example, Mendick, et al. (2018) note how hyper-feminine celebrities such as the Kardashians are coded as working-class even when they come from privileged backgrounds. This is in part owing to their seemingly unconvincing attempts to 'do femininity' correctly (Skeggs, 2001: 298), particularly in comparison to celebrities who display a restrained, 'natural' beauty. For Nikki, the selfies of Kim Kardashian, a coded working-class celebrity, work to accentuate her 'failed' performances of femininity. This is perhaps because in such images her body 'not only carr[ies] signs of effort but celebrate[s] them, representing deliberate desires to be looked at' (Mendick, et al. 2018: 68). I return to this argument in the following chapter in relation to the participants' desire for celebrities displaying 'authentic' femininities on Instagram.

As noted in the Introduction, celebrity and the selfie have been collapsed together in popular discourse; specifically, the selfie has been framed as 'a product of our age of celebrity-obsessed narcissism' (Ryan, 2013), with 'trashy TV stars' at the forefront

[6] It is important to note that Kardashian's book title *Selfish* (2015) plays with popular perceptions of selfie culture. This does little to convince participant Nikki that Kardashian's product is anything less than a 'fail' – but seems to actively fuel her critique.

(Wallop, 2013). The findings here begin to highlight how this popular discursive framing shapes the participants' talk. That is, celebrity remains a 'hierarchical domain of value formation' and celebrity figures continue to play a 'central role in the mediation and communication of class differences' (Tyler and Bennett, 2010: 376-389). In this respect, the participants' critiques of the Kardashians – particularly Kim Kardashian's selfies – are not evidence of any straightforward resistance to normative (disciplinary) ideals, as the regulation of these images simultaneously reifies popular classed debates. I return to and expand on this point throughout this thesis – that is, I highlight how celebrity selfies on Instagram (as a contentious and devalued practice/media form) can work to strengthen participants' value judgements of reality television stars as 'doing femininity' incorrectly. Moreover, I discuss how in their shared rejection of the Kardashians, participants discursively contribute to the notion of celebrity as a 'system of value', complexly intertwined with performances of gender, class and race (Marshall, 2016).

'I try to stay away from shaming accounts'

The Kardashians were often used as a site from which the participants worked through their dislike of certain aspects of celebrity and beauty culture – namely, weight loss practices and unattainable beauty standards. In the quote above, participant Ani criticised the Kardashian's for 'spreading the message that to be beautiful all women should have to look like [them]'. This was a common critique among participants – consider the following reflections wherein Stella, Kayley and Sonu reference Kim Kardashian's endorsement of dieting products on Instagram:

> Kayley (she/her): I don't really understand that bit of celebrity culture and it doesn't really give me anything, she also did that ad [advertisement] for the lollipop that helps you lose weight or something so like hm, I don't want to open this can of worms, I try to stay away from shaming accounts.
>
> Stella (she/her): I don't like how some of them promote that slimming lollipop, just I morally and ethically I think some of that clashes with how I think, that's why I don't like it.
>
> Sonu (they/them): I've watched every episode of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, um I don't like how they're slut shamed, but I also don't like

> how they put dangerous messages out, especially when they endorse like those tummy fit teas and I think Kim Kardashian put up this picture, it was this appetite suppressing lollipop, so I find that really problematic like the message they're trying to put out.

Stella makes clear that the promotion of dieting products 'morally and ethically' clashes with her own views, while Kayley similarly regards the Kardashian's as 'shaming accounts'. Sonu's reflection is somewhat different in that, unlike Kayley and Stella, they admit to enjoying *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* and are aware that they are often the targets of 'slut shaming' (i.e., they are criticised based on their sexuality/perceived sexual behaviour). Yet, bound up with Sonu's pleasure is a sense of caution – just because they find pleasure in watching the Kardashians and are critical of the ways the family are disciplined, they are also wary of the 'dangerous' messages that are endorsed via Instagram. All of them draw on Kim Kardashian's advertisement of 'tummy fit teas' and an 'appetite supressing lollipop' as evidence of the Kardashians' immorality. This speaks to the participants' adoption of mainstream media narratives: in 2018, Kim Kardashian's promotion of said Flat Tummy lollipops on Instagram made headlines, with various celebrities and news outlets labelling the move 'toxic' for young women and girls (see Giles, 2018b). The participants in this study therefore occupy contradictory subject positions in which they simultaneously reject *and* adopt popular narratives about the harmful 'influence' of celebrity culture.

It is significant that the 'dangerous' messages put out by normative celebrities, such as the Kardashians, are seen to negatively impact the 'younger generation' rather than the participants themselves. This finding mirrors Gill's recent work on young women's social media use; for the participants in her research, 'concerns about the pressures that young people feel [are] projected onto a younger age group – whose suffering could then be readily acknowledged and discussed' (2023: 204). We can see how a similar rhetoric plays out in the reflections below:

> Sophie (she/her): What is this doing to young people and what pressure is this putting on teenage girls to look a certain way, act a certain way, make them feel bad about what they have got, what they haven't got? I like to think that most adults are mature enough, probably not all, not to feel worse about their

> lives because of it but I think when you're a teenager it's more difficult to separate what reality is and what it isn't.
>
> Nikki (she/her): I just watched a really interesting documentary about one of the Little Mix members, and I was really upset by it cos it was a horrible example of this sort of selfie culture turning on somebody and she just totally gave into it. Like at the end of the show she didn't learn a lesson, she completely moulded herself into this idealised version of herself and it was so sad. Those trolls were too much for her and she just had to give in, so she got heaps of plastic surgery and lost heaps of weight and like completely changed the way she looked so they would leave her alone, and I just thought fucking hell, that's so sad. I just feel very sad for all the other young women who feel all of that pressure to look that way, that's just a terrible example that I think she's set.

For both Sophie and Nikki, attention is paid to the negative – and apparently intensified – affects experienced by young people in response to celebrity content. Sophie notes how there is 'pressure […] on teenage girls to look a certain way' that makes 'them feel bad'; 'when you're a teenager it's more difficult' to critique such discourses, while adults are 'mature enough' to see through their construction (decipher what is 'reality' and what is not). Similar narratives of risk are prevalent for Nikki, who 'feel(s) very sad for all the other young women who', like Little Mix star Jesy Nelson, 'feel all of that pressure to look that way' in response to 'selfie culture' and celebrities who 'mould' themselves into 'idealised version(s)'. These reflections echo – and contribute to – popular discourse in which young girls are positioned as 'at risk' of media images, particularly image-driven social media. Gill suggests that her participants projected their concerns onto a younger age group because discussing their own experiences openly 'would be too painful or humiliating' (2023: 204), but in the context of this research, I think it is also because the participants often found it difficult to articulate how exactly celebrity images made them feel 'pressure'. As I explore in detail in Chapter 6, this is because they often added a moral judgement to their actions (i.e., they feel they should know better than to be affected by celebrity) and because the 'pressure' is entangled with life and feelings beyond Instagram and celebrity culture. Further, the participants' framing of 'young people' as at greater risk arguably allows the participants in this research to 'occupy a flattering position of

power – a stance so regularly denied them in constructions of their own media subjectivities' (Holmes, 2018: 160). For instance, in that they can examine and extrapolate on the influence of celebrity images that make young girls feel pressure, particularly in terms of the 'terrible example' set when women celebrities 'totally' give into aesthetic ideals (Nikki).

In line with my definition of celebrities as useful and accessible symbols (or signs) which epitomise the ideological tensions of their time (Dyer, 1979), I view the participants' talk about the Kardashians as *productive*. Notably, the participants' negotiations of dieting and body transformation narratives (using the Kardashian's images) speak to the cultural and social functions of celebrity culture and can be seen as indicative of their wider critiques of neoliberal notions of self-as-project. As noted in the Introduction, postfeminist media culture depicts women as confident, fun, 'desiring sexual subjects' who use their agency to present themselves in an objectified manner and take advantage of the 'free choices' available to them (Gill, 2007: 258). Kim Kardashian could be considered as exemplary of postfeminism in her use of her body to advance her career, coupled with the way she strives for a narrow approximation of feminine 'perfection' (i.e., through dieting) under the guise of empowerment (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2007). The participants' discussions above highlight that they reject this disciplinary regime; rather than being interpreted as empowering, Kim Kardashian's intentions to reinforce and capitalise on idealised norms is rejected on the basis that it is 'problematic' and promotes (bodily) shame. The participants do not simply internalise the normative 'lessons' on display but debate and contest their 'dangerous' and 'problematic' meanings, which discursively complicates the mainstream idea they are docile subjects when it comes to (celebrity) media consumption.

On the one hand, such critiques can be seen as a positive resistance to the idea that women should engage in critical forms of bodily surveillance/discipline their bodies – notably, through dieting – to live up to a narrow standard of (idealised) femininity. However, in distinguishing the Kardashians as evidence of how *not* to behave, they are also constructed as the abject other. Academic work exploring 'ordinary' celebrity (such as reality television stars) has shown how 'improper' celebrities have long acted as 'a pedagogic tool, a form of governmentality which demonstrates to viewers how

not to behave, what not to wear and what not to do' (Stewart and Giles, 2020: 6). As briefly discussed earlier, research has shown that evaluative judgements about 'ordinary' (coded working-class) celebrities position them as valueless due to their lack of moral worth and cultural capital, their attributed celebrity status, and their 'excessive' corporeality (Allen and Mendick, 2013; Skeggs and Wood, 2011; Tyler and Bennett, 2010). Therefore, the consequences of the above reading are two-fold: the participants' accounts illuminate how postfeminist sentiments are rejected *and* reinforced along classed lines. In this respect, critical discourse about the Kardashians, while signalling a rejection of bodily surveillance and transformation practices, also reproduces wider processes of social classification, stigmatisation and marginalisation (Tyler and Bennett, 2010).

'They wouldn't influence the selfies I take'

Despite how celebrity selfies are seen to be a key force behind the proliferation of the selfie among young women in popular discourse, the participants in this research often denounced or downplayed the use of celebrity selfies in relation to their own selfie practices. This was especially the case when participants were asked directly about the subject – consider the following quotes:

> Nikki (she/her): [Celebrity selfies] possibly makes me do it less [laughs] cos I think of selfies, I think of the Kardashians, I think of big lips, I just don't meet the mark and I'm fine with that, but I don't even want to engage with that whole thing.
>
> Jane (she/her): They wouldn't influence the selfies I take partly because of the logistics, like I don't have the aesthetic room to take these selfies, but I like her a lot, her selfies are one of the reasons I've kept following her.

Nikki's indication that she doesn't 'even want to engage with that whole thing' and Jane's note about the (inaccessible) 'logistics' that go into celebrity selfies work to signal a sense of ambivalence to celebrity selfies on Instagram, as well as a reluctance to deliberately follow the scripts of celebrity figures in their own selfie practices. Nikki's assertion that celebrity selfies make her engage in the practice herself less is particularly interesting; she associates selfies with the Kardashians and 'big lips', which again reflects a dismissal of a particular brand of celebrity. Namely, one that is

'excessively' corporeal and meets and reifies Instagrammable (i.e., normative) conventions and aesthetics. In Chapter 5, I explore how bodily transformation and a woman using her body to advance her career is regarded as acceptable in some circumstances – notably, when the celebrity in question is (unambiguously) white, middle-class and has achieved their celebrity status through 'legitimate' means. Here, I want to focus on how the above accounts work to position celebrity selfies/images on Instagram as inaccessible and thus insignificant to their own selfie practices. It is this understanding of celebrity selfies – as logistically unrealistic – through which participants dismiss their influence.

Jane above distinguishes between consumption and imitation; referencing fat positivity and fat activist selfies, she notes that while she enjoys 'seeing' such selfies, she 'wouldn't take selfies like that (her)self […] partly because of the logistics'. Namely, celebrity selfies could not be realistically engaged with (in terms of imitation) as she does not have the 'aesthetic room' to produce them. Participant Dora expresses a similar sentiment:

> Dora (she/her): For me it's obvious that the picture isn't authentic, but I get that that's part of her career and she is a fitness blogger, she needs to look good and there probably is an expectation that she does post pictures of herself looking toned.

Here, Dora observes that some selfies are part of a celebrity's brand or 'career' and are therefore not 'authentic'. In this regard, participants acknowledge that celebrity bodies are partially captured (i.e., at one spatial and temporal moment) and adapted, which limits them from being read in their totality. In her research with young girls and their relationships to media images, Rebecca Coleman found that 'the impossibilities of becoming (like) the bodies of popular media images […] are the impossibilities of becoming 'caught' as the body of a popular media image' (2009: 105). Becoming 'caught' as the body of a celebrity image refers to the 'particular processes and technologies' involved in the 'capture' of that celebrity image (Coleman, 2009: 105). The participants in this study further this finding in the context of Instagram; that is, they show an awareness of the external processes *beyond* celebrity selfies that are utilised to shape the image in a particular way, such as Instagram filters and, in relation to fitness bloggers, exercise/training as an expectation

of their career. Participant Monica encapsulates this argument when she says: 'celebrities always look great […] but I guess if I had a makeup team, I'd probably look great too.' It is this precisely this (habitual) knowledge of the construction of celebrity selfies – time, Instagram filters and bodily work ('big lips' and exercise) – that participants are able to distance themselves and therefore live with or through 'impossible' or unobtainable celebrity selfies on Instagram.

This argument does not mean to suggest that the participants in this research are altogether *unaffected* by celebrity selfies but aims to emphasise that how they are experienced is complex. Namely, I have sought to highlight that the young women in this study are critical and not passively subjugated or 'trained' by idealised celebrity selfies on Instagram. At the same time, the participants' talk was often highly contradictory – Chapter 6 thus returns to this argument and accounts for how the participants' 'knowledge' and critiques about the construction of (idealised) celebrity selfies do not prevent them from comparing themselves to them anyway. As Gill argues in *Perfect,* young women are 'critical but caught' (2023); in other words, the act of wanting to be unaffected by these types of images does not divorce young women from their 'influence' (disciplinary power) entirely. In line with the aims of this chapter, the following section turns to an analysis of the factors beyond celebrity that more explicitly 'influence' participants' selfie practices.

Part 2. Living My Best Life on Instagram

In Caldeira, Ridder and Bauwel's (2021) audience research with young women about their self-representation tactics on Instagram, the authors note how their participants dismissed and distanced themselves from purposeful or pre-meditated selfie practices. In the context of Instagram, it was a practice that their participants claimed they did not 'think too much about' (Caldeira, Ridder and Bauwel, 2021: 1080). The following analysis highlights that this finding does not translate to the participants in this study; in comparison to their dismissals of celebrity, they speak more freely about their selfie practices and, in the context of Instagram specifically, how purposeful and considered they are. The significant attention or labour given to their selfie practices can be attributed to issues of anticipated judgement and their attempts to circumvent popular

discourse on selfies and selfie-takers, as well as the popularity of Instagrammable conventions and aesthetics. This section explores how both factors act as forms of intensified (self-)surveillance (Burns, 2015; Gill, 2023; Elias and Gill, 2018) that explicitly shape when, where and how participants' selfies are created and displayed on Instagram.

'I'm so in love with myself'

As evidenced in the Introduction, selfie-taking is often problematised in popular discourse through the use of gendered stereotypes: young women are associated with selfies which, in turn, are tied to pathologised constructions of femininity (Burns, 2015). Participant Jane reflects how the word 'selfie' operates is itself bound up with gendered assumptions: 'like if a woman takes a picture of herself it's a selfie, if a man does it it's a picture of himself and that's weird.' This framing produces selfie-takers as in need of regulation and produces a context in which participants feel hesitant to take and post selfies:

> Tayma (she/her): I do think people interpret people who take pictures of themselves as being in love with themselves […] I think I stopped posting pictures because of these comments, I wouldn't put a selfie on Instagram just to have people say I'm so in love with myself […] even my Facebook profile picture, I stopped changing it all the time, I think I've changed it three times this year, but yeah I think I stopped because of these comments.
>
> Sophie (she/her): Both [selfies] were on the walk home from the hairdressers, so my old hairdressers was five minutes from where I used to live so this one, the one where [the hairdresser] said oh just make sure you [post a selfie], I remember thinking oh crap I'm gonna have to do this before I get home otherwise [my husband] is gonna laugh at me […] I don't want him to think that I'm shallow.
>
> **B: He's married to you [laughs]**
>
> Sophie: I don't want him to know the truth [laughs], I take a lot of selfies that I just send to him, but that's different cause it's selfies of me looking hideous cause there's a dog on my shoulder, I don't make any effort to make them look nice, I think he'd think less of me putting hideous selfies on Instagram than

> doing my make-up nice and putting that on Instagram, I think he'd look at that and think oh that's silly.

Both Tayma and Sophie negotiate the gendered assumptions about what it means to take and post a 'nice' looking selfie, which they reflect is seen as a 'silly', 'shallow' and narcissistic endeavour. They describe their attempts to mitigate these gendered assumptions and any anticipated judgement: for Tayma, this was achieved through not posting selfies on Instagram anymore (as well as changing her Facebook profile picture less regularly). Sophie's reflection highlights her tactics to circumvent (her husband's) judgement through taking selfies in private and taking self-deprecating selfies. For instance, she notes how a 'hideous' selfie is seen as more acceptable than a 'nice' make-up selfie. As I explore below, this is owing to the latter displaying signs of effort and thus being open to heightened scrutiny. Significantly, the reflections above highlight how the fear of being perceived as a shallow selfie-taker becomes imbricated in the process of selfie-taking. In Sophie's instance, it is spatially imbricated; selfie-taking is something she engages in when no-one else is around:

> Sophie (she/her): So I was on the walk home […] I looked around to make sure no one was about […] I guess I think people would be making assumptions about me thinking that I was vain or you know self-involved.

In her purposeful avoidance of taking selfies in front of her husband (or anyone else), we can begin to see how popular discourses of shame and narcissism have 'influence'. This shares similarities with Katie Warfield's (2017) empirical research, in which 'most young women said that they took selfies in private because they felt "judged", "ashamed", or "embarrassed" when they took them in public' (2017: 3). This sense of being watched and judged (potentially disciplined) is not limited to 'offline' spaces – as evidenced in Tayma's avoidance of posting selfies to Instagram and Facebook. Both examples highlight how pervasive popular discourse on selfies – as a distinctly gendered practice – can be, as it becomes inextricably intertwined *with* processes of selfie-taking and posting. Sophie's reflection that she 'looked around to make sure no one was about' and Tayma not posting selfies on Instagram altogether is illustrative of how power functions through perpetual (self-)surveillance (Foucault 1977); here, both women submit to the 'inspecting gaze' of others (their followers, husbands,

strangers) who they perceive will police their behaviour as 'self-involved' or evidence of them 'being in love with themselves'.

In terms of Instagram, the participants in this research employed various tactics in an attempt to circumvent the perceived scrutiny of their followers. For some participants, getting others (friends, family, pets) 'involved in' the process of taking selfies is a key tactic in circumventing judgement:

> Kayley (she/her): I always think oh it's okay to post this because someone else took it, so someone else made me look attractive in the photo […] if somebody else has taken it, it seems more acceptable.
>
> Monica (she/her): if I post a selfie it's usually with my friends or family or me and my dog or, I don't know because there's someone else in the photo the focus isn't just on you.
>
> Jane (she/her): I'm way happier to post selfies with other people on Instagram.
> **B: Why is that different for you?**
> Jane: I think again it's scrutiny and also people thinking that I'm a narcissist and I worry about the kind of people who might make that assumption about me.

Getting others involved means 'somebody else has taken it' (Kayley) or there is 'someone else in the photo' (Monica, Jane). Both act as a means of permission to post a selfie on Instagram, as they work to remove participants as the focus and thus alter the function and reception of the selfie. This helps to balance out the risk of (gendered) assumptions being made about the participants by audiences on Instagram. While these tactics are somewhat agential, they are also nevertheless rooted in the participants' fears about being judged (i.e., as narcissistic). We can see above how these fears change the materiality and shape of the participants' selfie practices on Instagram – i.e., as a space that requires them to carefully monitor their image and behaviour. Then, feeling judged is not simply done by others (followers, husbands, strangers) to the participants; the young women here are clearly accustomed to viewing their own selfie practices on Instagram through a critical or 'inspecting gaze'. This gaze is informed by popular ideas about what it means to take an 'attractive'

photo of oneself and post it to Instagram as a young woman – which is, ultimately, felt to be 'wrong'.

Drawing on Foucault's conception of power as productive (1977), Anne Burns views the popular discussion of selfies as maintaining gendered power relations in the way it incites and legitimises the discipline of women's behaviors and identities. Notably, she argues that the repeated criticism of selfies and selfie-takers has naturalised certain 'truths' – selfies and selfie-takers as narcissistic, sexualised, attention-seeking (2015). The experiences highlighted here offer an empirical contribution to this argument and how such discourses get under the skin of young women. Significantly, the fear of being seen as a narcissistic selfie-taker (that thus requires discipline) has more explicit or obvious 'influence' than celebrity in terms of how the participants in this research take and post selfies. The following sections explore how Instagrammable conventions and aesthetics also shape the participants' selfie practices. Notably, it explores the requirement for young women to be 'perfect' on the platform (Gill, 2023).

'I felt like I had a valid excuse'

Instagram was described as the most curated and controlled platform among participants; as participant Emily notes, 'I care more about what goes on Instagram […] I'll be living my worst life on Twitter and my best life on Instagram.' In their discussions of the selfies which had been permanently posted to their Instagram profiles (i.e., on the home feed), participants often quoted a reason for posting beyond just looking 'nice'. The reasons for posting were equated with events and/or when participants looked 'nicer than the average day' (holidays, getting dressed up, parties, post-haircut):

> Kayley (she/her): I was at a New Year's Eve party and I was dressed up […] I felt like I had a valid excuse because it was a fancy dress party.
>
> Sophie (she/her): I thought I looked nice, so I did my make-up ready, I can't remember if I was going out, I think I was going out um and um I thought I looked good, I'd been pre-drinking, so I put a picture up.
>
> Jane (she/her): I usually take selfies on the occasions that I actually put makeup on, when I'm going out usually, yeah, when I feel like I look nicer than the

> average day […] I think I've only posted one selfie on here in years and that was on holiday, and my friend made me post it, I wasn't gonna post it.

These reflections begin to highlight how Instagram's platform vernacular shapes participants' selfie practices. As explained in the Literature Review, the term platform vernacular refers to the combination of affordances, styles and conventions which constitute how a platform's users communicate and interact (Gibbs et al., 2015). For example, Instagram is seen to have popularised candid-looking yet highly stylised shots, or what Caldeira, Ridder and Bauwel call the 'Instagrammable staging of an aestheticized everyday life' (2020: 8). For the participants in this research, events and/or occasions where they look 'nicer than the average day' are presented as opportunities to adhere to the acceptable visual grammar of the platform – i.e., showcase their appropriately aestheticized everyday lives. They do not necessarily go out of their way to achieve an Instagrammable state, but post opportunistically, while on holiday, at a party or before a night out.

Sophie above downplays the process of posting a selfie to Instagram, making it seem as simple as 'I looked good, I'd been pre-drinking, so I put a picture up.' However, when explicitly asked to describe the process of taking a selfie, Sophie and the other participants revealed the strategic and effortful staging (gesturing, posturing, selection and adaptation) behind their Instagram selfies:

> **B: So what is a good angle?**
> Emily (she/her): Oh it's got to be high up so there's no double chins involved [laughs], this is my, I always go for this [places phone above head] you know everyone has a side, I like it up here, also you've got to have the lighting right, so I tend to do a bit of a lighting spin.
>
> Emma (she/her): I look thinner usually than I do, my skin is completely clear, often free of freckles as well if I can get the bleaching effect of the light right so that I don't have any complexion visual which is ridiculous, never with my glasses on usually apart from that one [selfie], which is interesting, always with my contact lenses in, hair never flat.

> Rose (she/her): I breath in, pull my leggings higher up, sometimes lean forward a bit into the mirror and also like almost stand up taller, and put the top half of my body out more and the bottom half out as well.

Participants describe getting the 'right' angle and lighting to avoid 'double chins' and 'any complexion visual', as well as efforts to contort and filter their bodies to appear the 'best' (thinnest) they can. Constructing the self(ie) in ways to appear thinner and smoother can be seen as emblematic of the 'work' that is normatively required of women to appear and behave in a certain way. We can see here how platforms such as Instagram *intensify* aesthetic surveillance in the way they encourage women to choose to 'engage in intensive regimes of selfie-taking labour' (Elias and Gill, 2018: 68). This labour is reproducing an 'appropriate' ('perfect') femininity; that is, while selfies enable women to create images of themselves they are 'happy' with, the standard they seek to achieve is one which adheres to normative and narrow standards. This finding reveals features of a postfeminist sensibility, or what McRobbie calls the 'postfeminist masquerade' (2007) – that is, apps such as Instagram can be seen as reinforcing the shift from objectification to subjectification in contemporary culture, wherein the self is a project to be worked on and 'controlled'. Namely, the participants engage in 'the knowing and self-reflexive terms of highly-stylised femininity' (McRobbie, 2007: 726). Then, the participants' Instagram selfies, as described here, certainly seem 'pre-emptively limited' (Caldeira, Ridder and Bauwel, 2021: 1079) in that they only create representations of themselves that they perceive will be 'acceptable' (normative) to themselves and their followers.

Informed by a feminist Foucauldian framework, Elias and Gill (2018: 63) argue that engaging in 'intense metricized self-scrutiny' is simultaneously constructed as pleasurable for young women. This argument is reiterated in McGill's empirical work (2023); the participants in her study produce selfies that adhere to Instagrammable aesthetics and meet normative beauty standards, a process they describe as labour intensive but pleasurable. Then, it is significant that taking selfies for Instagram is not considered 'useful', 'pleasurable' or 'fun' for the participants in this research. Popular discourse, coupled with the 'pressure' to look a certain way on the platform, not only shapes how, when and where the participants take selfies, but in some instances

actively deters participants from sharing them. This is illustrated in the reflections below:

> Layla (she/her): I don't publish them anymore because it was something of trying to look perfect or better or you know the best you can because you're gonna post it, it wasn't just like, eh any photo, it was like try again and try again and try again, so I think that's why it wasn't enjoyable anymore posting.
>
> Emma (she/her): I just have [my selfies] on my phone so they don't go anywhere […] that's one things I don't like about social media is that it's only ever the really good stuff and I feel like my good stuff isn't as good as everyone else's good stuff, so I just don't share it because it doesn't meet that level, which I know is ridiculous, everyone is just in the highs.

Here, participants cite the pressure to be 'witty' and look 'perfect' on Instagram as reasons why they no longer post their selfies. The requirement to meet Instagrammable ideals becomes a source of anxiety and takes away from their enjoyment. As Layla notes, posting a selfie on Instagram changes its meaning – it becomes a photo one must 'try again and try again and try again' to get perfect. Emma similarly notes the pressure to only share 'the really good stuff' and how it is easier to disengage and 'just [not] share it' when it does not 'meet that level' – presumably, referring to an Instagrammable aesthetic. Self-regulation here becomes too much; both outwardly reject engaging in the practice on/for Instagram as a form of intensified aesthetic labour. Thus, while the platform encourages the maintenance of a narrow approximation of femininity (the 'perfect'), it is not straightforwardly successful in arranging and producing the body in such ways – i.e., as subjected and practiced, 'docile' bodies (Foucault, 1977). I return to this argument in a moment.

'I can't take myself seriously'

Whether it was altering the angle of their phone 'so there's no double chins involved' (Emily) or calling on the 'bleaching effect of the light' (Emma) to produce a clear complexion, participants described putting a great amount of labour into some of their selfies. These selfies – in which participants are alone and often posing – differ in composition to those discussed earlier; namely, where they would get other people

involved in the selfie process to deflect attention. Unsurprisingly, solo selfies rich in aesthetic labour required similar deflection. A revealing example is participant Sophie's experience of posting a selfie captioned 'New lipstick selfie':

> Sophie (she/her): Okay honestly, you're going to anonymise all this right? It wasn't a new lipstick [laughs].
>
> **B: That's amazing.**
>
> Sophie: I needed an excuse […] the lipstick wasn't new, I had put it on in a slightly different way, don't tell anyone […] I'm so ashamed [laughs].

This revelation certainly differs from Sophie's comments earlier in the interview, where she described posting a selfie on Instagram as being as easy as 'I looked good, I'd been pre-drinking, so I put a picture up.' Sophie reveals here how she needed 'an excuse' to post a selfie; in this case, she did not already *have* a 'valid excuse' so fabricated one. Even in the process of revealing her misleading caption to me she jokes about feeling 'so ashamed' and thus, perhaps, silly or embarrassed. The need for an excuse in any case highlights the uneasiness of posting a selfie for the sake of posting a selfie. To be 'acceptable', it needs to be supported with context, purpose, or justification. Participants Jane and Rose exhibit similar tactics to Sophie in the way their captions work to 'deflect' negative attention/assumptions from the 'inspecting gaze' of their followers:

> **B: What did you caption it?**
>
> Jane (she/her): 'Sultry holiday selfie posted by request of @[friend]' and then I said I cropped out the triangle sunburn on my forehead, I like can't take myself very seriously posting them […] like I make a joke so it's not like as sincere, I can't take myself seriously even though taking that picture I was, but I can't publicly emulate that, I have to add some kind of humour to show that I'm not taking myself too seriously […] I just didn't feel comfortable taking myself seriously in that capacity, even though when I was taking it I very much was taking myself seriously in that capacity, but I can't perform that publicly, I have to counter it.
>
> Rose (she/her): You know what, I don't really take many selfies, the last selfie I took was that which was in 2018.
>
> **B: [Laughs] and you captioned it #catfish, why?**

> Rose: Yeah [laughs] today for example I don't look like that because I'm tanned and my skin is glowing and everything, I don't know [laughs].

By being self-aware in her use of the word 'sultry', Jane seeks to deflect responsibly for the post to her friend (even @-ing them in the post) and referencing the 'triangle sunburn' on her forehead. In this way, Jane uses the caption feature on Instagram to carefully re-frame her selfie (both the taking and posting of it) as not *actually* serious. Returning to the distinction between public versus private behaviour discussed earlier (Warfield, 2017), Jane is comfortable to take her selfie practices seriously when alone but feels uncomfortable performing that seriousness 'publicly'. This is owing to the popular idea that selfies are tantamount to a preoccupation with the self – a narrative which participants actively seek to distance themselves from. By using a caption to 'counter' the seriousness of her selfie, Jane pre-emptively achieves some level of self-protection against the perceived judgement of her followers. Rose – although arguably less explicitly – employs a similar tactic with her caption '#catfish'. A 'catfish' (as popularised by the MTV show of the same name) has become shorthand for someone who creates a fictitious persona online – either through pretending to be an 'enhanced' version of their offline selves or someone else entirely. By using this hashtag, Rose controls the narrative framing of her selfie and, like Jane, acknowledges (and mocks) the aesthetic labour that has gone into her appearance. Namely, she is the first to admit she doesn't 'look like that' – tanned and with 'glowing' skin – in 'real' life. In their own ways, Jane and Rose both work to make their selfies 'a joke' and reassure their audiences that they are not taking themselves seriously – and are thus not in need of correction or regulation from their followers or wider publics on Instagram.

These tactics, whilst critical and agentic, are also characteristic of the requirement to be 'perfect' on Instagram in ways that extend physical appearance. Notably, we can see here how performing in the 'correct' way is about more than meeting Instagrammable aesthetics but is also about displaying the 'right' kind of attitude (Gill, 2021; Kanai, 2018). The analysis above thus shares similarities with other audience work on social media use/selfie practices in that the participants describe how the self 'must be carefully curated but not look as if it is the result of any particular care or design', such as through self-deprecating captions (Gill, 2021: 1388; Cambre and Lavrence, 2020). While the participants in this research did not explicitly refer to their

selfies as needing to appear 'authentic', the way their carefully curated selfies are framed as 'not actually serious' and not meaning to oversell themselves (as a #catfish) illustrates how they feel they must put forward a somewhat still 'real', authentic self(ie) on Instagram. In this regard, their concerns are not only rooted in fears of being judged as narcissistic but are also 'shaped by a set of moral judgements around fraudulence, and ethical orientations towards authenticity' (Gill, 2023: 148). Overall, their selfie and Instagram practices require a great deal of labour and management to look 'perfect' *and* 'real' – it is only through meeting this contradictory requirement (through self-regulation) that they feel they can post and not be subject to judgement from others.

Other means used by participants to circumvent the perceived judgement of their followers are the temporal functions on Instagram. Available for 24-hours only, the 'stories' function offers an impermanence – and in turn, safety – to participants when it comes to the posting of their selfies:

> Meg (she/her): I'll do ridiculous ones on my stories […] it's not as permanent, if I'm feeling bad about it later on it will just go, it's probably more how I used Snapchat as well, I was just more willing to be silly on Snapchat and I've carried that over, whereas the Instagram feed I feel like it has to look a certain way or I have to put on more of a performance of things being good […] it's there for a longer time, people are more likely on Instagram, like you can see the whole feed and you can scroll back really easily to see the rest of them, and because it's so image-led, like it feels like it needs to look good […] I probably post more selfies on my stories because I'm way less picky about how I look, I literally put one after the gym the other day where I look disgusting, or I'm feeling ill, or I'm trying a new filter.

Meg's use of the Instagram feed differs from the silliness she exhibits on other platforms (Snapchat), illustrating how the shape and materiality of selfies can change depending on the platform. As discussed above, the 'certain way' to be on Instagram is 'perfect'. Meg details how this is particularly the case when posting to her main Instagram feed, 'because it's so image-led' and because 'people' (the imagined audience) can 'scroll back really easily' on her profile. Meg's reflection illustrates that

posting a selfie to this more permanent space, which functions as an archive of the self, is a vulnerable exercise that comes with (gendered) assessments and judgement. This illustrates particularly well Foucault's argument that 'the fact of constantly being seen, of being able to always be seen […] maintains the disciplined individual in his [sic] subjection' (Foucault, 1977: 187). Being seen on one's Instagram feed is bound up with Instagrammable expectations; in comparison, there is a comfort and autonomy in the ephemerality of stories. It is the act of not constantly being seen that makes Meg feel more at liberty to post selfies – particularly 'silly' and 'disgusting' ones. This comfort is related to feelings of control and a lack of (long-term) surveillance – she knows followers can only see her selfies for a day, a time frame that is tangible and at her discretion in comparison to the permanence of the Instagram feed. Further, if Meg is 'feeling bad' after posting, which may refer to the selfie or the fact her followers can see it, the image (and the bad feelings) will nevertheless 'just go' after a day. In this respect, Meg's use of the stories function provides a space through which she can disengage from selfie-taking as a form of intensified aesthetic labour/self-surveillance. In this context, Meg's selfies function as an exercise in more playful documentation of her 'real' or 'everyday' life, when she has been to the gym or is feeling ill.

We can see here again how the requirement to meet Instagrammable ideals takes away from the enjoyment of posting selfies to Instagram. As discussed earlier, participants Layla and Emma share a similar experience to Meg in that they outwardly reject engaging in the practice on/for Instagram as a form of intensified aesthetic labour. I discussed earlier how disengaging from the practice can be viewed as a form of resistance to Instagrammable ideals, an analysis of which can be extended to the way Meg carves out a less 'perfect' and self-protective space using stories. Yet, it is worth reflecting here on the ways Instagrammable aesthetics nevertheless *shape* the participants' selfie practices. Not posting a selfie and only posting 'disgusting' selfies outside of Instagram's main feed is both evidence of resistance to Instagrammable ideals *and* illustrative of how they arrange and produce the body. The disciplinary power of these ideals is coupled with the anticipated judgement of the participants' followers/the imagined audience; in seeking to circumvent popular assumptions on selfies and selfie-takers, participants submit to their 'inspecting gaze'. In turn, their actions do little to challenge what has become embedded as the acceptable visual grammar on Instagram.

'I'm doing so much better now'

So far, we have seen that Instagrammable aesthetics and popular discourse about selfie-takers shape the participants' selfie practices – including how, when and where they take and post them. While I have focused so far on the disciplinary effects of Instagram and popular discourse, I want to highlight here that the relationship participants have with their selfies is complex. For some, their (highly stylised) selfies *also* helped them to renegotiate and connect to their bodies. For example, Kristie below acknowledges that her filtered selfies 'probably come across' as vain, although in contrast to other participants in this research, such judgements do not stop her posting them. Therefore, following the case study approach used in this thesis, I want to end this chapter with an analysis of participant Kristie's selfie experiences and how they help her to internalise 'truths' about her self-worth.

> Kristie (she/her): [My previous partner] didn't like people looking at me on social media or even in person, so I went through that which was really difficult and I suppose that was from the age of 18-24 and when I got out of that relationship which was a really long, difficult few years, I don't know why but going onto social media and doing what I do gave me the confidence that I felt he took away from me, does that make sense? I don't want to sound too sad but, and I almost feel like even to this day cos he was really not a nice person to me, I post a picture and go I'm doing so much better now if that makes sense, I'm not doing it for everyone to go oh she looks amazing blah blah blah it's almost like, it's almost aimed at him like you didn't break me, I am now a confident person and my life is so much better now […] I don't know [laugh] I'm not vain, it probably comes across that way.

Here, Kristie describes her experiences of coercive and controlling behaviour from her previous partner, and how the act of taking and posting selfies gives her the 'confidence' that 'he took away from [her]' for many years. In this respect, Kristie's selfies act as a 'knowledge device' through which to experience a sense of autonomy over her body (Tiidenberg and Gómez-Cruz, 2015). Drawing on Foucault's concept of 'technologies of the self' (1988) which sees care for the self as a positive resistance, Tiidenberg and Gómez-Cruz argue that taking and sharing selfies NSFW (sexy) selfies

on Tumblr can help women internalise corporeal truths (2015). They note that 'alternations to one's agency, power and political intent' happen through taking and sharing sexy selfies as women's beliefs about what is photographable change (Tiidenberg and Gómez-Cruz, 2015: 83). Kristie similarly uses her selfies to internalise 'truths' about her self-worth and 'unfix' her body from the past in that they act as a reminder that she is 'doing so much better now'. This is an explicit alteration to Kristie's agency given that her previous partner did not allow her to have social media or 'people looking at [her]' in any situation. Taking and posting selfies has therefore become a practice of self-care (positive resistance) for Kristie; a way for her to reassure, know and experience herself differently from how she felt in the past.

As noted in the Literature Review, McGill's study (2023) with women about their selfie-taking practices highlights the prominence of 'discourses of control'. Kristie's experience shares similarities with McGill's participants in that her selfie-taking practices offer a sense of 'empowerment-through-control' over her image. This control is used to produce selfies that adhere to Instagrammable (normative) aesthetics. For example, Kristie described the process of taking and choosing her Instagram selfies, which is labour intensive yet also pleasurable, given the context above:

> Kristie (she/her): I looked through them and picked which one was my favourite, I guess which one I thought I looked nicest in […] makeup, angle, I like that one because the angle I'm at I look like I have a nice cheek bone, and I liked the way my hair looked straight and the way my hair was sitting […] and I just thought I looked nice in it compared to the other ones [laughs] but I would say I take about ten every time and then I'll just delete the ones I don't use.

In relation to her own study participants, McGill argues control discourse speaks to a language of postfeminist, neoliberal 'empowerment' where women are encouraged to 'choose' appropriate femininity (2023). For this reason, she argues that her participants' 'desire for control can be realised only to be undone' as the standard they adhere to and are happy with is culturally and technologically determined (McGill, 2023: 4117). Kristie similarly 'chooses' to adhere to normative femininity – indeed, it is important to note that this individual experience is not necessarily challenging wider

beliefs about who and what is photographable, in that her selfies reproduce Instagrammable (white, slim, smooth) aesthetics. However, being able to shoot, edit and share photographs she is 'happy' with goes beyond how Kristie looks (selfies as representation) and speaks to what she knows and feels about herself. In this respect, the sense of 'empowerment' she feels (through control of her image) cannot be reduced to a postfeminist paradigm or seen simply as patriarchal power internalised; the purpose of her selfies and the 'control' they offer differs given the wider context of her past relationship. I would argue that sharing her selfies is actively subversive after 'a really long, difficult few years' wherein Kristie was denied autonomy not only over how she could be seen, but whether she was seen at all.

Conclusions

This chapter set out to explore if and how celebrity selfies shape young women's selfie practices. Indicative of the perceived futility and low cultural value of celebrity in popular discourse, the participants in this study overwhelmingly denounced or downplayed the use of celebrity selfies in relation to their own selfie practices. Selfies that displayed normative (Instagrammable) ideals, in particular, were framed as forms of content that they do not have the resource or desire to replicate. Their talk also reflected a dismissal of a particular brand of celebrity – namely, those who are 'excessively' corporeal and who's fame is achieved through concentrated media exposure. In this way, the participants' discussions mirror a wider social discourse about reality television fame, but particularly the Kardashians, in that they were construed as being outside the parameters of 'natural', white middle-class respectability (Sastre, 2014). The following chapter builds on this argument and explores how 'ordinary' celebrities, such as fitness bloggers and reality television stars, often served as negative reference points from which participants constructed a narrow definition of 'authentic' femininity.

This chapter has also highlighted how the participants occupied contradictory subject positions in which they rejected *and* adopted popular narratives about the harmful 'influence' of celebrity culture. While celebrity selfies on Instagram were seen to have little influence over their own selfie practices (i.e., because they were unrealistic), they were understood to negatively impact the 'younger generation'. The framing of

'young people' as at greater risk allowed the participants to occupy a position of power, of which they are so often denied in popular discourse. Instead, the participants cited factors beyond celebrity as 'influencing' when, where and how they created and shared their selfies. It is here that their talk highlighted the disciplinary power of Instagrammable ideals and popular discourse about selfies and selfie-takers (narratives of narcissism and feeling judged). The experiences highlighted here offer an empirical contribution to Burns' argument that the popular discussion of selfies maintains gendered power relations in the way it incites and legitimises the discipline of women's behaviors and identities. Indeed, the fear of being seen as a narcissistic selfie-taker (that thus requires discipline) had the most explicit or obvious 'influence' over how the participants in this research took and posted selfies on Instagram.

This chapter has also shown that the participants in this research are critical and skilful in their Instagram use; for example, they shared their attempts to pre-empt and circumvent judgement from others (their husbands, strangers, and followers). Taking selfies in private or with other people, utilising witty captions and hashtags, and using Instagram stories as an ephemeral – and thus 'safer' – alternative to permanent posts were tactics employed by participants to reframe their selfies as self-aware and therefore not vain or in need of 'correction'. I reflected on how these tactics are both agentic but also illustrative of how gendered judgements and Instagrammable ideals arrange and produce the body. Their selfie and Instagram practices are characteristic of the requirement to be 'perfect' on Instagram – not only in terms of physical appearance but also in terms of displaying the 'real', authentic self(ie) (Gill, 2021; Kanai, 2018). In this final chapter, I look at how the requirement or pressure to appear 'perfect' on Instagram (and in their lives generally) is also learned through comparison to others – notably, the participants' peers.

Finally, the case study of Kristie in this chapter highlighted how the participants' own selfie practices – despite their limitations in terms of how they 'choose' to reproduce an 'appropriate' (normative/perfect) femininity – are nevertheless complex. Kristie's experience highlights that such selfies can simultaneously act as a 'knowledge device' through which to internalise 'truths' about one's self-worth (Tiidenberg and Gómez-Cruz, 2015); i.e., function as a resistant practice. In this respect, this chapter contributes to the growing body of audience work showing that selfie practices on/for

Instagram can positively shape the ways women experience their bodies (Olszanowski, 2014; Tiidenberg and Gómez-Cruz, 2015; Caldeira, Ridder and Bauwel, 2020).

This chapter and the conclusions drawn here do not mean to dismiss the positive effects of celebrity, or indeed the relevance of celebrity in itself. Despite their dismissal of celebrity as a 'guilty pleasure' (Monica) or a topic that they 'pretend' not to be interested in (Sophie), participants nevertheless derive, guilty or not, a certain pleasure from celebrity. As Ang notes, drawing on Roland Barthes, '[p]leasure eludes our rational consciousness' in the context of media consumption (1985: 84). Writing about watching television, she stresses that it 'is a cultural practice which has much of the nature of a habit', particularly when 'it is directly available, casual and free. And a habit is always difficult to explain in intellectual terms, because it feels so natural and self-evident' (1985: 83-84). The same can be said of women's Instagram use and celebrity on the platform in that it is a free social media app that allows for endless skimming/scrolling of content. The analysis here has offered only a partial insight into participants' initial negotiations of celebrity and one which does not do justice to their overall experiences of engaging with their content/selfies on Instagram. The following chapters attend to participants' curational desires and practices as indicative of what they want from, as well as how they use, celebrity and their selfies on Instagram. While the celebrity selfie does not always or explicitly 'influence the selfies [they] take' (Jane), it nevertheless proves itself to be intrinsic to participants' experiences – and pleasure – on Instagram.

Chapter 5: A Good Space

Curating Celebrity Content and the Desire for Authenticity on Instagram

Introduction

This chapter attends to participants' curational practices and desires, as indicative of what they want from celebrity content on Instagram. In doing so, it seeks to answer the second research question guiding this thesis:

1. What do young women want from celebrities and their selfies on Instagram?
    - How do they curate celebrity content – i.e., who do they follow, unfollow or mute, and why?

In the context of this research, curation is defined as 'an act of qualitative judgement' in the selection of Instagram content (Caldeira, Bauwel and Ridder, 2021: 1078). This process refers to how the participants in this study navigate flows of celebrity content and engage with the affordances of Instagram – i.e., who they 'follow', 'unfollow' and 'mute', as well as how they perceive the algorithm. Attending to these curational practices illustrates their desire for diversity and celebrity content that feels 'real' (authentic) – in terms of being in closer proximity to their own bodies, identities and the actualities of their lives. The focus of this chapter is a response to popular concerns about the 'negative effects' of Instagram for girls and young women's mental well-being, specifically in terms of celebrity content on the platform invoking negative social comparison and body image anxieties (see Malacoff, 2019; Dang, 2021). It is also a response to academic work on the celebrity selfie, in which audience identification with celebrity selfies is overwhelmingly limited to concepts of aspiration and imitation (Abidin, 2016: 87; Jerslev and Mortensen, 2016; Marwick, 2015; Caldeira, Bauwel and Ridder, 2021). In turning to the audience, this chapter reveals that the participants in this research want much more than to imitate the cultural scripts of celebrity images on Instagram.

The first half of this chapter highlights how participants' curation tactics are highly calculated and demonstrate moments of agency and resistance to idealised norms of

femininity. While Instagram endorses an ideology of gendered perfection in the way it privileges white, slim, young bodies (Olszanowski, 2014), I explore how participants are aware of – and reflect on – this fact. Notably, I make the case that participants incorporate their knowledge of what is granted visibility on the platform (and wider visual economy) to curate, to their best of their ability, a 'good space' to be in. This involves seeking out and prioritising celebrity content that has use-value, which is defined as that which educates, displays 'realistic' qualities, and reflects their identities and personal values. In this respect, this section draws on and contributes to feminist audience work of popular media texts to make sense of the pleasure participants feel in response to celebrity content – notably, how it is bound up with the recognition of the self (Ang, 1985; Stacey, 1994; Feasey, 2008).

The second half of this chapter reflects on the centrality of (in)authenticity as a structuring force in participants' curation tactics. It extrapolates on the ways participants find pleasure in searching for the 'truth' or moments of authenticity when celebrities are 'really' themselves on Instagram. Specifically, it analyses the markers of authenticity that make celebrities and their selfies on Instagram feel 'real', which include displays of negative affect, a lack of premeditation and a sense of access to celebrities, as well as 'natural' aesthetics. It also explores what authenticity *does* through a Foucauldian lens (Foucault, 1978; Butler, 2004) – as a disciplinary and knowledge-making device in participants' talk and curation practices. Questions of (in)authenticity have a long history in the field of celebrity studies (Dyer, 1986; Gamson, 1994; Hill, 2002; Abidin, 2016; Mendick, et al., 2018); this section contributes a contextually specific analysis of authenticity to this area of work. Notably, it highlights the continuities and differences in how the concept is taken up and negotiated by young women on Instagram in comparison to other media forms and celebrity figures. For example, 'ordinary' celebrity on Instagram, including fitness bloggers and reality television stars, continue to be especially prominent targets of policing where authenticity is concerned. These celebrities serve as negative reference points from which to construct a narrow definition of 'authentic' femininity that is white middle-class, 'natural' and as something not commercial. Overall, I highlight how authenticity carries great weight on Instagram, despite being (or precisely because it is) a platform characterised by perfection (artifice) and structured by the logics of self-branding (Banet-Wieser, 2012).

Taken together, this chapter demonstrates that participants are intentional, creative, and knowledgeable in their navigation of celebrity content on Instagram. In this respect, it troubles popular discourse and offers nuance to existing academic work on the celebrity selfie, both of which conceptualise audience engagement in relation to the risks of, or their aspirations to, Instagrammable aesthetics.

Part 1. Curating Celebrity Content

Despite being understood as a somewhat problematic platform for women (see Chapter 4), Instagram was discussed as valuable tool in the way it allows for a sense of curational agency and personalisation:

> Sophie (she/her): I used to buy a lot of women's magazines and now I don't […] because the things that I was buying them for I now get from social media for free and I can choose what I see, and I like that, it's like a mix and match your own women's magazine.

Sophie likens the Instagram homepage to a 'mix and match your own women's magazine' in which you have more choice over the content you see. This is not to suggest celebrity content on Instagram is as static or tangible as a print magazine. Indeed, Sophie's reflection encapsulates an Instagram user's ability to curate (and update) content to create a personalised space. This section explores how participants engage in this process of 'mix and match' curation in relation to their celebrity consumption. In doing so, it seeks to understand what kinds of celebrity content they are drawn to and align themselves with.

'You need to include something useful for people'

Despite initially downplaying their interests in celebrity culture or branding it a 'guilty pleasure', participants began to express a desire for celebrity content on Instagram that is *useful.* Participants described following and engaging with celebrity accounts who acted as a source of information or a tool for exploration. These modes of curation often reflected participants' identities and personal pursuits — for example,

participant Layla noted seeking out Middle Eastern celebrities to bridge the cultural gap between herself and her husband:

> Layla (she/her): I had a phase as well I was looking for loads of Middle Eastern [celebrities] because my husband is Middle Eastern, so I wanted to see how the fashion [sic] and how they dressed, what they do and stuff like that, so that's why I follow a few of them, […] you know the whole approach I had about that culture was my husband's family one, and I knew how they dress and stuff like that but what about the other people you know, I know how Mexican celebrities, non-celebrities, rich, poor people dress, I was like what about there?

Following a celebrity in this instance is driven by a desire for information. In hoping to gain access to spatio-temporal worlds relatively inaccessible independent of technology, Layla 'had a phase […] looking for loads of Middle Eastern [celebrities] because (her) husband is Middle Eastern.' Following such accounts gave her a view into cultural traditions and proclivities specific to a location that would have otherwise been inaccessible to her due to locational differences. It is worth noting that said information is not 'fixed' or indicative of any ontological reality or 'truth', but something perceived through Layla's arguably imagined (or curated) world of the Middle East. In other words, the Middle East is clearly not home to just one culture and a monolithic way of life, which Layla's musings on 'how they dressed, what they do and stuff like that' potentially suggest. However, Layla acknowledges that her previous understanding was limited to her 'husband's family' and thus lacked nuance in comparison to her own culture and knowledge of how 'Mexican celebrities, non-celebrities, rich, poor people' live. In this way, Layla uses celebrity content as a tool for cultural exploration. Layla went on to juxtapose this kind of 'productive' celebrity content with a 'simple selfie' or posting photos of oneself (which is implied as comparatively useless). This was a recurring theme throughout the interviews in that they often distanced themselves from celebrity culture/selfies – i.e., as frivolous (see Chapter 4). Consider Layla and Nikki's explanations of what does/does not constitute worthwhile celebrity content:

> Layla (she/her): I think we all try to look for something in it, more than just think oh that's beautiful or that we want to just look at each other looking

> nice […] I think as well a lot of non-celebrities don't get followed that much because you don't really produce any content, so I think you need to include something useful for people, you know more than just a simple selfie.
>
> Nikki (she/her): I don't know, something about it felt very self-centered and indulgent and I didn't find that very appealing, and [Ruby Rare] took a lot of photos of herself and I just got bored with it, because it wasn't really what I was after, I was wanting her to educate me and signpost me to interesting sources and stuff but it was just her in her pants bragging about some kind of sexual experience that she'd had, I don't know, she just seemed kind of up herself so that's why I unfollowed her.

In wanting something beyond beauty and celebrities 'looking nice', Layla favours celebrity content with a degree of functionality. Notably, she believes there is a need for celebrity accounts 'to include something useful for people'. For her, this is what generates a following on Instagram (a celebrity status) in comparison to non-celebrities. Without this productive quality, a celebrity is ultimately uninteresting and unworthy of Layla's affective investment. Specifically, it appears that idealised norms (or just 'looking nice') with no context is rejected; as with their own selfies, such selfies need to be supported with context, purpose, or justification to be acceptable (see Chapter 4). A similar sentiment is echoed in participant Nikki's experience of unfollowing UK-based sex educator Ruby Rare. In a somewhat ironic reading, Nikki's desire for sex education was tempered by the fact that Rare posted a lot of photos of herself – notably in her pants. What is salient here is that a selfie on its own that lacks self-awareness, functionality or justification is met with intense criticism – the selfie-taker is deemed 'self-centered and indulgent' and devoid of purpose vis-a-vis their audience. It is also significant that certain types of selfies (or the absence of them) marked out the worth of celebrity accounts. For instance, Nikki noted seeking out different sex education accounts after unfollowing Rare:

> Nikki (she/her): There's one called the Sex Ed which is an account run by a woman, I think it's mainly a podcast, and again that was what I was after really, experts talking about different aspects of sex and sexuality and I guess they were more informed and there's no selfies, well no, there are selfies, but it's just a headshot to promote the particular podcast.

For Nikki, a headshot on the Sex Ed account established them as 'experts' in comparison to Rare's choice of selfies. Such a reflection speaks to the pervasive devaluation of selfies and selfie-takers in popular discourse. It not only shapes their own selfie practices (as seen in Chapter 4) but structures the way they judge and discipline other women on Instagram – as necessarily vain and not to be taken seriously. Here, a celebrity's educational credentials are called into question owing to their style of semi-nude selfies. This discursive framing can be seen as in keeping with how reflexivity operates as a form of cultural capital among my sample of predominantly middle-class participants. That is, discussions of utility are perhaps a way for Nikki and Layla to counter the perceived low value of celebrity culture and selfies.

More than this, though, we can understand these critical forms of looking (or judging) as revealing features of a postfeminist neoliberal sensibility (Gill, 2023). Notably, we can see how performing in the 'correct' Instagrammable way extends beyond one's physical appearance to displaying the 'right' kind of attitude (Gill, 2021; Kanai, 2018). For example, Nikki engages in the policing of affects; it is not just Rare's semi-nude selfies that are judged, but the way they 'brag' about their sexual experiences. This extends my arguments in Chapter 4; while the 'work' that is required to produce a 'perfect' selfie is not considered 'useful', 'pleasurable' or 'fun' for the participants in this research, they nevertheless continue to mark out of the worth of celebrity women using the very same criteria they critique. As Gill notes, young women have been somewhat 'trained' to engage in critical forms of looking in contemporary mediated culture – of which are historically unprecedented in their attention to micro surveillance of the body, feelings and affects (2023). This can be seen as stemming from various forces, from the beauty industry to the user expectations of social media platforms (e.g., Instagrammable aesthetics). We can see how these forces, alongside the popular discursive framing of selfies and selfie-takers, interact and play out in the participants' critiques of celebrity selfies on Instagram. A 'simple' celebrity selfie, i.e., that is normative, carries signs of effort or represents deliberate (sexual) desires, is typically subject to greater scrutiny than those which are non-normative.

I discuss the implications of participants discursively constructing some celebrities as 'useful' and others not in the second half of this chapter. Specifically, I discuss how – from a Foucauldian perspective – rendering certain celebrities/bodies as 'useless' is intrinsic to processes of normalisation (Butler, 2004). I now turn my focus to what celebrity selfies *are* considered useful for participants – which is celebrity selfies displaying 'non-normative' bodies (i.e., those who disrupt ideals of femininity).

'She takes the absolute piss'

Across interviews, participants expressed a liking for celebrities displaying 'realistic' (authentic) qualities. These qualities often came up in relation to celebrities who post selfies that 'take the absolute piss' (out of more 'serious' selfie culture) and display non-normative bodies:

> Monica (she/her): @ChessieKing, have you heard of her, she's absolutely incredible, so she takes the absolute piss out of like […] so she does things liked that, makeup smeared, in the evening she will literally have her hair scraped back […] it's like this [turns phone] she'll point out her spots so yeah, she's good […] you know just realistically things that I would do or things that could happen to me.

> Froze (she/her): [on lad baby mum] she just looks crazy in her pictures, she doesn't care she's not one of these that just overly has to look perfect […] you know when you'd take a selfie of yourself and think oh my god I look really bad, she's got those ones on there and you just think yeah go for it […] I think that's really good that she does, some people would be like oh […] cos you're bent at that certain angle you're like omg I've got a double chin, but it doesn't matter because it's normal and she's a normal body size as well and I love those ones where they take the piss.

These reflections illustrate that there is less tension in participants' negotiations of 'satirical' or 'realistic' celebrity selfies in comparison to selfies that conform to Instagrammable norms (see Chapter 4). This is in part because this framing allows them to occupy a position of power; the construction of celebrity and the 'ideal' image becomes *part* of the performance for Monica and Froze, allowing for a knowledgeable and mocking perspective on 'serious' selfie culture/the requirement to be perfect on

Instagram. In this regard, these types of celebrity selfies may be valued by participants because they produce a feeling of *catharsis*. As explored in the previous chapter, participants often disengage from posting on Instagram as the process behind capturing the 'right' image becomes a form of labour, as well as it is not considered worth the reward given the ways it might be perceived and responded to. Thus, celebrity selfies displaying realistic qualities, such as double chins, 'normal' body sizes, blemishes, smeared makeup and scraped back hair, provide a moment of relief from more explicitly curated Instagram feeds. These images are read (and felt) as a rejection of the labour that goes into an Instagrammable selfie and the pressure to conform to normative embodiments. The admiration and enjoyment felt here ('I love those ones' and 'she's just incredible') constructs pleasure as an affective resource to feel differently about their own bodies. Namely, these types of selfies arguably act as a *counterattack* to the idea that women should engage in critical forms of looking (surveilling) their bodies to live up to ideals of perfection on Instagram.

It is prudent here to recall Foucault's (1976) closing arguments in *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1*. Namely, he notes that while bodies are disciplined, organised and constructed through discourses of sexuality, 'the rallying point for the counterattack ought […] to be […] bodies and pleasures' (Foucault, 1976: 157). In this sense, to achieve 'agency' and 'tactically reverse' (Foucault, 1976: 157) normative formulations of the body, we must centre pleasure and seek out bodies in their varied and diverse forms. Applied to the context of this research, we can see that pleasure and bodies act as a mode of resistance; participants enjoy images where celebrities look 'really bad' (read: not idealistic) and, simultaneously, their ability to *not care* creates pleasure ('I love those ones where they take the piss'). This pleasure provides a rupture in the discourse that idealised femininity should shape women's experiences of their bodies.

To extend this analysis of pleasure, such comments also mirror other audience work on female audiences of gendered media forms. For example, Ang (1985), Stacey (1994) and Feasey (2008) have all similarly found that audiences enjoy 'the recognition of familiar aspects of everyday life' in a media text (Stacey, 1994: 126). In this way, the appeal of realistic celebrity selfies also speaks to the 'pleasure of recognition' (Ang, 1985) and how such images allow participants to find a point of

connection to *their* reality. That is, participants seek out elements of celebrity on Instagram that are relevant to their own lived experiences and, in turn, pleasurable. In the case of Monica, it is by being imperfect with 'makeup smeared' and 'spots' that Chessie King appears *like* her. The celebrity is 'realistically' performing 'things that could happen to' Monica herself, and in turn creating a sense of connection through the sharing of accessible aesthetics. Froze loves 'really bad' selfies because they normalise the non-normative; it doesn't matter that the celebrity looks 'bad' because 'it's normal and she's a normal body size'. Both Monica and Froze reach for moments of connection – it is the recognition of the self in the selfies that makes them feel 'real' and, in turn, pleasurable.

Finally, I want to return to Sophie's reflection that Instagram is like a 'mix and match your own women's magazine'. Rolls of fat, blemishes and so forth (i.e., 'realistic' aesthetics) are not specific to Instagram but have a longer history in gossip magazines and paparazzi images. These are understood in (textual) feminist work as governmental spaces in which celebrity women's bodies are 'always at risk of 'failing' (Gill, 2007: 149). Gill draws on tabloid magazines and paparazzi shots of celebrity women to highlight how their bodies are evaluated and judged, noting that '[no] transgression is too small to be picked over and picked apart' (2007: 149). Hirdman similarly notes how tabloid magazines (re)enforce shared judgments, with the 'excessive' female celebrity body framed to evoke disgust and shame (2017). However, empirical work has highlighted that, despite the intended framing, readers do not read such images as a form of discipline (i.e., in terms of teaching them what is not appropriate femininity). For example, Rebecca Feasey's work with readers of *heat* magazine illustrates that seeing a celebrity's physical and fashionable 'imperfections' invokes empathy among readers, as well as such images become 'a useful route to accepting their own imperfections' (2008: 695). Here, we can see how 'real' bodies on Instagram operate in a similar way; the aesthetics of 'really bad' selfies are not read as 'imperfections', nor do the images 'incite disgust reactions' or encourage a process of judging celebrity women for their bodily 'failures' (Hirdman, 2017: 374). The participants in this research also differ somewhat to magazine readers, as such images do not invoke feelings of empathy, but pleasure and respect. As I explore in the final chapter, this is because these images are shared *purposefully* by

celebrities, which is read as a refreshing example of confidence in the context of a platform and practice that is typically normative.

'As long as it's not completely against my views'

For the participants in this study, curating a space on Instagram that reflects their values was another recurring theme. This was alluded to in the previous chapter; participants Stella and Kayley noted actively not following the Kardashians as they considered them shaming accounts and as being morally and ethically misaligned with their values. Such tactics of curation based on values – moral, ethical, political, or otherwise — is further reiterated in Kayley's account of unfollowing an unnamed embroidery artist:

> Kayley (she/her): There was a really big embroidery artist who did really amazing things but then she posted this really […] it was like a, it wasn't writing but it was like this piece and alongside it she'd written this thesis in inverted commas about gender hysteria and how you can't expect people to, basically it was really transphobic and really gross and it made me really sad so I was just like nope, no thank you, and then a lot of people in that community responded, and responded very openly and very strongly, so I followed some of them, and they are also interesting artists but I feel like, I don't want to follow crap people, I want to follow good people who stick up for other people.

Kayley's reflection is indicative of the ongoing *process* of curation participants go through to create an acutely personalised space. Here, she rejects 'a really big embroidery artist' owing to a 'really transphobic and really gross' piece posted on the artist's Instagram account. Not only did Kayley refuse its message and unfollow said artist, but the incident also fuelled reactive tactics of curation. Namely, she followed other accounts in the embroidery community –presumably outspoken allies or trans people. The ways in which her curation reflects her values (and her LGBT+ identity) is further encapsulated in the statement that she wants 'to follow good people who stick up for other people.' Then, who Kayley chooses to follow appears not to be restricted to 'interesting' (or indeed idealised) celebrity accounts, but whether they align with her values and aspirations to these values. It is particularly significant that

Kayley unfollows or 'get(s) rid' of this celebrity because she doesn't 'want that in (her) life.' This suggests that, far beyond being trivial, Instagram and celebrity content is an active and informative part of how she negotiates her values and identity (and, notably, gender equality). Participant Meg curates celebrity content in a similar manner – consider her 'unfollowing' of author and television presenter Candice Brathwaite:

> Meg (she/her): [on celebrity sponsors and ads] as long as it's not completely against my views, there was someone recently, Candice Brathwaite I saw she was doing partnerships with WW who are the thing Weight Watchers has rebranded to and I was like, absolutely not. Not only do I think they're a scam but it's not in line with my interests at all, I'm very conscious of what they're promoting.

Meg's reflection highlights the displeasure and disconnection she feels towards Brathwaite's endorsement of weight loss programme Weight Watchers. Brathwaite's intentions to reinforce and capitalise on postfeminist gendered norms (i.e., dieting under the guise of empowerment) is rejected on the basis that it is a 'scam', as well as it is 'completely' against Meg's views. This brand partnership is thus disruptive to Meg's pleasure; she can no longer recognise herself in the content and yet it still provides an avenue for a counterattack on normative gendered embodiments. Meg's reading process is thus similar to the ways participants rejected Kim Kardashian's promotion of dieting products in Chapter 4. We can see here that Meg is not interpellated into the self-reflexive terms of feminine 'perfection' sold by celebrities on Instagram. Indeed, I would argue that dieting content does not offend Meg because it encourages her to look inward towards the self, but because it fuels outward reflection at the social forces that underpin the celebrity-brand partnership. In this sense, displeasure acts as an effective – and affective – mode of counterattack. That is, Meg actively pushes away fatphobic ideals of beauty in her refusal to believe that she should strive towards them through her consumption habits. This commentary extends and adds nuance to the idea that celebrity – in general – is both a 'disciplinary technology' *and* 'sense-making resource' through which young people can 'contest, resist and rework' their own social reality (Mendick, et al., 2018: 12); while Meg exercises agency through a refusing celebrity content that disciplines fat bodies as in need of work, she simultaneously uses Braithwaite as an avenue to explore, express

and clarify her own views. To unpack this notion further, Chapter 6 explores how Meg seeks out fat-activist and fat-positive images that that affirm her sense of self and embodiment.

We have seen so far how participants carefully curate celebrity content on Instagram to reflect the self/their own experiences. This includes prioritising celebrities who are 'useful', which encompasses those who act as an educational tool, display 'realistic' qualities, or reflect participants' values. Taken together, their practices of curation are attempts to create a space that is pleasurable (i.e., makes them 'feel good') as a means to both recognise the self and resist normative embodiments. I explore this in further detail below.

'I want to curate a good space for me to be in'

Taina Bucher argues that social media algorithms, despite their intangible quality, 'have the power to enact material realities' for their users (2016: 40). This is because, for example, a user's perception about Instagram's algorithm and 'how it works shape[s] their orientation towards it' (Bucher, 2016: 40). At the time of conducting the interviews, the Instagram 'home' feed and order of 'stories' was generated by an algorithm. This means that certain celebrity images were foregrounded in the interview context dependent on who participants followed and engaged with most (in terms of likes, views, comments), while others remained absent or peripheral. Much like the influencers platformed in Cotter's (2019) exploration of algorithms, visibility and 'playing the game', some participants displayed an awareness of the Instagram algorithm. As below, these participants described the tactics they used to 'rig' the algorithm to suit their interests:

> Jane (she/her): I like following celebrities but I don't often like their posts and I've made a point out of trying to mute the stories of the celebrities or people I don't know in real life […] because I'm really not interested in them posting ads and stuff on their stories […] I have actual friends, family or acquaintances and a few celebrities I've left, but for the most part I've rigged it, a few celebrities made the cut but they often post less commercially-orientated stuff.

Here, Jane's perception of the algorithm allows her to curate a personalised space that limits the types of celebrity content she sees (e.g., 'commercially-oriented stuff'). While she likes following celebrities, she notes muting their stories and not 'liking' their posts so as to prioritise the content of friends and family. Jane's assertion that 'a few celebrities made the cut' alludes to the visibility she has granted certain celebrities over others. This subverts the experiences of influencers (Cotter, 2019) in their attempts to gain greater algorithmic visibility; Jane instead 'rigs' the algorithm to deny visibility to celebrities she is 'really not interested in'. This echoes Bucher's (2012) Foucauldian exploration of the algorithm as a disciplinary technology that permits or denies visibility – a material reality Jane enacts through her curation of celebrity on Instagram. Further, while Jane does not explore how exactly Instagram's algorithm functions, she demonstrates an awareness of user-value in shaping it; namely, that it 'repond(s) to user input in an adaptive way' (Bucher and Helmond, 2018: 248). In this sense, Jane's perception of the algorithm (as something she can manipulate and control) has shaped her orientation towards celebrity content (Bucher, 2016: 40), in that it influences her to grant visibility to 'actual friends, family… and a few celebrities'.

This type of curational process also extends beyond participants' perceptions of the algorithm to the ways they experience Instagram more generally – i.e., as a platform that works to privilege idealised norms of femininity. Their curation tactics involve muting, not following or unfollowing accounts that accentuate Instagrammable ideals:

> Jane (she/her): I've seen stuff like [fitness accounts] that come up on my feed, like posturing tips, through other friends that follow them, so they come into my circle, but I don't follow them partly out of self-preservation because I don't want another reason to feel bad about not doing that.

Jane's reflection explicitly highlights her curation tactics as led by how she feels about herself; she actively avoids following fitness accounts out of 'self-preservation' and not wanting 'another reason to feel bad'. This suggests she compares herself or feels bad in response to the proliferation of normative ideals outside of Instagram/from other unnamed forces (e.g., mass media more broadly). A similar sentiment was reiterated by participant Kayley:

> Kayley (she/her): I want to curate a good space for me to be in […] I think women already feel self-conscious and already suffer a great deal of surveillance about their behaviour and their bodies all the time, I don't think social media has changed it a lot, but I think it does allow you to be very overt in how you create the stuff around you.

Kayley's reflection here likely speaks to her status as PhD student in the field of gender studies. Indeed, the language of 'surveillance' brings Foucault's concept of disciplinary power (1977) to mind. Far from seeing women as postfeminist, 'freely choosing' subjects (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2015), Kayley is acutely aware of the role of patriarchal structures that make women 'feel self-conscious'. She uses this knowledge to create, to be best of her ability, a 'good space' to be in. It is worth noting that, despite their efforts, participants are nevertheless confronted with normative celebrity content on Instagram. For example, Jane suggests that fitness accounts and posturing tips enter her 'explore' feed because of her friends' activity on the platform. She is under no illusion that she can successfully 'rig' the technology to be rid of normative ideals entirely, but rather utilises Instagram in the ways she can as a form of attempted remediation. Kayley similarly reflects that social media has not drastically changed the ways women's behaviours and bodies are subject to intense surveillance. However, she acknowledges that Instagram allows women to be somewhat intentional in their consumption of celebrity content.

As noted in the Introduction, girls and young women have been at the forefront of debates about the 'risk' of Instagram and its (celebrity-endorsed) ideology of gendered perfection. While I do not contest that Instagram intensifies aesthetic self-surveillance in terms of the amount of labour that goes into women's selfie-practices (Gill, 2023), the participants in this research highlight that there are moments of resistance to idealised norms of femininity. This is through both disengaging with content they deem to be harmful and curating a pleasurable online space to exist in. For all its faults, Instagram is considered a valuable tool for participants in the way it allows for a sense of curational agency and 'mix and match' personalisation when it comes to celebrity content. It is in this respect that this thesis troubles popular debates that suggest celebrity content on Instagram necessarily leads its users to 'experience *more* negative feelings about their self-image' (Dang, 2021; my emphasis). It also provides nuance

to academic work on the celebrity selfie, the majority of which has suggested that celebrity audiences seek to emulate or 'imitate' the conventions and aesthetics of celebrity images in their own selfies (Abidin, 2016: 87; Jerslev and Mortensen, 2016; Marwick, 2015). The participants in this research utilise Instagram's affordances (i.e., following, unfollowing, muting) in agential and distinct ways to represent and prioritise a diversity of femininities – importantly, ones which reflect themselves and make them 'feel better'. I explore further in my final chapter what 'feeling better' about one's body means under contemporary neoliberal capitalism, wherein women are encouraged transform or 'better' themselves not only in terms of looking better through bodily work but *feeling* better about the body.

To conclude, participants' perception of Instagram and celebrity culture as reductive and disciplinary can be seen to have productive consequences. That is, in how they carefully curate celebrity content on Instagram to carve out a space in which they feel recognised and 'good' about themselves. It is through the recognition of the self, and the way this disrupts normative embodiments of femininity, that celebrity becomes useful and pleasurable. My final chapter explores in further detail how participants feel and experience their bodies in response to celebrity selfies, as well as what this can elicit and do in terms of how their bodies become through these images (Coleman, 2009). The remainder of this chapter turns to a prevalent theme in their curation and negotiation of 'useful' celebrity – the desire for authenticity.

Part 2. Authenticity and/as Artifice

Celebrity audience work has repeatedly shown that audiences find pleasure in searching for the 'truth' or moments of authenticity when celebrities are 'really' themselves (Dyer, 1986; Gamson, 1994; Hill, 2002; Mendick, et al., 2018). Questions of authenticity are also central to how the participants in this study discuss – and (de)value – celebrity selfies. As evidenced in the previous section – the desire for authenticity shapes participants' curation tactics on Instagram; celebrity selfies that display 'realistic' qualities and disrupt Instagrammable ideals are prioritised. This section explores their negotiations of authenticity in further detail – specifically, it analyses the markers of authenticity that make celebrities and their selfies on

Instagram feel 'real', which include displays of negative affect, a lack of premeditation and a sense of access to celebrities, as well as 'natural' aesthetics. Using a Foucauldian lens, it also analyses what authenticity *does* as a productive force in participants' talk about celebrity. Finally, I turn to how commercialisation can negate a celebrity's perceived authenticity using Banet-Weiser's (2012) work on branding; as well as participants' awareness that authenticity is, after all, a construction in itself.

'I know what sort of person she truly is'

The practice of confession or self-disclosure has been an integral component of authenticity in modern media (Giles, 2018a: 135; Banet-Weiser, 2012; Abidin, 2018), from Big Brother's 'diary room' (Aslama and Pantti, 2006) to cam-girls' video diaries (Senft, 2008) and YouTuber's vlogs (Jerslev, 2016). Giles notes how it is during moments of confession that audiences 'believe they have access to the inner reality of the celebrity' (2018a: 135). Indeed, these explorations echo Foucault (1988) in his genealogical tracing of self and confession. As stated in his seminar on Technologies of the Self, 'in the modern world, knowledge of oneself constitutes the fundamental principle' and 'each person has the duty to know who he is… what is happening inside him' (1988: 22, 40). Exploring the evolution of the 'self', he argues self-disclosure (confession) has become indicative of the Western will to (self) knowledge (Foucault, 1976). According to this line of thought, 'to prove suffering, to show shame, to make visible humility and exhibit modesty' (Foucault, 1988: 42) is uniquely bound to self-expression. Practices of self-disclosure and suffering remain a governing principle of authenticity in contemporary (self-)brand culture (Banet-Weiser, 2012), including celebrity selfies on Instagram, as I explore below.

While there is no existing research about how confession operates on Instagram specifically, there are several studies on YouTube vloggers (Berryman and Kavka, 2018; Bishop, 2018; Dobson, 2015b; Jerslev, 2016). This research has explored how 'mediated tears, sobs and struggles' provide a sense of access to the inner 'truth' of the celebrity/self (Berryman and Kavka, 2018: 85). In turn, it is assumed (given that the existing research is not empirical) these affirmations of authenticity strengthen 'ties of intimacy with followers' (Berryman and Kavka, 2018: 85). The way the participants in this study respond to performances of negative affect on Instagram

support this claim. While participants are aware that celebrity images on Instagram are highly constructed and resource intensive (Chapter 4), self-disclosure can work to perforate such performances. Consider Monica's reflections:

> Monica (she/her): I keep fangirling over Alive Living, I swear it's just a phase at the moment, so she'll post a selfie and it's like you know perfect but then what I like is the fact that she'd write about how she's had mental health issues and it's not all perfect.

This echoes the Foucauldian argument that proof of suffering is key in the Western formation of self. Alive Living disclosing her 'mental health issues' in a caption creates a juxtaposition with a 'perfect' selfie. Intentional or not on the part of the Living, it is through revealing such details that she is read as 'authentic' and can thus cultivate a more intimate connection with Monica, as suggested by her 'fangirling' (this is a gendered colloquial term to describe one's 'obsession' with a celebrity). What is significant about Monica's reflection is that it illustrates how authenticity on Instagram operates somewhat differently to YouTube. Notably, authenticity on Instagram does not rely on the same visual performances of negative affect to create connection; instead, authentic posts may be comprised of a 'perfect' selfie alongside a written account or confession that *contrasts* with the visual. Far from the 'mediated tears, sobs and struggles' of YouTube vloggers, this juxtaposition highlights how Instagram encourages – at least visually – users to put forward their 'best' or 'perfect' selves. That Monica 'likes' this juxtaposition illustrates that celebrity images on Instagram continue to operate through an 'ordinary-extraordinary' paradox (Dyer, 1979). This is seen, for instance, in how Alice Living simultaneously performs ordinariness (through captions about mental health) and extraordinariness (through 'perfectly' produced selfies). It is this oscillation that Monica values, perhaps because glimpses of Living's 'inner' truth covertly disrupts Instagram's user expectations. Indeed, there is a predominantly positive attention economy on social media and on Instagram specifically, wherein users are encouraged to showcase their 'best' selves (Gill, 2023; Kanai, 2018). This is in keeping with how happiness, resilience and (relentless) positivity have become celebrated characteristics under neoliberal capitalism (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Gill, 2016). Monica's appreciation of Living's post signals a rejection of relentless positivity – indeed, her liking of this post seems to be

more about ‘resolving’ the relentless image of perfection (as oriented towards happiness) on Instagram.

The juxtaposition between the ‘perfect’ (selfie) and the ‘real’ (caption) can also be read, however, as further highlighting the tensions that are at stake for women on Instagram. That is, it is worth proffering whether Living’s post, and Monica’s preference for this type of content, is indicative of the contradictory requirement for women to be perfect *and* real on Instagram (see Gill, 2023; Kanai, 2018). Indeed, celebrities were often evaluated and judged against this requirement by the participants in this research:

> Layla (she/her): If I see they are not authentic it doesn’t attract me much […] it’s like a balance, like you need to find a balance between looking natural and that looks not very produced [sic] but that you still look good because there are some, it’s obvious as well when you look at some people and you’re like, oh my god, they don’t have facial expressions because it’s been so filtered, so you know it’s not real and I basically just discard seeing it, it doesn’t matter that it looks good because it looks fake. But when you see someone that doesn’t look so perfect but that still looks good, I think that, like you believe it more like that’s a pretty person.

Here, Layla describes how you can achieve an authentic persona if you strike the ‘balance’ between looking ‘natural’, ‘not very produced’, yet still ‘good’. Selfies that are ‘so filtered’ work to fashion an image of the celebrity as ‘fake’, which is negotiated as ultimately uninteresting for Layla. That is, she ‘basically just discard[s] seeing’ the celebrity content as it gives her no sense of what the celebrity is ‘really’ like. Interestingly, Layla’s reflection is not rooted in a critique about celebrities unethically reproducing unrealistic expectations for women. Instead, it seems that a celebrity filtering their selfie to the point that ‘they don’t have facial expressions’ (explicit fakery) is disruptive to her enjoyment and desire to *believe* in the image. Thus, a ‘fake’ celebrity is not deemed productive or worthy of her affective investment.

The negotiation of some celebrity selfies as ‘filtered’ and ‘fake’ is indicative of how the practice is framed in popular discourse (Burns, 2015). Selfie-taking (as a gendered

practice) is often associated with narcissism and vanity, both of which are qualities that do not outwardly align with a sense of 'realness' or 'being oneself'. It is owing to this popular discursive framing that selfies posted on Instagram can threaten a celebrity's authenticity. Speaking about *The Only Way is Essex* (*TOWIE*) star Chloe Brockett, participant Kristie reflects on the disjuncture between her television performances and her Instagram selfies:

> Kristie (she/her): I think she's really really beautiful but then sometimes I think some of her selfies, in *TOWIE* she's such a nice girl but when she does selfies like that [filtered, pouting selfie] she makes herself look really stuck up, I don't want to sound like I'm being horrible, but I don't understand how she's got her lips, I think it makes her look really stuck up […] I've watched her on TV shows and what I've seen on these shows is that she's actually got a really big heart, she's quite an emotional girl and I watched all these shows and then I click on that and I think she doesn't come across how she actually is, I don't know how to explain it but there you would look at that and automatically think she loves herself, but when you watch her on the show or watch her stories, she doesn't, but I like it because I believe I know what sort of person she truly is, you know?

Kristie recognises Brockett's performances on *TOWIE* and on her Instagram stories as representative of who she *actually* is but cannot reconcile this person with the selfies posted to her main feed. Kristie grapples with how this 'really beautiful', 'emotional girl' can come across so differently in her Instagram selfies. Namely, Brockett's selfies make her look 'stuck up' and narcissistic ('she loves herself'). The selfie in question is filtered and features a posed, pouting Brockett. It is the latter which Kristie identifies as creating the impression that she is stuck up – 'I don't understand how she got her lips' presumably refers to her pout and specifically the gendered and ridiculed 'duck face' pose (Rodulfo, 2015b). We can see here that Kristie's self-reflexivity does not offer the uncoupling of agency from structure; while she engages in similar selfie work – even reflecting that her own selfies probably come across as vain (see Chapter 4) – she simultaneously invests in popular discourse about selfies and selfie-takers. Despite being on the receiving end of unwanted judgement from her followers, as well as claiming to know what sort of person Brockett 'truly is', Kristie struggles to see past

pervasive and gendered narratives about women who pout in selfies. In this respect, the proliferation of this type of selfie does not seem to have normalised the behaviour on Instagram, but rather only normalised the ridiculing (disciplining) of women who adopt the aesthetic (Burns, 2015). Much like Nikki's earlier ridiculing of Ruby Rare, Kristie's account speaks to the qualitative judgments participants make when curating celebrity content on Instagram.

Despite being read as inauthentic, the disconnect between Brockett's television performances and selfies does not detract from Kristie's pleasure but actively fuels it. *TOWIE* appearances, stories and selfies all contribute to Brockett's star image and to Kristie's investment in seeking out the 'real' self. That is, selfies that tell Kristie what Brockett is *not* like simultaneously threaten and reinforce her claims to authenticity. This reading process again shares similarities with the ways television audiences enjoy and search for the truth or 'emotional realism' of its characters (Ang, 1985). Just as viewers of soap opera read and find pleasure in only certain elements of the text, here we can see that Instagram users similarly read and find pleasure in that which is relatable. Here, Kristie is less concerned with the denotive or literal, manifest content of Brockett's construction – i.e., her filtering, poses – than she is with recognising the 'emotional realism' at a connotative level. This is also evidenced in Monica's negotiation of Alice Living's mental health issues. In both cases, what is recognisable/pleasurable for the participants is the display of 'real', relatable experiences.

'She looks great and it's not in a sexualised way'

As briefly explored in Chapter 4, participants' distinctions between what constitutes 'real' and 'fake' point to the classed discourses underpinning participants' negotiations of celebrity. I have highlighted how participants are often roused by a sense of moral and ethical anger at the Kardashians, in particular. To return to this argument, it is significant that reality television stars on Instagram were also prominent targets of gendered authenticity policing. The association of authenticity with what appears 'natural' was often evaluated against the perceived artifice of the Kardashians:

> Dora (she/her): I like people like Holly Willoughby cos it always feels authentic as opposed to Kim Kardashian where it never does […] although this [Willoughby selfie] is staged, she's posed, she looks great and it's not in a sexualised way, she just got dressed up so like, this for me is nice, it's all, not like innocent, but I don't know, I just quite like it, and there's ones of her family and stuff […] they're all just nice, basically.
>
> Tayma (she/her): The Kardashians you can tell are fake from the moment you see them, the way they pose, the duck face, their shapes like the way they stand and when they, what's the word in English, when they try to show their butts off and they twist their bodies in a weird way, I'm like ew.

The excess and apparent fakery of the Kardashians is owing to the contortion of their bodies (Tayma), as well as the ways they choose to display their bodies as 'sexual' (Dora). While both focus intensely on the Kardashians' bodies and what they choose to do with them, Tayma's issue seems to be with their explicit and strategic aesthetic labour – 'the way they pose, the duck face [and] twist their bodies in a weird way'. Dora's reflection reiterates how Kim Kardashian's 'excessive' corporeality contributes to her apparently inauthentic femininity. Holly Willoughby (a white British television presenter, model and author), while also staged and posed, is read in a markedly different manner, as 'just nice'. However, such a description is deceptively simple given the racialised and classed differences between the celebrities in question. That is, the reading of the Kardashians as excessively corporeal and 'too' sexual may be owing to their racially ambiguous aesthetic – namely, one which appropriates and capitalises on aesthetics of Blackness (Sastre, 2014). In contrast, Willoughby seemingly does not 'break the codes of idealised, 'natural', restrained middle-class femininity' (Mendick, et al. 2018: 68). Here, what is clear is that 'ordinary' celebrity – but particularly reality television stars – that serve as a negative reference point from which to construct an 'ideal' authentic femininity. Thus, while the participants' discussions often illustrate a rejection of idealised bodily norms, it could be argued that the repetitive use of them as a pedagogic tool functions as a form of 'digital horizontal violence' (Duffy, Miltner and Wahlstedt, 2022: 1660). For example, in that their critiques are more often directed laterally at the character of these specific

individuals rather than capitalist patriarchy (i.e., wider power structures responsible for the ubiquity of idealised, 'authentic' femininity).

To unpack this dialogue from a Foucauldian perspective is to explore authenticity as a disciplinary and knowledge-making device on Instagram. Namely, by understanding how participants discursively construct celebrities as real (authentic) or fake in relation to race, class and sexuality. As per Butler's application of Foucauldian thought in *Undoing Gender* (2004: 27), 'the question of who and what is considered real and true is apparently a question of knowledge' and intrinsic to processes of normalisation. At the moment Dora aligns Willoughby's authenticity with her 'nice', not 'sexualised' aesthetic, a white middle-class standard of femininity is (re)produced. In contrast, the Kardashians' fakery – as a direct result of their overt sexuality – is deemed an illegitimate form of femininity. In tandem, these discursive productions of authenticity work together to normalise and legitimise certain embodiments over others; demonstrating how 'recognition becomes a site of power by which the human is differentially produced' (Butler, 2004: 2). It begs the question as to whether 'real' versus 'fake' is a productive continuum through which bodies are organised as more or less human. In this case, a *real* woman can only be recognised – and respected – as one when she is not sexual. Thus, we begin to see how 'a normative conception of gender can undo one's personhood' (Butler, 2004: 1) on Instagram, with authenticity used as a key marker in this (de)construction.

It is also significant that in Dora's reflection above, depictions of the (nuclear) family contribute to Holly Willoughby being read as authentic. Participant Stella similarly 'loves' seeing the content shared by American singer Pink, in part because of her posts about family life. Consider the following quote, which came straight after Stella's critique that the Kardashians 'morally and ethically' clash with her values:

> Stella (she/her): I follow Pink I do and I really love seeing her stuff, just because it's very different like the acrobatic stuff that she does on her tours and kinda like to show that she's still a normal person and stuff just with her family and stuff like that.

Here, postfeminist 'having it all' femininity is taken at face value: Pink is seen to successfully juggle her career (tour) with her 'normal' family life. It is through the sharing of family images on Instagram that Pink appears like 'she's still a normal person' (ordinary), despite her fame. Consider here, as per my Foucauldian analysis above, how Stella's words normalise and construct certain embodiments of femininity as ideal (through implying womanhood and family should be synonymous and celebrated). Further, it's worth noting that both Stella and Dora's preferences for family-orientated content – at least when posted by the likes of Pink and Holly Willoughby – contrasts research on the policing of female influencers (Duffy, Miltner and Wahlstedt, 2022). In Duffy, Miltner and Wahlstedt's study, influencers who shared images of their children were denigrated for their exploitative and unrealistic depictions of motherhood, or for being 'out of touch with the "real" challenges of parenting' (2022: 1667). It is significant that Kim Kardashian also shares pictures of her family on Instagram, yet such images remain absent from the participants' talk. That is, while participants do not explicitly critique her parenting, it is nevertheless significant that celebrities who apparently are 'successful' in this domain are again evaluated against the fakery of this celebrity. In a similar vein to female influencers, the fact Kardashian is not granted access to discourses of the 'authentic' nuclear family may well be owing to her 'illegitimate' career and/or corporeal excess (see Chapter 4). Participants do not believe Kim Kardashian trades on her 'authentic' life in other domains (career and looks), which may be why her image is also incompatible with idealised notions of motherhood and thus 'having it all' femininity.

I now turn to other prominent markers of authenticity, including a lack of premeditation and commercial interests. The former provides the participants in this research with a sense of proximity to celebrities, while the latter can work to corrupt a celebrity's claims to authenticity.

'I follow the ones where you get a sense that it's them doing it'

David Giles notes how social media offers 'a continual sense of access to celebrities' which can 'help to consolidate the idea that the performers are living out their lives in tandem with our own' (2018a: 135). This resonates with how the participants in this research negotiate authenticity in the context of Instagram:

> Jane (she/her): There's some where their feeds are very PR [public relations] style, so a lot of today I was on *Jimmy Kimmel* and just no sense that it's them maintaining the feed and I'm less interested, so I follow the ones where you get a sense that it's them doing it, and probably a PR person too doing the mandatory ones, I don't want to say it's authentic because I know it's not, but you get the impression of that authenticity.

Jane's liking for a lack of premeditation draws attention to how Instagram can generate feelings of proximity (authenticity) – namely, through temporal closeness (Giles, 2018a). I refer to temporal here in the sense that Instagram appears to offer a candid experience, or 'sense that it's [the celebrity] doing it'. This technique of documentation is an important vehicle in a celebrity's claim to authenticity as it promises actuality; it emphasises the notion of a 'live', real person behind the managed and 'mandatory' PR content. This is further reiterated by the participants' dislike of commercial content – across interviews, there was a clear disregard for celebrities who only or too often use their Instagram accounts for commercial means:

> Emily (she/her): I get quite bored of like paid posts and you can just tell it's so fake, they don't really sit there using head and shoulders shampoo, but they're posting like oh look at this head and shoulders, my hair is amazing and I'm just like shh.

> Froze (she/her): It got too selly, where [the 'fitness vlogger'] was like oh you should be buying this and this is what you need to buy […] and I think that got a bit too like, not persistent but almost like naggy, and I was like ugh, I don't want to follow you anymore.

As noted in the Introduction, Banet-Weiser suggests that there has been a shift from 'authentic' culture to the branding of authenticity (2012). Traditionally, authenticity was conceptualised as residing in the 'inner' self, whereas the 'outer' self was understood as a performance 'often corrupted by material things', i.e., capitalism (Banet-Weiser, 2012: 10). While Banet-Weiser posits that authenticity can no longer be seen to exist 'outside' of consumer capitalism or as a space that is not material (2012), she acknowledges that individuals continue to invest in the notion that authentic spaces are distinct from the realm of the market; 'What is understood (and

experienced) as authentic is considered such precisely because it is perceived as *not* commercial' (2012: 10). For the participants in this study, a celebrity's intensions to overtly capitalise on their Instagram presence corrupts their claims to authenticity. We can see above how a fitness blogger's continuous attempts to sell products led Froze to unfollow as a punitive measure, as her posts became 'selly' and 'naggy' (persistently annoying). Emily notes how sponsored content is 'so fake' and therefore boring, echoing participant Layla's earlier reflection that a 'filtered' and 'fake' selfie is ultimately uninteresting and unworthy of one's affective investment. Not only do paid posts provide Emily no sense of what the celebrity is 'really' like, they are also considered disingenuous as 'they don't really sit there using head and shoulders shampoo'. This contrasts with Crystal Abidin's research on influencers, which suggests that the labour involved in their selfies is 'overlooked' and 'quietly subversive' in that it monetizable yet appears effortless, going 'unnoticed to the untrained eye' (2016: 10-11). Here, the labour of female influencers/fitness bloggers is not overlooked but apparently obvious and in turn dissected – as 'naggy', 'boring', disingenuous and, ultimately, unproductive. Indeed, given the critical lens through which women are judged on social media and the pervasive focus on perfection and simultaneously authenticity required of them (Gill, 2023), it is somewhat unsurprising that celebrity women's commercial interests are also scrutinised.

This is not to suggest that all consumer-centric posts were negotiated as a priori 'boring' (Emily) or 'naggy' (Froze) by participants. It is significant that 'PR style' posts do not detract from participant Jane's enjoyment of celebrity accounts; while she is *more* interested when there is a 'sense of [the celebrity] themselves maintaining the feed', she acknowledges that there is 'probably a PR person too doing the mandatory ones'. This highlights how promotional posts on Instagram are more likely to be accepted if posted by 'mainstream' or traditional celebrity figures. For example, Jane does not unfollow the unnamed celebrities who appear on *Jimmy Kimmel* in the same way as Froze unfollowed a fitness blogger. This is perhaps because the posts Jane describes are not selling material products *per se*, but rather reselling the celebrity's established (legitimate) brand image. This aligns with Duffy, Miltner and Wahlstedt's study on Instagram celebrity argues that feminine-coded influencers are held 'to different (and arguably more stringent) standards, making them more susceptible to critique than traditional celebrities and other public figures understood as products of

the industrial publicity apparatus' (2022: 1663). This is because their careers are built on the branding of authenticity and postfeminist 'having it all' femininity. Thus, while the blurring between the authentic self and commodity self is, as Banet-Weiser notes, increasingly 'expected and tolerated' in contemporary brand culture (2012: 13), there is a higher level of tolerance afforded to celebrities who embody legitimate (traditional) forms of stardom, or whose fame is rooted in spaces beyond Instagram.

'You get the impression of that authenticity'

This final section picks up on participant Jane's earlier reflection regarding celebrities appearing to maintain their own Instagram account: 'I don't want to say it's authentic because I know it's not, but you get the *impression* of that authenticity'. This type of negotiation was not uncommon; while participants remained interested and invested in its presence or absence (for example, as something not commercial), they were also quick to acknowledge that authenticity is just another element of a celebrity's construction. That is, participants often demonstrated an explicit awareness of authenticity as a performance rather than an innate or fixed quality:

> Kristie (she/her): I follow a lot of women that wear a lot of makeup, like that Jasmine and Chloe Brockett and Chloe Sims like all the girls out of *TOWIE*, they have a lot of lip fillers and tattooed eyebrows and things like that, whereas Michelle Keegan that's just her face without anything, well I believe it is, you don't really know do you?
>
> Sophie (she/her): I'm sure there is money changing hands, but it looks like something she's doing for herself cos she enjoys it rather than it being a career or a business, and I think maybe I'm perceiving it as more authentic.
>
> Stella (she/her): I like [Melissa McCarthy] just because she's funny and I don't know she just seems quite down to earth the way she comes across, yeah, I could be completely wrong, but I like this like, no makeup stuff.

Participants remain critical of celebrity images that perform authenticity, just as they do in relation to idealised selfies (Chapter 4). In this respect, following Gamson's framework for conceptualising audience-celebrity relations (1994), one could posit the participants in this research as 'postmodern' celebrity watchers. Although focusing on

a different media form to Gamson, the reflections above illustrate the participants' awareness of the production techniques that 'make' a celebrity on Instagram and how the 'true' or 'real' self of a celebrity becomes impossible to discern. For participant Kristie, this is related to the physical appearance of the celebrity and whether they are *actually* make-up free, whereas for Stella it is also related to their character and how they can perform being 'down to earth'. Sophie deconstructs the (in)authenticity of a blogger and calls into question her commercial interests – she is aware that there is likely to be 'money changing hands' even when such interests are hidden behind the branding of authenticity. Taken together, these reflections highlight that even 'authentic' celebrity images on Instagram are understood as artifice – or, as Beccy Collings puts it, an 'authentic inauthentic self' (2014: 512). In other words, participants are aware that they are seeing a highly constructed view of the 'private' arena, which caters to both their viewer expectations and the visibility requirements of Instagram.

As noted in Chapter 4, performing a very particular self(ie) on Instagram is not exclusive to celebrity accounts; the participants themselves noted toeing the line between 'real' (witty captions) and 'curated' (visually appearing their 'best') in their own selfies. In this respect, the above reading process is somewhat unsurprising: they use their own selfie-taking and Instagram knowledge to deconstruct celebrity content on the platform. However, it is significant that the participants in this research understand, in the context of Instagram at least, that authenticity itself is a brand (Banet-Weiser, 2012: 11). We can see here that power does not function linearly; or as Banet-Weiser notes, consumers are not simply 'tricked' or 'manipulated' by authentic branding strategies (2012: 12). This contrasts academic work exploring celebrities' claims to authenticity on YouTube, which suggests that authentic performances can work 'reassure the audience that what is being said is 'real', unscripted, and untinged by brand collaborations and sponsorships' (Bishop, 2018: 96). While focusing on a different platform, the participants in this research question the methods and motivations of celebrities on Instagram despite markers of authenticity making them *feel* 'real'. Not only does this illustrate the highly reflexive ways the participants consume celebrity, it begins to highlight the value of authenticity as a relational quality. Performances of authenticity do not convince the participants in this research that anything is *actually* real (or indeed 'untinged' by brand

sponsorships); the simulated nature of authenticity can rather be seen to stimulate feeling. As I explore in the next and final chapter, performances of authenticity are thus particularly important as they impact on how celebrity images become affectively invested in.

Conclusions

This chapter used participants' curation tactics (unfollowing, following or muting) as a vehicle to explore what young women want from celebrities and their selfies on Instagram. The first half highlighted how participants make curational judgements based on the perceived 'usefulness' of celebrity content, which encompasses those who act as an educational tool, display 'realistic' qualities, or reflect participants' values. Taken together, their practices of curation can be seen as attempts to create a space that is pleasurable, i.e., that makes them 'feel good'. This pleasure was explored in two ways: firstly, as a 'pleasure of recognition' (Ang, 1985) in that participants sought out celebrities that in some way reflected themselves, and secondly, as an avenue for affective counterattack against normative representations of femininity (Foucault, 1976). In terms of the latter, they showed an acute awareness of how women are subject to a 'great deal of surveillance' (Kayley) outside of Instagram, and thus sought to counterattack this fact by prioritising celebrity content that provided a moment of relief (or catharsis) from ideals of femininity. This chapter thus provides a more nuanced perspective to academic work on the celebrity selfie and the ways audiences are assumed to identify with or imitate celebrity figures in their own selfies. 'Identification' with celebrity selfies on Instagram can be best understood in Jackie Stacey's terms, as a process that 'involves not simply the passive reproduction of existing femininities, but rather an active engagement and production of changing identities' (Stacey, 1994: 171-172). This does not intend to suggest that the participants' curational practices are entirely successful, or that they straightforwardly always 'feel good' on Instagram or in response to celebrity content they seek out. Instead, this chapter has illustrated the complexities of using Instagram and negotiating algorithmically generated flows of (idealised) celebrity content.

The second half of this chapter dealt with authenticity as central theme in how participants negotiated celebrity content on Instagram. It traversed the prominent

markers of authenticity discussed during the interviews, including displays of negative affect, a lack of premeditation and commercialisation, as well as 'natural' aesthetics. In doing so, it demonstrated participants' consistent desire for authenticity, despite the idea that authenticity was understood as an 'impression' (read: construction). Going beyond authenticity as a key affective driver of curation, I also explored how it functioned productively in participants' talk – namely, this section understood authenticity as a disciplinary and knowledge-making device that allowed participants to organise certain celebrities (and their worth) along the lines of sexuality, race and class. While celebrities that embodied ideals of femininity (non-sexual, white, family-oriented) were deemed 'authentic', displays of overt sexuality (explored through the Kardashians) were deemed 'fake'. In this sense, while authenticity proved to be something participants sought in celebrity content, it also became a vehicle to (de)construct and normalise certain embodiments as more or less human (Butler, 2004). Herein lies the push and pull nature of participants' curation tactics; while they were agentic in their search for non-normative embodiments – which felt cathartic, recognisable, pleasurable, resistant – they simultaneously contributed to the normalisation of certain bodies in doing so.

Overall, the empirical findings presented in this chapter report somewhat complicated results. It highlights their attempts to resist normative ideals of femininity and how these attempts co-exist with and are punctured by critical forms of looking (surveilling, judging) that conceals participants' complicity in valuing certain embodiments over others. In doing so, however, this chapter has succeeded in responding to Mendick, Allen and Harvey's call for more audience research that unsettles 'easy' answers about what celebrity is and does (2015: 376). Furthermore, it has unsettled the passiveness assumed of young women's relationship to idealised celebrity images, but particularly selfies on Instagram. The participants' intensely purposeful approach to curation demonstrates the desire among young women to enact agency in how they engage with celebrity content. This provides the basis for my final chapter, which turns to how celebrity content on Instagram – particularly 'real' or 'authentic' experiences and aesthetics – can create a sense of comfort and belonging for participants. It is in this final chapter that I explore what celebrity selfies on Instagram can *elicit and do* for participants (Coleman, 2009). Thus, the following

chapter moves beyond the question of what constitutes authenticity and draws focus to participants' affective investments in these types of celebrity selfies.

Chapter 6: How I Want to Be

The Affective Potential of Celebrity Selfies

Introduction

In recognition of the importance of feeling (good) on Instagram, this final chapter explores how celebrity selfies on the platform are experienced with and through the body. It seeks to understand what celebrity selfies on Instagram make (im)possible for the participants in this research, or in other words, how their bodies 'become known, understood and lived through their relations with [these] images' (Coleman, 2009: 3). It is inspired by Rebecca Coleman's concept of bodies as becoming in and through images; using this lens, images are not understood as representations which have any linear ideological effects on bodies, but as affects which resonate with bodies (2009). This approach will allow me to move past a 'media effects' positioning of the participants' bodies as a thing (subject) that can be passively inscribed, e.g., by popular culture/images (objects). Instead, it focuses on how the participants' bodies are produced in affective relation to their surroundings and directed or 'oriented' (to move, think and feel in new ways) though celebrity selfies (Coleman, 2009; Ahmed, 2006). In doing so, this chapter seeks to address my final research question:

2. How do young women experience their bodies through celebrity selfies on Instagram?

I recognise I have not yet fully accounted for how the participants in this research encounter and compare themselves to idealised images, despite their attempts to 'push' normative celebrity away (Chapter 4) and curate a diversity of femininities on Instagram (Chapter 5). The first half of this chapter thus turns to how celebrity selfies on Instagram can limit the possibilities of becoming; namely, it explores how they can evoke unwanted comparisons to the self and extrapolates on the ways participants feel 'bad' in response to these comparisons. It mobilises a relational understanding of bodies (Coleman, 2009; Ahmed, 2006) to explore why not interacting with idealised celebrity selfies to mitigate a 'reaction' (affective response) is not always as straightforward as unfollowing or scrolling past such content. I posit that this is

because feeling 'bad' is not just a response to the ideal celebrity body, nor the processes that produce the image, but also the moral judgements participants make about their behaviour (i.e., feeling compelled to compare oneself is viewed as 'unhealthy'). This section also explores how normative celebrity bodies are often connected to positive affective structures, e.g., repetitively described as 'amazing'. It is in this respect that I draw on Ahmed's application of phenomenology (2006) to explain how participants are 'oriented' towards scripts of normative femininity. That is, I explore how the 'ideal' image of femininity, as conflated with what is 'right, good, or normal' in our affective economy (Ahmed, 2006: 72), is not something the participants in this research can just 'switch off'. While the participants express knowledge and frustration at the (power) structures that produce these images as the 'ideal' (see Chapter 5), as well as unfollowing and scrolling past idealised images affords them some agency over the content they see, these processes do not simply 'fix' how they feel about their bodies in the context of our wider visual culture. Finally, this section highlights how encounters with friends, or celebrities who are already like participants, invite harsher bodily comparisons. I suggest this is owing to the tension they create for participants in that the images are both impossible and proximate. I put forward the idea of the *power of recognition* as an encompassing term to describe what drives the participants experiences of celebrity selfies (and their affective intensity) on Instagram.

The second half of this chapter turns to the ways participants become through celebrity selfies on Instagram in ways that are expansive; notably, I explore how non-normative celebrity bodies invite participants to feel comfort in their bodies, as well as discuss whether such an invitation aligns with themes of (self-)transformation in the context of neoliberal capitalism (Gill, 2007). This section offers an empirical contribution to academic work on fat- and body-positivity, as well as providing nuance to existing arguments about celebrity selfies. Specifically, I draw on and extend Tiidenberg and Gómez-Cruz's argument that taking selfies can act as a 'knowledge device' (2015) through which women can internalise corporeal 'truths' and reject body shaming discourses. I suggest that viewing non-normative celebrity selfies can similarly act as a vehicle through which one can feel and experience the body, i.e., as more than an 'unfinished' project. I discuss how non-normative content that is shared on celebrities' own terms is particularly expansive for the participants in this research. They read

such images as evidence of a celebrity 'not giving a fuck' (rejecting and confusing the existing standards of norms of femininity in a way that is unabashed). I relate this empirically informed analysis to Kavka's argument that there has been a shift in the celebrity system (specifically in the post-Weinstein era) from 'fuck-me' to 'fuck-you' celebrity. Specifically, the findings in this chapter suggest that fuck-you celebrity (i.e., images that challenge existing standards of feminine beauty) are certainly *felt to matter* in the contemporary moment. I suggest this is partly because these images invite participants to 'feel in their bodies' *as they are* (Hynnä and Kyrölä, 2019). The experience of 'feeling in one's body' is not understood as a case of feeling 'positive' or 'proud' about one's body (as a simple matter of choice), but is a momentary catharsis or 'counterattack' (Foucault, 1976) to the pressures of normative ideals of femininity.

Overall, this chapter demonstrates how celebrity selfies shape the participants' knowledges, understandings and experiences of their bodies in ways that are both limiting and expansive. Furthermore, it illustrates that the participants' intentions or desires to be(come) like the celebrities they follow is by no means a straightforwardly imitative or impossible exercise (Coleman, 2009). Rather, the ways participants experience and feel their bodies through celebrity selfies on Instagram can be seen as an 'awareness-raising' practice (Tiidenberg and Gómez-Cruz, 2015; Foucault, 1988), specifically in terms of how they curate a space which re-imagines the non-normative body as unremarkable, or as something they do not need to 'give a fuck' about.

Part 1: Impossible Ideals

One of the central aims of this thesis has been to give space to the ways young women negotiate and experience celebrity on Instagram beyond narratives of harmful 'effect'. To do this, I have drawn on the participants' accounts of how they enact agency in the ways they engage with idealised celebrity selfies. For example, I have shown that they demonstrate knowledge about how celebrity images are produced (i.e., as 'authentic' and involving a great deal of aesthetic labour). In this first section, I want to account for how the participants' knowledge about the construction of idealised celebrity selfies did not prevent them from comparing themselves to them anyway.

‘I’m never gonna look like that’

Many participants expressed that celebrity comparisons made them feel ‘bad’, ‘self-conscious’ or a sense of ‘pressure’ to slim. Consider the following reflections:

> Emma (she/her): I’d prefer to see people doing things rather than just being this angelic version of themselves, like something that’s just been edited or taken a thousand times to get it perfect, but you see them and you can’t help but compare yourself to them and think oh well I don’t look like that, I’m never gonna look like that [laughs].
>
> Meg (she/her): I’m picky now about who I follow […] there were things where I started to notice I’d feel self-conscious, like seeing beautiful women and thinking I can never look like them, and it’s not healthy and it’s not a good behaviour.
>
> Froze (she/her): Weight wise like to be slim, I think definitely, there’s pressure there and there’s pressure to look good all the time, like you look at celebrities and they always look gorgeous and every time you see them they look amazing.

Here, Emma admits that she ‘can’t help but compare’ herself to perfect selfies, despite knowing that such images require a lot of work (e.g., a ‘thousand’ retakes). Froze more explicitly talks of the ‘pressure’ she experiences to ‘look good all the time’ in response to celebrity content on Instagram, especially regarding her weight and the need to be ‘slim’. Meg is perhaps the most explicit in describing the *feelings* that idealised (normative) images evoke, reflecting that they made her ‘feel self-conscious’. She acknowledges this act of comparison is ‘not healthy’ and ‘not a good behaviour’, further compounding her negative experience of impossibly ‘beautiful women’ through Instagram. That is, Meg feels both self-conscious in comparison to these women *and* unhealthy for making such comparisons in the first instance. These reflections have led Meg to be ‘picky’ about who she follows, characteristic of the trend amongst participants to curate celebrity content carefully and in a way that helps them to ‘feel good’ (Chapter 5). I explore why Meg and others often added a moral judgement to their actions (i.e., being affected by celebrity) later in this section.

Phrases such as 'I can never look like them' and 'I'm never gonna look like that' illustrate that the participants experience normative embodiments as an impossibility, far removed from their own (aesthetic) realities. In this respect, the participants experience their bodies as limited or fixed. Significantly, the participants in this research differ to the girls in Coleman's (2009) study in that they do not describe any explicit attempts to make their bodies become like the perfect images discussed – they only acknowledge the impossibly of such as feat, as well as the pressure they feel (i.e., to lose weight). In other words, they do not describe acting on their comparisons, imitating the celebrities or making their bodies like the bodies on display in their Instagram selfies. Returning to my arguments in Chapter 4, such an omission is in part a reflexive discursive strategy in terms of how the participants in this research navigate popular discourse about the 'risks' of celebrity culture and simultaneously its perceived futility and low cultural value. However, the images discussed are nevertheless held up as the 'ideal' standard in relation to which participants feel inadequate. This shares similarities with Evans and Riley's (2013) audience study; the authors note how their participants' 'negotiations of celebrity created a context in which [they] were only ever able to position themselves as somehow failing' (2013: 278). Here, in the way that participants describe them, celebrity selfies on Instagram similarly limit or make impossible particular becomings of bodies, in that the participants 'can never' be like the body of the perfect celebrity (Coleman, 2009).

In the sense that participants are unable to be(come) like the bodies of celebrity selfies, a 'media effects' model might conclude that these images act as 'impossible' or 'unobtainable' points of identification (Coleman, 2009). As explored in my Literature Review, this line of thought has structured popular and academic debates about the relations between idealised media images (including celebrity selfies) and girls and young women. However, to conclude here that celebrity selfies on Instagram constitute an impossible 'destination' overlooks some important insights about the participants' experiences. Coleman's (2009) notion of the becoming of bodies offers an alternative way of understanding the relations between celebrity selfies and participants' bodies that accounts for how they continue to become *through* these limits and impossibilities. Notably, they do this by disrupting the idea that a celebrity body is reducible to one image (e.g., a selfie). Instead, the bodies of celebrity selfies – like the bodies of popular media images more generally – are understood to '*exceed*

the images in which they are caught' (Coleman, 2009: 102; original emphasis). That is, participants discuss the technologies and processes that go into the production of perfect celebrity selfies, including time, editing, careful curation and bodily work. As briefly explored in Chapter 4, participants call on these things to position celebrity selfies on Instagram as inaccessible and thus insignificant to their own selfie practices; 'they wouldn't influence the selfies [they] take partly because of the logistics' (Jane). It is this understanding of celebrity selfies – as *logistically unrealistic* – through which participants become *through* 'impossible' images on Instagram.

I want to explore this point in greater depth. It is certainly significant that feeling 'pressure' (Froze), 'self-conscious' (Meg), or more vaguely 'bad' (Jane) in response to celebrity selfies on Instagram is not as much a response to the celebrity body as it is '*the processes through which that body is caught as that particular temporal and spatial image'* (Coleman, 2009: 105; original emphasis). This provides much needed nuance to the way the relations between women's bodies and celebrity selfies are predominantly understood in popular discourse. It may be that popular debates about celebrity selfies are structured by narratives of 'risk' in part because these images are assumed to be somewhat accessible in comparison to other media forms. For example, plentiful articles provide tutorials and tips on how to take the perfect selfie, often calling on celebrity selfies as their reference point (Valenti, 2016; Kim, Olsen and Rosa, 2021). One article even proffers that celebrity on social media impacts on people's body image and self-esteem because 'if anyone can be a celebrity, it can feel like everyone is *expected* to be celebrity-worthy' (Malacoff, 2019; original emphasis). Indeed, in comparison to the processes and technologies behind celebrity images in magazines, adverts or films, Instagram and selfie-taking *are* somewhat accessible technologies. Further, given that Instagram allows for displays of the 'real' lives of celebrities (Chapter 5), perhaps young women are seen as more likely to believe that they can be(come) *like* the body of a celebrity selfie, e.g., if they simply follow '*The Kim Kardashian Guide to Taking a Perfect Selfie*' (Valenti, 2016). However, the participants in this research are under no illusion that they could ever be(come) like the body of a celebrity selfie. In this respect, celebrity selfies do not simply stop or fix in place the becomings of the participants' bodies and they are certainly not *only* able to position themselves as failing in response to these types of images. This complicates

popular discourse that focuses on the disciplinary force of these types of images as having any linear or pre-determined 'influence' on young women.

This analysis is not to overlook the ways participants do, after all, feel 'bad' in response to perfect celebrity selfies. Rather, it has aimed to 'open up alternative ethical ways of thinking' about how young women deal with, or become through, 'impossible' images of femininity as they circulate through celebrity selfies on Instagram (Coleman, 2009: 111). While this section has explored how participants become through 'impossible' celebrity selfies, is has not yet explained *how* such images make them feel beyond the somewhat vague descriptions of 'bad' and 'self-conscious'. This is because the participants often had difficulty explaining (or indeed, simply did not tell me about) their experiences or feelings in any greater detail than this. I explore why this might be below.

'I might have to do some self-analysis'

Across the interviews, participants were more open to discussing the negative effects of celebrity in terms of their impact on 'others'. For example, and as explored in Chapter 4, participants reflected on the 'pressure' that comes from viewing idealised images for young girls. They discussed that 'when you're a teenager it's more difficult to separate what reality is and what it isn't' (Sophie) and that 'most adults are mature enough […] not to feel worse about their lives' because of idealised celebrity images (Nikki). Implied in these reflections is that they have learnt to 'deal' with these types of images – e.g., through their (accumulated) knowledge about the technologies and processes behind their capture. This is exemplified by participant Froze; while she noted the pressure that comes from idealised celebrity selfies to look 'good' and 'slim' (see section above), she caveated this with further critique about their construction:

> Froze (she/her): I think with age I've come to learn that it's fake, or not necessarily fake but they've had hours of makeup and this and that and the lighting is perfect, and they've probably taken hundreds of selfies to get that one picture that they then upload, so you come to learn and then you don't let it influence you so much.

Here, Froze calls out the 'hours of makeup' and 'perfect' lighting that goes into the production of a celebrity selfie. It is through exposing these processes that she contends the images do not 'influence' her as much now compared to when she was younger. However, the impossibility of normative celebrity content *was* experienced by many participants – including Froze. Their self-reflexive discursive strategies (Chapter 4) were therefore rife with contradiction; while intellectually they could hold celebrity at a distance or discuss its effects for others (most often girls), there were moments of vulnerability in their talk. In other words, being critically self-aware of the 'negative effects' of idealised celebrity images did not put a stop to the affectivity of the images – celebrity (despite their attempts to push it away) is ultimately something participants are moved by. Yet, how these comparisons made them feel exactly was not always or immediately obvious. In positing why negative affect was often difficult to explore or quantify, we can turn to Emma's reflexive positioning that she 'might have to do some self-analysis' after the interview:

> Emma (she/her): I think [Zendaya and Bella Hadid] are very beautiful human beings who I will definitely never look like for obvious reasons [laughs] […] yet I still consume it at such a rate that is absurd and still let it affect me as well […] why do I leave them in there? It's my choice [laughs] I might have to do some self-analysis after this [laughs].

Emma describes Zendaya and Bella Hadid as two 'very beautiful human beings' who she 'will definitely never look like'. While she does not discuss any attempts to make her body like these celebrities, Emma does stress the impossibility of ever being like them, 'for obvious reasons'. Even though she is aware that these celebrity images are not legitimate points of comparison, Emma contends with how she still 'consumes it at such a rate' and lets it 'affect' her. The commentary about her behaviour – alongside her laughter – suggests that she *should* know better than to let such images influence or affect her. This draws parallels with Meg's earlier reflection (or moral judgement) that she would compare herself to 'beautiful women', a process she described as 'not healthy' and 'not a good behaviour'. Appearing as a recurring theme throughout this thesis, this type of stance (occupying a position of distance and power) is indicative of participants' attempts to distance themselves from popular narratives of risk and pathology. We can begin to see here how participants want to be unaffected by

idealised celebrity images and feel somewhat frustrated when they cannot intellectualise their way out of feeling 'bad' in response to what they know is not 'real'. I return to this point in a moment.

The ambiguity in participants' reflections in terms of how they 'feel bad' also speaks to how entangled these affects are with life and feelings beyond Instagram and celebrity culture. Here, I am referring to how their bodies exist more broadly under the pressures of normative gender expectations and in the context of our consumerist visual economy. Consider the following reflection from participant Monica:

> **B: What do you dislike about selfies if they come up?**
> Monica (she/her): It depends what mood I'm in so if I'm in a foul, I hate myself mood, cos we all have them don't try and deny it, it's the case of oh for goodness sake, I just scroll past them I don't react, I don't like, I just sort of skip over them cause I don't want to interact with them, which seems silly as it's just a photograph but you just reach that point where you're like ugh can't deal with.

Monica's declaration 'ugh can't deal' is read here as indicative of her desire to not 'react' (compare herself) to idealised celebrity selfies, a process which can contribute to her 'foul, I hate myself mood'. This shares similarities with Jane and Kayley's reflections on their curation habits (as explored in Chapter 5), wherein they described avoiding certain accounts out of 'self-preservation' and not wanting '*another* reason to feel bad'. Kayley was perhaps the most explicit in naming the 'forces' beyond Instagram that contributed to what Monica describes as 'I hate myself moods' in her suggestion that 'women already feel self-conscious and already suffer a great deal of surveillance about their behaviour and their bodies'. Taken together, these reflections highlight that the participants compare themselves or 'feel bad' in response to the proliferation of normative ideals outside of Instagram. I note this here to place idealised celebrity selfies within their wider contexts; namely, to highlight how 'I hate myself moods' – negative judgements or critique about the self – become part of participants' experience on Instagram. Celebrity selfies in this regard are not 'causes' which have 'effects' for participants but are *another* relation through which they re-negotiate the body, which co-exist with a myriad of other relations. This point is

highlighted particularly well by participant Rose and her experience of unfollowing Olivia Grace Herring:

> Rose (she/her): I don't know her feed is just incredible, and I would look at her and think I'm not like that you know. I unfollowed them to try and think about my body less but she posts such cool photos and she's a YouTuber so she must get paid loads […] I just thought I can't compare myself to her because I'm never gonna look like her and what do I gain from following her?
>
> **B: Have you felt better since you stopped following?**
>
> Rose (she/her): I don't think so [laughs] I don't know, I think about it less, but feel better, probably not.

Despite describing her Instagram images as something that she should not or does not want to compare herself to ('I can't compare myself'), like other participants Rose 'can't help' but make comparisons. Through these comparisons she understands her body as restricted to what it is – i.e., what she would like to be is understood as impossible. Significantly, this reflection demonstrates Rose's becoming as a process 'never fully finalised' (Coleman, 2009: 87); even after unfollowing the celebrity in question, to 'try and think about [her] body less', Rose does not 'feel better'. Here, it is useful to mobilise Coleman's (Deleuzian inspired) understanding of bodies as *assemblages* – in constant flux and produced in (affective) relation to their surroundings, including popular media images and other bodies. Understood in this way, we can understand the body is not a coherent and stable object that is simply moulded by patriarchal ideology (power), as its 'capabilities cannot be known before or outside of its relations' (Coleman, 2009: 43). It is in this respect that not 'interacting' with celebrity content to mitigate a 'reaction' (affective response) is not always as straightforward as the participants' reflections suggest; while unfollowing and 'scrolling past' idealised images afford them some agency over the content they see, these processes do not simply 'fix' or 'better' how they feel about their bodies. Indeed, these feelings exceed Instagram and celebrity culture. The participants' shared experiences of wanting to 'scroll past' and not 'interact' does, however, illustrate the potency of idealised celebrity selfies on Instagram as a relation through which they experience their bodies. Or, in Sara Ahmed's terms, it highlights how such images are affectively 'sticky' (2004).

For Ahmed, affects – whether they be joy, rage, sadness, shame – circulate within a wider affective economy. Feelings in this sense do 'not reside in subjects or objects but are produced as effects of circulation' (Ahmed, 2014: 8). When certain emotions circulate repetitively and performatively, they become 'sticky'. For example, I discussed in the previous chapter how tabloid magazines are understood to (re)enforce shared judgments, with the 'excessive' female celebrity body framed to evoke disgust and shame (Hirdman, 2017). For the participants in this research, normative celebrity bodies are connected to more positive affective structures; even when discussing not following or unfollowing celebrities that made them feel bad, participants describe their bodies as 'amazing', 'incredible', 'gorgeous' and 'beautiful'. This suggests that they enjoy, or at the very least appreciate, such images and simultaneously feel 'bad'. The contradictory affects at play here (joy at the perfect image/ideal femininity, frustration for making comparisons) can help explain why participants found the negative effects of idealised celebrity selfies hard to explain in any great depth. To theorise or explain the 'effects' of the images, we can draw on Ahmed's (2006) application of phenomenology, which explores the directions in which bodies meet the world, how the world 'extends' certain kinds of bodies and not others. Ahmed describes how scripts of heteronormativity can act as a repetitive strain injuries for queer bodies out of place (Ahmed, 2006: 91); '[b]odies take the shape of norms that are repeated over time and with force […] bodies become contorted: they get twisted into shapes that enable some action only insofar as they restrict the capacity for other kinds of action'. Here, we can see how normative embodiments of femininity impress upon the bodies of the participants in this research. Our visual culture is a space which is affectively gendered and which (re)constructs norms in terms of repetitively selling certain embodiments of femininity as the 'ideal'. Despite knowing that this 'ideal' is restrictive in terms of it not being 'real' (impossible to become a reality), the participants' bodies are nevertheless directed or 'oriented' in this way. If we understand the 'ideal' as conflated with what is 'right, good, or normal' (Ahmed, 2006: 72) in an affective economy, we can understand why the participants in this research cannot simply think their way out of feeling bad in response to idealised celebrity selfies.

‘If all my friends got super fit, I’d be like, shit’

Finally, it is significant to note that how ‘close’ celebrities felt to the participants’ own lives and embodiments also impacted on how they were experienced (and felt). I am defining this closeness in Ang’s (1985) terms as a sense of recognition, i.e., how participants find a point of connection to *their* reality. To make this point, I return to Rose’s reflection above about why she unfollowed Olivia Grace Herring, the YouTuber with the ‘incredible’ feed. While reading the reflection below, consider that Rose is sponsored by a gym company to post images endorsing a workout programme (through posting images of her body) on Instagram:

> Rose (she/her): she’s my age, and she’s just, she looks like she just has the life, look here, but she’s really cool and she’s got a really, really, really good body and she wears really cool stuff but I unfollowed her when she was posting things like this, them in the gym and everything, and in summer she was posting stuff like this [bikini selfie].

We can begin to see here that recognition of the self remains important in influencing how – and to what extent – participants affectively connect with celebrity selfies and experience their own bodies as a result. Herring is living ‘the life’ (that presumably Rose aspires to), which encompasses having a ‘really cool’ fashion sense and a ‘really, really, really good’ body. Rose positions herself *alongside* Herring, noting that she is her age and unfollowing her when she was posting content ‘in the gym’ specifically. It can be argued that a sense of recognition allows for more compelling points of comparison with the images; that is, Rose perhaps finds the images affectively intense because the ‘impossible’ life and body on display simultaneously resonate with the realities of her own life. This encounter prompts the question as to whether ‘impossible’ images that are proximate to participants’ lived experience are more difficult to endure for participants, especially when pitted against those they feel distant from. Consider the fact participant Emma continues to follow Zendaya and Bella Hadid, celebrities she will ‘definitely never look like for obvious reasons’. In comparison to Rose, Emma does not discuss any parallels in terms of lived experience, which may be why the images do not incite a similar reaction or response.

The significance and power of recognition is further demonstrated in participants' talk about their friends or acquaintances on Instagram. In comparison to celebrities, participants would more often position 'normal' people as likely to make them feel 'pressure' to change their bodies:

> Dora (she/her): If suddenly all of my closest friends were posting pictures like that fitness blogger, like super toned and skinny, I'd be like shit what's happening, I think 100% I'm more affected by friends cos for me celebrities, like they have more time to look good and do all of that, but if all my friends got super fit, I'd be like, shit.
>
> Stella (she/her): I knew that I wasn't a celebrity, I was never going to achieve that state […] so there is no point me comparing myself to something that's unattainable, and I think a lot of the pictures from the celebrity side I thought were quite retouched and not a true sense of self right? Yeah so that was always probably at the back of my mind, so that's why I'd probably compare myself more harshly to my friends.
>
> Layla (she/her): I guess it's different, it's like they're celebrities they get to do it, they get paid for that and stuff, but it's like more my friends, we are kind of the same.

Here, we can see how friends (read: non-celebrities), who 'are kind of the same' as participants, act as more compelling points of comparison than celebrities. Or, in Coleman's terms, the bodies of friends hold greater potential to transform participants' 'bodily knowledges and understandings' (Coleman, 2009: 88). For example, Dora notes how if her friends 'got super fit', 'toned and skinny' like a fitness blogger, this would become a state that she could (and should) realistically achieve. Stella similarly shares that she compares herself more 'harshly' to her friends' selfies; while she is 'never' going to achieve a celebrity body, she presumably feels she could achieve a similar aesthetic state to her friends' bodies. This is owing to friends being in closer proximity to the specific actualities of participants' lives and understood (felt) as 'real'. Celebrities, on the other hand, are dismissed as 'unattainable' (Stella) as they have 'time to look good' (Dora) and 'get paid' to do so (Layla). Recognition of the self (proximity) is thus key in participants' determinations of how affectively intense an image is.

That encounters with friends, or even celebrities who are already *like* participants, invite 'harsher' comparisons is owing to the tension they create for participants. Notably, such images are simultaneously *impossible and proximate.* For example, if Dora's friends became 'super toned and skinny' – i.e., moved towards embodiments of normative and desirable femininity – with similar lived experience and resources, then she would experience the impossibility of those images as *personal* failure. Instead, images of celebrities, who 'have more time to look good', are both *impossible and distant*, allowing Dora to mitigate (and accept) the fact she cannot follow the same trajectory. For Rose, the impossible processes behind Herring's images do little to dilute the affective intensity of the images because of the parallels in her lived experience (similar age, career and body). This tension flips Ang's concept of the pleasure of recognition (1985: 20); for the participants in this research, recognition is a double-edged sword. It can lead participants to unfollow celebrities who have a 'really, really, really good body' and fear the reality that friends will achieve the same. Thus, recognition here is not always pleasurable for participants – it brings about heightened feelings that are neither exclusively positive nor negative. For this reason, the *power* of recognition would be a more accurate term to describe what structures and drives the participants' negotiations of celebrity selfies on Instagram.

I now turn to the ways participants become through celebrity selfies on Instagram in ways that are expansive; notably, I explore how non-normative celebrity bodies invite participants to feel comfort in their bodies as they are, as well as I discuss whether such an invitation aligns with themes of (self-)transformation in the context of neoliberal capitalism (Gill, 2007).

Part 2. Re-Imagining the Non-Normative Body

The previous chapter demonstrated how the process of curating celebrity content involved mediating impossibility (unattainable ideals) and promoting possibility (non-normative content). This section extrapolates on the participants' desire for non-normative or 'realistic' celebrity selfies on Instagram. In doing so, it seeks to highlight the expansive potential of celebrity selfies, specifically how they teach the participants to feel in their bodies as they are (as opposed to what they could or should be).

‘She reflects how I want to be so much, but like realistically’

I want to open this section with a case study of participant Meg, a twenty five year old white British bisexual woman. During the interview, Meg spoke of how fatphobic judgements limited her selfie practices, particularly in terms of posting on her timeline. Adopting Coleman’s definition, judging is ‘when the relations a body has with other things (be they bodies or other organs of that body) are reduced to only one aspect of that body’ (2009: 124). In the reflection below, we can see how judgements reduce (fat) bodies to only their looks:

> Meg (she/her): I feel like people have so much judgement based on how you look with how well you’re doing in life, there’s such a connection with that, and I have a good career, I’m living in London, I have a cat, but people make these judgements especially based on your weight like oh she’s let herself go, she’s not doing well, and I think that’s partly it, and it’s silly because I don’t care what they think rationally, but irrationally I’m like but I also do […] I just think people will make snap judgements based on my appearance because I know how people view fat people and I’m very conscious. Even when I know I don’t care it’s hard to disassociate yourself from the knowledge of that and like how people view you.

Here, ‘rational’ thinking does not simply fix how Meg feels in response to particularly ‘sticky’ affects. Returning to Ahmed’s theory of how relations of affect operate through an ‘affective economy’ (2004), judgements concerning weight stick harder to Meg’s body. Remarks such as ‘she’s let herself go’ and ‘she’s not doing well’ that are based on weight get under the skin; ‘it’s hard to disassociate yourself from […] the way people view you’. This is because, as Meg notes, one becomes known through their looks first and foremost, which is then used to make assumptions about ‘how well you’re doing in life’. Then, the possibilities of Meg’s body are restricted to how she looks, while her successful career and life in London with her cat (i.e., what else she is) is overlooked. Judgements (the reduction of a body to one aspect) stop Meg from posting selfies to her timeline – instead, and as explored in Chapter 4, she noted using the ‘stories’ function which offers an impermanence and safety.

In their exploration of women's NSFW (sexy) selfies on Tumblr, Tiidenberg and Gómez-Cruz (2015) argue that taking and sharing selfies can help women internalise 'corporeal truths' and reject body shaming discourses. Also drawing on Coleman's concept of the becoming of bodies (2009), they note that 'alternations to one's agency, power and political intent' happen through taking and sharing NSFW selfies as their beliefs about what is photographable change (2015: 83). It is for this reason that they view selfies as 'knowledge devices' (a positive resistance) through which women can 'unfix' their bodies and become something more than unfinished projects (2015: 88). This is not as straightforward for Meg in the context of Instagram, a platform that has been called out for discriminating against fat bodies – in terms its algorithmic and censorship bias (Dazed Digital, 2020; Christie, 2020) and the way it allows for fatphobic abuse to be directed at its users (Baska, 2021). However, while Meg does not feel able to use her own selfies as a 'knowledge device' in this context, the act of viewing celebrity selfies on the platform performs a similar function. Consider her reflections on why she follows fat-activist and fat-positive celebrities such as Bethany Rutter and Stephanie Yeboah:

> Meg (she/her): One of my fav [sic] things is seeing actual fashionable pictures of plus-size people and not just plus-size people wearing nice clothes but taken in a fashion, editorial style way. I loved fashion so much growing up and I still do, but I did get to a point where I was like this is not the world for me, it's not reflecting me, I can look at all these clothes and collections and I can't wear any of them, it's not relevant and I find it hard because I can't connect with it, I love it and it hurts me, whereas being able to see photos of someone […] actually seeing editorial style photos of a plus-size woman, in the nice environments and in the poses, poses that fat women aren't meant to do I think that's so, I don't know, it's fascinating and it's real.

Meg notes the feelings of alienation that came with enjoying fashion growing up and the lack of space given to fat bodies; 'I can't connect with it, I love it and it hurts me'. In a somewhat corrective move, Meg now seeks to fashion a world on Instagram that does reflect her own embodiment – i.e., one she can affectively connect and relate to. Participant Sophie's reflection in Chapter 4 that Instagram operates like a 'mix and match' your own magazine is pertinent here; Meg's experience of viewing 'actual fashionable pictures of plus-size people' highlights an Instagram user's ability to

curate content to create a 'good' space to be in. The idea of creating – or *making* – space is particularly significant here given that fat bodies are often excluded from and discriminated against in mainstream media forms (indeed, the realm of fashion continues to centre thin white bodies). Meg is able to know herself (and fat bodies) differently on Instagram – notably, fat activist and positivity accounts afford Meg the opportunity to see 'editorial style photos' of plus-size women in 'poses that fat women aren't meant to do'. These images, which explicitly challenge the regulation of the fat feminine body, act as a vehicle or 'knowledge device' through which Meg 'unfixes' her body from similar images that 'hurt' her in the past (i.e., limited the potentiality of her body). They are not only 'fascinating', as Meg describes it, but arguably expansive in the way open up 'the affective restraints around how a fat body should take up visual space and stand out' (Hynnä and Kyrölä, 2019: 6).

Then, in terms of what these selfies elicit and do for Meg, they invite her to inhabit her body *as it is*. This argument draws on Hynnä and Kyrölä's article on how body positive and fat activist blogs invite their publics to 'feel in their bodies' (2019). The authors argue that in these blogs, publics are not simply invited to feel 'positive' or 'proud' about their bodies (i.e., as a simple matter of choice), but are invited to 'feel in their bodies' as they are. The idea of 'feeling in one's body' is understood as a critique to (postfeminist) notions of transformation and the 'pull toward treating bodies as objects, to be molded, evaluated, and seen from the outside' (Hynnä and Kyrölä, 2019: 2). I argue that fat activist and positive celebrity selfies on Instagram invite similar bodily experiences and becomings. Consider Meg's reflection on why she likes fat-positive selfies:

> Meg: [Bethany Rutter] reflects me so much, like I do feel connected to her […] I don't know her at all but she reflects how I want to be so much but like realistically reflects how I want to be, professionally as well as looks-wise, her politics align with mine, she just does lots of cool things.
>
> **B: What do you like about her selfies?**
>
> Meg: She doesn't disguise her weight and I really like that and it's something I aspire to a lot – to take more pictures of myself that I don't feel self-conscious about and I do feel happy to just look like that on my own timeline […] It

> becomes more of like an okay I can do that and gives me permission I guess, and probably makes me a bit free with it.

Meg uses a mass of aspirational language in this account, positing Rutter as how 'how [she] wants to be' and her selfies – particularly the way she does not disguise her weight – as something she 'aspires to a lot'. Unlike impossible ideals, Meg's future is experienced as *potential* through her encounters with Rutter on Instagram; she expresses an intentional becoming in the way she 'projects' herself into the comfort of Rutter's life (profession, politics, body). This comfort is not simply one of 'self-love', a critique often levelled at body positive media for the way it repackages the demand for bodily 'transformation' in contemporary neoliberal capitalism from the physical (looking better) to the affective (feeling better) (Gill and Elias, 2014). In other words, I argue that Rutter's images do not invite Meg to transform her relationship to her body into one that is simply 'positive'; they instead can be seen to expand the capacities of her body insofar as they help '(re-)imagine how norm-exceeding bodies could just inhabit their space, feel comfort, and affectively connect to their surroundings' (Hynnä and Kyrölä: 2019: 9). In this respect, Meg's aspirations to 'become' like Rutter is by no means a straightforwardly imitative exercise. Indeed, her affective connection with this celebrity and its consequences – in the context of a fatphobic culture – cannot be reduced to any simplistic or linear understandings of 'effect' (i.e., imitation of physical or behavioural characteristics). Instead, Meg seeks to above all feel in her body *as it is* – here, this relates to taking selfies where she doesn't disguise her weight and feels 'free' to post these on her timeline.

This case study offers an empirical contribution to work on fat and body-positivity (a point I return to later), as well as it provides nuance to existing arguments about celebrity selfies. As noted in the Literature Review, from an empirical perspective very little research exists to account for young women's experiences of negotiating celebrity selfies on Instagram. Across the existing works, it is often assumed that 'ordinary' users find the lifestyles of the rich and famous aspirational and are encouraged to emulate or 'imitate' the conventions and aesthetics of celebrity images in their own selfies, such as their styles, locations, and poses (Abidin, 2016: 87; Jerslev and Mortensen, 2016; Marwick, 2015). This section highlights that celebrity selfies can offer audiences much more than this. In turning to their affective potential, we can

see how celebrity selfies can open up spaces of comfort, which I understand to be a radical resistance for bodies such as Meg's which are accustomed to 'hurt' and discomfort (Hynnä and Kyrölä, 2019).

'She just doesn't give a fuck'

While the focus above is on fat bodies and Meg's specific experience, there was an overwhelming preference among participants for non-normative content (see Chapter 5). I want to explore further here how participants find pleasure in celebrity content when it *re-imagines* the non-normative body, framed not as something to be improved but something one does not need to 'give a fuck' about. For instance, in the analysis above, Meg responds not just to the content of fat-positive images but their affective charge; specifically, the challenge to fatphobic standards of femininity and how they manifest in fashion, on Instagram and in celebrity culture. This section extrapolates on this point – specifically, it explores how participants are not moved by 'real' aesthetics or representations alone, but a celebrity's apparent energy of 'not giving a fuck'. For participants, the concept of not giving a fuck is bound up with how celebrities reject and confuse the existing standards of norms of femininity in a way that is confident, assertive and unabashed. I thus understand the 'fuck-you' attitude as persuasive and engaging for participants because of the way it challenges normative gender expectations and standards. Specifically, I understand non-normative content that is shared on the celebrities' *own terms* as particularly affective in the way they make space for bodies to 'feel, move, and exist under the pressures and barriers of heteronormative gender expectations and "normal" size' (Hynnä and Kyrölä, 2019: 2-4). Consider Jane and Kayley's reflections on what they like about body-positive and fat-positive celebrities:

> Jane (she/her): there's this embroidery artist and she just doesn't give a fuck and it makes me really happy, like she posts a lot of selfies where she's just not bothered and you can see rolls of fat or like blemishes, but she's really cool and I just like her confidence […] I wouldn't take selfies like that myself but I just really like seeing hers, it makes me happy, some of her selfies are my favourite, I really like the shots of her body, it makes me feel better about my body the confidence she has.

> Kayley (she/her): [Ruby Rare's] feed is very positive and happy and inclusive and it does feel nice having that, being able to curate that in my feed and so have that energy within my life […] she posts a lot of selfies about her body and in just underwear or naked but it's all like I'm happy with my hairy legs and my belly and I'm just happy doing this thing […] I find it really nice and affirming or comforting that somebody is just happy in their body […]I guess she uses her selfies to celebrate her body and by extension all bodies, so I feel like my body is more okay.

Here, we begin to see how Kayley and Jane re-negotiate their experiences of their bodies through non-normative celebrity selfies. While Jane is drawn to an unbothered embroidery artist who posts pictures with 'rolls of fat' or 'blemishes', Kayley feels affirmed and comforted by selfies showing hairy legs. Similar to Meg's experiences of fat-positive content, these celebrities open up spaces of comfort and invite a re-imagining of their bodies as 'okay' (i.e., *as they are*). However, we can also begin to see that how an image engage(s) people affectively does not directly follow from what can be read on the surface on the image. In other words, the ability to feel accepting of their bodies is not only a reflection on the visual content of these non-normative images but their affective charge. In Kayley's case, that the celebrity appears 'happy in their body' and 'is very positive' is what makes her feel 'like (her) body is more okay'. For Jane, it is not just the embroidery artist's fat or blemishes that 'make (her) feel better' about her own body, but 'the confidence she has' and how 'she doesn't give a fuck'. The commonality among participants is how they are not necessarily moved by the images but specifically their 'energy', as Kayley calls it, which stems from the celebrities posting images of their non-normative bodies confidently and on their own terms.

This fuck-you energy or attitude is something that participants sometimes seek to channel into their own selfie practices. As briefly explored in the previous section, Meg aspires to 'take more pictures of (her)self' where she does not disguise her weight, in a similar way to Bethany Rutter. Participant Kayley spoke of a similar experience:

> Kayley: I feel like I'm a little bit more able to take selfies of myself but not necessarily post them, I think what she does is very brave and I'm not that brave about my body, I would like to be so maybe at some point I'll be able to.

Having body-positive 'energy within [her] life' is expansive for Kayley in the way she is 'a little bit more able' to take selfies as a result. In this regard, both Meg and Kayley's experiences draw parallels with the way women have been shown to use their own selfies as 'knowledge devices' through which they experience a sense of agency and power over their bodies (Tiidenberg and Gómez-Cruz, 2015). Here, the participants are invited to experience their bodies as it they through their selfie practices, rather than what they could be. The idea that celebrity selfies invite participants to feel 'a little bit more able to take selfies' (Kayley) or gives them 'permission' and makes them feel 'a bit free' (Meg) shares similarities with Rebecca Feasey's work with readers of *heat* magazine (2008). Feasey found that a celebrity's physical and fashionable 'imperfections' invoked empathy among readers, as well as such images were 'a useful route to accepting their own imperfections' (2008: 695). The participants in this research differ somewhat to Feasey's participants; on Instagram, non-normative bodies invoke feelings closer to respect than empathy; 'she's really cool', 'it makes me happy', 'it's something I aspire to'. However, they perform a similar affective function in the way they render a specific practice (here, taking selfies) 'safe' because it is 'tried and tested' by the celebrity (Feasey 2008). Then, Kayley and Meg's intentions to 'imitate' non-normative celebrity selfies is less about becoming like the celebrity and more about assuming their fuck-you energy. Non-normative celebrity selfies offer reassurance in the context of a platform that encourages users to adhere to narrow Instagrammable conventions, and this reassurance is transformative in the way it helps participants unfix their bodies from idealised standards of femininity.

It is important to note that while fuck-you celebrity images can make *taking* selfies easier or 'safer' for the participants in this study, this does not necessarily extend to the *posting* of their selfies. Indeed, Instagram is a platform that encourages the surveillance of the self and others; assuming a fuck-you energy in their own practices is a different matter to publicly displaying their bodies as they are. It is also significant to note that this attitude is not something participants necessarily aspire to imitate in a

literal sense – for example, participant Jane notes above that while she likes seeing non-normative selfies, she 'wouldn't take selfies like' the celebrities she follows. This may speak to her personal preferences and/or the inaccessible processes behind a celebrity image (see Chapter 4). Taken together, the feeling of 'not giving a fuck' could above all be seen as cathartic in the way it momentarily invites participants to 'feel in their bodies' (Hynnä and Kyrölä, 2019). In other words, feeling in one's body is not seamless – as explored earlier in this chapter, celebrity images (whether idealised or transgressive) are just *another* relation through which they re-negotiate the body, which co-exists with a myriad of other relations.

To contextualise and further understand the significance of non-normative celebrity selfies, we can turn to Kavka's argument that there has been a shift in contemporary celebrity culture from 'fuck-me' to 'fuck-you' celebrity (2020). The former refers to Hollywood-built celebrity which 'has long depended on the institutionalised production of women whose look, stance and performance to the camera signals, first and foremost, their sexual availability' (Kavka, 2020: 16). White, Western, thin, heteronormative, and able-bodied celebrities dominate in this sphere. For example, Kavka draws on Richard Dyer's (1986) analysis of Marilyn Monroe in *Heavenly Bodies* (specifically his chapter 'Monroe = sexuality') as illustrative of 'fuck-me' celebrity. Notably, how her image became a reference point for sexuality, or what Kavka calls 'feminine fuckability standards' (2020: 17), which was felt to matter so much in the 1950s and early 1960s (Dyer, 1986). In contrast, 'fuck-you' celebrity 'shifts the terms and channels of desirability' as well as it more broadly challenges the gender/power nexus underpinning celebrity (Kavka, 2020: 19). One form of this is the body-positive celebrity who 'explicitly challenges the body-shape standards and body-shaming tactics of the media industries that feed celebrification' (Kavka, 2020: 20). Kavka cites @effyourbeautystandards as evidence of this 'fuck-you' attitude, which is an Instagram account founded in 2013 by Tess Holliday, a plus-size model and diversity and inclusivity consultant. Kavka notes that the account:

> is rife with posts that celebrate a wide spectrum of embodied identities, including images not only of full-figured women but also of non-white, non-Western, non-binary, non-heteronormative and differently abled people – all

> of whom, presumably, feel themselves to be resonant with the 'effyou' of the hashtag (2020: 20)

Kavka argues that such images are illustrative of shifts in the celebrity system (i.e., specifically in the post-Weinstein era). This thesis contributes an empirically-informed analysis to this argument – that is, the participants in this research heavily favour the fuck-you over the fuck- me. This is not to claim that the celebrity system is changing per se, but what I can proffer is that fuck-you celebrity (i.e., images that challenge existing standards of feminine beauty) are *felt to matter* in the contemporary moment. As I explore later, while scholars disagree about whether body positive celebrity is necessarily progressive (in the sense that they can work to implement new norms), they nevertheless have a 'useful' discursive function in terms of dramatising contemporary tensions surrounding norms/standards of femininity. The popularity of fat- and body-positive images highlights that celebrity figures – whether commanding a global appeal (see Dyer, 1984; Holmes, 2005) or more niche audiences in the context of their primary existence on Instagram – productively engage audiences in questions about the social and cultural contexts of their time.

To conclude, celebrity content that affectively says fuck-you to idealised standards of femininity invites participants to feel comfortable in the ways they deviate from these expectations. The desire for celebrities who embody a fuck-you attitude, coupled with how participants carefully curate celebrity content on Instagram to carve out a space in which they feel recognised and 'good' about themselves (Chapter 5), speaks to what is *felt to matter* in the contemporary moment. I understand this to be a rejection of idealised and persistent 'feminine fuckability standards' in visual culture and more broadly patriarchal power (Kavka, 2020). I now turn to the final section of this thesis, which discusses whether the invitation to 'feel better' about one's body aligns with themes of (self-)transformation in contemporary neoliberal capitalism.

'It makes me feel better'

This final section reflects on the idea that (non-normative) celebrity selfies can make participants 'feel better' and 'more okay' about their bodies. These words and phrases, which were commonly used, signal a sense of improvement in participants' relationship with their bodies. This idea of 'improvement' can be seen as indicative of

contemporary neoliberal capitalism and the emphasis on self-transformation within this context. As noted in the Literature Review, a neoliberal rhetoric is seen to have ushered in new discourses of femininity, or a 'postfeminist' media culture (Gill, 2007), which encourages a greater emphasis upon self-surveillance and self-discipline to 'better' oneself. This manifests not only in terms of looking better through bodily work but feeling better about the body (see Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2006; McRobbie, 2009; Gill and Scharff, 2011). This underpins the academic critiques of body positive media, which cautions that 'self-love' and 'positivity' discourse can work to frame one's affective relationship to their body as a matter of choice, as well as it re-emphasises that women's value lies in their appearance (see Gill and Elias, 2014). For example, Gill and Elias argue that, 'far from representing a liberation from harmful beauty standards, [love your body] discourses are implicated in a deeper and more pernicious regulation of women that has shifted from bodily to psychic regulation' (2014: 179). In this respect, feeling 'better' through such images is seen as interpellating women as active, autonomous and self-reinventing subjects, divorced from the regulatory (fatphobic) context of gendered power relations/normativities.

In the context of this research, to posit that 'feeling better' in response to fat- and body-positive celebrity selfies is straightforwardly indicative of themes of self-transformation would be reductive to participants' experiences. Following my Foucauldian approach, I understand pleasure as productive and as able to 'tactically reverse' (Foucault, 1976: 157) normative formulations of the body. As noted in Chapter 5, I see non-normative selfies as able to act as a *counterattack* to the idea that women should engage in critical forms of looking (surveilling) their bodies to live up to narrow ideals of femininity. I do not understand this as a personal choice made by participants, but rather an affective experience. For example, fat- and body-positive images do not invite participants to transform their relationship to their bodies into one that is simply 'positive'; they instead can be seen to expand the capacities of their bodies insofar as they experience alternations to their agency – i.e., in the way they feel a bit more able to take selfies of their own bodies, or indeed just feel in their bodies, as they are. Thus, to feel in one's body here is understood as inviting participants to engage in practices of self-acceptance (stillness), a feeling that exists *within* the constraints of power. Participant Alice's experience of following skin-

positive celebrities reiterates the idea that 'feeling better' invites transformation insofar as this refers to feelings of momentary comfort or stillness:

> Alice (she/her): I've had acne in the past, and they're like we've got acne but we're still good anyway or beautiful anyway or whatever […] I like to see that yeah, I like to see that […] you're not the only one who has problems with your skin and it's like a teenage problem and these are my age and they're still having the same problem and it makes me feel better […] they also recommend things like products and stuff and things but I don't pay much attention to that cos I know what works for me.

Here, Alice's past experiences with acne become part of her experiences with celebrity images on Instagram. Notably, this experience is understood to be outside of (Western) society's appearance norms; 'we're still […] beautiful *anyway*'. However, through celebrity selfies Alice can 'feel better' about the fact. Further, she 'feels better' insofar as she is able to re-imagine her body and (history of) acne as somewhat unremarkable; 'you're not the only one who has problems with your skin […] these are my age and they're still having the same problem.' In this regard, skin-positive images do not encourage Alice to adopt an increasingly 'positive' outlook but invite a sense of belonging through the re-framing of her experience of acne as common, 'beautiful anyway or whatever'. It is also significant that Alice notes that the commercial elements (product recommendations) made via skin-positive accounts are redundant; she already knows what 'works' for her and seeks out this type of celebrity content to know she is 'not the only one' with (a history of) acne, as opposed to aspiring to be(come) like these skin positive celebrities. In this sense, her investment in these types of celebrity images is affective in nature – it is driven by how she feels as opposed to the pull of other (commercial) elements of the content. This draws parallels with accounts in the preceding chapter, which suggested participants are actively drawn to 'useful' celebrity content. 'Useful' here is signalled by a celebrity's ability acting as a 'knowledge device' (Tiidenberg and Gómez-Cruz, 2015) through which to re-imagine the body as something more than 'unfinished' and in need of transformation.

This reading is not to suggest that Alice and others are socially and culturally dislocated from cultural influence, nor that fat- and body-positive media images do not reveal features of a postfeminist neoliberal sensibility. I certainly agree that, in terms of analysing the 'patterned articulation' of neoliberal postfeminist ideals as they circulate in the media, these images can be seen to foreground new norms (Gill, 2007; Gill and Elias, 2014). However, the empirical work here highlights that, for the participants in this research, investments in these types of texts is complex; these ideals or ideologies are not simply 'internalised' to form a new disciplinary regime in which women are encouraged to change their affective relationship to their body through their consumption habits, under the guise of empowerment or simple choice (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2007). Rather, the accounts in this chapter display the participants' 'mobile and transitory points of resistance' to cultural influence (Foucault, 1998: 96). Specifically, it has shown that the participants in this research are touched and moved by non-normative celebrity on Instagram in the sense that their selfies allow them to experience a momentary catharsis (stillness). Yet, while momentary, the affective potential of these types of images is still significant. As Hynnä and Kyrölä note, feeling in your body 'does not dismiss the shame of living in a non-normative body but recognizes it as they very reason why "just feeling" is already revolutionary' (2019: 5).

Conclusions

This chapter has explored how the participants in this research experience their bodies through celebrity selfies on Instagram. The first half highlighted how celebrity selfies on Instagram can limit or make impossible particular becomings of bodies – i.e., in that participants described feeling inadequate or 'bad' in comparison to the ideal image, particularly when proximate to their own lived experience and embodiments. This was not viewed as evidence of idealised images of femininity successfully 'training' women's bodies in docility and obedience. Indeed, this would have only reinforced the patriarchal positioning of women as passive viewers at risk of the damaging 'effects' of media texts (Stacey, 1994). Instead, this chapter sought to work through the ambiguity in the participants' accounts of feeling 'bad' and account for how they continued to become *through* these limits and impossibilities (Coleman, 2009). Notably, they did this by disrupting the idea that a celebrity body is reducible

to one image (e.g., a perfect selfie). Despite the processes and technologies behind Instagram and selfie-taking being somewhat 'accessible' or easier to replicate than those behind celebrity images in magazines, adverts or films, the participants in this research were under no illusion that they could ever be(come) like the body of a celebrity selfie. Indeed, the participants in this research did not describe any attempts to make themselves like the 'ideal' celebrity body, nor replicate their selfie practices. Then, despite how often we hear about the negative 'effects' of social media and idealised celebrity content, the way it makes young women feel (and act) is certainly contradictory, ambiguous and complex.

This chapter has also illustrated how feelings about the body ('I hate myself moods' which exist outside of the platform and celebrity culture) become part of participants' experiences on Instagram, further complicating any linear or causal correlation between idealised images and young women's self-image. Extending my arguments in Chapters 4 and 5, I understood participants' reflections about and dismissals of 'perfect' celebrity images as reflexive discursive strategies. That is, the way they held celebrity at a critical distance may be a reflection on the predominantly middle-class sample of participants and their attempts to distance themselves from popular narratives which position young women and girls as 'at risk' of media influence. This is not to say these strategies were successful, as the images discussed (and dismissed) were nevertheless held up as the 'ideal' standard. Their reflections illustrated that in addition to feeling bad, they also *enjoyed* seeing normative embodiments – as amazing, incredible, the 'right' or 'good' way to be in our affective economy (Ahmed, 2006). Then despite knowing that 'ideal' femininity is restrictive in terms of it not being 'real', the participants' bodies were nevertheless directed or 'oriented' in this way. Thus, while the participants in this research were highly critical, this did not divorce them social and cultural influence. In other words, being aware of the disciplinary 'effects' of idealised images did not simply 'fix' how they felt about their bodies, which is somewhat unsurprising in the context of gendered power relations and the reproduction of normativities in visual culture.

The second half of this chapter explored how participants became through celebrity selfies on Instagram in ways that were expansive; notably, I explored how they used *non-normative* celebrity selfies to remind themselves of who they are. In displaying

diverse femininities underserved in mainstream media, as well as attributes typically dismissed as 'flaws' to be corrected, the celebrity women's selfies discussed in this chapter can be seen to 'broaden the scope of who and what is considered *photographable'* (Caldeira, Ridder and Bauwel, 2020: 1, original emphasis). In this respect, I consider non-normative celebrity selfies – understood as 'knowledge devices' – to be tangentially political in the sense that they helped to shift the participants' attitudes towards their bodies. Specifically, such images helped them to reimagine their bodies as something they do not need to give a fuck about. I have argued that the desire for celebrities who embody a fuck-you attitude, coupled with how participants carefully curate celebrity content on Instagram to carve out a space in which they feel recognised and 'good' about themselves (Chapter 5), can be seen to speak to what is *felt to matter* in the contemporary moment. I understand this to be a rejection of idealised and persistent 'feminine fuckability standards' in visual culture and more broadly patriarchal power (Kavka, 2020).

As noted in the Literature Review, work exploring celebrity audience practices has long highlighted how celebrity figures – despite their 'obvious' limitations at a textual level – can be socially productive and transformative (see, for example, Dyer, 1986; Mendick, Allen and Harvey, 2015; Jackson, Goddard and Cossens, 2016). Across their different methods, focus and period, these works have repetitively shown that how people experience and make use of celebrity figures is a contradictory process and one that can create a sense of belonging among audiences. This chapter is a contemporary and contextually specific addition to this body of literature in its focus on how young women experience (and feel in) their bodies in relation to celebrity selfies on Instagram. Specifically, this chapter has shown how non-normative celebrity selfies on Instagram can function 'to reconnect us in new and […] perhaps liberating ways with the world' (Holmes, Ralph and Redmond, 2016: 114).

Chapter 7: Conclusions

This thesis has given space to the wide-ranging ways young women experience and use celebrity – specifically the celebrity selfie – on Instagram. In line with my feminist Foucauldian approach, I have sought to explore the disciplinary power of normative femininities (i.e., as circulated through idealised celebrity selfies and Instagrammable aesthetics) whilst simultaneously giving space to participants' mobile and transitory points of resistance to cultural influence. Overall, the material presented in this thesis offers nuance to current understandings of the relationship between users, celebrity material and Instagram. This final chapter offers an overview of the key interventions of this research before it concludes with a consideration of possible directions for future research.

Key Interventions

The 'influence' of idealised celebrity selfies

Given the gendered discourses surrounding both selfie culture and celebrity consumption, it is perhaps unsurprising that the participants in this research distanced themselves from the suggestion that they are 'influenced' (disciplined or 'trained') by celebrity selfies on Instagram in any straightforward way. This was particularly salient in the context of their own selfie practices; participants were often quick to posit that celebrities 'wouldn't influence the selfies [they] take' (Jane), in part owing to the inaccessible logistics (time, money, bodily work) involved in the capture of celebrity images (Chapter 4). Such negotiations disrupt popular assumptions about the causal 'effects' of idealised celebrity selfies on Instagram, as well as they provide nuance to academic debates which have limited audience 'identification' with celebrity selfies to one of emulation and imitation (Abidin, 2016; Jerslev and Mortensen, 2016; Marwick, 2015). The participants in this research showed a critical awareness of these types of images – particularly those deemed normative or Instagrammable – as not only unrealistic to replicate but dangerous (for the younger generation). Yet, despite the participants' knowledge of 'impossible' celebrity images as carefully curated constructions, these images still led to bodily comparisons (Chapter 6). For instance, participants discussed feeling a sense of 'pressure' to look a certain way (often thin)

in response to 'perfect' celebrity content. Taken together, then, this thesis reports somewhat complicated findings. While the young women here are certainly not passive viewers at risk of the damaging 'effects' of celebrity selfies (specifically in a practical sense), they do nevertheless impact participants. The participants in this research can thus be best described in Gill's (2023: 50) terms as 'critical but caught'; they 'do not operate outside [patriarchy's] powerful force and their critiques [of ideal femininity] do not facilitate the ability to escape the tyranny of the perfect', especially on Instagram.

This thesis has provided much needed nuance to the popular argument that young women feel 'bad' in response to celebrity selfies. Specifically, it has given space to how and why celebrity comparisons were often hard to explore, articulate or quantify for the participants in this research (Chapter 6). This phenomenon was partly attributable to their attempts to distance themselves from popular narratives of 'risk' and occupy a position of power in the interview context, which is a stance young women are so regularly denied in popular debates. This position of power also provides some explanation for why the participants projected their concerns about 'dangerous' celebrity images onto a younger age group (Chapter 4). In addition, and what came through across the interviews, is the moral judgements participants added to their behaviour; for example, they often labelled their comparisons as 'unhealthy' and 'silly' because they felt they *should know better* than to compare themselves to idealised media images. This again highlights how participants are critical but caught – 'knowing better' and actively not viewing these types of images on Instagram (e.g., by unfollowing celebrity accounts) did not simply 'fix' or 'better' how they felt about their bodies (Chapter 6). This is because the feelings and pressures idealised media images evoke continue to exist outside of the platform and celebrity culture – that is, they are part of a wider affective economy in which a narrow approximation of 'ideal' femininity has become conflated with what is 'right' or 'normal'.

Based on the data, this thesis has explored the various factors beyond celebrity that (more explicitly) shaped their selfie practices. These factors, discussed below, included Instagrammable aesthetics and popular narratives about selfies and selfie-takers, both of which impacted when, where and how the participants' selfies were created and shared.

Instagram perfection and narcissistic narratives

Participants described taking and posting selfies to Instagram as both a strategic and effortful practice, involving careful staging (gesturing, posturing, selection, and adaptation) to capture their 'best' selves. This typically involved constructing the self(ie) in ways to appear thinner and smoother – thus, their selfie practices could be seen as evidence of them engaging in the self-reflexive terms of highly-stylised (ideal) femininity. Additionally, the participants described their efforts to hide this labour – whilst they took their selfie taking seriously, this seriousness could not be made public. It was only through meeting the contradictory requirement of being 'perfect' but also 'real' (through self-regulation) that they felt they could post their selfies and not be subject to judgement from others. This judgement stemmed from popular understandings, or rather criticisms, of selfies and selfie-takers – as narcissistic, sexualised, attention-seeking (Burns, 2015). In this respect, the experiences highlighted in this thesis offer an empirical contribution to Burns' argument that popular discussion of selfies maintains gendered power relations in the way it incites and legitimises the discipline of women's behaviors and identities. It is not just Instagrammable ideals, but also the fear of being seen as a narcissistic selfie-taker (that thus requires discipline), that shape young women's selfie practices.

Notably, unlike other research exploring young women's selfie practices (see McGill, 2023; Elias and Gill, 2018), engaging in selfie labour for Instagram was not considered 'useful', 'pleasurable' or 'fun' for the participants in this research. Popular discourse, coupled with the 'pressure' to look a certain way on Instagram, not only shaped the participants' selfie practices but in some instances put a stop to them. For the young women in this research, the self-regulation required to post an 'acceptable' selfie was too much, leading them to outwardly reject engaging in the practice on/for Instagram. On the one hand, we can see this as a form of resistance – while the platform encourages the maintenance of a narrow approximation of femininity, it is not straightforwardly successful in arranging and producing the body in such ways. On the other hand, the platform nevertheless functions as a form of intensified aesthetic surveillance that encourages women to pay significant attention to the ways they manage their image and its reception. For example, the participants' tactics of

circumventing judgement (by not posting selfies, taking selfies with others, or using self-deprecating captions) illustrates how they carefully manage what they post and how they post in a way that is structured by the 'inspecting gaze' of their followers and others, who they perceive will police their behaviour, i.e., as narcissistic.

By engaging with selfie-takers directly, this thesis has sought to highlight that the process of taking and posting normative selfies to Instagram does not diminish their potential or usefulness. Indeed, the practice can also be seen as a therapeutic exercise – for example, I have highlighted how taking selfies helped participant Kristie to internalise new 'truths' about her self-worth after she left a difficult relationship (Chapter 4). In this regard, the work here contributes to existing audience research with selfie-takers which seeks to highlight how the practice can be socially and politically productive (Caldeira, Ridder and Bauwel, 2020; Tembeck, 2016; Olszanowski, 2014; Tiidenberg, 2017; Tiidenberg and Gómez-Cruz, 2015).

The pleasures of (non-normative) celebrity selfies

The findings in this research highlight that how young women experience and use celebrity selfies on Instagram is fundamentally bound up with pleasure and possibility. This was highlighted most pertinently through their reflexive curational tactics; their knowledge of who and what is granted visibility on Instagram (and wider visual economy) led them to studiously curate, to their best of their ability, a 'good space' to be in. This involved prioritising non-normative celebrity selfies that reflected their lived experiences and embodiments, namely diverse body types and celebrity selfies that disrupted Instagrammable ideals. Images that took the piss out of more 'serious' selfie culture (Chapter 5) or proudly displayed 'real' aesthetics, such as rolls of fat or acne-prone skin (Chapter 6), were of crucial importance to their interest in celebrity on Instagram. Significantly, participants felt comforted by images that reimagined the non-normative body not as something to be improved or 'fixed', but as something they did not need to 'give a fuck' about. For participants, the concept of not giving a fuck was bound up with how celebrities rejected or confused the existing standards of feminine beauty in a way that was confident, assertive and unabashed. This finding suggests that 'fuck-you' celebrity representations (Kavka, 2020) are *felt to matter* in the contemporary moment. This is partly because these images invite participants to

feel in their bodies as they are (as opposed to what they could or should be). This is one of the most important contributions this thesis makes to the existing literature on the celebrity selfie, in which audiences are assumed to want to emulate or imitate the conventions and aesthetics of celebrity images in their own selfies. Again, this thesis highlights that audience identification with celebrity selfies is much more expansive than this; in turning to their affective potential, this research has shown that celebrity selfies can open up spaces of comfort. In the context of this research, this comfort cannot be reduced to a form of postfeminist bodily and psychic regulation. Indeed, the participants in this research did not describe feeling 'positive' or 'proud' of their bodies in any simple terms (i.e., as a matter of choice); they instead sought out moments of comfort in their bodies. The 'comfort' participants feel in response to non-normative celebrity selfies can thus be understood as a momentary catharsis or counterattack (resistance) to the pressures of normative ideals of femininity.

There has been a great deal of debate in the field of Celebrity Studies about whether social media is 'narrowing' celebrity-audience hierarchies and altering what has been traditionally understood as 'parasocial' relations (the mediated encounters audiences have with celebrity figures, which are predominantly transmissional or one-way). This is encapsulated well in Marwick's assertion that social media can 'transform the parasocial into the potentially social and increase the emotional ties between celebrity and fan' (2015: 139). While celebrity-audience relationships remain parasocial in the sense that they are (mostly) one-sided, this did not stop the participants in this research experiencing meaningful affective responses (Chapter 6). Indeed, whether these relationships were parasocial or 'potentially social' was seemingly insignificant, as illustrated by the absence of any discourse about the potential for reciprocity across the interviews. That users may feel 'close' to celebrities on social media platforms does not mean that celebrity-audience hierarchies are being straightforwardly 'narrowed' (Marshall, 2006) and this thesis illustrates that audiences are not necessarily expecting (or hoping) for them to be. In the context of Instagram, being entertained, informed, affirmed and made to 'feel' good was instead central to the way users engaged with celebrity figures. This finding speaks to a sample of participants who were not necessarily 'fans' – or at least did not identify themselves as such – but rather people who casually and inconsistently engaged with celebrities on Instagram.

Research with celebrity fans would therefore make for an intriguing area of study in future audience research interested in celebrity-audience relations on Instagram.

In the Literature Review I posited that celebrities on social media can be seen as continuing to operate through what Dyer called a 'rhetoric of authenticity' (1986) in that their construction is organised around revealing aspects of their private lives, or what they are 'really' like. I noted that there is an absence of research exploring how social media users engage with and negotiate 'authentic' celebrity content. This thesis helps to address this gap in the literature in that it has extrapolated on the ways audiences find pleasure in searching for the 'truth' or moments of authenticity when celebrities are 'really' themselves, specifically on the context of Instagram (Chapter 5). Namely, it has explored the markers of authenticity that make celebrities and their selfies on Instagram feel 'real', which for the participants in this research included displays of negative affect, a lack of premeditation and a sense of access to celebrities, as well as 'natural' aesthetics. Yet while the participants in this research remained interested and invested in its presence or absence, they recognised authenticity to be another element of a celebrity's construction (rather than an innate or stable quality). In this respect, participants were not necessarily reassured by authentic performances that celebrities were being 'real' on Instagram, in so much as they valued it as a quality that generated intimacy (Chapter 6). This contrasts with text-based work exploring celebrities' claims to authenticity on social media, which assumes that authentic performances can work reassure the audience that what is being said is 'real', unscripted, and untinged by brand collaborations (e.g., Bishop, 2018). This research illustrates that users are not simply 'manipulated' by authentic branding strategies on the platform but are critical in their consumption habits (Banet-Weiser, 2012). This again complicates the idea of celebrity audiences, but particularly young women, as necessarily passive – indeed, *all* celebrity content on Instagram was viewed critically by the participants in this research, even those that felt 'real'.

Overall, the participants' preferences for what was deemed 'natural', 'normal' and 'real' also points to some of the values underpinning authenticity, in particular how it is a classed, raced and normative phenomenon. I explore these findings below.

'Improper' celebrity/femininity

While participants attempted to resist normative ideals of femininity (such as through their curation tactics and prioritising non-normative imagery), these attempts co-existed with otherwise critical forms of looking (surveilling and judging celebrity women). For example, Chapters 4 and 5 explored how the participants in this research often used the selfies of reality television stars to work through their dislike of certain aspects of celebrity culture – namely, dieting and body transformation narratives. Kim Kardashian, who could be considered an icon of postfeminism in her use of her body to advance her career, was a key feature in these discussions and was considered the opposite of an 'authentic' or 'empowered' woman using 'natural' beauty for herself. On the one hand, such critiques can be seen as a positive resistance to the idea that women should engage in critical forms of bodily surveillance/discipline to live up to a narrow standard of (idealised) femininity. In this respect, we can see again how the participants did not simply internalise the normative 'lessons' on display on Instagram. However, their criticisms simultaneously mirrored a wider social discourse about Kim Kardashian's brand of celebrity in that she is often construed as being outside the parameters of white, middle-class respectability (Sastre, 2014). For instance, it was often the case that Kardashian's 'excessive' corporeality contributed to her apparently inauthentic femininity. The repetitive use of her (body) as a pedagogic tool can be seen to function as a form of 'digital horizontal violence' (Duffy, Miltner and Wahlstedt, 2022: 1660); that is, in that it was this specific individual that became the target of their criticism, rather than capitalist patriarchy (i.e., wider power structures responsible for the ubiquity of idealised, 'authentic' femininity).

It is both significant but somewhat unsurprising that Kim Kardashian was an especially prominent target of the gendered policing of authenticity. The specificities of television fame and its celebrities are often characterised in disparaging – gendered, classed and racialised – terms in popular discourse (e.g., Sastre, 2014; Mendick, et al. 2018). However, this research demonstrates how selfies (as a contentious and devalued practice/media form) can work to strengthen participants' value judgements, perhaps because such images represent significant effort and deliberate desires to be looked at. For the participants in this research, the likes of Kim Kardashian and Chloe Brockett's selfies worked to accentuate their inauthentic femininity. This thesis sought

to unpack this from a Foucauldian perspective and explore authenticity as a disciplinary and knowledge-making device. As per Butler's application of Foucauldian thought in *Undoing Gender* (2004: 27), 'the question of who and what is considered real and true is apparently a question of knowledge' and intrinsic to processes of normalisation. In this context of this research, authenticity (what is 'real) was aligned with a white middle-class standard of femininity, whereas inauthenticity (what is 'fake') was aligned with overt sexuality and mapped onto a coded-working class and racialised celebrity. Then, a 'real' woman could only be recognised – and respected – as one when she was not deliberately sexual. 'Real' versus 'fake' thus acted as a productive continuum through which bodies were organised by participants as more or less human. Thus, in the context of Instagram, this thesis highlights how 'a normative conception of gender can undo one's personhood' (Butler, 2004: 1), with authenticity used as a key marker in this (de)construction.

As is the case for all the interventions set out here, these preferences for authenticity (white middle class femininity) speak to my largely university-educated and white sample of participants. Given the centrality of authenticity as a concept in Celebrity Studies, these findings suggest more attention needs to be paid to its contextual specificity – specifically, how it operates differently (or not) across various media forms and how it is negotiated differently by various audiences.

Future Research Directions

As in the case of all research that focuses on changing technologies and platforms, my analysis only captures a snapshot of Instagram (interviews took place over a period of 4 months in 2019/2020). Since then, the app has evolved with new features added. For instance, users are now able to organise their 'home' feed or timeline in chronological order, as well as specify and organise their 'favourite' accounts (in turn only viewing the posts and 'stories' of these accounts on their home feed). Both changes offer greater opportunity for curation and (a sense of) agency, altering the user experience on Instagram more generally. The proliferation of other digital media platforms such as TikTok has also (re)shaped Instagram content since the outset of this thesis. 'TikToks', which are short, shareable video excerpts, are now widely shared across Instagram. Instagram has attempted to rival this increased desire for video content,

creating the 'reel' function, as well as announcing its intention to algorithmically privilege video over photo content going forward (Zib Digital, 2021). The changing nature of Instagram thus makes future research exploring celebrity-audience relations on the platform both a necessary and fruitful endeavour.

Beyond this thesis, the fervent search for 'authenticity' on social media is supported by the proliferation of other platforms such as BeReal, which has now gained over 20 million users (Mileva, 2022). As suggested in the name, the premise of this platform is to capture a 'real' moment once a day. This is triggered by a notification from the app, sent out to all users at the same time daily. It encourages users to photograph one moment, documenting what or who is in front of both the front-facing and rear-facing cameras. To encourage 'realness' or authenticity, 'retake' metrics are visible to their connections on the app. This both creates a level of transparency and is intended to encourage users to 'BeReal' with others, discouraging a more carefully staged or curated picture by unveiling just how spontaneous (or not) that day's submission *really* is. Taking into account how 'authenticity' is a dominant structuring force in participants' curation tactics on Instagram, the growing popularity of a social media platform calling for 'real' or authentic images is significant. Indeed, the arrival of this new platform would make for a relevant and poignant area of study in future research on selfies and/or celebrity.

Throughout this thesis, I have responded to popular debates that position young women (and girls) as at 'risk' of idealised media images on social media platforms. However, in seeking to complicate this narrative, I recognise that my approach may have discouraged more marginalised women from coming forward owing to the sole attention I put on 'the category woman', positing gender as a more salient – and homogenous – axis of the lived experience than any other. This hierarchy is a tradition of white feminism and scholarship throughout the decades (Mohanty, 1984), and it thus perhaps unsurprising that my PIS and 'snowballing' method created a sample of predominantly white, cis-gender women. This is characteristic of the study of celebrity in general, which beyond audience research, has predominantly focused on western stardom and white, middle-class heterosexual celebrities. As Iqani notes, '[w]here celebrities of non-white ethnicities are examined, they tend to be from western backgrounds or already widely recognised in the west' (2016: 164). The preceding

chapters contain limited discussion of celebrity and selfies in terms of race, as well as disability and queerness. A move away from the white, western, cis-gender and able-bodied subject as central is therefore necessary in future research, both to speak to the lived experience of other subjectivities as well as to see whether concerns of pleasure and authenticity remain relevant to negotiations of celebrity.

As noted in Chapter 3, a key limitation of my methodological approach was the lack of collaboration with participants in terms of co-creation of data. I recognise that a thesis which aimed to prioritise the lived experiences – or subjugated knowledges – of young women could have adopted more collaborative approaches to the research design, data analysis and writing up phases of the research. This is particularly relevant given the nuanced and sensitive subjects discussed in this thesis – from identity construction and navigating fatphobic judgements through to self-esteem issues and coercive and controlling relationships. Such topics were not always a lived experience that I shared as the researcher interpreting and writing up the analysis. Future research, especially that which touches on topics such as identity construction and self-image, may want to consider using collaborative approaches in the data analysis and writing up phases of the research. While it is not possible to fully represent research participants 'authentically' or faithfully, this could facilitate a more generous or expansive depiction of people's lived experiences in that they would have a role (i.e., some agency) in what is granted visibility and how.

While recognising its relatively small-scale, this research acts as a useful starting point for future explorations on celebrity-audience relations in the context of social media. Despite the 'obvious' limitations of Instagram, the experiences presented throughout this thesis suggest the platform is a space in – and through – which we can feel differently about ourselves, as well as it highlights the complex and myriad functions of celebrities and their selfies. In this respect, this thesis further illustrates the importance of finding value in 'trivial' and devalued (read: gendered) media forms and practices (Ang, 1985; Hermes, 1997; Feasey, 2008). As explored in the Methodology, I 'became' a lesbian through celebrity content on Instagram and I continue to become in (gendered) ways through my encounters with this content. This speaks to the way social media – but specifically celebrity content in these spaces – can broaden one's spatial and social reality and, in turn, the potential to become as a

social subject. While none of the participants in this research explicitly shared a similar experience to mine, the social and cultural potentialities of celebrity on Instagram were nevertheless apparent – for instance, in the way participants sought out celebrities who affirmed, and invited them to positively re-imagine, their bodies and their lived experiences.

Appendices

Appendix A: Participant Information Sheet

Researcher: Bethany Atkins, University of East Anglia, [email address]

Below is further information about this study, why I am doing it and what it involves. If after reading this you are happy to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form.

Purpose of the study

This research project is looking at women's experiences of selfie production and consumption on Instagram, and specifically the ways they consume celebrity selfies on the app. The mainstream media often links women's selfie practices to narcissism, passivity and celebrity culture-led forces. For example, the selfie has been described as 'a product of our age of celebrity-obsessed narcissism [that] could leave young women with low self-esteem' (Ryan, 2013[1]). Yet there has been little or no research about whether there is any relationship between celebrity selfies and women's own selfie practices. In an attempt to complicate these popular assumptions, this research explores how and why women take selfies and the extent to which, and in what ways, celebrity selfies are or are not 'influencing' women's own selfie taking practices and wider identity construction.

Criteria for taking part

You are eligible to take part if you have an active Instagram account, follow some celebrity women, are 18-35 years old and identify as a woman (as this thesis speaks back to popular narratives about young women) and are available to conduct the interview face-to-face. I do not expect you to travel to Norwich but rather I will organise the interview at a location convenient for you.

What does the study involve?

The study will involve a one-to-one interview which will be audio-recorded for research purposes, and the interview is expected to last approximately one hour. The

interviews will take place in person. The interview will be semi-structured, and indicative areas of questioning are:

- The stages of selfie production, for example, on what occasions you take selfies and what (if any) editing software is used
- Your perspectives on celebrity selfies and what you like/dislike about celebrity selfies
- Whether you see any relationship between your own selfie-taking practices and the celebrities you follow
- If you are aware of the popular discourse around young women's selfies/the ways celebrity selfies are thought to be consumed by young women, and what you think about this.

The study adopts a participant observation approach, which means we (the participant and the researcher) will discuss your consumption of celebrity selfies as it happens, while looking at the Instagram app in real time. In terms of your own selfie production, I am going to ask that we look at your personal profile as we discuss the ways you use Instagram and specifically your process of taking selfies (the captions, the editing, etc.)

The resulting research will provide material for a PhD thesis (which may be published) and academic journal article/s. Any personal data collected will be anonymised at the point of writing. If you are happy to, you can consent to the researcher republishing the selfie/s of your choice in the PhD thesis and/or the academic journal articles. These may be identifiable. It is not a requirement that your selfies are republished, and you can still take part in this study if you do not consent to your selfies being included in any publications. Following publication, the thesis and any article/s will be available in print and online, and you may request a copy if you wish.

If you agree to be involved in the study, you can change your mind prior to or during but not after the research has been fully written up. If you do decide to withdraw, all data will be deleted. After the research has been fully written up/published, it will not be possible to withdraw. However, your data will not be used in any subsequent academic journal articles.

Ethics

This project has been reviewed by and received ethics clearance through the University of East Anglia's Research Ethics Committee (Ref: HUM 19-010). Should you have any questions regarding the study, please email me at [email address]

How will the data be stored?

Only the researcher will have access to the audio data that is collected. This data will be held electronically and stored securely by the researcher, and then disposed of after the completion of the PhD (3 years).

Complaints

If you have a concern or complaint about any aspect of this project, please contact Bethany Atkins [email address] and Su Holmes [email address]. Your email should be responded to within 10 working days and you should receive an indication as to how your concern/complaint will be dealt with. If you remain unhappy and wish to make a formal complaint, please contact: Dr Malcolm McLaughlin (Head of School), AMA, University of East Anglia, Norwich, NR4 7TJ. [email address].

[1] Ryan, Erin G. 21 November 2013. 'Selfies aren't empowering. They're a cry for help.' Jezebel. Accessed: https://jezebel.com/selfies-arent-empowering-theyre-a-cry-for-help-1468965365.

Appendix B: Consent form

If you are willing to take part, please complete the checklist below:

☐ I have read and I understand the participant information sheet
☐ I have been provided with the researcher's contact details and the opportunity to ask any questions if necessary
☐ I have received satisfactory answers to any questions I have asked
☐ I understand that my participation is voluntary and I may withdraw from the study at any point before and during but not after the research has been fully-written up without any negative consequences
☐ I understand that all data will be anonymised at the point of writing and thus in any resulting publications
☐ I understand that I can ask for a copy of any resulting publications if I wish
☐ I understand how the data (audio and visual) will be included in any articles which are submitted for publication
☐ If I have any concerns about the project I understand how to make a complaint
☐ I understand that the interview will involve the researcher (Bethany Atkins) looking at my Instagram account (my personal profile and homepage)
☐ I agree to participate in the research project

☐ I opt in to having the selfies of my choice published in the final PhD thesis and any resulting publications, such as academic journals, and I understand that these may be identifiable.

Name:

Signed: **Date:**

Appendix C: Interview Question Schedule

Preamble

Summarise study – any questions?

Turn recorder on

About me/my identity – about them/their identity

Why have you decided to take part in this study?

1. How long have you been using Instagram?
   - How often do you use/check the app?
   - Do you post different content on this app compared to others? I.e. what do you use it for?
   - Has the way you use Instagram changed at all since you first starting using it?

2. In what situations/contexts do you take selfies? Looking at their personal profiles, ask:
   - Why did you post this selfie?
   - What is the caption/what hashtags are used?

3. Can you describe the stages of how you take selfies? For example:
   - Do you take multiple images?
   - Do you edit your selfies, and if so, what do you do to them?

4. Are you aware of the way selfies, particularly women's selfies, are interpreted by the media? What do you think of these debates?
   - How do you feel about how having an interest in celebrity selfies is seen and discussed?

5. Can you tell me your definition of 'celebrity' on Instagram? (NOT A TEST)

6. What celebrity women do you follow and why?
   - What makes a good celebrity selfie?

- Do you remember any significant celebrity selfie fails/successes?
- Why do you like/dislike celebrity selfies?
- What do you like about [name] selfies?
- Is authenticity important? How do you judge it?
- What don't you like about [name] selfies?
- Have you unfollowed any particular celebrities and followed certain new ones? Why?
- Do you think celebrity selfies influence your own selfie practices in any way? (i.e. tips of what to do/what not to do)

7. Is there anything else you would like to say or add? Is there anything I haven't asked today that you thought I might ask?

Appendix D: Demographic Information Form

Please fill in the following information. This information will be kept separate from your consent form and any identifying information. You do not have to provide this information if you would prefer not to.

Gender	
Pronouns (e.g. she/her, they/them)	
Sexual orientation	
Race and/or ethnicity	
Highest education qualification	
Employment status/current occupation	

Interview date:

Appendix E: Overview of participant demographics

Note: All personal data collected was anonymised at the point of transcribing the interviews. In terms of participant identifiers, (chosen or assigned) pseudonyms are used when citing participants throughout this thesis to preserve their anonymity. I offered participants the opportunity to choose their own pseudonyms. This was an attempt to reduce the hierarchies between researcher and participant (i.e., by making the process collaborative) and to provide them some agency over their representation in the write-up of this thesis.

Kayley	27	She/her	White British	Bisexual/Queer	Student
Layla	35	She/her	Mixed race, Mexican	Heterosexual	Strategy Director
Stella	33	She/her	White British	Heterosexual	Nurse
Sophie	28	She/her	White British	Heterosexual	Pharmacist
Dora	28	She/her	White Irish	Heterosexual	Teacher / Practitioner
Jane	25	She/her	White British	Bisexual	Student
Alice	26	She/her	White British	Heterosexual	Pharmacist
Monica	23	She/her	White British	Heterosexual	Trainee auditor
Emily	24	She/her	Mixed White British and Asian	Heterosexual	Teacher
Kristie	30	She/her	White British	Heterosexual	Rehab support worked
Ani	26	She/her	Latin American	Heterosexual	Entrepreneur
Emma	25	She/her	White British	Heterosexual	Clinical Trials Manager
Tayma	25	She/her	North African	Heterosexual	Student
Nikki	32	She/her	White, New Zealand	Heterosexual	Researcher

Froze	26	She/her	White British	Bisexual	Cat groomer
Meg	25	She/her	White British	Bisexual	'Social media for a charity'
Rose	18	She/her	White British	Homosexual / Heterosexual	Student / sponsored on Instagram by a gym company
Sonu	25	They/them*	Indian	Gay	Student

*Note: This participant is non-binary.

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