



Selfies: the good, the bad and the downright irritating



Photo Credit: Patrick Nygren Author: Lucy Doyle

The selfie has become a huge part of modern life. It has transformed the simple self-portrait into something more immediate and has grown in cultural importance – it's been linked to identity, self-exploration and narcissism. Something as simple as putting a camera on the front of a mobile device has created a cultural trend that looks set to last.

Fears about the impact of the selfie generation were recently brought to the fore with the story of Essena O'Neill – the popular Instagrammer who claimed she quit the platform after her online presence started to impact negatively on her life. So is it something to worry about, or just a bit of harmless fun?

Selfies are everywhere. In 2013 it was named word of the year by Oxford Dictionaries, in 2014 a song was released called #selfie, selfie sticks were banned in Disneyland in July 2015 and you could argue that the world would be seeing a lot less of Kim Kardashian and her clan if the selfie had never been invented.

Recent figures show that 91% of teens have taken a selfie and over 1 million are taken each day.

Let's get it right: sexting vs. selfies

Sometimes the actions of 'sexting' (sending sexually explicit words, videos or images to somebody, known as 'nude selfies' and 'nudes') and sending someone a selfie become confused. Sending a selfie will only move into the territory of 'sexting' when a naked, suggestive or sexualised image is sent.

A selfie, on the other hand, normally refers to a **non-sexual** self-portrait, taken on a mobile device, either with friends or alone. It may or may not involve at least one of the people featured making a 'duck face' at the camera.

Narcissism

Some people worry that selfies are helping to create a superficial generation who value their looks above anything else.

People's growing obsession with posting the perfect selfie is evident in the existence of apps designed to allow the user to touch up and perfect their image before posting online.

Posting selfies online has also been linked to self-objectification, which is when you view your body as an object based on its sexual value, and tend to derive your sense of self-worth from appearance.

Many worry that such focus on looks can undermine young people's self-confidence and body image. Young people can get caught up in how they're portrayed on social media; seeking approval and affirmation from others in the form of likes and retweets. Relying too heavily on this as a means of boosting self-esteem will inevitably lead to unhappiness and low self-confidence when they're not getting as much praise and approval online as they'd like.

This appeared to be the case with Essena O'Neill – the teen famous for her incredibly popular social media presence, particularly on Instagram. In November 2015, she famously quit the platform, stating how social media wasn't real, that the focus on gaining likes and followers had made her feel 'miserable' and that it was simply 'contrived perfection to get attention'.

'When you let yourself be defined by numbers, you let yourself be defined by something that is not pure,' she said.

She added new captions to her photos, stating the truth behind them: many were PR shots and it often took hours to get that 'this is me just hanging out' look just right.

Psychologist Dr. Linda Papadopoulos has described how young people can get too caught up in their online presence, which tends to be more about gaining status and approval than individuality. This can result in young people being unsure of who they truly are as a person.

Dr. Papadopoulos encourages young people to be aware of this and to take time to foster an offline, *real* sense of self and identity, while also relying less on their online profile as a means of defining who they are.

Selfies on social media

Several separate studies have shown that an image-centric social media platform, such as Facebook, can cause depressive symptoms. This is because of the way Facebook enables and encourages the user to compare themselves to others.

Some people go to extraordinary lengths to curate the 'perfect' online persona. They remove or de-tag any unflattering pictures, only the most attractive selfies are posted, and the only moments which are recorded are the positive or happy ones, creating the illusion of a flawless existence.

When young people forget that this isn't real, and compare their entire self, complete with flaws and down days, to other people's curated, perfected versions of themselves, they can start to feel inferior and as though they fall short of everyone else.

It's really important to remind young people that comparing themselves to others on social media is unhelpful, as they're comparing themselves to something impossible and unattainable - nobody looks fantastic all the time and everyone has bad days.

As long as young people are aware of this, they can make the most out of all the benefits of social media – staying in touch with friends, posting photos and organising social events.

Selfies with friends

A study at the University of Georgia identified three main reasons people take selfies: self-absorption, art, and a social connection. For most young people, the latter will be the reason they're taking a selfie.

Taking a selfie, maybe pulling a silly face, and sending it to a friend is an amusing, unique way to communicate. Also, taking selfies within a group of friends is a great way to bond, cement friendships and create memories.

There's no need to panic about your child becoming self-obsessed if they spend quite a bit of time posing for selfies with friends, or on their own. Teenagers are naturally preoccupied with how they look as they change and grow – this has always been a natural part of teen life. Selfies have given them a new way of expressing this, and it's likely they'll grow out of any slightly worrying predilection towards taking too many of them.

Selfie safety

There have been several worrying reports of children taking inappropriate selfies that then end up in the wrong hands. This has led to a panic around the subject of selfies and children.

But, taking a selfie rarely falls into the category of sexting, and starting a conversation about selfies with your child provides a good opportunity to raise the importance of their online reputation.

Remind them that what goes online stays online, and when they post a selfie, or send one to a friend, boyfriend or girlfriend, the image is then *out of their control*.

If they are unsure about sending it because it's embarrassing, a little bit *too* silly, or perhaps rather risqué, it is always best not to. Have a look at our article on [digital reputation](#) for more information.

For advice on what to do if your child has sent someone a selfie they regret taking, or if it has been shared online, have a look at our [content on what to do](#).

The verdict

In the vast majority of cases, selfies are fun and harmless. The only time you may need to intervene is if your child's selfie-taking is leading to them becoming overly-concerned about their appearance, it's affecting their self-confidence or if they've sent someone a picture they regret taking.

Doing anything in excess isn't good, but as long as you encourage your child to lead a balanced life, then selfies will simply be another way to have fun in the digital age.

[1] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kdemFfbS5H0>

[2] <http://socialmediaweek.org/blog/2014/08/selfie-boom-good-bad-selfies-will-change-future/>

[3] <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/nov/03/instagram-star-essena-oneill-quits-2d-life-to-reveal-true-story-behind-images>

[4] <http://guilfordjournals.com/doi/abs/10.1521/jscp.2014.33.8.701>

[5] <http://guilfordjournals.com/doi/abs/10.1521/jscp.2014.33.8.701>

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