



# Selfies as expressively authentic identity performance

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### Abstract

This paper explores whether or not our online social media persona is viewed as authentic. The selfie is a fundamental part of the structure of the online identity for young people in today's digital world. The relationship between an individual's self-identity in the physical face-to-face environment was analysed and compared to a carefully constructed, modified virtual representation in a selfie posted on social media platforms. Data was obtained through four focus groups at the University of Adelaide. Two key theoretical frameworks provide a basis for this study: Erving Goffman's concept of the self as a performance, and Charles Horton Cooley's concept of the looking glass self. In examining the focus group discussions in light of these two frameworks as well as associated literature, we conclude that the authenticity of the selfie as a way of visualising a social media persona is subjective and dependent on the individual posting a selfie. Ultimately, authenticity involves a degree of subjectivity. It was on this basis that focus group participants argued that selfies could be considered authentic expressions of identity.

### Contents

[Introduction](#)

[The selfie as contemporary online identity display](#)

[Methodology](#)

[Findings and discussion](#)

[Conclusion](#)

### Introduction

The taking of selfies has now become something of a global phenomenon. Indeed the word 'selfie' was honoured by Oxford Dictionaries (2013) as its 'Word of the Year.' Typing 'selfie' into the search bar of Instagram (2016) yields almost 300 million posts. This study uses the selfie as a way to interrogate subjective perceptions of authenticity in photo-based social media platforms. The relationship between authenticity, the digital self, and physical self was examined in five focus group discussions with female students at the University of Adelaide, Australia. These findings are contextualised here within a framework of the self as a performance. This performance was designed in response to our subjective understanding of how others have — and will — view us. Through focus group discussions, we saw a belief that only the person who took the selfie can determine whether it is 'authentic', and authenticity was understood as expressive, rather than fixed.

### The selfie as contemporary online identity display

The term selfie is defined as "a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and shared via social media" (Oxford Dictionaries, 2013). The term selfie and the practice of selfie taking and sharing has now become a global phenomenon, lauded in the press as becoming the most popular trend among social media users (Day, 2013). Hardey suggests that through the selfie people are able to constantly modify and therefore rewrite themselves (Hardey, in Day, 2013). Day (2013) asserts that due to the instantaneous character of the selfie, some users believe this promotes superficiality. As a result, social approval only comes as a result of personal appearance, rather than through achievement, employment, moral beliefs, or other attributes (Day,

2013). The ease by which selfies may be framed or edited to 'improve' a subject's physical appearance has led to accusations that these representations are 'fake', or inauthentic in relation to the actual physical self. Warfield (2014) argues that selfies are not 'fake' and are in fact the most authentic images that can be created. Warfield (2014) defined authenticity to not as being 'real' or 'factual', but rather followed the etymological origins — the Greek term *αὐθεντικός* (*authentikós*) — which translates to as original or genuine. Warfield asserts that a selfie can be an *authentic* portrayal of reality, but that does not necessarily make it an *objective* representation of reality. Its encoded meaning is always subjective as someone always generates the image. Warfield's theorisations of selfies as 'authentic' portrayals of reality aligns with the views of focus group participants in this study.

A key theoretical framework employed in many studies of online identity is Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework of the self. Goffman (1959) employed the theatre as an analogy to represent the significance of human and social action and interaction. Goffman suggested that "when an individual appears before others he will have many motives for trying to control the impression they receive of the situation" [1]. Additionally, Goffman argues that we attempt to emphasise 'desired impressions' in order to highlight positive ideas of ourselves (Goffman, 1959); this can be seen through the careful framing and editing work that goes into producing a selfie that aims to control the desired impression of a person in the eyes of the audience.

Authenticity is a highly contested term within studies of social media. For the purpose of this research, we utilise Dutton's definition of authenticity as expressive, as summarised by Lobinger and Brantner (2015): "perceived expressive authenticity is achieved when people evaluate the visual representation as being true to the nature of the depicted person" [2]. The specific terminology that will be used here, then, is expressive authenticity. This term refers to the association between an individual and his or her visual representation and is accomplished when "things are true to their own nature" [3]. In other words, the notion of expressive authenticity links to the relationship between an individual and his or her visual representation. Expressive authenticity of selfies necessitates the representation of an individual to be an accurate expression of the individual's nature (Banks, 2013), as well as performing an expression of the person's personality, morals, and beliefs.

boyd (2014) argues that social media has a vital role in the lives of networked teenagers. Their mediated interactions can complement or supplement their real life face-to-face engagements with others. boyd (2014) also notes that most young people going online use a variety of social media platforms as they negotiate their social relationships and perspectives. Seemingly dissimilar presentations on each platform might suggest that young people are attempting to be different people or are presenting a false front in one or more spaces. However, boyd (2014) believed that this is a narrow minded way of interpreting the kinds of identity work existing on and through social media. Instead, social media users respond to what they observe to be the customs of different digital environments as well as tailoring identities to different audiences. boyd (2014) also referenced Goffman's idea of the social customs entailed in self-presentation as impression management. Individuals base their performance on their understanding of the given social situation, as well as the context of the imagined audience, in order to make decision about what to reveal. This allows them to act suitably for the circumstances and to be viewed in the best light possible.

If we can understand that judgements of authenticity tie back to ideas of personal expression, the role of social media in facilitating expressive authenticity becomes key. Williams and Copes (2005) considered the Internet as an especially valuable "expressive" space for individuals to experiment with identity. When interacting with others in physical spaces, it is possible to convey one's authenticity via a variety of means, including style of dress, speech and behaviour (Williams and Copes, 2005). On the Internet, however, it is more complex to identify other users in such embodied terms. Thus, a key way for individuals to demonstrate their authenticity to others is through images, such as selfies.

This study contributes to ongoing discussions of perceptions and attitudes of social media users by exploring the subjective authenticity of the online self through the selfie. Here, we focus primarily on Facebook and Instagram, although Snapchat and Twitter are also included where these were discussed in the focus groups.

#### *Authenticity within social context*

A number of scholars have written on relationships between social media personas and authenticity. Marwick and boyd (2011) looked at this authenticity of the self through how individuals conceptualise an imagined audience on Twitter, by conducting an online experiment with their Twitter followers by asking a series of questions about how these users envision their audiences. The idea was to understand their methods, including targeting diverse audiences, obscuring certain types of topics, and maintaining authenticity of the self.

Marwick and boyd's (2011) findings indicated that individuals present themselves online differently according to whom they are talking to and the situation in which the interaction takes place. This parallels off-line behaviour; how one acts in a job interview would be different in terms of expectations and norms to how one would conduct themselves when socialising in a bar. Participants involved in the study described having an awareness of audience in every mediated exchange.

Marwick and boyd (2011) used Goffman to analyse how users negotiate through this multiplicity of expectations. Users who create Twitter and Facebook profiles are actors with these platforms acting as their stages. There, they enact performances of the self, according to context and audience.

Marwick and boyd (2011) also examined how tweets were constructed with significant influences from perceived judgements of imagined audiences. This perception entailed an ongoing front-stage identity performance that stabilised a desire to uphold positive impressions with the need to be seen as true or authentic to the self to others. Marwick and boyd pointed out that defining authenticity was difficult, as there appears to be no universally accepted definition. Therefore, individuals persistently adjusted self-presentation according to their audiences and specific situations.

#### *The "looking glass" self*

The second theory informing this research is Cooley's (1902) concept of the looking glass self. According to Cooley (1902), our concepts of the self are created as reflections of the reactions and evaluation of others in our close environment. Essentially, the concept of the "looking glass self" illustrates that self-relation, or how one perceives oneself, is not a solitary phenomenon, but is influenced by others (Rousseau, 2002). That our assumptions of others' opinions and assessments of us are fundamental in how we see ourselves is central to Cooley's notions of the looking glass self (Gecas and Schwalbe, 1983).

The phrase 'the looking glass self' describes how others in our close environment function as the mirrors that project images of ourselves back to us. Cooley outlined three steps in this process. First, we envision how we appear to another person. Secondly, we imagine what assessments people make of us based on our appearance. Lastly, we envision how the other person feels about us, based on assessments made of us. As a result, we often change our behaviour based on how we believe others perceive us.

Within their study exploring the development and reinvention of the online identity, Liubinienė and Keturakis (2014) integrated Cooley's concept of the looking glass self as one of their underpinning theoretical frameworks. They explored how cultural identity and the carefully constructed and modified virtual presentation of the self are connected (Liubinienė and Keturakis, 2014). The measure of personal self-esteem an individual exhibits in social situations is established by what the individual believes others may think of them.

In applying the looking glass self concept to online personas, Liubinienė and Keturakis (2014) argue that the concentrated and continual flow of reactions and assessments obtained via a number of social media platforms that a majority of young people are a part of today help shape the identities of users. Consequently, users are likely to want to modify their behaviours to gain a greater number of favourable reactions. Thus, our mannerisms and behaviour are modified and moulded by how we believe others view us.

#### *Selfie as "looking glass"*

Katz and Crocker (2015) investigated selfies and photo messaging as a form of visual conversation through a survey of selfies created by university students in the United States, United Kingdom and China. The researchers discovered that when asking participants whether "it is important to make sure I look good in selfies", almost half the participants agreed (45 percent), while only 17 percent strongly disagreed [4]. While selfies may be designed to appear spontaneous, many selfie developers put effort and time to consider how a given photo will appear to an imagined viewer (Katz and Crocker, 2015).

The British participants in Katz and Crocker's (2015) study were asked whether or not they believed a selfie should reflect the "true" self with the statement being "a selfie should express your true self," with seven percent strongly agreed and 22 percent agreed. This left 44 percent neutral and almost 30 percent disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. Thus, Katz and Crocker (2015) discovered that while opinions were diverse, there was no convincing support for the hypothesis that young people believed that selfies must reflect one's true self. A large number of participants also indicated that they frequently took selfies, however they code switched for diverse contexts and consumed them differently according to those contexts (Katz and Crocker, 2015). Many also stated that they were somewhat careful with their public image online because they desired to be proactive in maintaining their online persona, as opposed to feeling regretful of what they are portraying to audiences.

The study's participants also implied that they observe selfies constructed via Snapchat differently than the ones posted on comparably more public platforms such as Facebook and Instagram or ones saved onto mobile smartphones (Katz and Crocker, 2015). They view Snapchat as "impermanent, mostly edited, and more private" [5]. Snapchat's ephemeral nature allows users fewer restrictions and more creative modes of engagement. This characteristic of Snapchat also provides users with a platform to experiment with the self and try on different styles of presentation (Katz and Crocker, 2015).

#### *The objectified self*

Kwon and Kwon (2014) conducted a study in South Korea that explored the practice of taking a selfie and what it means to young adults through in-depth interviews. They examined how young adults practice selfie taking and sharing in order to discover, exhibit, and pursue their "real selves", as well as how this was subject to social consumption rituals. Through in-depth interviews with participants the researchers found that there were three phases of authenticating acts in the practice of taking selfies: to embody, to transfer, and to employ the self (Kwon and Kwon, 2014).

The first phase of authentication was the process of embodying the attributes of one's self-image, as a selfie is a medium in which users were able to capture a momentary image of themselves (Kwon and Kwon, 2014). The selfie was understood as self-expression. The majority of participants in the study stated that they were able to understand more about their physical exterior by observing a variety of images of themselves in selfies. According to Kwon and Kwon (2014), participants believed that selfies assisted them in learning more about both their external and internal selves. Through viewing her facial expressions in her selfies, one participant stated that she could see her current mental state; she was able to see a genuine reflection of her internal self because she was able to decipher the image as she was viewing herself as the subject. In other words, 'good' selfies were not just gratifying images, but were a means by which these participants saw how they wanted to accurately portray themselves.

The second phase of portraying authenticity through the selfie identified in this project was to transfer the self, a transferral of the carefully contrived version of self from a private to a public sphere. Many participants in the study mentioned that one of the key motivations for taking selfies was as means for them to communicate to other users on social media.

In the final phase, selfies were utilised to elicit social interactions in social media as part of authenticating acts in the practice of selfie taking (Kwon and Kwon, 2014). This is where other users viewed and commented on another user's selfies on these platforms and the owner then responded. The authors also noted that in order for users to preserve this level of interaction with their online friends, they constantly needed to upload new selfies.

Kwon and Kwon (2014) drew upon Cooley's theory of the looking glass self as it provided an insight into understanding the significance of control in selfie practice. The theory focused on the idea that the influence of others was one of the main factors shaping how individuals endured efforts to generate "good" pictures in order to control the judgement of others. They envisioned how they must appear to others and how they would judge them, which then led to a stronger sense of self (Yeung and Martin, 2003).



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## Methodology

In order to investigate subjective user evaluations of the expressive authenticity of selfies, as a component to online social media persona, focus groups were implemented. The aim in developing this research project was to gain insight into a small group of individuals' attitudes, and opinions about selfies and subjective understandings of authenticity. Prior studies have used quantitative methods to investigate these ideas: Ganda (2014) used a Likert-scale survey; Katz and Crocker (2015) combined qualitative and quantitative based exploration into selfies on Snapchat; and, Warfield (2014) conducted an online survey into selfies. All of these researchers recommended future researchers to use qualitative means to extend their quantitative findings.

The target population were young women, a convenience sample from the University of Adelaide, aged between 18 and 24 years old. Female identifying participants were chosen as the focus of the study because women are significantly more likely to take selfies in comparison to men (Manovich, 2014). Participants were recruited through flyers across campus, as well as through an in-class presentation to a large first year class. In terms of selection, all participants were students or very recent graduates who self-identified as active social media users, and took selfies at least once a month. Ethics approval was sought from the University of Adelaide Human Research Ethics Committee, and granted on 8 August 2016 (approval number H-2016-168).

The following four questions were asked in each session:

1. What does being 'authentic' online mean to you?
2. What are some ways in which authenticity and identity are connected?
3. How do users go about attempting to construct authentic identities online?
4. How do young women understand selfies as 'authentic' as part of an online identity performance?

Focus groups lasted between one and two hours, and ranged in size from three participants to five participants along with the coordinator (first author, Nguyen).



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## Findings and discussion

Several recurring themes were identified across the four focus groups. The three key findings are: the definition of authenticity and its measurement is subjective; the selfie as a tool is used as an expressive medium; and, an individual can be considered no more or less authentic as one social media persona than another, as she is simply abiding to different social contexts and audiences specific to each platform.

### *Being 'authentic' online*

The participants in all focus groups had lively discussions about the meaning of authenticity in online spaces. Two core themes emerged from these discussions:

1. A true, accurate representation of yourself — your online and off-line selves are both highly congruent; and,
2. The definition of authenticity in the online context is subjective, thus, dependant on the individual.

Several participants across all focus groups believed being 'authentic' online involved being able to portray an honest and accurate representation of oneself in terms of characteristics, values and beliefs, and personality online. Therefore, there must be a high level of congruency between the online and off-line selves:

"I guess what you post online about you, and when people meet you, it's who you are so it's not a different person."

A different participant commented:

"Well, I think [being] authentic online is when one tries to replicate what you are in real life."

The understanding of authenticity corresponds with Turkle's (1995) suggestions (made in discussion of anonymous online spaces) that in order for an individual to be deemed authentic between developing and portraying different aspects of their identity off-line into an online platform, the self may be multiple in nature but all aspects of this self are coherent. Interestingly, one participant expressed a more nuanced perspective, in which people could not fully portray their completely authentic selves online due to the differences in nature of online and off-line spaces:

"I don't think you can achieve being yourself in real life, online. So there are different ways we see things. So [a] definition for me would be trying to incorporate your real life persona, trying to be as reflective as you can or close to accurate. But obviously we know that they are two different platforms."

This connects with the second theme identified across the focus groups, which saw online authenticity as subjectively understood. Being *subjective* is here used to mean "the experience is understood from the viewpoint of the subject" [6]; in the case of selfies, this would mean that the understanding of whether a representation is authentic will depend on whether the person who created it believes it to be authentic, and also that different people viewing it might agree or disagree that the image is authentic. A large number of participants across the four focus groups agreed that, ultimately, the definition of what is authentic within the online sphere is dependent on the individual and, as such, is a subjective matter.

"the extent people represent the way they look might not be authentic ... I think it depends on the extent they go. You could put up a selfie of yourself and do minor edits and I feel like as though that could be pretty authentic. Whereas, if you go as far as changing your facial features and all like distorting yourself to the point you are completely unrecognisable in real life. That's not authentic but (then again) you rate it along the continuum of something."

It was clear that for these participants there is no clear way to determine whether an online identity was 'authentic'. Participants in all focus groups persistently returned to the idea what is understood as authentic and what determines the degree of authenticity is ultimately subjective. This idea of defining and determining authenticity is dependent on the individual, as stated by participants, illustrates expressive authenticity in which the link between an individual and his or her visual portrayal is successfully linked when "things are true to their own nature" [7].

### *Connecting authenticity and identity*

The second guiding question asked the participants to more closely consider the relationship between authenticity and identity online. Again, there was a high level of similarity in the responses across the focus groups, with three related themes emerging from data:

1. Identity is who you are and your ability to accurately portray this determines your level of authenticity;
2. The Internet is particularly useful "expressive" space for people to experiment with identity; and,
3. How authenticity and identity are connected is also influenced by others.

The majority of the participants agreed that in order to be authentic, you need to represent yourself in line with your own values, beliefs, and characteristics.

"Yeah, I think sometimes with identity you try to portray better versions of yourself online. I don't know if that's going to come up after ... I still think it's authentic but it's just a different representation. Maybe it's just not an everyday type but you want to put that better representation forward because it's on a social media platform."

This comment connecting identity and authenticity is supported by Banks (2013) who stated that an individual is able to accurately portray their identity through his or her visual presentation when "things are true to their own nature" [8]. This participant went on to say that young women attempt to authentically portray their identities online, but that these portrayals differ depending on social context. In online spaces, the social media platform often determines the expectations of social context. This idea is related to boyd's (2014) belief that people are no less authentic on one social media platform compared to another. The young women in the focus groups therefore acknowledged that they have learned how to seamlessly swap between social contexts in different platforms, allowing them to portray different sides of their identities that are appropriate to the given audiences and social expectations of the medium.

Continuing with this idea, several participants noted that online platforms are a great space for users to experiment with their identity and be more expressive. The participants believed experimentation of the self using technology can lead them to reach a more 'authentic' version of themselves. According to one participant's opinion, social media gives individuals a much broader platform to play out other aspects of their identity that are not easily portrayed in the off-line world. Turkle (1995) made a similar point in relation to online virtual reality games, although the context — anonymous online gaming spaces with predominantly text based communication versus identifiable social media spaces with predominantly image based communication — is clearly different.

Participants in one focus group spent some time discussing young women who attempt to put up an identity performance that may not entirely represent who they are presently but what they aspire to be in the future, with fitness fanatics as an example.

"In real life that's what they want to be; that's how they see themselves as but they're not authentic. They're not bodybuilders."

[in reply] "I think it depends on the motive of you posting that so if you're posting [about] yourself [from your off-line] life then that's your identity. If you're posting something that isn't you but you want yourself to be that way or to be perceived that way that's not necessarily your identity. It could be your aspiration [and] it could be something that you would like to be in the future but that's not the actual real you at that current time."

These two participants agreed that users who display other sides to their identity or their "aspirational" selves are experimenting with their identity and using social media as an "expressive" space to do so and receive feedback from others. This aligns with Williams and Copes' (2005) discussion regarding the construction of authentic identities on the Internet: whether or not people are understood as being authentic in their identity portrayal is a subjective matter.

Within the focus groups, participants were asked to assess the idea of young women who take numerous selfies but only select the few they believe portray themselves in the most positive light. Many of the participants indicated they felt that their assumptions of others' impressions affect our concept of the image of self, particularly when viewed through the lens of the selfie.

"The idea of what kind of makeup you do and what filters you should use I think that's what society wants and that's why they're doing it. It's not necessarily because they are fake they just want to appeal to other people."

According to Cooley (1902) our concepts of the self are constructed in accordance to the reactions and evaluations of others in our close environment. The concept of the looking glass self demonstrates that how one perceives themselves is not a solitary occurrence, but it also incorporates influences from others (Rousseau, 2002). However, the participants did not condemn this desire to deliberately present a positive face to the world:

"I think if you want to choose to show things that are going well in your life I don't think that makes you less authentic. It's just being selective."

In evaluating the responses from these participants, it is clear that editing and modifying selfies is not in itself seen as inauthentic, but instead is viewed as indicative of a desire to internalise positive feedback based on the expected perceptions of others. This is a form of "impression management" (Goffman, 1959), with the use of filters and editing tools understood as managing the presentation of the self in accordance with a social context.

### *Constructing authentic online identities*

From discussion between participants on how social media can be used to construct online identities that can be understood as authentic, the following three themes emerged:

1. Social media can be used as an “expressive” space in which an identity performance can take place;
2. Projected idea of the ideal self based upon assumed perceptions from others; and,
3. Users construct different sides to their authentic identity online according to the norms and community practices (social context) depending on the social media platform.

During the discussion of the definition of what it means to be authentic online and how users go about creating this authentic persona, one participant brought out the idea that users could utilise social media as a means to construct and develop their identities over time for others to see. Therefore, social media is a space which young female users can utilise the medium to try out and test different sides of their identity:

“If you take it to a different meaning as in you know you have a hidden personality and then when you go online and you reveal that person online that you have never shown to anyone before.”

Again, this idea relates back to Goffman’s dramaturgical theory of the self in which the performance on the “front stage” being social media is an “expressive” space (Williams and Copes, 2005). In developing the authentic self, young women would be able to utilise social media platforms in order to portray other sides of their identity that are not easily revealed in the off-line world due to limitations such as confidence issues (Williams and Copes, 2005).

The participant quoted above also suggested that users develop their online identities through responses from others in order to internalise positive feedback. This, she felt, works to assist in the formation of the most authentic version of themselves that they are content to portray. She used the example of the Likes function on Facebook and Instagram as tools users utilised as signals for affirmation of their performances of their identities:

“I think social media is now measured in Likes or [similar] interactions and it is the other person responding. [People] want to get engagement with their posts. It’s like a self-affirmation kind of thing and I think people also want likeable online identities. I think it’s like a branding exercise, if you like that person and you believe in what they are saying then people are likely to come back and buy things.”

The desire to create identities that are as authentic as possible to the individuals in question also depends on the audiences that the individuals wish to target. While considering a selfie of Jenn Im (a YouTube celebrity) provided as a prompt for the discussion, one participant commented:

“But then again looking at this picture that’s her job to look that way. To look that way that’s the same with us if we’re in a corporate setting. We might not look like that way 24/7 [when] we would prefer to just wear trackies.”

From this, we can see that the selfie-identity is situation specific, created through a process of impression management (Goffman, 1959). This idea connects to the looking glass self in which stressed the importance of the opinions of others in one’s image of the self (Cooley, 1902). In considering the prompting image, participants believed that this selfie was constructed specifically for Jenn Im’s audiences. Being a YouTube celebrity specialising in makeup and fashion, the participants felt that Im created this image to reflect the assumptions of her audiences: a beautiful young woman with good makeup and editing skills who is up to date with the latest fashion trends.

A different participant raised the idea that young women are using selfies and other social media posts to protest against expectations of society, as well as rules that govern participation on social media platforms:

“People were doing ‘Free the Nipple’ in protest and I guess that’s a sign people of being fed up with you know the “unauthenticity” of Instagram. [Also] things like no makeup selfies like that was a pretty big movement online and people did that in protest of Instagram’s high standards and double standards even because Instagram is very tight on, it’s very clean cut, they’ve banned nudes.”

The idea of experimenting with the projected ideal version of the self via social media was therefore understood as potentially authentic, even if it is presently aspirational. As such, this identity performance on the “front stage” can be internalised, leading to a newly developed version of the self (Goffman, 1959).

In building on these ideas, some of the participants expressed a belief that a person is no less authentic on social media if they choose to cater their image of their identity according to audiences

and social situations at hand:

“I don’t think it’s unauthentic it’s just how you portray yourself in real life to different people. You pick and choose. People have to think about what they want to say to other people and how they dress. It’s not inauthentic, it’s just what you choose to put out there.”

Therefore, portraying different sides to one’s identity does not make an individual less authentic, but rather “selective” in how to appropriately represent themselves within the social context for the “imagined audience” [9]. Connected to this is the finding that the majority of participants across the focus groups agreed that a user is no any less authentic on one social media platform from another even when presenting differently. Rather, it was understood that they are abiding by the social context and the expectations set out by the platform in question. This is considered to be the same as how individuals in face-to-face situations present different sides of their identities according to the expectations and norms that come with different social situations and audiences:

“I think it also depends on the platform though. [For example] LinkedIn is a completely different example because it’s work related but if it’s Facebook it all depends on your friends and the current trends and whatever you post could really be dependent on other people but it doesn’t reflect who you are then and the trend.”

Another participant in a different focus group described it the context of different platforms:

“Snapchat is temporary so kind of draws back to how [we were referring to before] where things change over time. Your brand changes over time and Snapchat sort of doesn’t keep that forever. Snapchat brings it back to how photos don’t always [have] to look perfect. That’s why a lot of brands are using it for behind-the-scenes to complement and supplement their Instagram content. I don’t think Instagram is necessarily better or worse than Snapchat or which one is more truthful, it’s just different. Instagram is polished and that’s part of their brand. Whereas, Snapchat is just quick.”

Users adjust their identity performance according to social context — the situation and the audiences. For instance, Snapchat is considered a private space in which one can easily control who they wish to view their selfies. The audiences here would be mainly those who the user is comfortable with seeing their ‘unpolished’ candid selfies. Thus, users are abiding with the social norms and expectations of the social media platform in order to represent a side of their identity that is appropriate to the situation and the audience.

#### *Selfies as ‘authentic’ as part of online identity performance*

In bringing together the idea of authenticity with the practice of taking selfies, as well as the affordances of digital media, the participants responses dealt with the following key ideas:

1. Props such as mobile editing, lighting and makeup are all part of a performance to develop an authentic self through the selfie;
2. Selfies are one of the major tools young women can utilise in conjunction with social media as an “expressive” space to experiment with their identity; and,
3. Other people’s influences can play a major role in how selfies are taken and which ones are selected to be posted online for targeted audience to view and respond.

Tools such as mobile editing applications, as well as makeup and hairstyling, can be a part of using social media as an “expressive” space for young women to experiment with their identity (Williams and Copes, 2005). In line with the ideas of presenting in contextually appropriate ways, a number of participants in the third focus group discussed these ideas, and agreed young women who use makeup and editing to ‘alter’ how they would naturally look can be viewed as no less authentic than those who chose not to utilise these types of tools. One participant summarised it as being

“sort of like Photoshop (and how) you can use it to make your skin look better. I don’t think I consider that being authentic. I think for most people it’s how they wish to look.”

This finding aligns with Kwon and Kwon’s (2014) study, in which they found that “good” selfies are not only gratifying photographs, but are also channels in which participants saw how they wanted to accurately represent themselves. One participant stated her reason to edit her selfies through Photoshop is “... to make pictures the way I look at myself. Photos do not reflect reality” [10]. The best representation of the self can only be determined by the individual who took the selfie:

“If I was at a wedding and I took a bunch of selfies and I had a couple of terrible photos but I only took one really good one, that’s like how I want to remember myself. That’s like how I like to think I look (in real life). It’s how I want to be seen and how I think I’m seen.”



Many of the participants reflected on the subjective relationship between editing and authentic representations of the self. One brought up the story of Australian Instagram model and influencer Essena O'Neill who initially came to fame through her selfies. Late last year, O'Neill 'came clean' and admitted that she felt her social media presentation was 'fake' (McCluskey, 2015). Before O'Neill "quit" social media she re-edited her captions on all her Instagram posts to reveal the truth of what happened behind the image. In considering this O'Neill's reframing of her identity, one participant commented:

"I think it's inauthentic because according to her it's inauthentic. So whether or not you know deep down that really is you or not is ultimately up to you. So basically [it's] a subjective thing, it's a personal thing. I guess it's like with some celebrities how [some have] completely banned Photoshop because that's their personal belief and value, whereas, others are fine with it."

Lobinger and Brantner (2015) supports the idea that selfies can be understood as a form of expressive authenticity. Their research looked at the observed authenticity of selfies, and found that expressive authenticity is subjective because the degree of perceived authenticity is affected when the observer knows the subject.

Within both Cooley's concept of the "looking glass" self and Goffman's dramaturgical analogy, the role of the audience is vital in how individuals formulate and portray their identity in different social contexts. Selfies were understood by the participant in this study as another means by which young women can highlight the different elements of their identity:


"I think people in general we all have an identity who we want to be as people and how we want to portray that. But sometimes the way we represent to others in real life doesn't really match to how we feel inside. And I think social media allows people to aspire to be who they want to be and it might not be accurate [at the time]. Say if I put myself up about something that I value and I might not express it to you, you might see that and perceive that a being not authentic but to me it is. So [social media allows] you to have that opportunity to construct someone who you aspire to be."



## Conclusion

This project aimed to analyse the authenticity of our social media persona through the specific lens of the selfie. It investigated into what it meant to be authentic in the portrayal of identity within the contexts of both online and off-line spaces. Within the focus groups, it was demonstrated selfies can be seen as an authentic element of a social media identity. Authenticity was understood as subjective, and the focus group participants argued that selfies could be considered authentic expressions of identity.

The views of others can influence how an individual shapes their identity construction (Cooley, 1902), as do the context and audience for identity performance. However, these influences from perceptions, context, and imagined audience are balanced by the selfie-taker, who becomes, as one participant described, the one author of the selfie. It is through this 'authorship' that the selfie becomes authentic, in the sense that the taker is "acting on one's own authority" [11].

It should be noted that there were several limitations in this using focus groups in this study this may have affected the results. In each focus group, there was at least one participant who tried to steer the discussion to areas that not relevant to the study. Future researchers who wish to continue this study should consider individual interviews in addition to focus groups so that such beliefs and behaviours could be explored in greater depth. Assessment through an ethnographic approach such as in naturalistic settings with participants is another option for observation (Seal, *et al.*, 1998), and the 'scroll back' method designed by Robards and Lincoln would provide a good way of structuring this type of investigation (Robards and Lincoln, 2016; Lincoln and Robards, 2017). Additionally, diversifying the types of participants included in the study — males, older or younger participants and so forth — would add richness to the data collected. It is hoped that these findings will add to the discussions around selfies as a contemporary social practice. 

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## Notes

1. Goffman, 1959, p. 8.
2. Lobinger and Brantner, 2015, p. 1,849.
3. Banks, 2013, p. 161.
4. Katz and Crocker, 2015, p. 5.
5. Katz and Crocker, 2015, p. 8.
6. Barbour, 2014, p. 36.
7. Banks, 2013, p. 161.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Marwick and boyd, 2010, p. 115.
10. Kwon and Kwon, 2014, p. 305.
11. Warfield, 2014, p. 2.

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