

Ugliness, selfies and self-denigration: Old wine in new bottles?

Dr Ruth Page

University of Birmingham

Outline

- The 'old news' – previous work on gender in computer-mediated contexts
- Ugliness 2.0 as a research focus
- Analysis of Instagram posts
 - Verbal content
 - Visual content
- Implications for further research

KEY CONCEPTS IN ANALYSING GENDER IN DIGITALLY MEDIATED CONTEXTS

Gendered performances in online contexts



- By Frankyjharte - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0,
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=72785801>

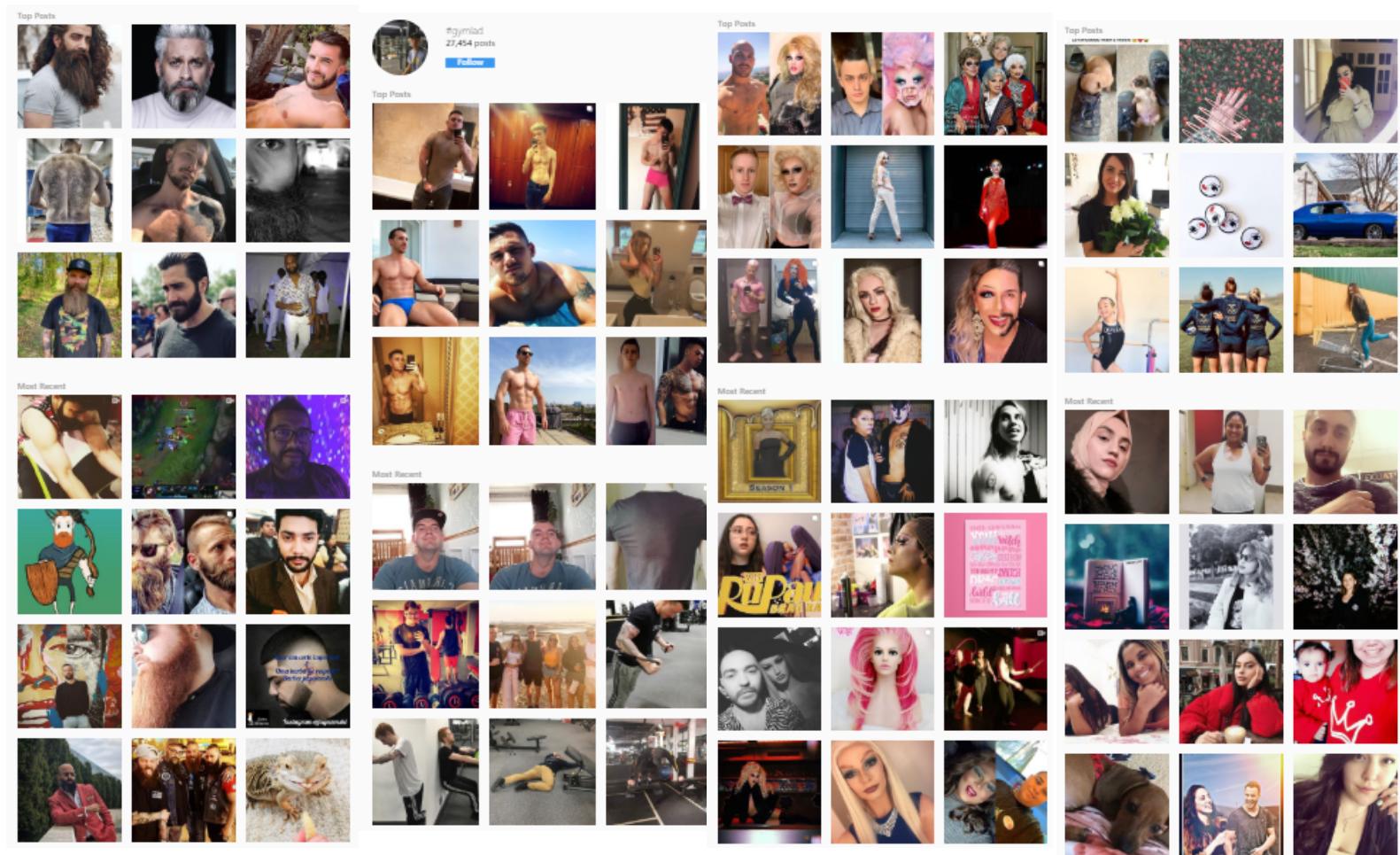
CMDA research – does gender matter?

- Gender is not a bottom line explanation for language used by people
- Gendered styles are a matter of tendency and relate to communities of practice
 - Page 2012 (Cancer blogs)
- Intersectionality
 - Age and ‘expressive punctuation’ (Page, 2012)
 - Nationality and expressive punctuation (Zelenkauskaitė and Herring, 2010)
- Once you control for genre, gendered differences disappear (Herring and Paolillo, 2006)
- What about multimodality?

Visual analysis of CMC

- Image sharing practices and gender
 - (Thelwall and Vis, 2017)
- Instagram images contain more stereotypical gender presentation than magazine adverts
 - Döring et al. (2016)
- Fitspiration/Thinspiration use of Instagram
 - Muscularity and masculinity and thin toned femininity
 - Baker and Walsh (2018) Tiggeman and Zaccardo (2018)
- Psychology
 - Problematic Instagram Use and gender (Yurdagul et al., 2019)
- Mental health
 - Eating disorders affect young women and gay men more than heterosexual men
 - Increasing rates of suicide for young men

Performances of gender on Instagram



INTRODUCING 'UGLINESS 2.0'

Ugliness 2.0

- Is an aesthetic, affective and moral form of evaluation, used to negotiate interpersonal relationships, and constructed as an embodied attribute on Instagram.
- Has a 'long tail'
 - I look ugly
 - I feel ugly
- #ugly: 6,000,000 Instagram posts
- #uglyselfie: 46,000 Instagram posts

Collocates of 'ugly'

#ugly

| | |
|---------|------------|
| 9.42945 | fat |
| 7.46373 | sad |
| 7.40778 | worthless |
| 6.7309 | depressed |
| 6.28174 | alone |
| 5.80561 | depression |
| 5.54617 | lonely |
| 5.38007 | suicide |
| 5.37657 | selfharm |

#uglyselfie

| | |
|---------|-----------------|
| 5.81328 | bored |
| 4.53306 | followforfollow |
| 4.07247 | likeforlike |
| 3.03885 | lol |
| 2.78029 | glasses |
| 2.77387 | uglyface |
| 2.77308 | just |
| 2.68401 | take |
| 2.67323 | like |

Media coverage

STUDENT > Student Life

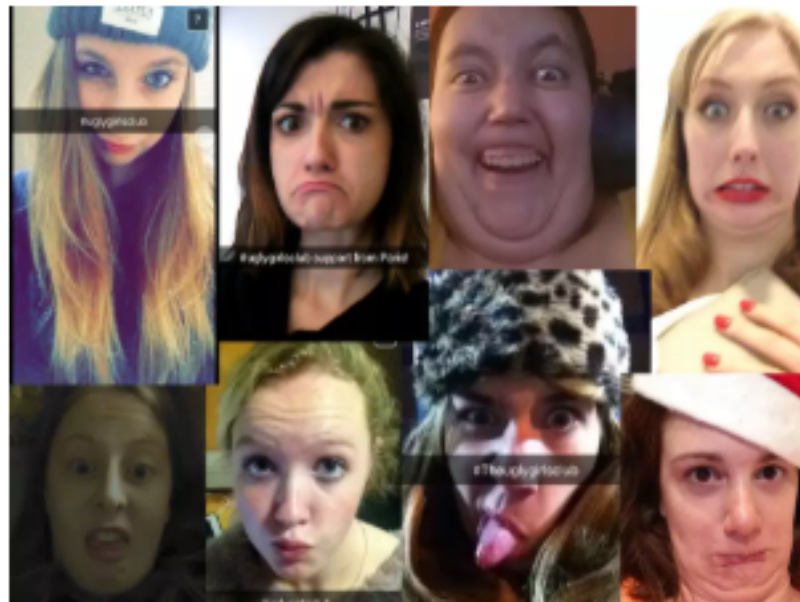
Meet the Ugly Girls Club: The new face of student feminism

Royal Holloway's feminist society is making waves with its latest campaign

Anna Calolla | @annacalolla | Tuesday 9 December 2014 13:54 | 7 comments



Click to follow
The Independent Online



The Ugly Girls Club

Instagram's disturbing 'thinspiration' pictures fueled my anorexia – but there's no point trying to regulate it

It is easy to shout for tighter controls. But what we really need is for adults to stop condemning social media sites, and start trying to understand them

Alice Gibbs | Thursday 21 March 2019 15:40 | 1



Click to follow
The Independent Voices

Instagram 'helped kill my daughter'

Molly Russell, 14, took her own life in 2017. When her family looked into her Instagram account they found distressing material about depression and suicide.

Molly's father Ian says he believes Instagram is partly responsible for his daughter's death.

In a statement, Instagram said it "does not allow content that promotes or glorifies self-harm or suicide and will remove content of this kind."

The UK government is urging social media companies to take more responsibility for harmful online content which illustrates and promotes methods of suicide and self-harm.

*If you've been affected by **self-harm**, **eating disorders** or **emotional distress**, help and support is available via the **BBC Action Line**.*

CASE STUDIES IN INSTAGRAM

Data

- 1000 Instagram posts tagged with #ugly
- 1000 Instagram posts tagged with #uglyselfie
 - Extracted in June and September 2018, using Netlytic (Gruzd, 2016)
- Images viewed and annotated separately in Nvivo using Ncapture
 - 226 posts from #uglyselfie
 - 285 posts from #ugly

Methods

- Corpus linguistic analysis of the captions
 - Frequency of particular terms
 - Collocations
- Identity of the account owners
- Content analysis of the image
- Inductive categories
 - derived from Goffman (1979)
 - Analysis of face and body display
 - Analysis of eye gaze and mouth expression
 - Where more than one person was in the image, each feature was coded per person (not image)

VERBAL POSITIONING

Gendered positioning (rfpmw) in Instagram captions

| | Instagram | |
|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| | #Ugly | #Uglyselfie |
| girl | 8825 | 7505 |
| boy | 4373 | 2043 |
| woman | 117 | 354 |
| man | 1718 | 2083 |
| trans | 703 | 196 |
| pansexual | 351 | 0 |
| gay | 1679 | 11042 |

Intersectionality: Collocations (2L-2R)

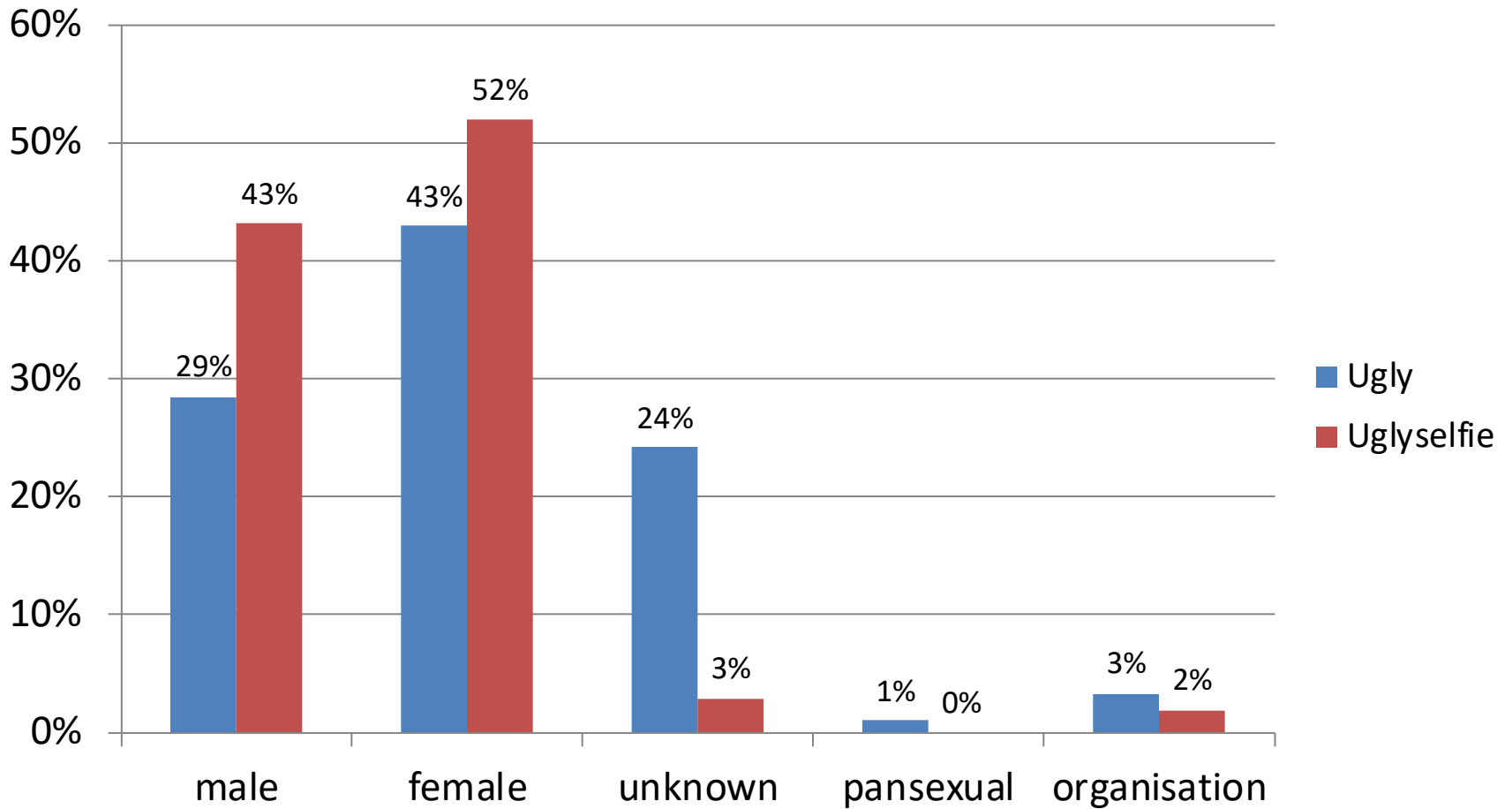
Ugly selfie

- *boy
 - Friends
 - Gay
 - Gergerman
 - Gaystud
- *girl
 - Weirdo
 - Weird
 - Uglyemo
 - Fashion
 - beautyselfie

Ugly

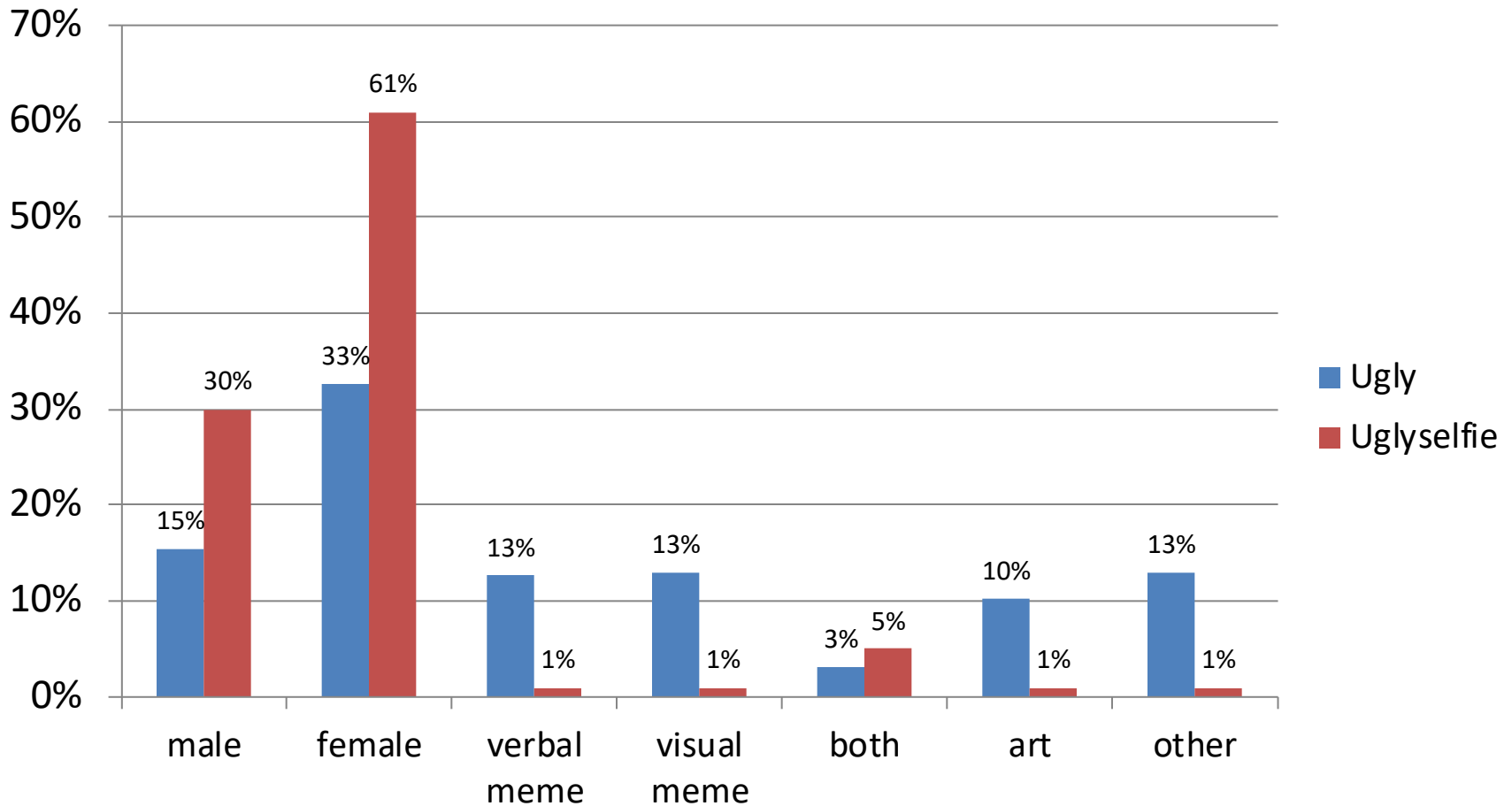
- *boy
 - Scenegirl
 - Emogirl
 - Goth
 - Emo
- *girl
 - Gothboy
 - Slim
 - Dainty
 - Calories
 - Thinspo, sadness, fat,

Account owners' identity



VISUAL POSITIONING

Visual content of images



Visual content of #ugly images by gender of the account

| Content | Male account | Female account | Unknown account | Total |
|-----------------------------|--------------|----------------|-----------------|-------|
| Male person | 44 | 0 | 0 | 44 |
| Female person | 3 | 84 | 6 | 93 |
| verbal meme | 4 | 15 | 17 | 36 |
| visual meme | 10 | 9 | 18 | 37 |
| Both male and female people | 4 | 2 | 3 | 9 |
| art | 9 | 8 | 12 | 29 |
| other | 11 | 10 | 16 | 37 |
| Total | 85 | 128 | 72 | 285 |

How much of a person's body is shown?

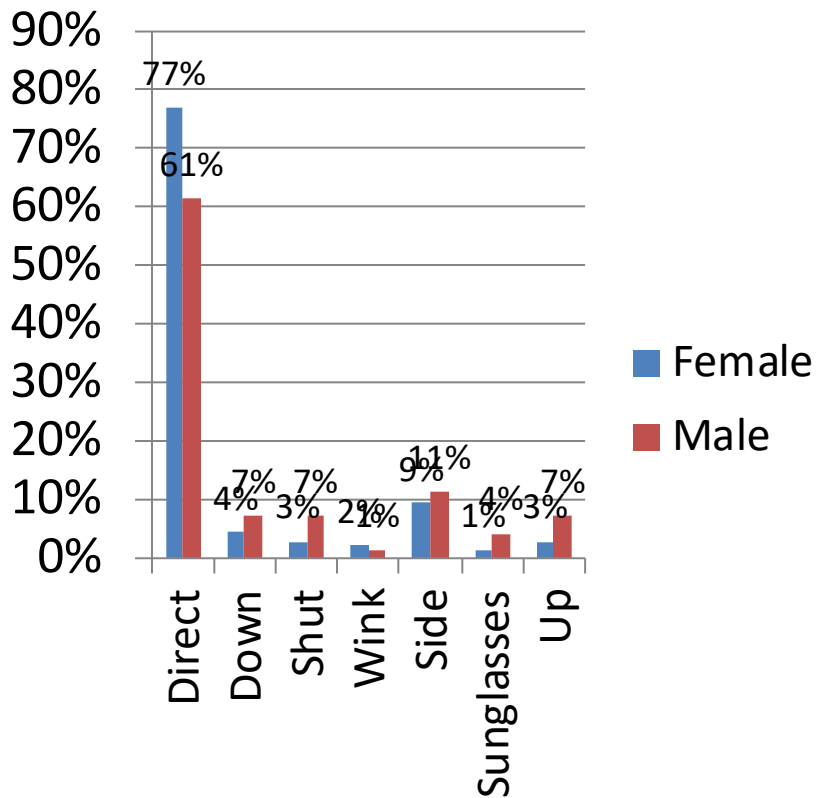
| | | Face only | Top half | Whole body |
|------------|--------|-----------|----------|------------|
| Uglyselfie | Female | 76% | 16% | 2% |
| | Male | 63% | 21% | 4% |
| Ugly | Female | 46% | 24% | 2% |
| | Male | 49% | 18% | 29% |

How much of a person's face is shown?

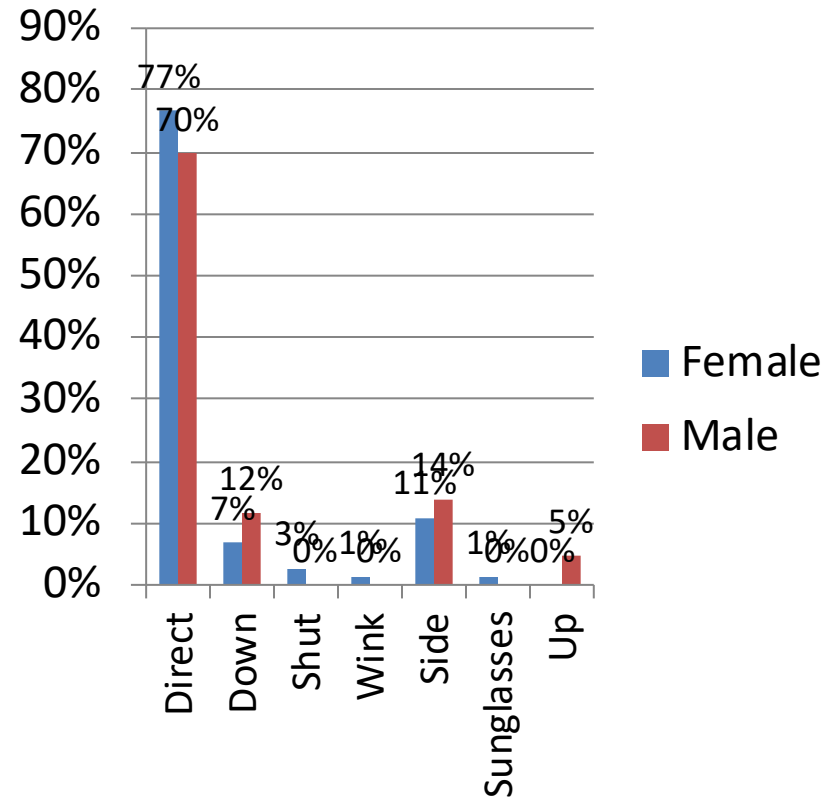
| | | Face cropped | Face obscured |
|------------|--------|--------------|---------------|
| Uglyselfie | Female | 4% | 2% |
| | Male | 4% | 4% |
| Ugly | Female | 20% | 29% |
| | Male | 10% | 27% |

Eye direction and gender

#uglyselfies

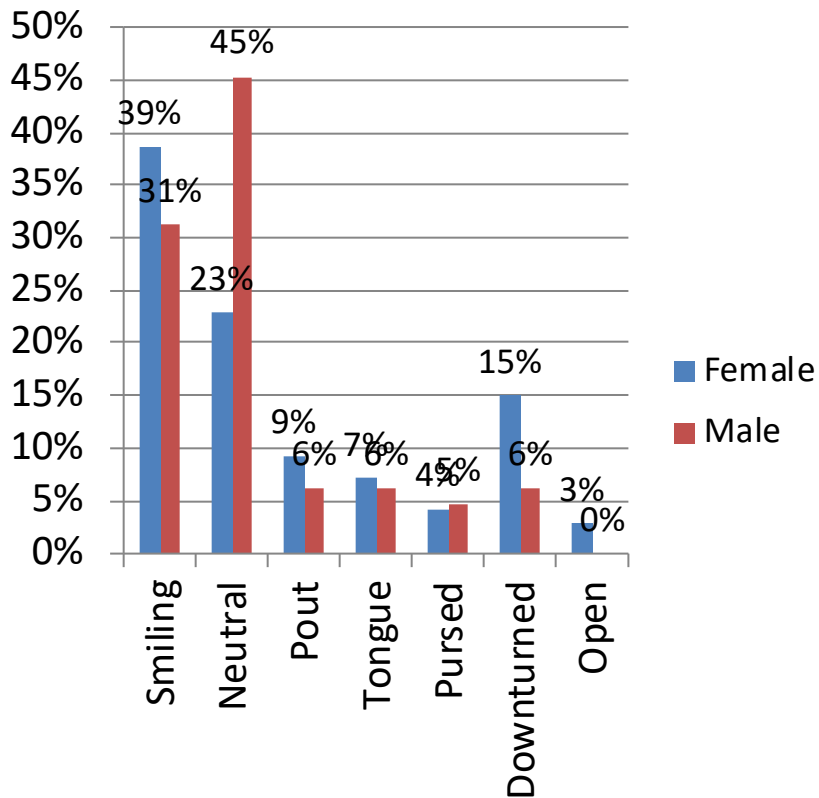


#ugly

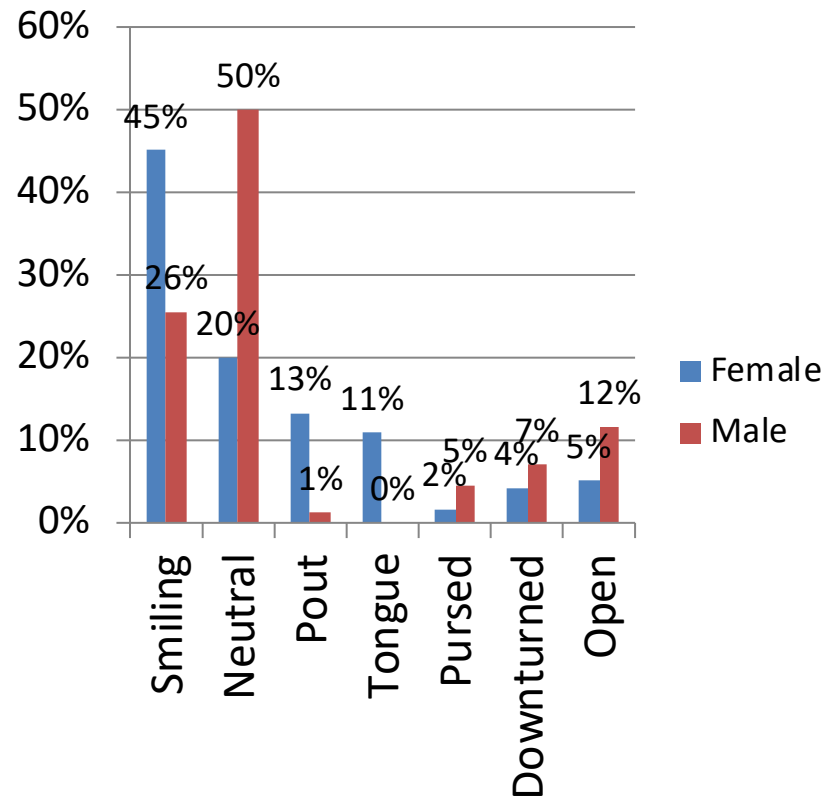


Mouth expression and gender

#uglyselfie



#ugly



THE PRAGMATIC USES OF 'UGLY SELFIES'

Self-deprecation



- Comments deny the negative self-assessment:
 - ‘Not ugly at all, beautiful [flames emoji]’
- Compliments:
 - ‘beautiful’, ‘gorgeous’, ‘sexy’, ‘stunning’

Self-praise - Fitness



- Hey, mamas! It took me years to get back to working out. I put everyone ahead of me, tried to do too much, and basically said fitness was for the other woman. This [#uglyselfie](#) is to encourage you. It's not too late to carve out time to take care of the one who takes care of everyone else (That's you, by the way). Take a walk, buy a workout dvd, dust off the bike, get that pile of laundry off the treadmill (you know who I'm talking to) and [#getyoursweaton](#). You'll never regret being healthy. [#over50fitness](#) [#ilovezumba](#) [#startsm alltoday](#) It's not about looks, or trends. It's about self care so you are the best you can be.
- Praise
'you inspire me!', 'Way to go!' 'Keep it up!'
- Compliments
'Cute' 'gorgeous' 'beautiful selfie'

Self-mockery



- I wanted to take an Ugly Selfie today. Luckily, I had just eaten something spicy and my nose was runny. Luckily, this long string of snot crept out at the perfect moment to make this picture 'extra special'. Luckily, I love myself enough to know that no matter how awful this picture is... I'm still the sexiest I've ever been in my entire life. Cute selfies are too easy. If you're feeling ultra sexy and sleek today... maybe go ahead and post an ugly selfie. It's amazing how incredible you'll feel afterwards. Mega bonus would be laughing so hard in the process that you fart. I love you.....#uglyselfie #wokeasswoman #wokeaf #moveandshift #awakening #spiritualandproud #bonergraveyard
- Laughter
- Praise: Def the best insta post today!!!, 'I know of no one more dope' and 'I freaking love you!!!'

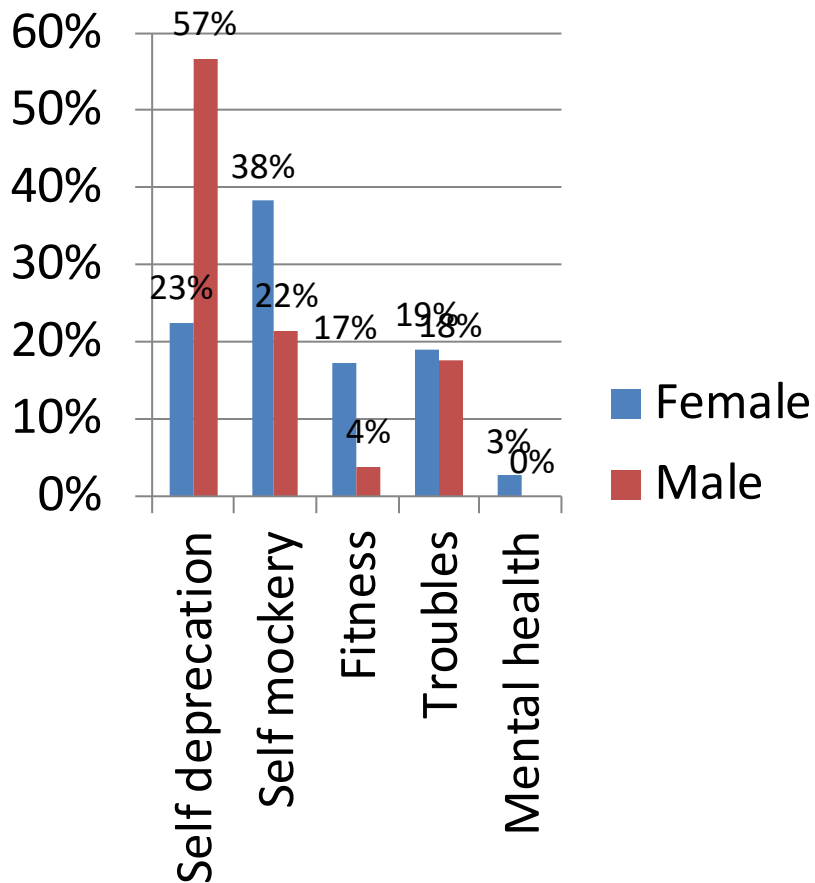
'Serious' claims: Trouble talk

- External troubles which can be shown or displayed
- Affective trouble
- 'I feel ugly'
- Mental health issues
- Depression, eating disorders, self harm

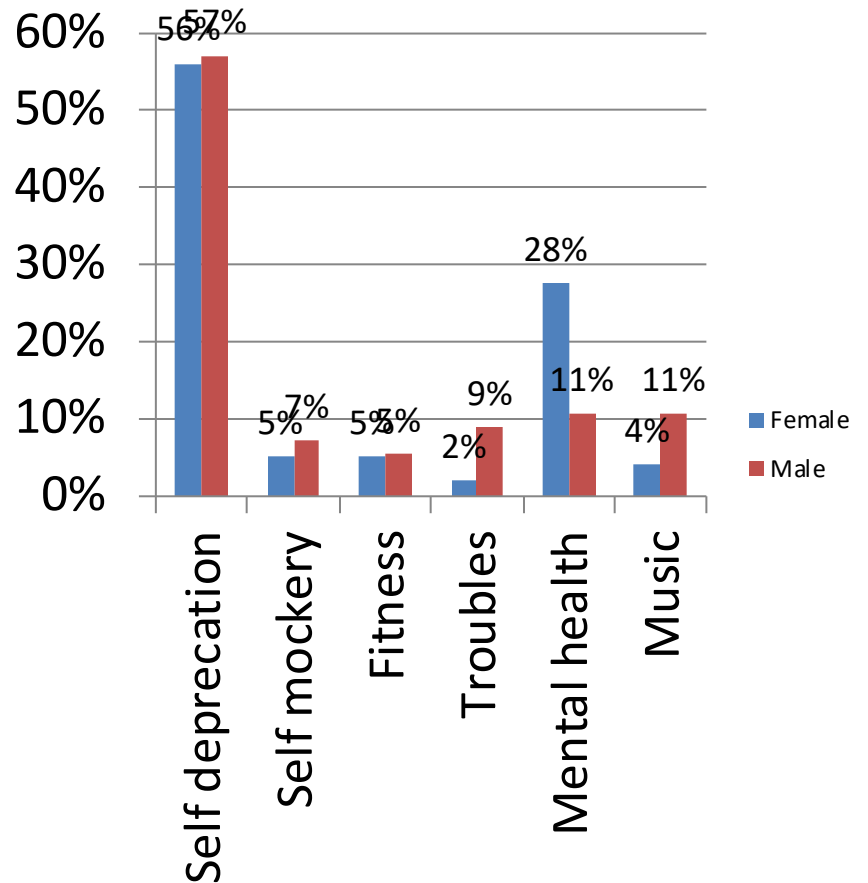


Ugliness, discourse and gender

#uglyselfies



#ugly



Responses to the #uglyselfie

- Disagree with the negative self-assessment
 - *Your so pretty [sic]*
- Offer a compliment
 - *Gorgeous!*
- Express shared experience
 - *SAME*
- Empathy
 - *Aww that sucks!*
- Laugh
- Agree with the negative self-assessment
 - *That's how you normally look*
- Insult or criticise
 - *Wigs on crooked dude*

Comparison of the comments

| Type of response | Count | Percentage |
|-----------------------------|-------|------------|
| No response | 93 | 42% |
| Face-enhancing strategies | 120 | 54% |
| Face-threatening strategies | 10 | 5% |

- Compliments (n=82)
- Laughter (n=24)
- Empathy (n=14)

Gendered patterns in responses to #uglyselfies

For women

- Denials
- Compliments
- Laughter
- Empathy

██████████ Getting this week started strong! ██████ is a beast!
#thebraveboutique #monday
#mondaymotivation #reallife #goals
#supportlocal #love #sprint #climb #killer
#keepgoing #neverquit #uglyselfie #redface

██████████ Cute

██████████ Beautiful selfie!! Thanks for coming and killing it on that bike!! 🐾💧💧

██████████ YES!!!

For men

- Denials
- Compliments
- Laughter
- Insults / criticism – male banter?

██████████ I hate taking selfies because I'm ugly as shit but I kinda liked this one, I think It's time to put something on IG besides my truck anyway #selfie #uglyselfie #ginger #fuckthishashtagshit

██████████ You look constipated

██████████ @██████████ eat a dick

██████████ I do in most pictures I take it's all good and how about you lick balls

Discussion

- Visual resources
 - Gendered differences occur a discourse level
 - Gendered differences disappear at the level of individual facial expression
- Particular gendered responses to beauty ideals for women
 - Self mockery increases the size of the face
 - Mental health images hide the face more often
- Hashtags make these differences more visible, particularly for young women
- But we should not ignore the masculine identities constructed as well

Fertility paradox in male beauty quest

By James Gallagher
Health and science correspondent, BBC News

© 28 May 2019

     Share

Implications for research

- There are many more aspects of ‘ugliness 2.0’ to be analysed
 - (e.g. Finstas, Snapchat, Tumblr, Social media influencers)
 - (e.g. different cultural contexts)
- Visual analysis is at least as important as verbal analysis
- Difference matters at a discourse level, but we need to be careful about a binary approach to gender
- It matters because there are significant socio-psychological outcomes of the interactions that take place online
- We need to gather more data and work in interdisciplinary teams
- We need participant-centred approaches to explore the beliefs and effects, not just the images alone.