

# The Female Gaze

Women actually are fibbing about objectifying men's bodies. But not in the way you think



MARY HARRINGTON



This week in silly internet discourse, the singer Olly Murs got fit, and posted Before and After shots. Then the psychologist William Costello posted the shots, and polled men and women on

which looked better. More men chose the After shot, but vastly more women chose the Before. Cue pandemonium, including a lot of men saying the women who claim to prefer “Before” are lying.



taoki

@justalexoki



why are women lying about this? like what's the actual cause?

**William Costello** @CostelloWilliam

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In the first reply to this poll there is a picture of Olly Murs before and after a 12 week gym transformation.

Do you think he looks better before or after?

Are you male or female?

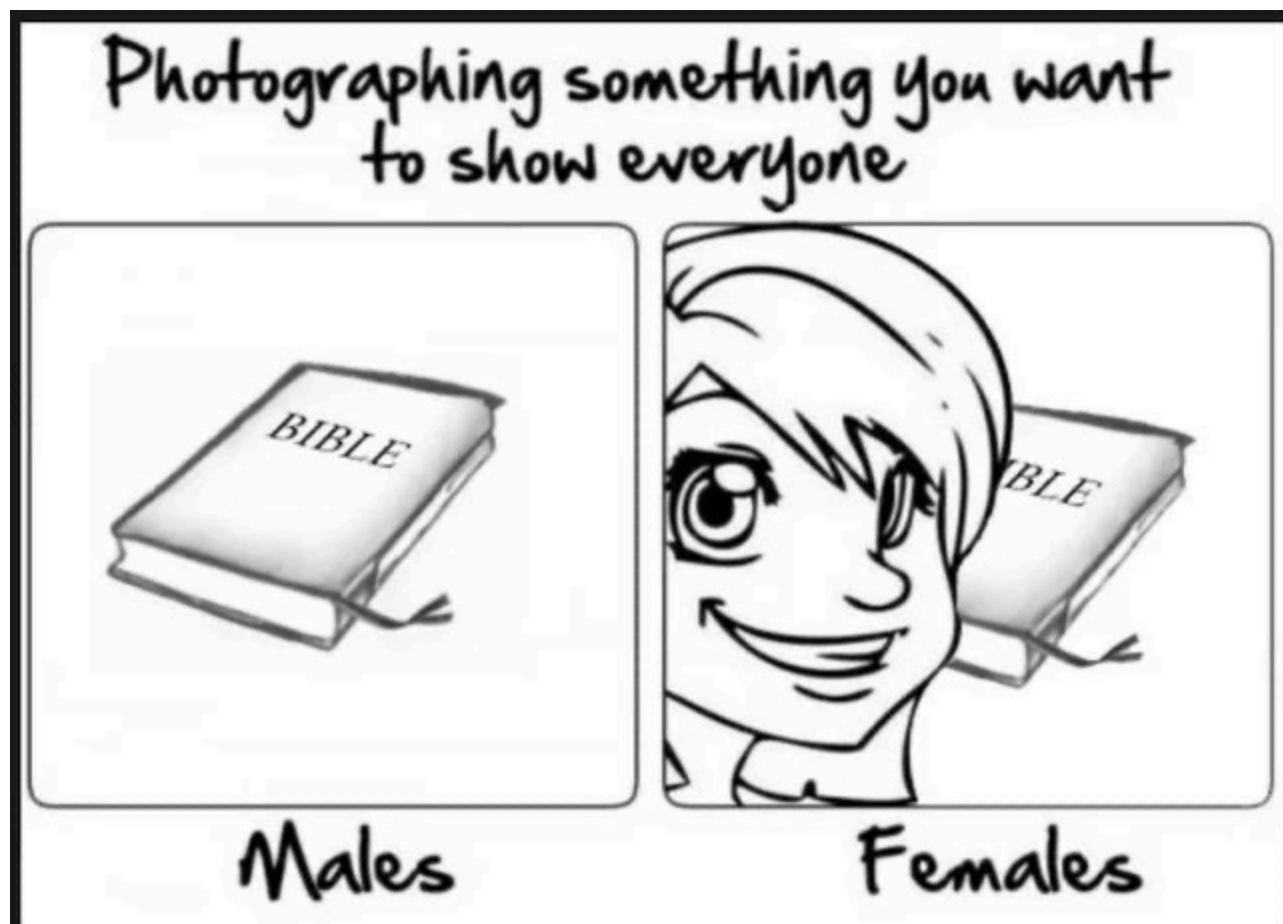
Male   Before	24%
Male   After	43%
Female   Before	27%
Female   After	7%

1920 votes • Final results

But what if they're not? What if, in fact, the problem is that the men and women who responded to this poll are answering different questions?

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Sure, this is all social media froth. But the gap in theory of mind that the episode revealed, between what women say they want and what at least some of the male respondents insist women *actually* want, speaks to a far more systemic mismatch between what the prevailing “men and women” discourse would like us to believe, and what is actually true. Elsewhere in Internet Gender Discourse, we can discern another tiny tip of this iceberg of confusion, in this notable meme about What Women Are Like:



The meme itself is well observed. You really do see this behaviour fairly often on social media. But why? Why, this meme invites us to ask, do “Females” add themselves into every photo they post online? To the manosphere, the answer is obvious: because women just can't stop making everything about themselves and their personal feelings.

But the problem isn't that women are lying - or, at least, not about Olly Murs. Nor are they necessarily more self-absorbed than the opposite sex. The central structural issue is that by and large, both sexes now unquestioningly accept the flawed premise that men and women are the same. It is, after all, a special case of the central liberal delusion that all people are the same: a dogma so central to the modern world that elaborate systems of law and social dogma exist to encourage compliance.

But nowhere is this dogma more insidiously false than as regards the sexes. And if a whole litany of apparent grievances flows from this, for any woman who has drunk the liberal feminist Kool-Aid, so too for any man who has (however unconsciously) accepted this the only possible outcome is confusion and anger, and accusations of lying and narcissism.

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But in truth, such accusations tell us less about what's really going on for women, than about the difficulty men experience in imagining what it's like to be the kind of woman they find attractive. This difficulty is precisely one of the driving forces behind the ecosystem of internet forums, talking-points and "training" schemes that make up the "manosphere", and which promises to explain what on earth is with these "Females". Its output is an elaborate architecture of internet truisms about "hypergamy", "resources", "the top 10% of men" and so on, that is frequently wildly off-base.

Very often, the reasoning goes awry in postulating a basically masculine mindset, in a female body, and then reasoning backwards to the logic that would explain otherwise mysterious patterns of pretty-girl-typical behaviour. But this is a basic error - because we are not, in fact, all the same. And recognising this is, paradoxically, the royal road to reconciliation between the sexes. Once you accept in principle that there really is an irreducible gap between what it's like to be a man, and what it's like to be a woman, it becomes far easier to interpret otherwise puzzling behaviour in a charitable light.

Before I go any further, let me be clear. We are not interchangeable, but men and women do not belong to different species. We are all human. The gap between the sexes is bigger than the ideology of sameness would have us think, but responds well to good-faith efforts at empathy, and indeed love and loyalty. There is more overlap than difference. As for the differences between us, these form patterns but there are always outliers, and this is not a bad thing per se, just a function of normal distributions. Description is not prescription. None of what follows implies value judgements, or should be taken as an instruction manual, the value of your investment can go down as well as up, et cetera and so on.

Now, with all the small print done, let's return to the "selfie" meme, and the self-absorption this behaviour supposedly evidences in "Females". If I were a man, projecting my mindset onto women, I might think about the pissing I'd get for doing the same. And I might conclude that the only possible explanation for women's obvious indifference to coming across as so bizarrely self-absorbed is that they are, in fact, bizarrely self-absorbed. But this interpretation misses, or chooses to ignore, one very obvious detail: that the behaviour it describes is indeed common, but it's not "Females" who do this - or not all of us. It is specifically *young pretty women*.

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Middle-aged and old women don't routinely add their own faces to pictures of a thing. And the reason this doesn't get noticed is also the reason young pretty women add their own image to photos of a thing: a reason so obvious I shouldn't even need to spell it out. Men, including women understanders, like looking at images of young, pretty women, while older ones are relatively invisible. This is not news; it is, in fact, a longstanding talking-point for feminism, and often subjected to interpretations at least as uncharitable as those ascribed to women posting selfies. There's even a term for it: "the male gaze".

From this objectifying perspective, so we are told, no matter how smart, capable, accomplished or authoritative a woman is, part of looking at her is (however unconsciously) to ask and answer the question: "Would I?". The art critic John Berger described its pervasiveness in his famous primer on art history, *Ways of Seeing*, defining the dynamic thus: "Men act, and women appear."

For liberal feminists this is a gross violation and should (somehow) be abolished. But whether or not we react angrily to this dynamic, as a violation of women's personhood, it's rooted in the embodied patterns of sexual desire and human reproduction. It's also asymmetric: it's banally true that more men desire pretty girls, and desire them more fiercely, than is the case in reverse. For our purposes here, though, the thing to note is not its moral value or cultural meaning but the fact that it also has a recursive impact on how women conceive of ourselves:

Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed is female. Thus she turns herself into an object of vision: a sight.

This sense of watching oneself being looked at sheds light on a further Gender Discourse talking-point, concerning how men and women understand "point of view" or "pov" images. Here, typically men will share an image as if photographed from the "point of view" the related caption describes.

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**Dan Baltic** ✓

@baltic\_dan



POV: you're a Viking advancing along Stamford bridge until this guy appears and says "Pack it in, mate"





6:07 PM · Apr 25, 2025 · **2.9M** Views

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Women, on the other hand reportedly don't understand "POV" because they will describe as "POV" an image of themselves as seen from a third party's point of view:



**Katherine Everitt** ✨  
@katherineveritt



POV: I'm explaining my favorite paradoxes in Hegel



7:30 PM · Apr 5, 2025 · 3.7M Views

This is, again, a pattern of sexed difference in the ways men and women use social media to present a visual “point of view”: one that, again, is sometimes interpreted as evidence that women are self-absorbed, or even “lack interiority”. But it’s far more neutrally understood in terms of Berger’s formulation: “Men act, and women appear.”

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By the time you’ve reached adulthood, any woman posting selfies on the internet is long since habituated to existing as “an object of vision”. I speak from personal experience when I tell you that a formative element of normal adolescence, for girls, is first becoming aware of this dynamic, and then learning to navigate it. It is both a power and a liability: especially where girls reach puberty relatively young, it’s a bit like handing a lit flamethrower to a child, without explaining what the trigger does. Adolescent girls handle this alarming new terrain in myriad ways, some happier than others: wearing skimpy clothes, wearing very baggy clothes, posting thirst traps, developing eating disorders or special genders et cetera. It’s often an acutely uncomfortable phase; it can be very dangerous. Its driving motor is, at the risk of stating the obvious, human sexuality. And for a young woman, assuming she makes it into adulthood relatively unscathed, what emerges is the recursive self-consciousness summarised in Berger’s stark formulation.

Then, once you map this onto the digital attention economy, what you see is a very obvious incentive structure. *Of course* pretty girls add their faces to photos they post online: it doesn’t take long to work out that doing so gets more engagement. But it really isn’t all “females”. Average-looking or older women are vastly less likely to do this, for the simple reason that if you do, you’re more likely to get mean-spirited remarks about Botox than extra clicks.

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Now, we can bring this all together to help explain *why* women might actually be telling the truth, when they said the “Before” image of Olly Murs looked better than the “After” one: relative to the men polled, they were answering a different question. The men evaluated at the

two physiques and answered the question directly, picking the one that looked objectively “better”. Women, on the other hand, looked at the “Before” and “After” shots less in terms of the physique on display than *in terms of the relation to the objectifying male gaze* that the contrasting images seemed to imply, taken in their totality.

In the first shot, a smiling Murs stands in a relaxed posture, against a gym backdrop. He’s carrying a few extra pounds but looks within normal range, and well-muscled underneath. He seems as though he’s mid-workout; it could have been a candid snap made in passing, between sets. In the second, by contrast, Murs stands in a pair of iddy biddy shorts, under stark lighting in a changing room, weighing scales visible in-shot. The background connotes not action but self-reflexive activities such as dressing, examining one’s reflection, watching one’s weight. Murs faces the camera, tense, flexing his muscles to show off the definition. In relation to the photographer he is not acting; he is *appearing*.

He has made himself an object in a way that, from the Bergeresque point of view, is deeply gender-incongruent. It’s as though in this image Murs is inviting the male gaze. And of course a man, habituated to asking “Would I?” about every passing woman, could take as read the liberal dogma that we’re all the same deep down, then logically conclude that women must surely be applying the same yardstick. It would therefore follow, logically, that the women in the poll would assess both Murs physiques with something like a “male gaze”. And were this true, they would surely be lying when they still insist the first image “looks better”. But while there really is a sense in which women really are being economical with the truth here, that’s not it.

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Rather, it’s in how sincere anyone really is, in holding to egalitarian dogma about the objectifying “male gaze”. When it comes to applying this gaze to men, the Murs poll strongly suggests that women do not, in fact, find this appealing at all. Offered two de-contextualised images of the same man, where in one image he looks ready to act, and in the other focused on *appearing*, they chose the former: the gender-congruent one. The fact that he is slightly thinner and with more defined muscles in the second image is largely beside the point.

None of this is, of course, to shame Murs for embarking on a fitness programme. Fitness programmes are good! My point is simply that women are not lying about finding men more attractive when they present as primarily *acting* rather than *appearing*. Conversely, too, castigating pretty girls for taking advantage of the incentive structure presented by social media

to garner clicks by enthusiastically *appearing* is to miss, or ignore, the underlying reality that this asymmetry runs very deep.

Equally, though, everyone really is dissembling a bit - women included - when it comes to acknowledging how tangled-up we really are in the dynamic of acting and appearing. How could we not be? At a pre-rational level, it's one of the drumbeats of polarity between the sexes. But the truth is that rather than being something done *to* or *by* just one sex - it is more like a dialectic, that creates advantages and vulnerabilities for both.

What we could do with, really, is a little more honesty all round - and a little more realism. We're not going to abolish the "male gaze", not least because in some circumstances women like it. Nor are we going to subject both sexes to it equally, because when men do this it gives women the ick. The best we can do is probably try and moderate the extremes of objectification and self-objectification in the name of good manners and common decency, bin the stupid dogma about everyone being interchangeable, and try to extend charity and empathy across the epistemic gap between the sexes. After all, at the risk of sounding like the middle-aged mum I am, life really is much nicer when we find ways to get along.

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