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THE  TIMES

Why do women hate photographs of themselves?

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I had just finished packing for our summer holiday when I realised that I'd forgotten to include our digital camera. In some ways I wished we were leaving it behind. Because although I love holidays, I hate holiday snaps. Once we are back, I'll squirrel myself away in my office at home, the door firmly shut so that nobody can see. Privacy is essential as I download the pictures. Or, more accurately, embark on an orgy of deletion.

There are few photographs of me to start with - I run from the camera - but those that there are almost invariably fill me with horror. "My God," I moan, "Do I really look like that?" Delete. Delete. Delete.

And I know I'm not alone in feeling like this. Proof, if needed, of our fear and loathing comes with the news that demand for photo-retouching services at Snappy Snaps, the processing company, rose by 550 per cent last year. For a mere £10, rolls of flab can be removed from unfortunate bikini shots, dark circles can be lightened, legs lengthened.

A host of internet companies has also arisen to deal with the demand for perfect pictures: www.digifacelift.com will whiten your teeth, slim you down and tidy your hair for around £12, while www.retouphoto.co.uk can even give you a complete facelift, wiping away sagging jowls and eyebags, with prices starting at just £2. And for those who think that prevention is better than cure, Hewlett Packard digital cameras now include a "slimming" feature, which stretches your image, visually removing about 10lb in the process - a practice dubbed "digital dieting".

The company developed it after commissioning a survey which revealed that two thirds of us are "deeply embarrassed" by many of our snaps, with only one person in three being happy with almost every one. Unsurprisingly, I fall into the category of people most likely to hate theirs: female, aged between 35 and 44. The blithe few who love every snap are men under 35; hardly a shock.

Talking to my friends, I realise that most of us have hundreds of pictures of our children, our partners, our friends, but scarcely a single one of ourselves.

My friend Helen - slim, attractive and stylish - confessed to me recently that she is photo-phobic. "From looking at our photographs, you'd think my husband was married to the au pair. If I died tomorrow, my children would hardly have a single photograph to remember me by," she says.

"I think I look absolutely terrible"

Amanda, another friend, "without wanting to sound boastful", admits that she's quite nice-looking. "I'm slim, men like me and I never bother with make-up because I think I look fine without it. Yet whenever I see a photo of myself, I think I look absolutely terrible."

For Amanda, and for me, just about every photograph comes as a shock. But why? I know what I look like. I see myself in the mirror several times a day. And knowing what I look like, I happily leave the house.

I am reconciled to not looking much like Christy Turlington - but I'm not Dot Cotton either. So if I don't spend every day in a frenzy of self-loathing, why does the sight of my image in a photograph fill me with despair?

Linda Papadopoulos, a psychologist who has worked with Big Brother contestants, says: "We women tend to hate photographs of ourselves more than men because we are encouraged to believe our value is in how good we look. Most of us have body-image issues.

"A photograph is worse than a mirror because we focus on it in a different way. With a mirror, we can walk away, rearrange our hair and change our pose. But we can't change a photograph. We also dwell on it longer than on our reflection in a mirror, and our focus usually goes to the areas we don't like instead of those that we do." She says that looking at a photograph can also unconsciously revive the feelings you experienced when the photograph was taken. "If you weren't having an enjoyable time, you will find it hard to feel good about your image."

John Rowley, a professional fashion and celebrity photographer, agrees (see panel, right). "Many women feel embarrassed when they have their picture taken, and shy away from the camera. Not only does this make for more unattractive poses, but they then relive their embarrassment when they see the photographs."

Dr David Lewis, a psychologist and expert in body image, and the author of *Loving and Loathing, the Enigma of Personal Attraction*, says that we all have three types of self-image: our "real self" - how we believe ourselves to be; our "other self" - how we believe other people regard us; and our "ideal self" - the type of individual we most want to be.

“Our degree of liking or disliking snaps of ourselves depends on how closely they match not our real self, but our ideal self,” he says. “A photo which, through careful lighting and camera angle, makes you appear closer to your ideal self will be treasured and preserved.”

Searching for an ideal self

These days, however, our ideal self is ever more unattainable. Papadopoulos says that in the old days people used to compare themselves with their neighbours and friends. “But today we are more likely to compare ourselves with the airbrushed images of perfection we see in magazines and on movie screens. These are not only of the most beautiful people on Earth, at the peak of youth and fitness - but they have also been professionally made-up and styled. It’s hardly surprising that we don’t feel we match up. The bar is impossibly high.” But Papadopoulos has good news for those of us plunged into gloom by our holiday snaps.

“Photographs aren’t very representative of what we look like in reality,” she says. “It is just a record of one static moment. People are never completely still like they are in a photograph, and animation changes the way we look. In studies, people are often rated as significantly better-looking in person than in photographs, and that’s because of personal qualities, such as confidence.”

Ironically, for all my dislike of cameras, I regret that I have so few photos as records of my personal history. I have scarcely a single picture of myself in my twenties, for example.

And oddly, when I look at old photos of me, ones that I loathed at the time I now think look fine. Where once I saw old and fat, I now see young and slim. So, tell me: why will I still be sitting at the PC deleting this year’s crop as usual?

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