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Taking Back the Gaze: The Contribution of Selfies to Women's Self-Identities

When Oxford Dictionaries revealed the Word of the Year for 2013, there was little to no surprise which word they chose: selfie. According to their statistics, usage of the term increased by approximately 17,000 % over the course of the year. Scrolling through any social media feed - Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and so on - it's most likely that someone's selfie will show. A common reaction to this might be an internal eye-roll or a sigh. But why the derision? Might it be possible that something deeper is going on beneath the stream of seemingly narcissistic self-portraits? Selfies contribute to a thoughtful exploration of self-identity for young women, since women are able to gain confidence and raise their self-esteem by recognizing their ability to refuse and subvert society's traditional use of their bodies as commodities. They can empower women to challenge the male gaze. Additionally, because constructing one's self-identity is a dynamic process, selfies facilitate self-identities that are now more fluid than ever. Finally, sharing selfies on the Internet may be problematic and thus detrimental to the construction of women's self-identity when women rely too much on the approval of others on their photos. A woman's self-identity is affected more positively and her self-esteem and confidence grows when she recognizes the shortcomings of depending on the feedback of others on her selfies. Selfies are thus a legitimate form of self-expression and should not be looked down upon.

Selfies allow women to project their own views of their bodies instead of letting others dictate it for them, because women control the camera, and thus, the gaze through which they are seen. Artist Michael Grafton demonstrates this in his photoshopping of Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer's famous 17th century work, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. The Dutch masterpiece originally showcased a young girl in a turban, looking over her shoulder into the viewer/painter's gaze. Her gaze is mysterious and thus intriguing for the viewer. The background is dark, which accentuates how the light falls from somewhere beyond the painting, illuminating the unknown girl's face and bringing the girl's pearl earring into focus. In Grafton's modern-day rendering of a Dutch classic, as posted on Facebook, the focus of the painting no longer includes the pearl earring. It instead centers around the digitally-inserted camera, which at first glance, appears as if it was originally painted by Vermeer himself (Grafton). With the camera's addition, the Dutch masterpiece now looks like a selfie - a modern-day image taken by a girl while posing in front of a mirror. In the manner Vermeer painted her, the unknown girl is assumed not to be looking into a mirror because there is no mirror in the original painting. However, the digital camera in her hand signals that she *is* taking a selfie, given that some selfies are taken with a digital camera in front of a bathroom mirror. Also, consider that the photoshopped Vermeer work was uploaded onto Facebook - a website people use in order to display selfies. Given both of these points - the camera and the online platform - the girl's gaze is no longer mysterious but instead self-assessing. "Do I look like what *I* want to look like? Do I look okay?" she asks herself. Her gaze is still challenging but not to the general audience of Vermeer's original - now, it is directed to herself and perhaps her Facebook friends. Thus, Grafton's work explores the idea that such a digital manipulation is an example of women challenging the male gaze. It should be acknowledged that Grafton himself is a male artist. Does this detract from the implications of his

photoshopping for the empowerment of women? Not necessarily. This image of a woman taking a photo of herself is one that is common enough in this modern age that Grafton's work represents selfies actually taken by contemporary women.

A contemporary phenomenon indeed, selfies challenge the traditional separation of the subject and photographer and introduce the paradigm in which subject, photographer, and viewer are one and the same. In this way, selfies allow women to define their presentation of self and thus their self-identity through control of the camera and the presentation of a female gaze. This female gaze is in opposition to the male gaze defined by film theorist Laura Mulvey in her seminal work. More specifically, Mulvey observes that "[i]n a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy [sic] on to the female form which is styled accordingly" (837). Note that Mulvey deliberately uses the "ph" in an alternative spelling of "fantasy" to signify the Freudian tradition of emphasizing the phallus, which places the male experience as a standard for measurement. Selfies counteract this male-centric tradition. Specifically, selfies allow women to adopt a female gaze that is active as the male gaze by projecting not the male fantasy, but the female fantasy of her ideal self. I say fantasy to deliberately imply that female ideal self is elusive and hard to attain. The female ideal self cannot be separated from the internalized cultural ideals of a so-called perfect woman. Some of these values are admittedly toxic. The idealization of the thin (but not too thin) woman who is simultaneously virginal and provocative is problematic because it caters to the male desire for possession of the female body. Deconstructing such internalized values is one that involves incredibly deep self-reflection. This can be facilitated through photos, particularly selfies. The continuous improvements in camera technology, allow for easy capturing of selfies. Camera

phones in particular allow for multiple, high-quality photographs that a woman can take of herself until she is satisfied with her self-portrayal.

Camera/mobile phones emphasize self-expression and self-presentation for women, encouraging photographs that suit their own aesthetic taste through the manipulation that technology allows. Comparative media studies scholar, Jose Van Dijck, comments, “In this day and age, (digital) photographs allow subjects some measure of control over their photographed appearance, inviting them to tweak and reshape their public and private identities” (70). Digital photography increases the role of the camera-phone in forming self-identity through more opportunities for the subject-photographer to manipulate her self-images. Most obviously, digital camera phones allow for many photos to be taken without the commitment to print out all of them, unlike analog cameras of old. From this proliferation of photos, a woman can pick and choose which to keep. Besides the freedom to take multiple photographs, software like Photoshop erases unsightly blemishes and other unattractive facial features, as well as allowing the addition of different filters to aid in a photograph’s atmosphere. Therefore, manipulating photographs, particularly selfies, allows women to play around with their self-presentation and self-expression. This exploration pushes them to gain a clearer sense of self which is important because women are subject to socialization - the unconscious learning of social values through various mediums (family, friends, media, school, work, etc.). Socialization programs a woman to see herself as a hypersexualized and infantilized object. To combat against this dehumanization and objectification, selfies are a valuable tool for women.

While women may not explicitly link their self-portraits to feminist actions, it nevertheless may lead to empowerment, because by encouraging the control of technology and self-presentation, selfies can lead to the questioning of social norms. Communications scholar

Dong-Hoo Lee points out that in her interviews with 17 young women, “Moreover, most interviewees hope to have or have actually bought a digital camera in order ‘to take more professional pictures.’ . . . As one controls a technology more freely, one experiences a kind of empowerment, which in turn gives one an interest in more sophisticated technologies” (Lee). Here Lee claims that as women use their camera phones more, they grow comfortable with the technology and may pursue taking pictures in a more professional way. In the same fashion, selfies can facilitate women’s realization of other professional/career avenues (i.e. professional photographer) that normally would not be considered. Women are exposed to the entire process of taking photographs, from considering the best angles and lighting to actually developing the photos through the addition of special effects. Familiarity with the camera through selfies can then unconsciously inspire women to further pursue photography in a manner that goes beyond taking selfies. Angela Aguayo and Stacy Calvert demonstrate this and the resulting subversion of social norms in their portfolio of “curated mobile photography images” gathered from the submissions of other women, in order to "show a more nuanced, dynamic version of womanhood that celebrates complexity across the life span” and combat "commercial imagery [which] turns women into cartoonish objects, even when the aim is to diversify representation and purport authenticity" (Aguayo and Calvert 183). Here women as photographers now subvert society’s view of “womanhood.” Notably, Aguayo’s article and portfolio of photos did not feature selfies. This can be implied to be a response to self-portraits by moving the focus away from how women are objectified to placing women as photographers with power to take pictures in any way they see fit. This also demonstrates how selfies can be a stepping stone for women to control the camera and realize that they have the power to turn the camera on other subjects besides herself. In other words, selfies can inspire women to explore the possibility of being

photographers whereas before, they may not have thought themselves capable. In doing so, they may also be led to explore themes such as challenging the hypersexualization and infantilization of women in the media, because women are in control of the camera and of the subjects it captures.

Through selfies a woman can begin to take pictures of herself that may seem complicit in the objectification of women in general. However, in the course of taking more and more pictures, she constructs an identity that is constantly in flux and becomes more multi-faceted as she is exposed to new ideas and experiences. This identity can be described as one that is “fluid” because self-identity is a process of meaning-making. As sociology professor Shelly Budgeon asserts, “To make known one's sense of self is [...] a process in which one's self-concept is achieved into a historical unity. . . .The construction that is yielded by this process highlights what is significant or meaningful to that individual at the particular point in time when he or she articulates a narrative of the self” (49-50). Self-identity is created and maintained through continuous reevaluation of past experiences. Thus, the easy proliferation of selfies makes it easier for women to make meaning out of varying self-representations at different points in time. Furthermore, self-identity is a continuous process of meaning-making for a woman - a dynamic state in which people are constantly reshaping their selves through their conscious and unconscious processing of experiences from work, school, family, and friends. For example, at one point in time, a woman might present herself to be aggressively militant in her politics - her dress and body language reflect this in the selfies she chooses to take of herself. However, years later as she learns and grows, she may no longer act and look the same way - which again can be traced through the pictures she takes of herself. Van Dijck further illustrates that, “Memories are created just as much as they are recalled from photographs; our recollections never remain the

same, even if the photograph appears to represent a fixed image of the past. And yet, we use these pictures not to ‘fix’ memory but to constantly reassess our past lives and reflect on what has been as well as what is and what will be” (63). Here Van Dijck claims that photographs of the self never have just one meaning. Instead, the meaning of photographs changes as an individual’s memory changes. This is important because memories facilitate the construction of identity in providing the material which a woman uses to see herself and reflect. Selfies specifically provide a woman with varying images of herself through time, thus aiding in memory. Upon this foundation of memory, she forms her unique concept of her ideal self. On the other hand, selfies may not necessarily generate an authentic self, but rather, an idealized self. However, considering that self-identity fluctuates as a woman continuously reflects on her self-image and experience, there may be intersections between the authentic and idealized self as women succeed in achieving parts of their ideal self through tangible accomplishments and choices to tweak one’s self-presentation.

Unfortunately, selfies posted on social media detrimentally affect one’s self-identity when women begin to depend on the approval of their peers and acquaintances to validate the selves they present. In a study of college students and their use of Facebook, social media scholar David Kasch observed, for example, that while students looked favorably on group photos because they signal social capital, “posting pictures of oneself without others in the photo was an important signal for students. Those who did so were considered at best ‘lame’ or ‘weird’ and at worst ‘pretentious’ or ‘narcissistic’ ” (96). Kasch claims in a previous section that photos were an extremely vital tool for students to use as a method to control the presentation of their digital selves (95). Here, he elaborates on that claim by showing how photographs on Facebook affect one’s self-presentation by presenting an idealized self. Kasch also substantiates Grafton’s choice

in presenting the photoshopped Vermeer masterpiece onto Facebook, a site whose users would understand the implications of the picture. Notably, students from this research study demonstrate the derision some feel towards selfies. Therefore, posting selfies on a website, and not getting any validation in the form of likes may negatively affect one's self-esteem. With the Internet as a platform, the validation that comes in the form of how many reblogs, notes, or likes a selfie garners can negatively influence how an individual sees herself. However, by keeping some selfies to herself, a woman's self-identity is affected more positively as her self-esteem and confidence grows. She can use her selfies as a tool for self-reflection. "Why would I want to appear/look like this? What does it mean when I choose these pictures over others?" A woman learns to listen and trust in her personal judgment without letting the noise of other opinions sway her self-esteem from one extreme to another. The construction of self-identity for women happens best when individuals do not depend too much on the opinions of others.

Selfies can also empower a woman to control her self-identity online because she is able to present which photos are uploaded and in which context they are looked. In terms of context, for example, she can choose the audience - close friends, acquaintances, and family - who has access to her selfies. Facebook has such a feature in which users can do so. As philosopher and essayist Susan Sontag noted in her seminal work *On Photography*, "To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge-and, therefore, like power" (2). Sontag claims that photographs give an individual control over the photographed subject. Consider that the photographer can choose the framing and the look of the subject of a photograph. Selfies place women as photographers with said powers, along with the added ability to curate, or organize, the photographs. The selfie thus grants increased control of the camera to women, especially considering the continuous

improvements in technology of mobile devices and their cameras. The improvement in technology encourages increased use of the camera in taking selfies. Taken together, improvements in technology and subsequent increase in taking selfies corresponds to a certain power, or control, that women can choose to exercise. Empowerment for women comes in the partnership of the Internet and camera phones because both facilitate women's control of their public identities.

Some may argue that posing in selfies may indeed not generate authentic selves for women because the act of posing is in effect the result of an individual self-consciously adjusting their appearance to appear more attractive. Nevertheless, women's self-identities encompass more than just their posed self. Philosopher Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* notes that when he notices a camera directed at him "everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of 'posing:' I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image. This transformation is an active one: I feel that the Photograph creates my body or mortifies it" (10-11). Here, Barthes claims that portrait photography inspires a dissonance between someone's sense of self and their image by examining the point of view that selfies may not necessarily facilitate a genuine self-identity for women whenever they strive too hard to present an idealized self to the camera. However, there is not only the idealized self versus the mental (or actual) self-image. As Barthes goes on to point out, there are two other images of an individual that are outside of their control - namely, that of one's self-imagery as dictated by the photographer and the public's own perception of the individual (13-14). These images are simultaneously at odds, complement, and extend one another. In terms of selfies, the interactions of these four "selves" for a woman are complicated in the myriad of ways they intersect. The idealized self that a woman affects through posing may not after all be a singular "self," but

instead is one that shifts with the intersections of the images within an individual's control (that is, the mental and idealized) and beyond (the photographed and public). Therefore, though women may pose in selfies to present their ideal self, their self-identity encompasses what they actually think themselves to be as well as what the audience perceives in the selfie.

Selfies have contributed to the identities of women through increasing opportunities to challenge traditional views of their bodies as either undervalued or overvalued objects for the pleasure of men, as well as increasing the fluidity of self-identity. However, it must be addressed that selfies contribute to an unhealthy formation of women's self-identity when women depend too much on online validation. A prudent and conscious use of the selfie is needed for women to use selfies in a way that is positive and encourages both self-reflections and self-evaluations. As such, modern self-portraits are a tool for young women to subvert society's traditional objectification of their bodies – which are often in the form of hypersexualization and infantilization - by encouraging exploration of the self to question toxic social norms. To investigate the implications of this more deeply, more research is needed to focus and explore specifically the topics of selfies and social media. Such questions this research should address are: What does it mean for women when selfies taken with other people - otherwise known as group selfies - are valued over individual selfies? How can selfies be used as art in the modern world to mirror what painters like Frida Kahlo have done with their paintings in terms of self-portraiture? Can abstract meaning be infused into selfies so that the subject of the selfie goes beyond the appearance of a woman and into her evolving emotions, ideas, and understanding of the self? Answering these questions contributes greatly to the positive formation of self-identities for women who live in a world that tries to constantly undermine their confidence and, most importantly, their agency.

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