

Cultural and societal impacts of the selfie



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For almost two decades, the act of taking and sharing selfies through technological devices is continuing to thrive as a digital ethnographic routine. Producing this type of photo is such a straightforward process, but there is certainly a more complex individual and cultural understanding behind the purpose of these visual expressions. This essay will examine the cultural and societal aspects that are incorporated into selfies with references to anthropological theories as well as examples from my personal experience (referencing my attached photos before the bibliography). In the first section, I will go over some essential Anthropology theories by Stuart Hall and Erving Goffman and explain how they can be applied to the task of analyzing selfies. Afterwards, I am going to explore how this method of photography is strongly linked to our individuality in both the public and private spheres of society. This segment will be followed by an evaluation of how selfies represent our political identity as well as other important visual signifiers. Lastly, my conclusion is going to reflect on why the combination of all of these factors play a significant role in determining how we wish to portray ourselves to others via the selfie platform.

One of the well-known models of Anthropology that correlate with selfies and visual messages comes from Stuart Hall's research on representation. He established three academic approaches as a way to comprehend the meaning of language and symbolism. First, the "reflective approach" which suggests the producer is using examples of true information and recreating it with encoded messages (Hall 1997: 24). In opposition to this is the "intentional approach" which explains that media portrayals are specifically encoded with the intents of the producer who created it. In this case, it is not

about the messages that are shown, rather the individuals who are showing it (Hall 1997: 25). Thirdly, the “ constructionist approach” combines the properties of reflective and intentional representations to create a sense of meaning that is interpreted as both denotative and connotative (Hall 1997: 25). Hall’s theory can certainly be applied to the cognitive process of taking a selfie because when we do this activity, we are sending a message that reflects who we are and that conveys our current intentions. For instance, my selfie from the workplace confirms that I was some sort of security employee who worked outdoors.

Erving Goffman is another theorist who is strongly applicable to this topic and he presents an alternative interpretation of the relationship between culture and imagery. This theory looks at how we perform our identities within controlled environments from the viewpoint of individuals, others, real, and unreal performances. First of all, he defines performance as “ any form of activity by a given participant on a given occasion that can influence other participants in a particular way” (Goffman 1959: 10-46). This main subject extends further into three additional notions about the theory of performance which Goffman classifies into separate categories.

First “ dramaturgy”, a term that compares social interactions to the metaphor of being a stage that recreates scenery into a composition consisting of primary identity performance in the foreground region and additional interactivity in the background. Next, “ dramatic realization” is a phrase used to describe when someone feels the need to express a more dramatic form of identity depending on the type of social interaction that they are involved in. Lastly, “ idealization” occurs when we want to establish

an ideal social performance that includes trending narratives about common values in culture or society (Goffman 1959: 10-46). It can be understood that selfies are a presentation of ourselves since we are essentially framing a particular theme through the use of facial expressions, clothing, location, and background props.

In addition to representation and performance, selfies allow us to share an extension of our individuality in a more intimate way than traditional photos. Through the interactivity of this medium, we are sharing the qualities that define who we are as an individual and what makes us stand out from others (Veum and Undrum 2018: 87). According to academics Michael Koliska and Jessica Roberts, “ people use selfies to express a particular notion of the self or to convey a certain impression: Through the clothes one wears, one’s expression, staging of the physical setting, and the style of the photo, people can convey a particular public image of themselves, presumably one that they think will garner social rewards (Koliska and Roberts 2015: 4)”.

In ‘ How the World Changed Social Media’, the authors present a similar argument, “ selfies are more engaged in acts of sharing and circulation”, and “ because of this it may represent a more socialised and less individually focused activity than traditional photography” (Miller et al. 2016: 158). However, they also imply that researchers are critical on how we digitally express our identity, stating that they believe this form of self-expression is an example of narcissism (Miller et al. 2016: 158). In some cases, it is likely that observers will interpret a person’s image of self-expression as a display of selfishness, but with the appropriate context, it can be seen in a more positive aspect.

Furthermore, “ visual tropes” add another potential layer of creativity to the practice of photographic self-expression. They are considered to be commonly used themes or visual cues that a generic audience can easily recognize (Zarzycka 2013: 178). A person may incorporate some kind of trope into their selfie to identify the most important details of their individuality. In ‘ American Anthropologist, Shipley implies that this is because “ digital images are easily detached from original contexts and recontextualized, in the process critically challenging the basic aesthetic principles presupposed in the images’ earlier incarnations” (Shipley 2015: 404).

Another key factor regarding individuality is the separation between public and private realms since there is always going to be content in your self-photography that you are either open to revealing or preferring to keep hidden. This is similar to the concept of keeping our work life and social or family life compartmentalized from each other. This predicament can potentially affect the quality and quantity of selfies that we post on social media because concealing information will make our representation seem less authentic.

Some of the images that I have added in this essay were taken during my teenage years because I determined that they provide a good illustration of the individuality complex. In the one with a short-buzzed haircut, blue filter, slightly angled pose, and simple background, it conveys that I wanted to replicate the tough male stereotype. The second image has more imagery and symbols throughout the foreground and background which creates a composition of my typical living environment. The clothing and personalized

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room setting of this selfie contain clues that signify my demographics such as current age (physical appearance), where I might be living (Toronto shirt), and the weather conditions (winter hat).

From a more social perspective, the information that we display in a selfie contributes to the framework of our identities such as our interests, lifestyle, opinions, and values. We want others to know what we care about by visually associating ourselves with it as if it were an advertisement. It is also an ideal strategy for supporting or protesting against the causes that you directly care about such as campaigns, social movements and other topics of concern. Within this context of society and relationships, Dr. Swaminathan contends that “ the selfie becomes a construction of the self and selfhood that’s constitutive of the processes of conformity and non-conformity, of strangeness and alienation, and of identity and rootedness (Swaminathan 2014: 5)”. In other words, when we choose to communicate through this medium, there is confliction between making the decision to share ideals that follow cultural norms or go against popular trends.

In support of this theory, I found that several attributes of my identity are visible in the majority of the selfies that were included in this essay. For instance, my political interests were exhibited by the city of Toronto shirt that I was wearing in one image, as well as a Canadian leaf symbol on the neck pillow in my workplace selfie. It might also be interpreted as an act of non-conformity to reveal myself relaxing on the job rather than being hard at work. My interest in pets (or specifically cats) is also evident because of the photo that I took with my cat. It gives off the impression that I am a pet owner who is comfortable with animals.

With all of these ideas in mind, the ultimate objective that people are trying to accomplish by posting selfies is to suggest that everyone else should recognize them as to how they personally want to be perceived. It is a message that is assembled for the purpose of being evaluated by someone else, yet the person in the photo is envisioning themselves as their imagined persona. This is further supported by another section of Jesse Weaver Shipley's photo essay. He insists that "the selfie, rather than a singular form of technologically driven self-portraiture, is a multimedia genre of autobiography or memoir that makes the image maker into the protagonist of stories of his or her own composition (Shipley 2015: 404)".

On the other hand, there is also statistical data on selfies which suggests that they are primarily uploaded by people for entertainment, information storage, and relationship development purposes (Williams, Stohlman, and Polinsky: 81-82)". However, when I reflect on the reasons for choosing to take these five particular selfies, they all revolved around an event or personal statement that I wanted to share with others. From an Anthropological perspective, the aspect of initiating social interactions quickly came to mind, but it took an analytical approach to determine how I attempted to represent my individuality.

It is evident that the selfie has effectively maintained its status as a central part of our customary social media activities. Sometimes this form of photography appears to be generic or repetitive with no meaningful intention, but even under these circumstances, there are many subliminal connotations to be observed. My paper went over how certain characteristics of ethnography are constantly integrated into the creation and circulation of

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selfies. I referenced the work of some credible anthropologists as well as my firsthand experiences to provide additional justification on this matter. The beginning of my essay summarized the concepts of representation and performance from an Anthropological context and described how they deeply inspire our visual expression choices. Then, I outlined how selfies are connected to our personal and public personas, which also lead to an explanation on why selfies embody our political identity, lifestyle and values. These sections were supported by image samples which were drawn from my first-person experience. In the conclusion of this paper, I reasoned that the convergence of these ethnographic elements has a substantial impact on the outcome of our selfie decision-making process.

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