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Digital Natives' Visual Narratives: Selfies as Curated Performances of Personal Identity

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By

Josette Pellicano

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The thesis of Josette Pellicano is approved:

Dr. Kimberly Kirner

Date

Dr. Gina Giotta

Date

Dr. Sabina Magliocco, Chair

Date

California State University, Northridge

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Abstract

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Josi Pellicano

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Anthropology has often focused on and debated the concept of identity and the conceptualizations of the self throughout the discipline's history. Studies conducted on this popular concept have seldom explored the World Wide Web, and more specifically social networking sites, as a prominent means for individuals to express their personal identities. This project explores how and why individuals use photography as an emergent form of communication to express their personal identities on the social networking sites Facebook and Instagram. This research focuses on the millennial users of these social networking sites and their use of a new and important type of photographic self-portrait known as "the selfie." By using an ethnographic and interview-based design, a folkloristic methodology through exploring selfies as personal narratives, and a holistic approach incorporating a number of theoretical frameworks, this thesis argues that selfies have meaning beyond just their informative definition. Selfies can be interpreted as self-presentational posts because they are visual personal narratives that

millennials curate in order to perform their personal identities. In addition, the use and interest in posting selfies as digital vernacular expressions of their personal identities can be utilized to understand a continued historical shift in communication about one's identity from verbal and written, to more visual. Furthermore, this photographic expression of one's personal identity in digital form demonstrates ways people not only promote their personal identities on these social networking sites, but how these sites in turn influence the ways they define their personal identities.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I feel like the selfie is kind of our generation's symbolic cultural artifact, for better or worse. – 25-year-old male, born in 1991

An arm extended outward, a camera phone in hand with its lens facing toward you, a click of a button, and instantly a picture is created. This immediate digital photographic self-portrait is known as the “selfie.” A selfie is defined as “a self-portrait usually taken with a digital camera or a camera phone in order to be shared with relevant others” (Lobinger and Brantner 2015, 1848). Since the invention and advances in social media in parallel with the invention and progressions in smart phones, selfies have become an increasingly popular social phenomenon that has rapidly become ubiquitous in contemporary culture.

Just about everywhere you go, you can see people taking selfies – your friends, your family members, your co-workers, celebrities, and even the President takes selfies.



Image 1: Obama Selfie (Fox News 2013)

Whether or not we like it, this popular social trend has become a part of our everyday lives. We not only consistently see people taking selfies at restaurants, tourist spots, or even in the comfort of their own homes, but we also see businesses apply the popularity of the selfie for their marketing campaigns.



Image 2: Heinz's "A Selfie For Good" Ketchup Bottle Label



Image 3: L'Occitane's "Selfie Moment Inside" Mall Store Front

Although people of all age groups take and post selfies, the millennial generation (adults born after 1982) or so-called “digital natives,” predominantly participate in this social trend (Howe and Strauss 2009; Pew Research Center 2014, 5). Millennials are not only the primary generation to take and post selfies, but this social trend has also become, as the quote above states, “a symbolic cultural artifact” for their generation. So much so, that when you type “millennials” into Google’s image search, the first image that appears is that of a group of people taking a selfie.

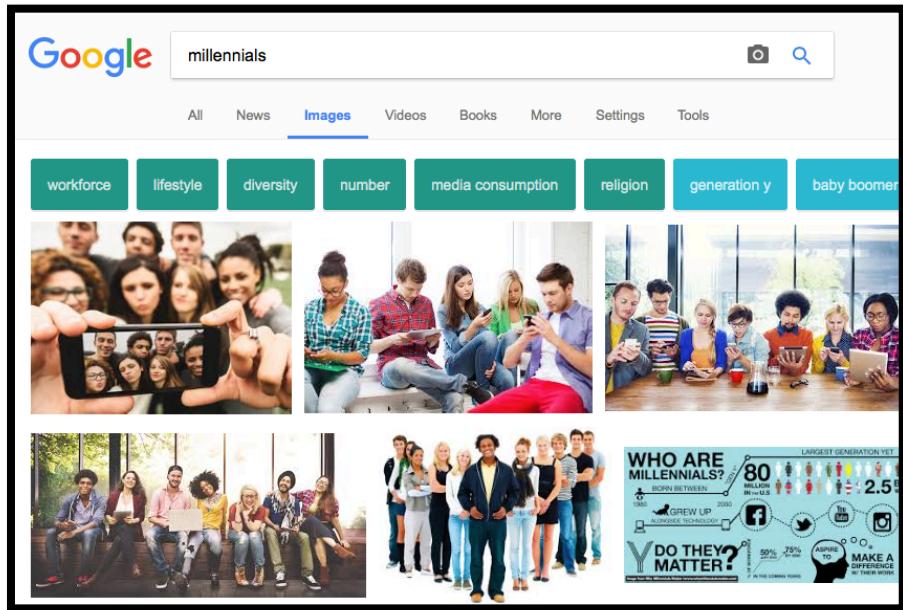


Image 4: Screen Shot of Google’s Image Search Results for “Millennials”

Their association with social networking sites and selfie posts has subjected the millennial generation to certain scrutiny. As their generation’s symbol, the selfie has been repeatedly used as one form of evidence to label millennials as the most narcissistic generation. As a result, scholars from many academic fields have produced literature either negating this perspective, or encouraging it (Mirzoeff 2016; Murray 2015; Tagg 2015; Twenge 2014).

As a member of the millennial generation, I have personally seen that selfies have become an iconic and regularly used genre of photography. I have also witnessed how the debate about what selfies represent has impacted how millennials take, post, and think about selfies. As I’ve watched the popularity of the selfie social phenomenon explode, I’ve become fascinated with how and why individuals in my generation regularly take selfies, and also why a fundamental part of taking selfies is posting them to social networking sites. From personal experiences, I began to see that to members of my

generation selfies are not simply digital photographs shared on social networking sites.

Rather, when placed on these sites, they become vehicles for communication that hold significant meaning for the people posting them.

Through their popularity, academics from a variety of fields have also recently begun to recognize that selfies have significant cultural and social implications. As this is a new field of inquiry, there is limited research on selfies. The few pioneer scholars who have researched this subject agree that selfies are visual forms of communication that “enable new modalities of visual conversation among those who exchange them” (Katz and Crocker 2015, 1861). Moreover, several of these researchers argue that selfies as vehicles for visual conversation should be “respected as valuable means of self-presentation and self-expression in today’s networked media cultures” (Lobinger and Brantner 2015, 1849).

Humans have always been social animals, but with advances in technology the ways people communicate with one another has continued to evolve. From the spoken word to written language, humans have constantly found new ways to communicate with one another. In the twenty-first century, social networking sites provide the platform for many of the innovative ways humans now connect. From Facebook “status updates,” to photo posts on Instagram, social networking sites’ design has fundamentally changed the ways people socialize. People no longer solely communicate through face-to-face conversations. Rather, with the invention of social networking sites coupled with mobile

devices that connect us to the Internet, people can instantly socialize with their friends and family anywhere, anytime.

Although the desire to socialize is one of the driving factors behind people's use of social networking sites, their design also plays a pivotal role in the ways people use them to self-present. Social networking sites are often structured using templates, or preformatted designs that are chosen for their users (Arola 2010). Today, the most popular template-driven social networking site worldwide is Facebook (Kirkpatrick 2011, 85). From the start, Facebook's template allowed users to easily and efficiently interact with friends and family with the simple creation of a profile page (Kirkpatrick 2011, 31). The content we post in order to create a profile on these template-driven sites encourages us not just to socialize, but also to self-present, or manage how others view our personal identities. In short, as users fill out Facebook's preformatted boxes asking them for personal information and to submit a profile picture, they are not just composing a Facebook profile. They are composing themselves into virtual existence. As social networking sites like Facebook have continued to progress by adding features allowing users to upload different types of content to their profile pages, the ways people self-present on these sites has also continued to change.

In the 21st century, we live in an extremely visual culture. As a result, the data we post on social networking sites like Facebook has become image-dominated (Kirkpatrick 2011, 156; Mirzoeff 2016, 12). Today, photos are an integral part of the online social experience (Duggan 2015, 2). According to a recent study, more than half of Internet

users post or share photos online (Duggan 2013, 1). The shift in user interest from text-based posts to image-based posts can be traced through Facebook's history. Facebook's early success was rooted in the inclusion of image-dominated features such as the "Profile Picture" and "Facebook Photos" (Kirkpatrick 2011, 155). As a result of the substantial popularity of Facebook's photo features, the desire to post more photos on social networking sites grew, causing Facebook to encounter competition from other image-dominated social networking sites and applications. One significant competitor was Instagram, a social networking application invented solely for posting photos. To eliminate this competition, Facebook purchased Instagram in 2012 (Instagram-Press 2012). As a result of their image-dominated features, Facebook and Instagram not only continue to be incredibly successful, but also influence users' interest in self-presenting online through photographs.

Today, one of the most popular forms of self-presentational photographs posted on the social networking sites Facebook and Instagram is the selfie. Although the selfie can be considered a revolutionary cultural artifact that is associated with millennials and according to some scholars denotes narcissism, others would argue that this designation is invalid. For example, digital anthropology, a new important sub-discipline of anthropology that specifically focuses on humans' relations to digital technology, argues that the digital world is simply an extension of the material world, and that human behavior online is neither more nor less significant than offline behavior (Horst and Miller 2012). Furthermore, digital anthropologists believe that the ways in which people use digital technology like social networking sites are a highly effective means for

understanding human behavior both offline and online (Horst and Miller 2012; Hill 2011).

By aligning myself with the specialization of digital anthropology, this thesis aims to explore the ways in which the millennial generation utilizes the popular social phenomenon of the selfie as a contemporary visual vernacular of self-presentation on the specific social media sites Facebook and Instagram. To accomplish this, my project utilizes an ethnographic and interview-based design, a folkloristic methodology through exploring selfies as personal narratives, and a holistic approach by combining a number of relevant theoretical frameworks and historical data to analyze my informants' interviews. Through these approaches, I argue that the selfie should be viewed as a form of self-presentation that takes place online.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Internet created a new means of connecting, and the World Wide Web fundamentally changed the ways people connected and communicated on the Internet. Although people often use these terms interchangeably, the Internet and the World Wide Web are actually distinct from one another. Invented by Tim-Berners-Lee in 1989, the World Wide Web (also known as “the Web”) is a “set of hyperlinked documents and pages *on* the Internet” (Han 2011, 18). The evolution of the structure of the Web is arguably divided into two interrelated periods: “Web 1.0,” and “Web 2.0.” The transition between the two periods showcases the major roles the Web has played not only as a means for accessing information, but also in creating a platform for people to socialize and self-present.

Berners-Lee’s original structure of the Web famously transformed the ways in which people acquired information on the Internet. Before the Web, the Internet was a prime technological resource that gave people access to information by interconnecting their computer networks. Although the Internet was a revolutionary invention during this time, using it was a tedious process. In order to acquire information from another computer network through the Internet, users would have to go through a number of pages hierarchically (step-by-step) in order to retrieve the information they needed. That is, until Berners-Lee invented the Web.

Berners-Lee developed the Web as a tool for users to quickly and easily exchange information between connected computer networks. His original vision was not really of

a commercial Web for everyday users, but a system that would help researchers utilize the Internet more efficiently. In 1989, he accomplished this by creating a “global hypertext system” that was designed to manage information (Han 2011, 22). By virtue of this system, information stored on computers everywhere was linked (McPherson 2009, 27). This meant that users could jump from page to page, not just on a single connected server, but across multiple unrelated servers using Berners-Lee’s Web browser (a software application installed on computers that is used to explore different websites). During the first years of the Web, which we retrospectively describe as “Web 1.0,” early adopters were largely using this technology to access information. In this way, Web 1.0 can be viewed as a period of “information consumption” (Han 2011, 24).

In 1991, Web 1.0 became accessible to the general public through affordable modem-equipped personal computers (PCs) that provided “a means for non-experts to get online” (Han 2011, 23). As these “non-experts” were accessing the Web from their PCs, more robust and user-friendly Web browsers began to compete with Berners-Lee’s original “World Wide Web” browser. In 1993 the first graphical Web browser known as Mosaic was released (Greenstein 2015, 110). Mosaic was designed to be an “easy-to-use browser for non-researchers,” and more importantly was “the first to get inline images working” (Greenstein 2015, 108-109).

Inline images are digital images that are embedded within the body of a Web page. Prior to Mosaic, Web browsers “had varieties of fonts and colors, but pictures were displayed in separate windows” (Greenstein 2015, 108-109). Mosaic’s inclusion of inline images

not only made it immensely popular, but also radically changed users' browsing experience by allowing them to view text and images on the same screen (Bendell et al. 2016, 311). Due to the release of affordable computers that connected the public to the Internet and Web browsers like Mosaic that allowed users to access the Web, Web 1.0 exploded in popularity in the mid-to-late 1990s.

The explosion of Web 1.0 between 1995 and 2000 is often identified as "the dot-com" or, "the IT (information technology) bubble" (Han 2011, 23). During this period, a number of new Internet service providers were launched, such as America Online, CompuServe, and Prodigy, that allowed more people to access the Web (Han 2011, 23). With a larger influx of people now online, these large corporations began to see the Web as an opportunity for economic growth. Instead of being solely used as a way for people to access information, "all attention became focused on e-commerce" (Lovink 2012, 4). The Web then became labeled as "the New Economy," and Web users were viewed "first and foremost [as] potential customers" (Lovink 2012, 4). Unfortunately for these companies, "the New Economy bubble burst into a cloud of scandals and bankruptcies in March of 2000, and the hyped-up dot-com entrepreneurs sprinted fast from the scene, and stocks never fully recovered" (Lovink 2012, 4). This failure became known as "the dot-com crash" (Lovink 2012, 5).

Web 1.0 shifted in structure and usage as a result of the dot-com crash in 2001, marking the beginning of what is known as the second period of the Web: "Web 2.0" (Han 2011).

With the horror of the dot-com crash still lingering, Internet service companies realized that in order to save the New Economy, “their focus had to shift from e-commerce” to “a more ‘participatory culture’” where “users had the final say” (Lovink 2012, 4). Internet service companies then altered their interfaces to endorse a new Web described as “Web 2.0,” where user sociality and information production was promoted, rather than information and economic consumption (Han 2011). For example, Yahoo launched Geocities, which allowed people to create personal Web pages. Shortly after, these personal Web pages gave way to online diaries like LiveJournal and, eventually, blogs. In addition, Wikipedia is often cited as being “somewhat of an allegory of Web 2.0,” as it showcases some of the distinguishing features of Web 2.0 such as, “it is easy to use, it facilitates sociality, and it provides users with free publishing and production platforms that allow them to upload content in any form, be it pictures, videos, or text” (Lovink 2012, 5). Through these distinctive features, sites like Wikipedia “paved the way for ‘collective Web content generation’ and ‘social media,’ two of the most significant aspects of Web 2.0” (Han 2011, 25).

Although social networking sites do not encompass all of what Web 2.0 is, they are often considered its most distinguishing feature (and asset). Social networking sites are “loosely defined as an online service allowing users to create an online profile and build communities” (Arola 2010, 5). Their design represents some key components of Web 2.0 such as: “the Web as platform, the Web as participation, and the Web as collaboration” (Arola 2010, 5). Pinpointing the exact start date of social networking sites is challenging, as “the Web and the Internet have always had a social aspect” (Han 2011, 24). Most

studies state that the first recognizable social networking site was known as “Six Degrees.” Created in 1997, the site “enabled users to upload a profile and make friends with other users” (Hendricks 2013). Subsequent to Six Degrees, some of the most famous social networking sites were created in the early 2000s, including LinkedIn, Photobucket, Flickr and MySpace (Hendricks 2013). Only a few years later, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter launched, profoundly impacting the ways people connected and communicated on the Web in the years to follow (Hendricks 2013).

The rise in popularity of social networking sites on Web 2.0 is rooted in their template design. Building on the initial appeal of the non-expert and user-friendly features of Web 2.0, social networking sites use “preformatted templates designed by the site’s creators” (Arola 2010, 6). In short, through social networking sites’ template design, users’ personal pages are pre-structured for them. In the case of the social networking site Facebook, users could create profile pages by simply filling out a series of boxes such as their age, gender, relationship status, etc. Although there is some agency in the type of data people post to their pages, the arrangement of their data is pre-determined by the site and homogenous across all user pages. For example, if a user wants to upload an image to their Facebook profile page, there are designated spots to do so, but the user cannot change the location where their image appears. When social networking sites initially launched, users enjoyed their template design because unlike on Web 1.0, “Web users who want an online presence do not need to code a web site” (Arola 2010, 5). These user-friendly template structures are still a fundamental reason for social networking sites’ continued success.

Facebook is currently the most popular and largest social networking site worldwide (Kirkpatrick 2011, 84). Since the site's emergence in 2004, Facebook has been a prominent part of people's lives. As of December 2016, Facebook reported it had 1.23 billion daily active users (Facebook Newsroom 2017). It is also reported that in the United States alone, roughly 79% of adult Internet users use Facebook, and 76% of those individuals report that they return to the site on a daily basis (Greenwood et al. 2016, 3). By exploring Facebook's history, its current success can be traced back to its evolving template design.

Inventor and Harvard student Mark Zuckerberg launched the site originally under the name "Thefacebook" in February, 2004 (Kirkpatrick 2011, 14; Facebook Newsroom 2017). The site initially only allowed Harvard students with an ".edu" email account to register. During this time, the site identified its purpose in the following statement:

Thefacebook is an online directory that connects people through social networks at colleges. We have opened up Thefacebook for popular consumption at Harvard University. You can use Thefacebook to: Search for people at your school; Find out who are in your classes; Look up your friends' friends; See a visualization of your social network (Kirkpatrick 2011, 30).

In order to connect on these social networks, Thefacebook required users to create a profile page by submitting a "profile picture" along with other personal information that included the user's name, age, Harvard student email address, sex, relationship status, political views, personal interests, etc. (Kirkpatrick 2011, 31). Through these features and user-friendly template design, Thefacebook registered 650 Harvard students within only four days of launching (Kirkpatrick 2011, 30). Building on its strong appeal with Harvard students, in March of 2004, Thefacebook expanded to include other colleges such as

Stanford, Columbia, and Yale (Facebook Newsroom 2017). Since the site was designed to connect users with others in their personal college networks, users did not have access to profiles outside of their college. Then a new feature was added that would play an immense role in the initial success of the company: cross-campus linking. With this feature, users could search for mutual friends whom they could then “add” as “friends,” or give each other access to their personal pages (Kirkpatrick 2011, 37). By the summer of 2004, Thefacebook grew to from 650 members to 200,000 (Kirkpatrick 2011, 86).

With its exponential growth in popularity within these few college networks, Thefacebook added more features that were essential to the company’s continued success. In September of 2004, Thefacebook added the “Wall,” or a central place on users’ profile pages that allowed their friends to publicly post messages (Kirkpatrick 2011, 92). This feature was not only frequently used, but attracted a substantial number of new users. Just three months later, in December of 2004, the company grew to one million users (Facebook Newsroom 2017). Exactly one year later, in September of 2005, the company expanded to not only support more than 800 college networks, but also began to support high school networks (Facebook Newsroom 2017). During this time, it was reported that “85% of American college students were users, and 60% of users returned to the site daily” (Kirkpatrick 2011, 149). In order to keep up with the company’s growing user base, Thefacebook obtained funding from a series of investors. In October of 2005, leading investor Sean Parker suggested the company drop the “the” and become formally known as Facebook (Facebook Newsroom 2017). From that point forward, “Facebook” became a household name and a powerhouse social networking site.

Facebook not only changed its name, but also continued to refine its original features to include ways for users to customize and modify their profiles (Kirkpatrick 2011, 153). Although other original features also played a pivotal role in the company's growing success, the profile picture attracted the most user interest. For example, "though you were allowed only one profile photo, students were frequently changing that photo, sometimes more than once a day" (Kirkpatrick 2011, 154). Since the profile picture was consistently being interacted with, Facebook recognized that users "clearly wanted to be able to post more photos" (Kirkpatrick 2011, 154). Thus, in October of 2005, Facebook launched "Facebook Photos," a feature that allowed users to post a series of photos in "albums" (Facebook Newsroom 2017). In addition, photos posted on Facebook could now be "tagged" with people who were confirmed "friends" (Kirkpatrick 2011, 154).

After Facebook Photos launched, it "became the most popular photo site on the Internet and the most popular feature on Facebook" (Kirkpatrick 2011, 155). During this time, many Facebook users shifted from writing posts in the form of status updates and/or writing on friends' walls, to posting photos because they were considered "basic forms of communication" (Kirkpatrick 2011, 155). "With Facebook Photos, your friends – your social graph – provided more information, context, and a sense of companionship" (Kirkpatrick 2011, 156). With the introduction of these photo features, "Facebook executives were seeing the Facebook Effect in action themselves" (Kirkpatrick 2011, 156). For example, Aaron Sittig, a Facebook employee who oversaw the user interface and design during the launch of Facebook Photos, stated, "'Pretty quickly we learned

people were sharing these photos to basically say, ‘I consider these people part of my life, and I want to show everyone I’m close to them’” (Kirkpatrick 2011, 155). Additionally, primary investor Parker explained, “‘Watching what happened with photos was a key part of what led Mark’s vision to crystalize. He was formulating a broader and broader theory about what Facebook really was’” (Kirkpatrick 2011, 157).

Because of their users’ continued interests in photos, in 2011 Facebook completely changed the layout of users’ profile pages to be even more photo-centered through the launch of “Timeline.” According to Facebook, the original profile page was, “pretty basic – just your name, a photo, where you went to school...stuff you’d cover in the first five minutes you met someone” (Tow 2011).



Image 5: Example of Facebook Profile Page Before Timeline

Therefore, Facebook altered users’ profile pages to be a “Timeline,” allowing users to view all of their previous posts by scrolling. Most importantly though, as Facebook stated, Timeline was an improved version of the old profile page because it was “wider than your old profile, and it’s a lot more visual” (Tow 2011). “The first thing you’ll notice

is the giant photo right at the top. This is your cover, and it's completely up to you which of your photos you put here" (Tow 2011).



Image 6: Example of Facebook's Timeline Cover Photo Feature

With the launch of Timeline, and changes to the profile page that included “cover photos,” users’ pages became extremely image dominant.

Due to the popularity of posting photos on Facebook, people began using other photo-centered social media applications such as Instagram, an exclusively photo sharing and video sharing social networking service. As an individual who studied and had a passion for photography, Kevin Systrom and his business partner Mike Krieger came up with the idea for Instagram in 2010. Systrom’s Instagram was no ordinary photo application (Swisher 2013). Its design was sleek, simple, and most importantly, focused solely on photos. Moreover, unlike Facebook, Instagram included a key feature that quickly became an important part of visual culture: the “filter” (Rettberg 2014, 457). Instagram’s filters allow users to add an overlay to their photos that changes their appearance. For example, the “Clarendon” filter makes users’ images appear more “blue.”

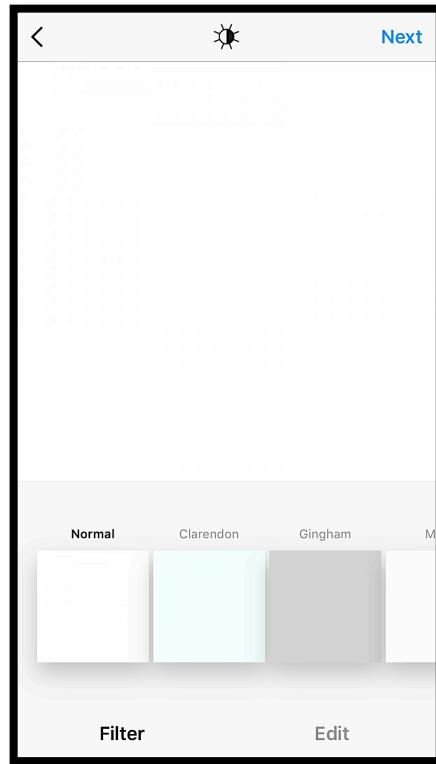


Image 7: Screen Shot of Instagram's Current Filter Selection Screen

In addition to filters, Instagram later included a basic picture-editing tool so that users could edit their images within the application before posting. This editor allows users to change their images' sharpness, brightness, contrast, saturation, warmth, color, highlights, shadows, etc.

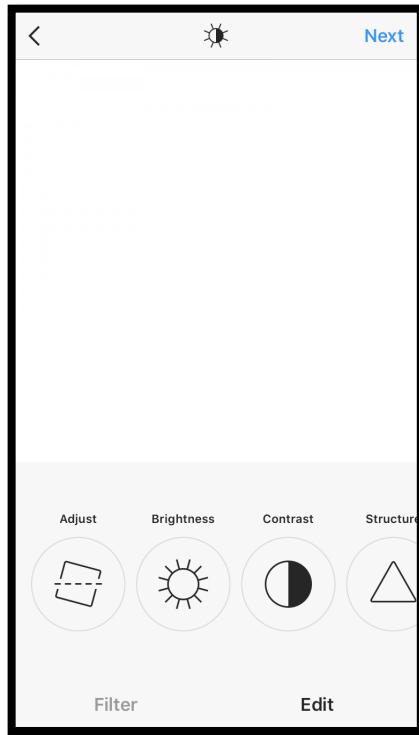


Image 8: Screen Shot of Instagram’s Current Photo Editor Screen

Although filters and editing already existed on other photo sharing applications, “Instagram was one of the first sites to really popularize filters” (Rettberg 2014, 457). This innovative feature and the simple, user-friendly design made Instagram immediately successful. On its first day, 25,000 people created accounts (Instagram-Press 2010). One year later, in December of 2011, Apple awarded Instagram the award for “App of the Year,” as the company grew to have 14 million users who reportedly posted 400 million images worldwide (Instagram-Press 2011).

Instagram’s photo-centered application quickly became a significant competitor for Facebook. “Zuckerberg had to pay attention to the rising tide of Instagram, especially since photo uploading had been a key element of Facebook’s own initial surge in popularity” (Swisher 2013). In order to keep its place as the number one photo site,

Facebook purchased Instagram in April of 2012 for one billion dollars (Swisher 2013).

Zuckerberg stated that, ““providing the best photo sharing experience is one reason why so many people love Facebook and we knew it would be worth bringing these two companies together”” (Hill 2012). Instagram assured users that even though Facebook now owned Instagram, it would still remain a separate application, by stating:

The Instagram app will still be the same one you know and love. You’ll still have all the same people you follow and that follow you. You’ll still be able to share to other social networks. And you’ll still have all the other features that make the app so fun and unique (Instagram-Press 2012).

The merging of the two companies proved to be a wise decision. In June of 2012, just two months after the merger, Instagram grew to “80 million registered users who have shared nearly 4 billion photos” (Instagram-Press 2012). Under Facebook, Instagram continues to be a very successful social media application today, with a reported 600 million users (Instagram-Press 2017). Further, in 2016 it was reported that around one-third of adults online in the United States use Instagram (Greenwood et al. 2016, 5).

Today, both sites have continued to center their features on photo posts in order to keep up with users’ interest in posting images rather than text. According to a recent study, users expressed that seeing their Facebook friends’ photos and videos was the main reason they used Facebook (Smith 2014, 3). Additionally, it was reported that people post more photos than other forms of data because photo posts tend to get significantly more engagement than links, videos, or text-based updates (Redsicker 2014). Due to this trend, both applications have continued to add more photo-centered features. For example, similarly to Facebook’s historical shift from the individual profile picture to Facebook Photos, on February 22, 2017 Instagram announced that they have updated the

application allowing users to post up to ten photos per post (Instagram-Press 2017). Instagram described this feature by stating, “With this update, you no longer have to choose the single best photo or video from an experience you want to remember. Now, you can combine up to 10 photos and videos in one post and swipe through to see them all” (Instagram-Press 2017). As both sites have continued to incorporate more photo-centered features, it is clear that photo posts have not only perpetuated both sites’ popularity, but can also be used to understand the ways people use these sites.

Facebook and Instagram’s mission statements clearly place their emphasis on social connection. Facebook states its mission is to “give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected” (Facebook-Newsroom 2017). In the same statement, Facebook asserts that people mainly use the site to “stay connected with friends and family, to discover what’s going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them” (Facebook-Newsroom 2017). Similarly, Instagram sets forth its mission as, “to strengthen relationships through shared experiences” (Instagram-Press 2017). Through these statements, it is clear that both sites emphasize sociality as not only their main purpose, but as the reason people use these sites. Their stress on the cultivation of social bonds neglects the other central reasons these sites are used. By exploring both Instagram and Facebook’s design aesthetics and usability, it becomes evident that these sites are used for more than social interaction.

As mentioned, Facebook and Instagram’s mission statements first state that the sites allow their users to “stay connected with family and friends”/“strengthen relationships.”

They follow this by implying that their users accomplish this through “sharing and expressing what matters to them” / “sharing experiences.” What is overlooked in their mission statements is that in order to share anything on these sites, users must *first* create a personal profile by filling out their sites’ templates. What we often fail to recognize is that both Facebook and Instagram’s specific template designs actually make their interfaces “rhetorical,” in the sense that the template design is intended to persuade users to fill out specific types of personal information to their online forms. Through filling out this personal information, users aren’t just composing a Facebook profile or an Instagram page. According to dana boyd (whose name is purposefully in lower case), by posting these types of data, users of social networking sites like Facebook and Instagram “write themselves and their community into being” (2007, 2). That is, “comprising a profile is an act of comprising the self” (Arola 2010, 8). Therefore, it is important to understand that the information people share to their profile pages is not solely used to cultivate social bonds, but is also used to self-present. To further argue and understand this, it is important to explore two things: What types of information do users share? And, more importantly, why?

As seen in Facebook’s history, its template was not only focused on photo posts from the start, but is the reason photos have continued to be the number one form of data people post to their pages. For example, in order to create a profile, Facebook’s template included a place for users to upload a “profile picture.” The profile picture was (and still is) located at the top left corner of the user’s profile page, and “given that users tend to read left-to-right and top-to-bottom, the profile picture will most likely be the first place

the eyes go” (Arola 2010, 8). Furthermore, with the addition of cover photos, users’ profile pages are now completely photo-centered. As we reviewed, these photo features played a central role in Facebook’s success, and a later influence on the creation and partnership with Instagram. Since photo posts are historically the most popular form of data users post to both their Facebook and Instagram profiles, they can be used to explore the ways people use these sites to self-present, or regulate the ways others perceive them.

One prominent type of photograph people share on Facebook and Instagram today is “the selfie.” The selfie is defined as a “self-portrait usually taken with a digital camera or a camera phone in order to be shared with relevant others” (Lobinger and Brantner 2015, 1848). According to this definition, the selfie can be understood by exploring its two defining characteristics: taking and sharing.

Taking selfies is considered a form of self-portraiture because they are always “taken by the person who is the subject of that image” (Katz and Crocker 2015, 1862). Although this self-portrait attribute is what makes selfies a specific category of photography, a selfie does not have to be an image of exclusively the individual taking the picture to be classified as a selfie. In fact, there are multiple types of selfies besides an “individual selfie,” (selfies of only the person taking the picture). Examples include: “mirror selfies” (selfies of the person taking the picture in a mirror, alone or together with other individuals), “pet selfies” (selfies of the person taking the picture and an animal), “dual selfies” (selfies of the person taking the picture and another individual), “group selfies” (selfies of the person taking the picture and two or more other individuals), “celebrity

“selfies” (selfies of the person taking the picture with a celebrity), etc. In addition to types of selfies, selfie taking has its own signature style. For instance, “the selfie is almost always taken from within an arm’s length of the subject taking the photo,” creating a “near-constant visual presence of one of the photographer’s arms, typically the one holding the camera” (Saltz 2014, 2). Therefore, such photographs “reflect on how they are made” (Westgeest and Van Gelder 2011, 201).

Since the photographer’s arm is usually the instrument used to take selfies, and smartphones are typically the camera used, certain techniques have been developed to take selfies. For example, “the wide-angle lens on most cell-phone cameras exaggerates the depth of noses and chins, and the arm holding the camera often looks huge” (Saltz 2014, 2). Therefore, many people take their selfies from a high angle to combat the bad perspective the camera-phone causes. Today, tools like the “Selfie Stick” have been invented to further alleviate this issue, as they allow the photographers to hold their smartphones at a further distance.



Image 9: Selfie Stick (Platform Reporters 2016)

Other techniques are also considered highly important when taking selfies, such as “finding the best light,” as more light can lead to a clearer photo and is even considered a technique to hide personal flaws.

Sharing or posting selfies to social networking sites like Facebook and Instagram is not only part of their definition, but is also often argued to be their central purpose. In Jerry Saltz’ article, “At Arm’s Length: A History of the Selfie,” he notes that selfies’ “primary purpose is to be seen here, now, by other people, most of them unknown, in social networks” (2014, 2). In addition, the act of sharing selfies to social networking sites is directly correlated to their rise in social significance. After Facebook’s purchase of Instagram, the two social networking sites have become the most popular place for people to post selfies. For example, last year it was reported that “Facebook was named the most popular platform for selfies,” and in 2013, 184 million pictures were tagged “selfie” on Instagram alone (Pilon 2016; Mirzoeff 2016, 29).

Although social networking sites have played the largest role in the increase in prevalence of selfies, the inclusion of cameras in smart phones has also been a significant factor. “It was the introduction of smartphones – most crucially the iPhone 4, which came along in 2010 with a front-facing camera – that made the selfie go viral” (Day 2013). Today, a large portion of the United States population owns smartphones such as the iPhone 4. In 2014, it was reported that 500 million people used iPhones, with a million new phones sold every three days (Mirzoeff 2016, 66). Since the iPhone 4, almost all smartphones, including the latest iPhone 7, come equipped with two built-in cameras: one on the back of the phone facing outward, and one facing the front. As the quality of the

front-facing camera improved, “selfies could now be taken outside or using a flash without the resulting burst of light dominating the picture, as it did in pictures taken in the mirror” (Mirzoeff 2016, 63). In addition, smartphones today include software that allows their users to easily download applications such as Facebook and Instagram. Therefore, “since people were starting to carry cell phones with built in cameras, users could instantly take a picture to record something that happened, then put it on Facebook to tell friends about it” (Kirkpatrick 2011, 155).

Social networking sites and camera phones not only popularized the selfie, but also played a large role in the dissemination of the word itself. The first appearance of the word “selfie” was posted in an Australian man’s caption for a photo of his injured lip on a social media site in September of 2002 (Pearlman 2013).



Image 10: “The First Selfie” (Pearlman 2013)

The caption stated, ““Um, drunk at a mates 21st, I tripped ofer [sic] and landed lip first (with front teeth coming a very close second) on a set of steps. I had a hole about 1cm long right through my bottom lip. And sorry about the focus, it was a *selfie*”” (qtd. in Pearlman 2013). After this Australian man’s use of the word “selfie” on his post, usage of the word quickly spread (OxfordWords Blog 2013). By 2013 it had become so

widespread, that the *Oxford English Dictionary* website selected “selfie” as word of the year because the “language research conducted by Oxford Dictionary’s editors” revealed that “the frequency of the word *selfie* in the English language has increased by 17,000% since this time last year” (OxfordWords Blog 2013).

Although selfies have been popularized through their use on social networking sites, the concept of the selfie is not new, but is actually rooted in art history. The selfie can be viewed as the “the self-portrait of the digital age” (Day 2013). Communication scholar Nicholas Mirzoeff argues, “The selfie resonates not because it is new, but because it expresses, develops, expands, and intensifies the long history of the self-portrait” (2016, 29). For centuries, artists have been producing self-portraits. For example, in the fifteenth century, Spanish painter Diego Velázquez’s masterpiece *Las Meninas* (1656) was one of the first paintings of its time in which the artist didn’t just paint a portrait of the King or Queen, but rather included himself in his painting of the King. Although *Las Meninas* is a renowned work of art for a number of reasons, Velázquez’s choice to include himself in the painting “makes a tremendous claim for the power of the artist, both literally and metaphorically,” as “the remarkable skill of the piece makes it clear that the painter is capable of accomplishments that others are not” (Mirzoeff 2016, 31). Like Velázquez’s accomplishment in *Las Meninas*, self-portraits became recognized as the works of highly gifted and revered artists (Mirzoeff 2016, 37).

With their reputation as works demonstrating the superior skill of the artist, self-portraits became increasingly popular in the years to follow. Digital culture scholar Jill Rettberg

notes that, “In the eighteenth century, artists’ self-portraits became fashionable collectors’ items, and towards the end of the twentieth century, artists have increasingly used their own bodies in their art” (2014, 8). Moving into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the ways artists utilized their own bodies and faces in their art expanded as a variety of art forms surfaced. Rettberg argues, “some of the most interesting pre-digital self-portraits in our context are those created by early photographers” (2014, 8). During the postmodern period (1977-2001) many artists began using personal image-making technologies as social critiques. For example, Cindy Sherman was a renowned New York artist during this time “whose awareness of feminism, combined with her DIY photographic aesthetics inspired a new generation of artists, writers, and academics” who became known as the “Picture Generation” (Mirzoeff 2016, 51). In her work, she photographed herself “in an ever-changing variety of poses and attitudes to explore how we make ourselves and make our gender” (Mirzoeff 2016, 51).

Due to the influence of social networking sites coupled with advances in smartphone technology, selfies have taken over as the self-portrait of the twenty-first century. One difference between selfies and past photographic self-portraits is the accessibility of these technologies. People no longer need to be expert photographers, or skilled painters to produce a self-portrait; they only need a smart phone with a built in camera. As these new technologies became widely available, selfies have become an ordinary form of self-portraiture that is omnipresent in contemporary culture.

Today, the selfie is not only ubiquitous in contemporary Western culture, but has become an iconic form of digital photography often associated with the millennial generation.

Neil Howe and William Strauss are believed to have coined the term “millennial” in their book, *Generations: The History of America’s Future, 1584 to 2069* (1991). In this book and their later book, *Millennials Rising* (2000), Howe and Strauss originally defined millennials as individuals “born in or after 1982 – the ‘Babies on Board’ of the early Reagan years, the ‘Have You Hugged Your Child Today?’ sixth graders of the early Clinton years, the teens of Columbine, and this year, the much-touted high school class of 2000” (2000, 4). Unlike Howe and Strauss’ (2000) definition of millennials that focused on the key trends and events of a specific time period, today millennials are primarily defined by their avid use of digital technologies. For example, millennials are also referred to as “Digital Natives,” or “the only generation for which these new technologies are not something they’ve had to adapt to” (Pew Research Center 2014, 5).

As the primary users of digital technologies, it is not surprising that millennials, or Digital Natives, are the primary generation to take and post selfies. According to the Pew Research Center in its comprehensive study, “Millennials in Adulthood: Detached from Institutions, Networked With Friends,” the millennial generation is more likely than any other generation to post selfies (2014, 6). In addition, the study reported that “about eight-in-ten millennials (81%) know what a selfie is, and 55% have shared a selfie on a photo sharing or social networking site such as Facebook, Instagram, or Snapchat” (2014, 48). Through their affiliation with the selfie, it has become the millennial generation’s symbolic cultural artifact.

Contemporary scholars have often argued that as the number one generation to take and post selfies, the definition of the selfie implies something about the millennial generation. This juxtaposition has not only branded millennials, but has introduced a new debate in the academic fields that analyze this generation: Does consistent use of the selfie say something positive or negative about the millennial generation? On the negative side, since millennials frequently take and share selfies, some scholars argue that their constant production of self-focused images indicates that they are self-absorbed. For example, psychologist Jean Twenge, whose work especially focuses on the millennial generation, labels them as “Generation Me” because she claims they are “the most narcissistic generation in history” (2014, 96). She argues that millennials’ narcissism is in part linked to their fervent social media usage because, “people who spend more time on social networking sites [are] more likely to suffer personality disorders such as narcissistic personality disorder” (Twenge 2014, 104). Since millennials are the predominant generation to use social networking sites and also to post selfies, some scholars hold up their selfie posts as prime example of their narcissism.

On the opposing side, some scholars argue that selfie posts are not always narcissistic. Rather, selfies “encompass a wide range of use and intention” (Katz and Crocker 2015, 1870). Mirzoeff argues that, “selfies are, like them or not, all about sharing” and are invitations “to others to like or dislike what you have made and to participate in visual conversation” (2016, 65). Author Derek Conrad Murray has explored the fascination with selfies in contemporary culture and argues that, “the selfie has become a powerful means for self-expression, encouraging its makers to share the most intimate and private

moments of their lives – as well as engage in a form of creative self-fashion-ing” (2015, 490). These scholars argue that, viewed in this way, selfies are “not so much showing off as seeking reassurance from one’s online network” (Tagg 2015, 63).

In this chapter, I have demonstrated the ways in which the evolution of social networking sites not only influenced the popularization of selfies, but more importantly shaped millennials’ association with them, leading to the question of what selfies represent today. As shown throughout this history, the “rhetorical” template interfaces of both Facebook and Instagram have played a major role in the promotion of self-presentational photo posts. These interfaces were created in the context of the market’s response to the dot-com crash, but were themselves shaped by users’ increasing interest in more self-presentational posts like photos. Selfies are one main form of self-presentational photo post that may exist strictly in the digital world, but their concept predates digital technology. As shown throughout art history, the concept of the selfie as a self-portrait has always been around. They are only considered “new” and, “tied to the Millennial generation” because they are posting these photographs and “using formats that make no sense to older generations” (Mirzoeff 2016, 63). Therefore, before we could understand how the selfie shapes meaning for the millennial generation, we had to first explore the history that led to the popularization of the selfie among this generation. With this context, we will now explore the ways the concept of the selfie aligns with self-presentational theories *offline*, and how these theoretical frameworks can be applied to analyze how and why the selfie holds significant social meaning for the millennial generation *online*.

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although social networking sites were primarily designed as a tool for people to socially interact, we should be equally aware that these sites were also designed as a way for their users to reflect upon themselves. Users' do not post content to their profiles to simply connect with relevant others; they also post to self-present, or manage the ways others perceive their personal identity. Personal identity is used to describe "the self," or "a set of traits and characteristics that are assigned to a particular person" (McKendree 2010, 545). When viewed in this way, personal identity is "tied to individual autonomy and the values, qualities, attributes, and personality characteristics that make the individual unique" (McKendree 2010, 545). As previously mentioned, photos are not only currently the most popular form of data posted to social networking sites, but they can also be viewed as a form of data people share to self-present online. Today, the selfie is one of the most popular types of photo posts on social networking sites, which scholars have only recently begun to define as a "new means of communicating the self and articulating a sense of connection to others" (Hess 2015, 1629).

Although selfies are defined as a new means of communicating the self, digital anthropologists argue that selfies are only considered "new" forms of communication because they exist in the digital world. Digital anthropology can be defined as "an emerging field focused on the Internet-related transformations that make possible a whole array of new social phenomena" (Boellstorff 2013). In addition, "research in this exciting

domain demonstrates anthropology's relevance and provides valuable perspectives regarding the relationship between technology and culture" (Boellstorff 2013). Digital anthropologists Heather Horst and Daniel Miller emphasize that digital anthropologists aren't focused on these new technological developments in the digital world. Rather, they use the digital world to "further our understanding of what we are and what we have always been" (2012, 3). They argue that the materiality of the digital world is "neither more nor less material than worlds that proceeded them" (Horst and Miller 2012, 3). Thus, "the digital should and can be a highly effective means for reflecting upon what it means to be human, the ultimate task of anthropology" (Horst and Miller 2012, 3).

According to another digital anthropologist, danah boyd, the ways people interact with technology in the digital world should not be viewed as a "cultural game changer" (qtd in Hill 2012). Rather, she argues that humans are simply finding ways online to replicate offline behavior (Hill 2011). For example, in a *Forbes* article that features an interview with boyd, she states, "Technology simply mirrors and magnifies all sorts of things we see in everyday life – and that's good, bad and ugly" (qtd. in Hill 2011). Through these digital anthropological lenses, it can be argued that there are not major differences between the ways people interact with one another online versus offline. Therefore, the ways people use selfies to self-present online can be compared to the ways people self-present offline.

Cultural anthropologist Martin Sökefeld (1999) asserts that anthropologists tend to underestimate the significance of the self, due to the field's approach to exploring their

subjects' identity as shared with others and derived from a culture, instead of a self (1999, 418). He argues that without understanding the concept of personal identity, you cannot understand how individuals define their identity within their societies (Sökefeld 1999, 418). Therefore, Sökefeld (1999) argues that the concept of personal identity is not only important in understanding how people define themselves within their cultures, but how their cultures influence their personal identity.

Sökefeld's (1999) argument can be utilized to understand how people's social networking posts can be defined as presentations of the self, and how social networking sites' design influences the ways in which people communicate their personal identity. As noted, social networking sites are designed to connect people to their social groups, but in order to do so, users must first create a personal profile. These profile pages are designed using templates, and these templates encourage people to post personal information. This posted personal information can be viewed as presentations of users' personal identity. Therefore, "in order to participate in online social networking, individuals have no choice but to represent themselves" (Enil and Thumim 2012, 88).

There is little agency in the format of personal information users post to social networking sites,' because those sites' templates only allow users to post certain types of content in certain places on their profiles (for example, in a place designated for a profile picture on Facebook, users can only post photographic content). Yet, since social networking sites are designed to connect people to their social groups, the personal information people post to their profile pages is viewed and interacted with. Since users

understand that others can view and interact with their posts, even if they cannot manage the format of the information, they do manage the content of the personal information they post to their profile pages. This management of the personal content they post is therefore considered self-presentational.

Self-presentation is not unique to digital technology. For example, one of the major ways people self-present is through personal narratives. According to communication specialist Charla L. Markham Shaw, “it is clear that one form that self-presentation may take is the telling of a personal narrative” (1997, 303). The concept of personal narrative has been defined and utilized by many scholars, but is most famously defined by folkloristics scholar Sandra Dolby (1989) in her seminal book *Literary Folkloristics and the Personal Narrative*. Dolby defines the personal narrative as, “a prose narrative relating a personal experience; it is usually told in first person” (1989, 15). In addition, Dolby argues that personal narratives should be viewed as a folkloric genre because they are traditional, meaning their “values or attitudes reflected in the stories are culturally shared and thus traditional” (1989, 16). Using Dolby’s (1989) definition, Shaw argues “the presentation of self takes the form of personal narrative when our memories take shape through language” (Shaw 1997, 303). For example, “stories may be told for the job of telling, as an effort to relive the past, or as presentations of the self” (Bennett 1986; Shaw 1997, 303). As with the study of personal narratives, scholars have explored for decades the ways in which humans self-present in social interactions; thus “many of the current self-presentational theories were developed at a time when the Internet was not invented or in use” (Zarghooni 2007, 6). Seminal scholars Erving Goffman and Mark Leary are the

most prominent theorists to analyze how humans self-present during face-to-face social interactions.

Goffman's (1959) "Dramaturgical Approach" uses a metaphor that is referred to as "the dramaturgical model of social life" to explore the ways individuals in society self-present during everyday social interactions. The metaphor he specifically utilizes is "all the world's a stage" to portray the importance and context of human social interactions. Through this metaphor, Goffman (1959) argues that social interaction is like the theater as a whole and that people in everyday life are like the "actors" who "perform" their personal identity. Further, he claims that the actors' personal identity can shift as they interact with their "audience," which refers to those who observe and critique the actors' "performances." Overall, he believed that by comparing everyday social interactions to the theater, we recognize that these performances could be viewed as a form of "impression management," or as self-presentational.

Goffman's (1959) Dramaturgical Approach includes several structural parts that demonstrate the ways social interactions are used to self-present. The first part is Goffman's (1959) definition of "performances." He uses the term "performance" as a metaphor for the way an individual acts in front of a particular set of observers, or audiences. He argues that during these performances, the individual/actor solidifies their personal identity through the audience's interaction with their performance. For example, Goffman notes, "when an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them" (1959, 17). He argues that the

exchanges of information during these performances are either accepted or rejected by the audience, therefore confirming or dismissing the actor's identity.

According to Goffman (1959), the place where actors perform for their audiences in the hopes of solidifying their identity is known as "the front stage." Goffman defines the front stage as the "part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance" (1959, 22). He breaks the front stage into two "standard parts" (Goffman 1959, 22). The first part is "the setting," which he defines as, "the physical layout, and other background items which supply the scenery" such as furniture, props, décor, etc. (Goffman 1959, 22). The second part is what Goffman labels as "the personal front," or "items that we most intimately identify with the performer" (1959, 24). These personal items include the performer's "appearance" and "manner" (Goffman 1959, 24). In Goffman's paradigm (1959), the performer's "appearance" refers to the actor's performed social status/social state to the audience. The performer's "manner" is used to describe how the performer plays a role (for example, if the actor is angry, receptive, apologetic, etc.). Goffman (1959) explains that all of these parts on the front stage must operate together in order for the audience to accept the actor's performance. To gain acceptance of their performance, Goffman (1959) adds, actors are constantly managing their impressions for their audiences.

Goffman's (1959) framework notes that there is a place where actors do not have to manage their impressions. This is known as "the backstage" or, "a place where the

impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted" (1959, 112). The backstage is distinguishable from the front stage because the audience is no longer present. To Goffman (1959), the specific location of the backstage is equally as important as the front stage because they are still connected – however the backstage is divided from the front stage by a partition, not only blocking off the audience from viewing the actor, but forbidding them from intruding. The fact that the front stage and backstage are adjacent to each other is beneficial to the actor because it allows the actor to not only receive backstage assistance during his/her performance, but to easily access the backstage so that the actor can interrupt his/her performance for momentary relaxation (Goffman 1959, 113). He notes that on the backstage, the actor can perform however they desire, as the role they are designed to play in front of the audience is no longer necessary. Consequently, without the presence of the audience on the backstage, no impression management is required.

Leary's (1995) seminal work builds on Goffman's (1959) impression management notion by specifically investigating the ways human behavior is impacted by people's concerns with their self-presentations. To Leary, "human beings have a persuasive and ongoing concern with their self-presentations" (1995, xiii). Like Goffman (1959), he asserts that when people are in social settings, it is rare for individuals to be completely devoid of their concerns for how they are being perceived and evaluated by others (Leary 1995, 38). As a result of this, he argues that human beings' concerns with others' perceptions of them will not only limit what they are willing to do, but also underlie and pervade nearly every encounter of interpersonal life (Leary 1995, 1-2).

According to Leary, self-presentation is a form of impression management, as self-presentation is simply “the process of controlling how one is perceived by other people” (1995, 2). He argues that contrary to what most believe, impression management is not a negative product of vanity or insecurity. Rather, Leary argues that, “paying an appropriate degree of attention to others’ impressions is healthy and adaptive” (1995, 2). Further, he believes that if individuals in society did not pay attention to or have any regard for others’ perceptions of them, their quality of life would suffer. He notes that although impression management is only one of the many reasons behind people’s behaviors during social interactions, “virtually any behavior can serve self-presentational goals” (Leary 1995, 37).

Leary (1995) proceeds to discuss the wide array of “self-presentational tactics” people utilize to manage their impressions on other people (Leary 1995, 37). Leary (1995) believes that there are eight self-presentational tactics common in everyday social settings. These include:

- 1) Self-descriptions (describing oneself in ways that convey a desired impression)
- 2) Attitude expressions (expressing attitudes to connote that one possesses certain attributes)
- 3) Attributional statements (explaining one’s behavior in ways that support a particular social image)
- 4) Memory contrivances (real or feigned remembering and forgetting for self-presentational reasons)
- 5) Nonverbal behaviors (facial expressions, gestures, body positions, physical appearance, and movements)
- 6) Social associations (publicly associating oneself and disassociating oneself from particular other people)
- 7) Conformity and compliance (behaving in ways that are consistent with social norms and/or others’ preferences)
- 8) Sets, props, and lighting (using aspects of the physical environment for self-presentational purposes) (Leary 1995, 38).

Leary (1995) then addresses the reasons behind people's motives to apply these tactics in social situations in order to manage their impressions. He argues that in order to understand these reasons, we must first address two separate issues. The first issue is why individuals feel concerned about others' impressions of them; the second issue is why people are motivated to manage their impressions in some situations more than in others. After exploring these two issues, Leary (1995) believes people manage others' impressions of them for three specific reasons: 1) to influence others to respond in desired ways; 2) to construct and maintain their private self-identities and self-esteem; and 3) to regulate their emotional experiences (1995, 64).

Leary's (1995) work concludes with an examination of the research that has addressed the emotional and behavioral consequences that surface when individuals overly worry about the impressions others are forming about them. He argues that when this stress occurs, individuals will express negative emotions, and will often begin to behave abnormally in social situations. Additionally, he notes that these self-presentational worries can actually lead to adverse health affects particularly due to people's poor choices as a result of being in a negative mental state.

As more individuals are now socializing on social networking sites rather than in face-to-face interactions, Goffman's (1959) and Leary's (1995) self-presentational theories are highly useful in understanding and comparing the ways people use social networking sites to self-present. As the number one social networking site worldwide, Facebook is often the social networking site of choice for scholars to explore in studies of online self-

presentations. As previously discussed, Enil and Thumim also argue that Facebook's template-design influences self-presentation, or as they state, "self-representation" online by stating:

We describe ourselves in the language offered by Facebook. We select a profile picture. We provide personal information about ourself [sic] (in the degree we find comfortable). We represent ourselves using the language and frameworks of Facebook. Of course we can protest against the standard by wittiness, playing with the 'format,' showing that we are critical. We can sabotage the device by posting someone else's image as our profile picture and a fake name, we can decide to represent ourselves by other kinds of images, of our pets, of a view, of our family. But we can't escape making some kind of self-representation (2012, 101).

Recent studies have validated this claim through their investigations of the reasons people use Facebook. In an article titled, "College Students' Social Networking Experiences on Facebook," authors Pempek et al. (2009) explore how and why contemporary young adults use Facebook. To answer this question, the authors utilized the following methodology:

92 undergraduates were given a diary-like measure containing 7 time use questions (one per day) and a 7-day activities checklist to document their Facebook use, which they were asked to take with them to complete each evening. When they returned this form one week later, they were given a survey about their Facebook use, which they completed overnight (Pempek et al. 2009, 230).

After analyzing this data, the authors concluded that students use Facebook not only to communicate with friends, but also "to establish their personal identity" (Pempek et al. 2009). They found that "young adults used media preferences to express their identity," and that out of these media preferences (such as posted content), students indicated that "photo postings helped express who they are to other Facebook users 'a whole lot'" (Pempek et al. 2009, 233). In a similar project, Nadkarni and Hofmann's (2012) research

also focused on the reasons people use Facebook, and came to the same conclusions. By using a “systematic review of existing literature on the psychological factors contributing to FB use,” Nadkarni and Hofmann also concluded that ‘Facebook use is primarily determined by two basic social needs: (1) need to belong and (2) need for self-presentation” (2012, 243 and 247).

Through these conclusions, researchers have utilized self-presentational theories to further understand how and why people use social networking sites. Sasan Zarghooni’s thesis explores self-presentation on Facebook and argues that, “self-presentational theories explain much of the self-presentational behavior on Facebook” (2007, 2). For example, Zarghooni (2007) specifically utilizes Goffman’s (1959) concepts of the front and back stages to understand people’s behavior on Facebook. He argues, “a person who is editing a Facebook profile exists in two places at the same time” (2007, 17). In other words, “while the presented self is seen by others who look at the user’s profile, the ‘real’ person is the physical human sitting behind the computer screen” (Zarghooni 2007, 17). Therefore, Zarghooni (2007) concludes that the user depicted on his or her profile page can be compared to the “front stage,” and the “real” person sitting behind the computer can be compared to “the backstage.”

Zarghooni (2007) also uses Leary’s (1995) “nonverbal behavior” self-presentational tactic to argue that posts on Facebook can be viewed as self-presentational. According to Zarghooni, “a number of nonverbal behaviors can be observed on Facebook” (2007, 18). One nonverbal behavior he explores in particular is the posting of pictures. Utilizing Leary’s (1995) tactic framework, Zarghooni argues that pictures posted on Facebook can be considered a nonverbal behavioral tactic because as Leary’s definition states, pictures

show users' physical appearance. "Therefore Facebook users have good reason to manage the impressions made by their pictures" (Zarghooni 2007, 18). Although Zarghooni believes Goffman's (1959) and Leary's (1995) approaches are relevant for understanding self-presentation on Facebook, he notes that these "approaches to self-presentation were with a non-computerized environment in mind, and therefore it is possible that some of the phenomena can better be explained with amendments" (2007, 22).

Other scholars, like Bernie Hogan (2010), agree with Zarghooni's (2007) argument that these self-presentational theories should be revised to better explain social interactions online. Hogan (2010) specifically takes issue with scholars' continued use of Goffman's (1959) Dramaturgical Approach when exploring self-presentation online. Although he is mindful of Goffman's (1959) seminal theoretical approaches for exploring offline self-presentations, he argues that self-presentation online operates differently. As a result, Hogan (2010) introduces his "Exhibitional Approach" as an update to Goffman's (1959) Dramaturgical Approach for exploring online self-presentations in his article, "The Presentation of Self in the Age of Social Media: Distinguishing Performance and Exhibitions Online."

Before introducing his amended approach, Hogan (2010) first explains why he critiques researchers' use of Goffman's (1959) backstage model when exploring online self-presentation. By using the specific example of Facebook, Hogan first disputes the theory that Facebook posts can be analyzed using Goffman's (1959) backstage model because some information posted on Facebook is "withheld from people" (2010, 379). He argues

that when users' withhold certain information on their profile pages, that "is not the same thing as saying this information was part of what went into the creation of a front or that it contradicts a front" (Hogan 2010, 379). Further, he argues that Goffman's (1959) notion of the backstage is inadequate in describing online behavior because it does not account for a third party that regulates "who has access to information about an individual" (Hogan 2010, 379-380). For example, Hogan notes that the fact "that Facebook allows only friends or 'friends of friends' to see specific content does not suggest that this content signifies a backstage to other possible content that is available for anyone to see" (2010, 380). In short, "to expect privacy online is not to imply that one has something worth hiding or a presentation that may contradict one's role in other spheres of life" (2010, 380).

Hogan (2010) also takes issue with scholars' continued use of Goffman's (1959) definition of performances to analyze online content. Hogan believes that it is questionable to consider online content a performance in the first place (2010, 380). In order to address this, Hogan argues that it is important to distinguish performance as an "ephemeral act" from performance as a "recorded act" (2010, 380). To Hogan,

Once a performance has been recorded, the nature of the performance has altered. It may still be a presentation of self, and undoubtedly it continues to signify an individual. However, it no longer necessarily bounds the specific audience who were present when the performance took place. Instead, it can be taken out of a situation and replayed in a completely different context (2010, 380).

Therefore, to Hogan (2010) online content is not a temporal performance, like the performances Goffman (1959) defines, but rather a recorded performance, similar to art shown in an exhibit.

After critiquing contemporary scholars' unrevised application of Goffman's (1959) models of backstage and performance, Hogan (2010) introduces his "Exhibitional Approach." Hogan believes that instead of using Goffman's (1959) stage metaphor, scholars should use the metaphor of an "exhibition site" to understand online behavior. An exhibition site according to Hogan can be defined as, "a site (typically online) where people submit reproducible artifacts (read data)" (2010, 381). Within these exhibition sites, Hogan (2010) argues that social media users should be compared to "curators." Further, unlike in Goffman's (1959) Dramaturgical Approach, the audience in an exhibition site is different: "the audience in these spaces consists of those who have and those who make use of access to the artifacts. This includes those who respond, those who lurk, and those who acknowledge or are likely to acknowledge" (2010, 381).

Hogan (2010) believes his Exhibitional Approach is superior to Goffman's (1959) Dramaturgical Approach when exploring online self-presentational posts, because Goffman's (1959) approach focuses on live, embodied, and ephemeral situations. Put differently, Hogan argues that Goffman's (1959) approach does not account for the fact that content posted online is not "bound in space and time with continued observation occurring between individuals" (2010, 381). Instead, he believes that social media sites, like exhibition sites contain two features:

- 1) Information signifying an individual is delivered to the audience, on demand by a third party.
- 2) Because of the reproducibility of content and the fact that it is sent to a third party for distribution, the submitter does not continually monitor these data as an audience is receiving it, and it may possibly never fully know the audience (Hogan 2010, 381).

Therefore, like in an exhibition site, online content should be compared to "artifacts," not "performances."

In addition, when exploring the ways users post content (artifacts) on their social networking sites (exhibitions), Hogan (2010) believes his concept of a “curator” is more applicable than Goffman’s (1959) performing “actors.” Hogan explains that online users should be compared to curators because both mediate our experience of social information (2010, 381). To Hogan, good curators control their presentations to be relevant and intriguing, and bad curators’ presentations showcase irrelevant or unexpectedly overwhelming information (2010, 381). Users as curators also facilitate functions that are available online, but are not the same nor limited to the performances and situations that Goffman (1959) addresses. One of these functions is *filtering*.

Filtering on exhibition sites (social networking sites) according to Hogan is the act of limiting which artifacts are on display (2010, 382). Hogan (2010) uses the example of Twitter to describe filtering by explaining that one may only want to read a “Tweet” that discusses a certain topic. If the Tweet is public, it is included in the artifacts that are on display. On the other hand, if it is private, then a specific curator determines access to the information / Tweet (Hogan 2010, 382). In addition, filtering does not fit into Goffman’s (1959) model because it is not something that can be done in a situation. In other words, an individual may choose to censor their performance in a particular way, but to Hogan (2010), this selectivity in a situation is not the same as filtering. Filtering, unlike performance censorship, implies that one can evaluate artifacts before they are put on display for consumption (Hogan 2010, 382). Overall, Hogan asserts that his Exhibitional Approach should be utilized to “extend present work concerning online presentation of

self” by exploring self-presentational posts not as performances, but as “curated artifacts” (Hogan 2010, 382).

The existing literature described above is important as pioneering work in studying the ways in which people self-present on social networking sites. Today, one of the most prominent self-presentational posts on social networking sites is the selfie. Although defined in various ways, most researchers agree that the selfie has meaning that stretches beyond its literal definition. Selfies are recognized as “new forms of visual communication” that are not only dense with information, but are taken for a purpose (Katz and Crocker 2015, 1862). As photos whose takers and posters are also the subjects of the images, selfies visually communicate the self and “long for – require, even, sharing to be considered ‘true’ selfies” (Hess 2015, 1631). Since these communications of the self are manufactured for the purpose of being viewed on social networking sites, the selfie can be defined as a self-presentational post.

Contemporary scholars have utilized selfies’ social significance to explore how people define their personal identity within their cultures. Two members of the Selfie Researchers Network, David Nemer and Guo Freeman (2015), explore the ways people use these posts to express their personal identity. In their article, the authors note, “though selfies have garnered much interest in media and Internet studies, the emphasis has been on Western countries” (Nemer and Guo 2015, 1833). To change this, the authors write about “an understudied group of selfie users — teens in Brazilian favelas — to contribute to research on selfies and online media production from a highly

marginalized set of users” (Nemer and Guo 2015, 1833). In their study, they specifically investigated selfie users “living in marginalized areas (i.e., the favelas of Gurigica, Itararé, and São Benedito in Brazil) that were under constant surveillance by powerful drug lords” (Nemer and Guo 2015, 1843). Contrary to many studies that argue that selfies are narcissistic, their ethnographic study did not support this assertion. Rather, through their ethnographic work on these selfie users, they found that:

Selfies were far more than an instrumental artifact of communication and self-representation. They perceived, used, and experienced selfies in a sociocultural dense form of empowerment: They could escape from the eyes of powerful drug lords to implicitly express their dissatisfaction and objections; consciously reflect on their true selves and maintain their spiritual purity; overcome the difficulties of being functionally illiterate and gradually learn literacy skills; and improve their interpersonal communication with family members and peers (Nemer and Guo 2015, 1843).

This article provides insight into how people give this form of technology meaning and utilize it to present and define their personal identity.

Similar to Nemer and Guo’s (2015) study, this project seeks to explore how selfies can be viewed as self-presentational posts. Although I am not focusing on marginalized groups as Nemer and Guo’s (2015) research did, my research aims to replicate their argument and methodology with the intent to validate their assertion that selfies cannot be reduced to mere expressions of narcissism. Additionally, this project seeks to expand on the argument that selfies can be viewed as meaningful cultural artifacts that provide valuable insight into how and why people communicate their personal identity in the digital era.

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

To ensure that I explored both the meanings of the selfie to millennials and how it is used to showcase these meanings, I utilized a number of approaches. To collect my data, I used an ethnographic and interview-based design by conducting in-depth interviews with 25 individuals belonging to the millennial generation. These interviews consisted of two parts: first, I applied a semi-structured interview style by asking open-ended questions regarding selfies and social networking sites, and then a folkloric narrative approach by exploring my interviewees' selfies as personal narratives. To analyze this collected data, I employed a holistic approach by calling on psychological, sociological, folkloric, and anthropological theoretical frameworks combined with the history of this phenomenon.

My data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews with 25 adult key informants. I use the term "key informants" to describe my interviewees, as this is the best term to define their role in my project. These "key informants" were frequent users of selfies and social networking sites, and were willing to share their knowledge on these topics with me. The group of 25 individuals I interviewed consisted of sixteen females and nine males, who were all living in the Los Angeles and Ventura Counties in Southern California. There were more females than males in the group, because when recruiting informants, more females volunteered than males, and in addition, most of my informants' referrals were females. This was not surprising, as women are reported to not only use Facebook and Instagram at a higher rate than men do, but also to take more selfies (Selfiecity 2014; Pew Research Center 2016, 4-5). These informants' ages ranged

from 21 years old (born in 1996) to 32 years old (born in 1984), with a mean age of 25.

Although some gave me permission to include their names, most of my informants wished to remain anonymous. Due to this, I made the stylistic choice to designate all of my informants as anonymous and only included their age and gender in the data. I noted the informants' ages, because their generation is the focus of this project. While my project does not analyze the data based on gender distinctions, because this is a major focus of others' research, I have included my informants' self-identified gender in order to optimize others' reflections on my data.

In order to participate in my project, potential interviewees had to meet a list of requirements. First, my informants had to be adults (individuals 18 years or older) who belong to the millennial generation (born between the years 1982-1998). I chose this generation because, as shown in the historical context section, they are the number one users of social media, and are the number one generation to take and post selfies. These millennial adults also had to currently have a Facebook account and/or Instagram account, and have posted selfies to one or both of these accounts. I chose Facebook and Instagram because, as noted above, Facebook is the most commonly used social media site worldwide, and is also the most commonly used social media site for selfies. Since Facebook now owns Instagram, and Instagram is the second most popular social media application for selfies, I choose to include it as well.

I recruited these 25 individuals through snowball and convenience sampling methods by utilizing friends, family, acquaintances, coworkers, fellow students, and their referrals.

These sampling methods were selected because this project is intended as a pilot study for future research. This project recognizes that this sampling method presents a number of limitations, as it is not representative of the millennial generation as a whole, but it does not seek to be so. Therefore, this project should be understood as a preliminary study to understanding the ways millennials self-present online. In addition, since my sample consists of individuals living in Los Angeles and Ventura Counties, this study primarily speaks to urban millennials. This thesis acknowledges that findings may be different in different geographic areas.

Once I had selected these informants, I conducted 25 two-part semi-structured interviews during a three-month period in October through December of 2016. These interviews lasted anywhere from thirty minutes to a little over an hour. I used the semi-structured interview style because it is the most appropriate form of interview for this research, as it is devised to produce the maximum amount of information from an informant. In addition, within these semi-structured interviews, I followed an interview guide that included a list of open-ended questions and prompts that were given to all participants. The questions within my interview guide were designed to promote open-ended conversation, allowing participants to shift the order of questions based on their knowledge and the course of the conversation. While interviewing my informants, I shared little to no information about my opinions on these topics to ensure that I would not steer informants toward certain answers, and in an effort to remove any personal bias from my data.

The semi-structured interviews involved two sections, which were explained to the interviewees before beginning the interview. In the first section, I collected general personal information about the individual such as their age and gender. Additionally, I asked general questions about social media usage pertaining to Facebook and/or Instagram and about selfies as a social phenomenon (refer to “Appendix A” for examples of interview questions in the first section). In the second section of the semi-structured interview, I utilized a folkloric methodology by exploring my informants’ personal selfies posted to either their Facebook and/or Instagram pages, as visual personal narratives. During this portion of the interview, my informants and I viewed their personal Facebook and/or Instagram accounts and viewed their personal posted selfies, while I simultaneously asked them questions about how and why they took the images and why they chose to post them (refer to “Appendix B” for examples of interview questions in the second section).

In the following chapter I will showcase the ways I analyzed each of the informants’ collection of narrative, selfies, and interview data holistically through the lens of multiple theoretical frameworks. These frameworks included sociological and psychological self-presentational theories and folkloric narrative theories. I also analyzed the entire collection of narratives as one corpus in light of the history of the phenomenon of selfies.

CHAPTER 5

DATA AND ANALYSIS

After conducting 25 semi-structured interviews with millennials who take selfies and post them to the social media sites Facebook and/or Instagram, I argue that their responses can be used to further understand the social significance of selfies within their generation. Through a holistic approach using several of the aforementioned theories to analyze my informants' responses, I argue that selfies are used as vehicles to self-present on these online spaces.

Selfies as Visual Personal Narratives

In the second section of my interviews, in which my informants and I viewed their personal posted selfies, all of my informants provided a narrative as to why they took and posted their selfies. Each of their narratives was not only personal to them, but as deduced from my informants' responses, was also embedded in the reasons they posted their selfies. By analyzing the reasons voiced by my informants for having taken and posted their selfies using the tenets presented by Dolby's (1989) folkloric definition of personal narratives, selfies can be understood as a contemporary vernacular form of personal narrative that includes the visual. Moreover, since "the presentation of self takes the form of personal narrative when our memories take shape through language," by defining selfies as visual personal narratives, selfies can be viewed as self-presentational posts (Shaw 1997, 303).

As suggested by the first part of Dolby's definition of personal narratives, they are a distinctive form of narrative because they relate to a *personal experience*. When viewing and discussing my informants' posted selfies, they all similarly stated that one of the main reasons that they took their selfies was to *preserve a memory of a personal experience*. For example, in my first interview with a 24-year-old female born in 1992, we opened up her Instagram account and discussed a "pet selfie" she took and posted of herself and her dog (while it would be optimal to present the narrative, selfie, and analysis in this example, I was not given permission to share her selfie). The selfie showed an up-close shot of her and her dog lying in her bed. When I asked why she took this specific selfie, she related the following narrative:

I had a bag of nuts and raisins, like a mixture that you can buy at Trader Joe's, and I left it on my coffee table, and then left my apartment. I came back to my apartment and noticed all of those nuts and raisins were all over the floor, the bag was chewed up, and he had eaten a majority of the bag. Being an animal lover, I knew from previous experiences that I have had, I knew some of those items in the bag were not okay for animals to eat. So, I looked it up online. I read that raisins and macadamia nuts are terribly poisonous to dogs [sighs]. I freaked out, called the vet, had to then spend 320 dollars that I absolutely did not have, but had to spend to get his stomach basically pumped. [She lets out a sigh and then a brief chuckle.] So, after all of that, um, he ended up coming home. He was fine. He and I were then cuddling on my bed, and I took that picture and posted it.

After she shared this personal experience as the story behind her selfie, I then asked her why she felt it was important to post it to her Instagram account. She stated the following:

Probably to make my friends and everyone aware that my little guy did something stupid, and to show I got the situation taken care of. And, maybe to kind of remember that situation.... [She pauses for a short time and thinks.] I feel sometimes in this society, or generation, excuse me [throws up air quotes], 'millennium,' people take selfies nowadays as like a landmark. To like, have it as a memory. Situations that happen in our life, places that we've been, people that they've seen, things that they've done. I feel like, people use technology and photographs, which yes in the past has always been a thing. Like, take a picture

you're in Yosemite! Take a picture you're at a beach, or whatever. I feel like today it's so much more broadly used.... Take a picture, your dog just came from the hospital and he's alive and well! Take a picture and then you'll remember it. I feel like it's used more as a memory more than anything now.

Not only does this response explain her motivation for posting her selfie, but also expresses important general views on why she feels her generation takes selfies.

Although I didn't know it at the time, her responses ended up being echoed in all my subsequent interviews. Similar to her answers, many of my informants stated they took their selfies to preserve a memory of a personal experience. Importantly though, when I asked why they posted their selfies, it became clear that the preservation of personal experiences is not the sole purpose they take selfies. Although several of my informants were initially reluctant to acknowledge the relationship between taking and posting their selfies, this dichotomy was blurred when they expressed that they also wanted to *share those personal experiences with others*.

This can be seen further in another interview with a 26-year-old female born in 1990. During this interview we viewed a “dual selfie” of her and her son that she posted to both her Instagram and Facebook pages.



Image 11: 26-year-old Female's Dual Selfie

When I asked her to describe why she took this selfie, she expressed the following personal narrative:

I love the rain, and it was raining, and it got really cold in the house, and I got really excited and put a sweater on me and my son, and we were all bundled up on the couch, watching a movie. It was just really happy. It was cold, and I just really liked the atmosphere, and I wanted to remember it. And, I think my son is beautiful, and I wanted to capture him. I mean there's nothing really that special, other than I liked that day, and I liked what we were doing, and I wanted to remember it.

When I asked her why she chose to post this to her Facebook and Instagram pages, she stated, “I guess I just wanted to share with all of my friends a positive moment in my life. Like, my son and I are happy, and having a good day, and I want to share that with all of you type of thing.” In this interview we can see that not only did she state that she took the selfie to *remember that particular personal experience* with her son, but also that she posted it to *share that experience* with others.

In the second part of Dolby's (1989) definition, she states that oral and literary forms of personal narrative are *told* from a *first person perspective*. Although selfies are not in oral

or literary form, they can be compared to Dolby's (1989) definition of personal narratives because they are always taken from a first person perspective – a selfie by definition is a photo taken of oneself in order to be shared with relevant others (Lobinger and Brantner 2015, 1848). Additionally, since the definition of selfies includes that they are shared, we can use Dolby's (1989) model and argue that the act of sharing selfies is comparable to *telling* oral and literary forms of personal narrative from a first person perspective. The only difference between selfies and other forms of personal narrative is they are visual. Therefore, by comparing selfies to the second part of Dolby's (1989) personal narrative definition, we can argue that selfies can be considered personal narratives that include the visual.

Curators: Filtering Selfies

During my interviews regarding my informants' general views on selfies, and viewing and discussing their personal selfie posts, all of my interviewees expressed that they often evaluate their selfies before posting them to their profile pages. By comparing Hogan's (2010) definition of "filtering" as a form of curation to the ways my informants express they assess their selfies, I argue that millennials curate their selfies before posting them. Furthermore, and most importantly, since selfies can be viewed as an expression of one's self, curating selfies can be viewed as a form of self-presentation.

As mentioned, Hogan's (2010) Exhibitional Approach compares social media users to curators because to him, they both select what types content to showcase for a particular audience. He goes on to note that like social media users, curators mediate our experience of social information, or posted content. One of the major ways curators and social media

users mediate this content is by what he calls “filtering,” or “the act of limiting which artifacts are on display and [filtering] implies that one can evaluate their artifacts before they are put on display for consumption” (Hogan 2010, 382).

As in Hogan’s (2010) definition, many of my informants expressed that they limit which selfies to post by evaluating whether or not they feel that the selfies are socially acceptable to post. This was described by some of my informants through the use of the phrase “Instagram worthy photo.” My first encounter with this term was during my second interview with a 25-year-old male millennial when we were discussing the importance of interaction with his selfies. He voiced that to him, there is a correlation between the number of “followers” one has on Instagram, and the number of likes he or she should receive when posting a selfie. He stated, “Well basically, the more followers I have, the more likes I should get. If I don’t get the right ratio, then I’ll delete the photo. It’s not Instagram worthy.” I then proceeded to ask him what “Instagram worthy” meant, to which he responded by saying, “You know, the right amount of likes.” In my later interviews, this term, or variations of the term, came up several more times. Each time it did, I asked the individual to define what they meant by it. Two examples of definitions of this terminology can be seen in the following two quotes:

- 1) Instagram worthy photo in my opinion captures your attention. You know, it makes you go, ‘oh wow that’s a great photo.’ Something you might see in a magazine. Something a lit bit more professional [32-year-old female].
- 2) I guess, more than just, you know, if someone were sharing something every single day. Like for me, I’m in the house way more than I am not, and it’s kind of the same thing over and over again. Like, ‘here I am in the kitchen again’, or, ‘here I am sitting on the couch again.’ It kind of loses its rarity. Where if someone who was traveling, like they’re in Europe, or South America or something, and they’re doing things or seeing things people

haven't seen before, I think it's more worthy of an Instagram photo [26-year-old female].

This concept of "Instagram worthy" plays a significant role in my informants' decisions to post their selfies. Through understanding this concept, I argue that by evaluating their selfies, and filtering out which ones are not "Instagram worthy," my informants' selfie selection can be viewed as a form of curation.

In addition to selecting which photos were Instagram worthy, my informants also discussed the ways their photos went through further evaluation. For example, many of my informants explained that after choosing which selfie to post, they also evaluated whether or not the selfie is technically proficient, and whether they looked physically attractive enough in the selfie for it to be posted. To address the concern regarding their photos being technically proficient enough to be posted, many of my informants said that they edit their selfies by applying an "Instagram filter," using the "Instagram editor," using another photo editing application to edit their selfie, or using a combination of both filtering and editing. For example, during my interview with a 32-year-old female millennial, I asked if she edits her selfies before posting them. She answered, "Absolutely, mostly every time. Well, it's kind of like an edit. I have a certain filter that I like, so I'll clarify the photo and then I'll add that filter to my photos, because I like that I have a little bit of a theme to my photos." Another 24-year-old female stated, "The most editing I'll do is a filter, or the brightness level."

Additionally, many of my informants expressed that they will not post a selfie unless they feel they look physically attractive in the photo. For example, in an interview with a 27-

year-old female, we viewed and discussed several selfies posted to her Instagram account.



Image 12: 27-year old Female's Instagram Selfie

When I asked her why she took and posted this particular selfie, she stated,

Okay, so I don't take too many selfies, because when I do I feel super uncomfortable, um, because I get super hypercritical of my face. So, I probably redid that selfie fifteen times. Fifteen times, which is just so stupid. This one was on the first day of the semester, and I was in a really good mood. It was still the beginning of the semester where there was a moderate amount of getting ready-ness [chuckles], rather than going to school in work out clothes, which I do everyday [chuckles again]. So, I felt good about myself because I thought I looked cute, my hair was doing something right, and I was waiting for another class to start, and I was like, 'I'm going to take a selfie,' and so, I did.

Like this informant's response, many of my informants similarly expressed that they would first take their selfie, evaluate whether or not they felt they looked physically attractive enough in the photo, and then post it. If they did not feel they looked physically attractive in their selfie, similar to this female millennial's response, they would then take more selfies until they did.

By returning to Hogan's (2010) definition of curators who filter their content before showing it a set of observers, these examples of the ways my informants' "filter" their

selfies by either editing them, adding an Instagram filter, or taking multiple selfies to ensure they look physically attractive, showcase that selfie posts can also be considered curated. Therefore, by curating their selfies (or expressions of one's self) before posting them, selfies can be viewed as a form of self-presentational post.

Selfie Performances

As expressed not only in the definition of selfies but also by almost all of my informants, selfies are often taken for a specific purpose: to post to personal social media sites such as Facebook and/or Instagram. Although a majority of Hogan's (2010) tenets are extremely useful when exploring the methods that go into posting selfies, many of my informants expressed that time and interaction from their viewers are in fact important elements to selfie posting. Therefore, contrary to Hogan's (2010) argument that selfies should not be compared to Goffman's (1959) Dramaturgical Approach because online content is not temporal, I argue that Goffman's definition of performance is still valuable in exploring the reasons people post selfies.

Although social media sites are not technically "face-to-face" social interactions as Goffman's (1959) theory explores, they are designed for people to socially interact with one another. Therefore, Goffman's (1959) explanations of the performing actor, their audience, and the front stage where they perform can be compared to the ways in which people interact with each other on social media. Since individuals' personal Facebook and Instagram pages are "fixed locations" where users post data to socially interact with others, these personal social media pages can be compared to Goffman's (1959) definition of the "front stage." In addition, users who create accounts on Facebook and/or

Instagram can be likened to Goffman's (1959) definition of "actors," as social media users create and post content to not only express who they are, but for others to interact with that content. Thus, the individuals who interact with and observe the actor's (social media user's) page can be compared to Goffman's (1959) definition of an "audience," also known on Facebook as "friends," and on Instagram as "followers." Further, since their audience (friends and followers) can interact with the content that the actor posts through "likes" and/or "comments," the act of posting data to their personal pages (or front stage) for others to interact with can be viewed as the way the actor "performs" their identity.

Since selfies are a type of data people post to their Facebook and Instagram pages, I argue that through the use Goffman's (1959) "Dramaturgical Approach," selfie posts can be classified as *performative* in two major ways. First, during my interviews, many of my informants expressed the importance of the interaction their selfie received from their friends and followers. For example, one of the major reasons my informants said they posted selfies in the first place was to receive "likes" and "comments" on their photos. In an interview with a 25-year-old male born in 1991, I asked him if it was important for him to get likes or comments on his selfies. He responded, "Yeah! That's the entire point! To get likes. To post a picture, and to get likes. That's the entire purpose."

Similarly, some of my other informants not only stated that generating likes and comments was one of the major purposes of posting a selfie, but that these interactions translated to a form of social validation. As seen through my informants' responses, I

argue that social validation through these interactions is often what drives millennials to post selfies to their social media pages. According to Goffman (1959), during performances the individual/actor solidifies meaning for themselves, for the people watching, and for their situation. He argues that the exchanges of information during these performances are either accepted or rejected by the audience, thereby confirming or dismissing the actor's identity. Therefore, Goffman (1959) notes, the actor's identity can constantly alter as they interact with their audience. This is similar to the emotional response my informants reported experiencing when their friends and followers interacted with their posted selfies through likes and comments. In the world of social media, an individual may post a selfie and receive a lot of engagement such as likes on that selfie, which they interpret as the audience either accepting or rejecting not only their selfie, but what the selfie represents. As I previously argued, selfies can be considered a form of visual personal narrative, as some individuals voiced that their selfies represent an important personal experience. Personal narratives that relate to people's personal experiences are often used to express a part of someone's identity, therefore, when individuals receive a lack of likes on their selfie, they feel that this translates to a lack of social acceptance of their personal identity. For example, when I asked my informants if interaction with their selfies such as "likes" or "comments" was important, they answered in the following ways:

- 1) I mean, you definitely see your phone lighting up with people liking your photos, and you definitely get a little tinge of, 'oh people like me!' You know? [32 year old female, born in 1989]
- 2) I'd say most definitely, yeah. Cause it's just like, it's like, when you're at school and someone likes your outfit and you get a lot of compliments, you know? And you're like, 'wow, like, I like my outfit today, but like, now I *really* like my outfit today because everyone loves it, and I'm going to wear it

again!' It's kind of like, that kind of thing. So, if you get a lot of likes, you're like, 'ok, I want to do that again because I got that reaction from all these people' [24 year old female, born in 1992].

Through exploring the ways my informants expressed the importance of audience interaction, receiving likes and comments from their friends and followers, the selfie can be viewed as a type of performance that helps users solidify their personal identity.

In addition to the importance of interaction with selfie posts, these posts can be viewed as performative because many of my informants expressed the importance of timing. For example, many of my informants stated that there are "optimal times" and even days for posting their selfies that would ensure the most audience interaction. Today, there are even applications such as "Best Time" that inform Instagram users when it is the ideal time to post their images based on statistical analyses of the times of day that their "followers" typically log on to the site.

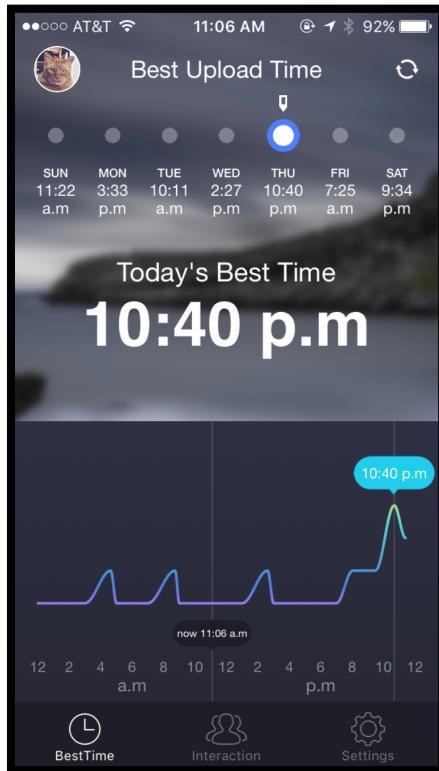


Image 13: Screen Shot of the “Best Time” Application

When I discussed her general views on selfies with a 24-year-old female informant, she expressed that she has noticed that people are often concerned with the social interaction they receive on their selfies. When I asked her why people are anxious about posting their selfies, she said, “I feel like people are stressing out about it because they feel like, they have to post at a certain time.” This concept of time came up in several other interviews. In one interview with a 26-year-old female, she expressed that she understands that there are better times to post during the day or week to get more likes. When I asked her what she felt was the “best time” to post, she stated the following:

The weekends aren’t usually a good time to post because people are out doing things, like a Saturday. Saturdays are not a good time to Instagram. I think weekdays are usually a good time to post, like people are probably more glued to their phone after working all day and just sitting around doing nothing, where over the weekend people are out doing stuff and probably not focused on their phone.

Although Hogan's (2010) critique of researchers' use of Goffman's (1959) performance concept to analyze online posts contributes several legitimate arguments, my informants' concerns with both time and audience interaction suggests that posting selfies can be interpreted as a form of ephemeral performance that takes place in the digital world.

Selfies as Self-Presentational Posts

Having argued that selfie posts can be viewed as performative, it is also important to further understand the ways in which people manage these performances. By utilizing Leary's (1995) definition of "self-presentations" and the tactics he listed for managing these impressions, I argue that using his self-presentational theory alongside the above-mentioned arguments we can further demonstrate that selfies are self-presentational posts.

Since I argue that the act of posting selfies (visual personal narratives that present one's personal identity), can be viewed as "curated performances," the rules people develop for when to post their selfies, what types of selfies to post, and what their selfies should look like, can be viewed as a form of impression management. Leary (1995) asserts that people will rarely do things that will lead others to view them negatively. Therefore, they constantly use "impression management." Like Leary (1995), I argue that individuals who post selfies are concerned about their public impressions, and therefore are unlikely to post images that will cause them to be viewed in a negative light. Correspondingly, some of my informants stated they felt that the selfies they post to their social media pages should depict a positive image of themselves. For example, one of my informants stated:

That's one of the beauties of social media. That's why so many people who are shy enjoy it because they can be extrovert on social media because they won't have to worry so much about the anxiety of being out in public, or around a lot of people. I'm not shy per se, but I feel like that's definitely one of the perks of it. You can polish it, before you present it [32 year old female, born in 1989].

When I asked another informant her opinions on what impressions selfies give to the people viewing them, she responded:

You just get the positive. You don't get the bad stuff on Instagram. I mean, when I was sick, I used to want to post all that stuff, but I didn't want the attention. So you post when you're doing well. That's what Instagram is. People don't really put bad moments. If there are people you know well enough, that you care enough to be connected with, then you talk to them. So, social media is just a way, or Instagram is a way to see what people are doing, or to be nosy [25 year old female, born in 1991].

Further, I believe that a number of Leary's (1995) list of eight tactics people use to manage their self-impressions can be compared to the tactics my informants stated they used to ensure their selfies depicted them in a positive fashion. For example, one of my 25-year-old male informants posted a "dual mirror selfie" or a selfie of him and his friend in the mirror to Facebook.

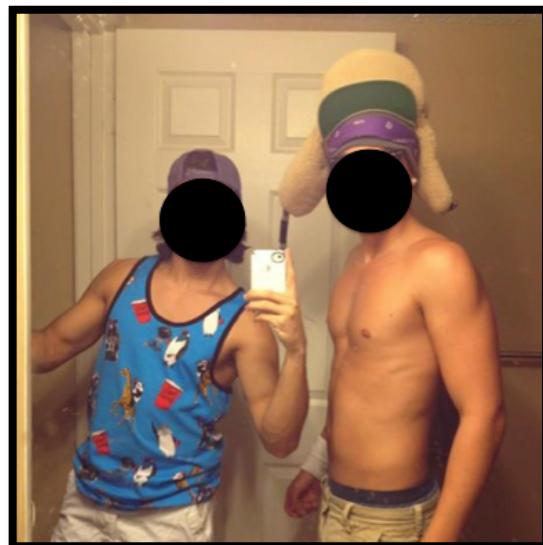


Image 14: 25-year-old Male's Dual Mirror Selfie

When I asked him to describe to me what is shown in this selfie, he stated the following:

It's me and my friend being goofy, because that's really what I want people to see. I want people to think I'm like funny, and outgoing, and I don't care what I look like, and blah, blah, blah. So, I'm wearing a purple backwards hat, I'm making a silly stupid face. Um, my shirt, I have a tank top on that has penguins and solo cups and giraffes and pandas on it. It's just a totally ridiculous shirt. Where he doesn't have a shirt on, and he's wearing three different hats on his head, and sunglasses...

When I asked him what message he wanted this selfie to send to viewers he said, "That I'm funny, and goofy. Yeah, like carefree. You know? Um, not too serious. Like, I don't have any serious selfies." When I asked him why he felt it was important to not post any "serious selfies," he answered, "I don't like pictures where people are trying too hard. Like, you know like the infamous duck face, and stuff like that? Where, girls are like 'I'm so beautiful I need to take a selfie,' where I'm more goofy." Throughout this interview, some of Leary's (1995) impression management tactics are prevalent. For example, when describing the message the selfie sent to his viewers, he used Leary's (1995) first tactic, "self-descriptions" to describe his actions in this selfie as "goofy" and "care-free" in order to, as Leary (1995) describes, "convey a desired impression." In addition, my informant used Leary's (1995) fifth and eighth tactics by using "nonverbal behavior" and "props" in his selfie, describing that he was making a "silly stupid face," and wearing "a totally ridiculous shirt." This informant's selfie is only one of many that demonstrate the use of Leary's (1995) tactics, and showcase the use of self-presentation when posting selfies on social media pages.

By utilizing Leary's (1995) self-presentational theory alongside the aforementioned theories and historical data, I argue that my informants' posted selfies showcase the ways selfies can be defined as self-presentational posts.

CONCLUSIONS

They say it's like the me generation. It's not. The arrogance is taught or it was cultivated. It's self-conscious. That's what it is, it's conscious of the self. Social media is just a market's answer to a generation that demanded to perform. So the market said, 'Here, perform everything, to each other, all of the time, for no reason.' It's prison. It is horrific. It is performer and audience melded together. What do we want more than to lie in our bed at the end of the day and just watch our life as a satisfied audience member?

– Bo Burnham 2016, *Make Happy*

Like other digital anthropologists, I believe that we can advance our understanding of human behavior through the study of social networking sites. To add to this understanding, in this project I have undertaken an exploration and analysis of the reasons millennials take and post selfies to the social networking sites Facebook and Instagram. By aligning myself with digital anthropologists, in this thesis I have argued that like previous forms of self-presentation offline, selfies are simply another way humans utilize social interactions to self-present online. By first reviewing the history of social networking sites and the concept of the selfie, we have seen that selfies are a form of self-presentational social media post. In addition, this history suggests that selfies have become associated with millennials because they grew up in a digital environment that influenced their generation to present themselves visually. Therefore, millennials' avid use of selfies does not denote that they are narcissistic. Rather, it demonstrates the ways self-presentation occurs online as well as offline.

Having demonstrated that selfie posts are another form of self-presentation – one which the millennial generation uses most frequently – this project used the aforementioned historical information alongside seminal self-presentational theories to analyze a set of 25

interviews with millennials who take and post selfies. Using the data gathered from these interviews, this project argued the following:

First, I argued that by using Dolby's (1989) definition of personal narrative, selfies can be interpreted as a new form of personal narrative that includes the visual. Human beings have always utilized personal experience stories as tools to present their personal identities. Since selfies can be viewed as visual personal narratives, they are simply another way that humans have utilized a visual form of storytelling to present their personal identities; only now they are self-presenting in the digital world.

Second, by using Hogan's (2010) Exhibitional Approach, I argued that selfies are curated. As explained by my informants, before they post their selfies, they must evaluate whether or not those selfies will be viewed as socially acceptable. Therefore, they use their understandings and definitions of "Instagram worthy photos" to evaluate whether or not their photos are technically proficient, and whether or not they looked physically attractive enough in their selfies before they post them. As a result of these concerns, millennials will use Instagram's filter feature, other editing features, and/ or take multiple selfies as a form of curation.

Third, by using Goffman's (1959) Dramaturgical Approach, I argued that selfies can be viewed as a form of performance. My informants asserted that the interaction they receive from their friends and followers in the form of likes and comments was one of the main reasons they posted their selfies. In addition, they voiced that these interactions with

their selfies are not only important, but since selfies serve as presentations of their personal identity, the interaction they received with their selfies translated to social acceptance from their peers. In addition, similar to Goffman's (1959) definition of performance, my informants expressed that the time they post their selfies was important, because the right time meant optimal peer interaction. Since my informants expressed audience interaction was one of the main purposes of posting a selfie, they felt timing must be accounted for. Thus, I argue that the act of posting a selfie can be considered a form of temporal performance.

Lastly, by understanding selfie posts as visual personal narratives that millennials curate to perform their personal identity, I applied Leary's (1995) impression management framework to further demonstrate the ways millennials use selfie posts to self-present. Like Leary's (1995) list of eight tactics he argues people use to self-present during social interactions, my informants' statements regarding how and why they took their selfies showcased they used these tactics to self-present. Using this line of argument paralleled with my previous arguments, I attempted to show that selfies are significant forms of self-presentation that take place online.

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Appendix A
Examples of Part One Interview Questions

1. Why did you choose to create a Facebook and/or Instagram account?
2. If you have both, which one do you use more, and why?
3. If not, why do you not have a Facebook/Instagram account?
4. What types of content do you post to your Instagram and/or Facebook profile page?
5. What is your opinion of selfies as a social phenomenon?
6. Do you often post selfies to your personal Instagram and/or Facebook?
7. Out of the multiple types of selfies (group selfies, individual selfies, dual selfies, pet selfies, etc.) which do you post the most of, and why?
8. How many selfies would you say you post on average to your social media account(s)?

Appendix B
Examples of Part Two Interview Questions

1. Why did you take this selfie? / What is the story behind this selfie?
2. Why did you choose to post this selfie to your personal Facebook and/or Instagram page?
3. Did you post a caption with this selfie, if so, what is this caption, and why did you post it?
4. Do you think it's important for people to interact with your posted selfie, for example, commenting or liking it?
5. Does this interaction on your selfies evoke any emotional response?
6. What messages do you think this selfie sends to your friends and/or followers who view it?
7. What message do you want this selfie to send to your friends and/or followers who view it?
8. Do you think the collection of selfies posted to your social media page tells a story or sends a message about your personal identity? If so, what is that story or message?