



Individual Assignment Coversheet (Online version)



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We live in an ecosystem of connective media, which is “nourished by social and cultural norms that simultaneously evolve in our everyday world” (Dijck 2013, pp.21). The phenomenon of the selfie is a culture norm that continues to spark debate within the media community over its benefit to society. The practice of a selfie can be defined as “a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and shared via social media” (Oxford Dictionary 2018). However, there is a heavy emphasis on selfies representing more than just the physical act of taking one. Rather, they become “expressive acts” (Tiidenberg 2018, p.7) to discover and form our online and offline identities. Through exploring the emotional, social, financial and legal implications of a selfie, this essay will present a contrast of the advantages and disadvantages the cultural norm imposes on society.

While the word ‘selfie’ was Oxford’s Dictionary’s ‘Word of the Year’ in 2013, the phenomenon dates back much earlier than this. The term selfie was believed to be coined by an Australian man, Nathan Hope, known as ‘Hopey’. When seeking advice on a public forum about stitches in his lips in 2002, he used the word to describe a photo taken of his lips (Zimmer 2013). However, when tracked down and confronted by ABC news, Hopey explained: “It was not a word I coined. It's something that was just common slang at the time, used to describe a picture of yourself. Fairly simple” (2002, cited in Zimmer 2013). Contrary to his denial, Dictionary Editor, Katherine Martin, is still confident that the term originated in Australia due to our tendency to abbreviate words, known as Hypocorism (e.g. barbecue = barbie) (Pearlman 2013). As for the concept itself, many consider the first photographic portrait ever taken in 1939, by photographer named Robert Cornelius, to be the introduction to ‘selfie culture’ (Public Domain Review n.d). Before the invention of front-facing cameras, tools such as “timers or remote-control devices, the use of reflective surfaces, or a human proxy” (Frosh 2015, pg. 1611) were required to take a self-portrait. Therefore, the concept of a selfie existed in 1939, however the practice we know today has evolved as technology becomes more readily available.

As selfie culture evolves, it is crucial we study the emotional narrative we construct while performing this practice. The University of California conducted a study which revealed a link between regular selfie taking and becoming a happier person (2016). Due to the reflection and connection aspect of selfies, participants reported “becoming more confident and comfortable with their smiling photos over time” (University of California 2016). While happiness is one motivation, another study provided deeper understanding by finding young females endeavour to convey the impression of happiness and positive physical appearance. They then received “affirmation through likes which enhanced their self-esteem” (Kowalczyk, Pounders & Stowers 2016, p.1890). These two studies provide evidence that selfies can psychologically quench our thirst in finding self-worth.

However, the quest for self-worth through selfies can provoke negative perceptions from others and oneself. Frequently engaging in the act can give the public “perceptions of self-indulgence or attention-seeking social dependence” which gives the impression of “narcissism or very low self-esteem” (Barakat, 2014, cited in Baym & Senft 2015, p.1591). When asked if posting selfies to social media encouraged narcissism and selfish behaviours, 55% of participants in a 2015 study answered with a definite yes (Wickel 2015). These views influenced the rise of the proposed mental disorder: ‘Selfitis’. It is linked to the degree one practices these six factors: “Environment Enhancement, Social Competition, Attention Seeking, Mood Modification, Self-Confidence and Subjective Conformity” (Veissière 2017). Psychologists have not claimed it is a legitimate mental illness yet as more research needs to be conducted (Veissière 2017). Perhaps what could contribute to this research is the rise of snapchat lenses which use augmented reality to often blur blemishes, widen eyes, put on makeup and shrink the face. Along with Selfitis, the term 'Snapchat dysmorphia' (Racco 2018) is emerging and is best explained through the tweet; "Not sure if I was always ugly, or if Snapchat just conditioned me to think I can't look pretty without a filter" (@Sarah_Elena_94 2018). This illustrates the harmful mental side-effects of forming our identity through being "enchanted with (our own) faces" (Tiidenberg 2018, p.6).

The subcultural practice of being 'always on' (Boyd 2014) creates a virtual community to share our experiences and evolve our collective identity through selfies. A selfie can communicate a role, relationship and status towards those it is shared with (Waskul 2016, p.89). “Mediated self-representation” (Waskul 2016, p.89) occurs when we pick and choose what aspects we reveal to each audience online. For example, an individual may holiday in Los Angeles and chooses to send holiday pictures to their grandmother and their partner. It is likely they would tailor each photo to the two different audiences, revealing a different aspect of themselves in both. Furthermore, Psychologist Ma. Fiona Ella G. Sandoval reveals that selfies have become the new way to “document important moments shared with loved ones” (cited in Brand Magazine 2018). Recent studies have shown that selfies hold a “strong familial and community element” (Sandoval, cited in Brand Magazine 2018). This demonstrates how selfies can be used to memorialise moments to share with others and immortalise a sense of belonging.

Juxtaposed to this, selfies are not perceived as an appropriate way to document every situation. Selfies are reimagining the social norms around dealing with grief and how we commemorate somebody's 'digital legacy' (Arnold et. al 2017, p.14). In 2015, a study which analysed the hashtag '#funeral' on Instagram found that individual selfies were the "most prominent type of photograph" featured (Arnold et. al 2015, p260). There was a split between users focusing more on their own self representation (e.g. selfie in formalwear) and others choosing to reflect on the person and emotions (ie. full face selfie while travelling to the funeral) (Arnold et. al 2015, p260). In Aboriginal culture where the name and images of the deceased are repressed for months, these public declarations could be interpreted as disrespectful (NITV 2017). Moreover, relatives of 9/11 victims are becoming enraged over tourists taking selfies at the New York memorial. Tourists are being urged to "leave the selfie stick at home and remember where you are going" (Harris, E 2016) out of respect for the deceased and those in mourning. Consequently, taking a selfie on solemn occasions such as at funerals and memorials challenges society's acceptance of this practice as cultural norm for grieving.

In 2018, the social practice of taking a selfie has evolved from a leisurely activity to a profitable brand building tool. In a world where the Web 2.0 emphasises user-generated content, everybody is a 'producer' who can both produce and consume content (Bruns 2009). This affords users to build a social media brand through curating content in a unique way that traditional media did not permit. When an individual's following exceeds approximately 10,000, the user becomes a microcelebrity. A microcelebrity is defined as "an online performance which involves creating and maintaining an online identity that resembles a branded good in order to gain status online" (Marwick 2013; Senft 2012, cited in Mavroudis 2018). Selfies are a key way to begin a profitable career as a microcelebrity. Once a persona has been created, microcelebrities then "monetize their following by integrating 'advertorials' into their blog or social media posts" (Mavroudis & Milne 2016). Influencer marketing company, Tomoson, launched a sponsored selfies program back in 2015 where influencers were asked to simply post a selfie wearing a sponsored product (Cohen 2015). Since the sponsored selfie trend took off, websites such as Influencer Marketing Hub have created an 'Instagram Influencer Earnings Calculator' to label a profile's worth (2018). From these approximations, it is estimated Kylie Jenner earns \$1 million per sponsored selfie (Dipasupil 2018,). The seamless integration of influencer marketing into selfies demonstrates how they have become a profitable hot commodity.

While selfies may be profitable, the pressure to maintain the microcelebrity status can overpower their worth. Being a microcelebrity involves more than just taking a selfie, it creates a form of emotional labour to keep up appearances online (Mavroudis & Milne 2016). Influencer Michael Turchin with over 100,000 followers admitted that “my whole day could be taken up by selfies, it’s very time consuming” (2015, cited in Mavroudis & Milne 2016). The exhaustion behind being a branded self is apparent through ex-microcelebrity Essena O’Neill. O’Neill sacrificed her 612,000 Instagram followers and brand deals in order to tell the truth about her ‘perfect life’ (Hunt 2015). She did this through dramatically editing the captions of each selfie to reveal the “manipulation, mundanity, and insecurity” (Hunt 2015) behind them. Her comment “I just want younger girls to know this isn’t candid life” (Hunt 2015) directly corresponds to the discovery that “489/504 microcelebrities believe that Instagram encourages young people to strive for fame” (Mavroudis 2018). Evidently, the mental strain over maintaining a brand through selfies may outweigh the benefits of using them as a revenue stream.

Undoubtedly, selfies have a plethora of uses which include their role in the justice system. Selfies are being used as evidence in legal proceedings. In one case, a 16-year-old Marion Morton fatally shot 16-year-old Ryan Mangan and took a selfie with the body (Holley 2015). The accused then sent this selfie to a friend on Snapchat, who screenshotted it and handed it over to police. The District Attorney on the case said that “during his 30-year career, he’s never known of a killer who took a self-portrait with the victim.” (Holley 2015). While this case was solved through a selfie posted after the crime, another was solved through posting a selfie before the crime. 18-year-old Brittney Gargol was strangled to death by a belt and left on the side of the road (VICE 2018). It was later revealed that her murderer was her 21-year-old best friend, Cheyenne Rose Antoine. She was arrested by police after they found she was wearing the belt in a selfie, posted to Facebook hours before (VICE 2018). These two examples display how selfies can be used as a key piece of evidence in court and benefit the justice system.

Unfortunately, selfies can become a burden on lawyers when discrepancies arise over legally determining who owns the selfie and the rights that come with it. In 2014, Ellen DeGeneres posted a selfie at the Oscars with multiple high-profile celebrities. It ended up breaking the retweeting record with over 1 million retweets. Lawyers then became curious as to who technically owned the selfie and the royalties that accompanied it as the "commercially valuable reputations of celebrities are often widely exploited" (Tan 2017, p.1). Was it Ellen who co-ordinated and posted the selfie, Bradley Cooper who physically captured the selfie, Twitter in which the photo was posted on, or Samsung in which the selfie was taken on their device. If the selfie was snapped in Australia, under our laws, Bradley Cooper would own the photo as he pressed the shutter button (White 2014). However, laws differ from country to country. The above example of DeGeneres' selfie establishes the complexities which need to be further researched to determine the true legal owner of a selfie.

Selfies do not possess a "universal meaning" (Tiidenberg 2018, p.8), instead they have many conflicting uses within their emotional, social, financial and legal implications. They positively benefit us through leading to happiness, a sense of belonging, becoming a profitable microcelebrity and solving legal cases. However, selfies can negatively impose on us if we rely on them excessively for self-esteem and grieving, along with feeling pressured to keep up appearances as a microcelebrity and the ambiguity that exists over their legal ownership. Therefore, the contrasting perspectives on selfies presented in this essay supports the idea that selfies can be both advantageous and disadvantageous to society.

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