# SELFIES

## Why We Love (and Hate) Them

# SOCIETYNOW

*SocietyNow:* Short, informed books, explaining why our world is the way it is, now.

The *SocietyNow* series provides readers with a definitive snapshot of the events, phenomena and issues that are defining our 21st century world. Written by leading experts in their fields, and publishing as each subject is being contemplated across the globe, titles in the series offer a thoughtful, concise and rapid response to the major political and economic events and social and cultural trends of our time.

*SocietyNow* makes the best of academic expertise accessible to a wider audience, to help readers untangle the complexities of each topic and make sense of our world the way it is, now.

*The Trump Phenomenon: How the Politics of Populism Won in 2016*
Peter Kivisto

*Becoming Digital: Towards a Post-Internet Society*
Vincent Mosco

*Understanding Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union*
Graham Taylor

*Internet Celebrity: Understanding Fame Online*
Crystal Abidin

*Kardashian Kulture: How Celebrities Changed Life in the 21st Century*
Ellis Cashmore

*Poverty in Britain: Causes, Consequences and Myths*
Tracy Shildrick

# SELFIES

## Why We Love (and Hate) Them

BY

## KATRIN TIIDENBERG

*Baltic Film, Media, Arts and Communication
School, Tallinn University, Estonia
and
School of Communication and
Culture – Information Sciences,
Aarhus University, Denmark*

# CONTENTS

*This page intentionally left blank*

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Katrin Tiidenberg,** PhD, is Associate Professor of Social Media and Visual Culture at the Baltic Film, Media, Arts and Communication School of Tallinn University, Estonia, and a Postdoctoral Researcher at the School of Communication and Culture at Aarhus University, Denmark. She is a founding member of the Estonian Young Academy of Sciences, a second-time board member of the Estonian Association of Sociologists and has just published her first book in Estonian on social media. She is currently publishing and speaking on selfie culture, digital research ethics, visual research methods and young people's social media practices. Her research interests include visual culture, social media, self-presentation, gender, sexuality and norms.

Find her on the internet:
@kkatot
kkatot.tumblr.com

*This page intentionally left blank*

# Introduction

## WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL, IT'S JUST SELFIES?

One afternoon, on the very first week of December 2017, when this book was practically done, I asked my son what selfies are. He's eight.

'Well', he said, 'selfies are when you take a picture with your phone. Like you turn the camera around, and you look at yourself, like with Snapchat, and you take a picture'.

He stretches out his arm and mimes the gesture. He then presses his cheek to mine and takes a pretend selfie. From the corner of my eye, I catch him pulling a face, but can't really tell what the expression is.

'Do you have to make a face to take a selfie?' I ask.

'Yeah', he says, like it's obvious. 'You can do this', he says and winks, raises his hand and spreads his fingers into a victory V that grazes his cheekbone; 'or this', he pouts his lips into a kiss; 'or this' he says, sticking out his butt.

I watch with wide eyes and an open mouth. I am pretty sure I have never seen him do any of the things. I know I do the kissy face when I take pictures with my sister, my mom,

my best friends, probably him too. But the butt thing?! That is not me, I swear!

One part cracking up; two parts uneasy, I press on, intrigued. 'So, who do you think likes taking selfies?'

'Girls, when they have pretty dresses on', he says.

'I see', I say, trying to keep at bay the creeping sadness at the apparent tentacles of mainstream explanations and every-day sexism within my kid. 'But boys … can boys take selfies too?', I ask and brace for the response.

'Oh! Yeah', he says. He's sure. There is no doubt in his voice.

Stupidly pleased, I keep asking questions. After all, this is an 8 year old. Any time now, he'll ask to be left alone, and we'll be done. So I ask, 'What about old people?'.

'Well', he says, scratching his head, 'Some old people can take selfies, but other old people, if they're very old, like if they are over 70, then they sometimes say they are too old for this,' He thinks for a moment, and adds, 'But they could actually take selfies.'

I nod.

'But what are selfies even for?', I ask.

'Well, they're like your family pictures, or you can take a selfie with your friend, or with the person you want to kiss.'

Huh … I think, so for him, selfies seem to presume other people and warm feelings.

'So what has to be on a selfie?', I probe.

'Um … anything can be on the selfie. It's just a picture you take with your phone.' He looks at me like I'm a little slow.

'If I take a picture of this bottle of nail polish with my phone is it a selfie?'

'No', he says, and looks exasperated. 'I told you. You have to turn the camera around.'

'So your face has to be on it?', I ask. Poor child. He thinks his mom is really not getting it.

'Yeah', he says, but seems confused by this idea, and the direction this discussion is taking.

'OK, one more question', I promise. 'Why do you think people take selfies?'

'To get likes.' A lightning-quick answer.

I blink.

He adds cheerfully, 'People take selfies, so they can be the Master of Likes, and would get lots of subscribers.'

Master of Likes. I blink some more.

'Uh … and … what do you need the likes and the subscribers for?' I ask, totally forgetting that I said the previous question would be my last. I just can't stop now.

'To be rich, and become a famous star', he says.

So much for the warm and fuzzy feelings, I think to myself.

'And do you think everyone wants that?', I carefully prompt.

He looks pensive. 'Well no', he acquiesces, 'Some do, but some don't.'

'So why do the people who don't want to be rich and famous take selfies?'

'To show their parents, it makes their parents very happy.' I can't really fault this logic. Seeing his face does make me very happy. I know my mom appreciates our selfies.

'I see', I say, 'Have you taken any selfies?'

'Oh, I've taken loads of selfies, like this sandwich I made last spring that we uploaded to Instagram.'

Wait a minute…

'A picture of a sandwich is a selfie too?', I ask.

He looks confused again. 'No', he says, uncertain. 'I haven't taken any selfies', he finally says, and leaves to build a new spaceship for his Lego men.

He has taken selfies; I sometimes let him play with Snapchat lenses on my phone. I've seen him pulling faces at the

iPad – not to mention that I take selfies of the both of us all the time: at airports, on planes, eating ice cream. Our family is scattered across many countries; it's what we do to remind each other we're still fine, still kickin', still smiling, but his explanation is fascinating for me, and not just because I am his mom and find a lot of what he says cute. It is fascinating in its interplay of certainty and confusion, of the way the definition and boundaries of what counts as a 'selfie' stretched the more we discussed it. It's fascinating because of the broad range of why selfies matter, which could, at first glance, seem incompatible. From family and togetherness to a 'Master of Likes' in a blink of an eye.

This is why I wrote this book. Everyone knows what selfies are – probably, kind of. Many of you have taken them or refuse to take them. You might have strong opinions on them. This book looks at what and why selfies mean, why we seem to love and hate them and what that says about us: our collective cultural values and social norms. In this introduction I will tell you a bit about why I thought it would make sense for me to write this book, what this book is and is not, and offer a very brief glossary of some terms, as I think it is important we all understand them same way before we proceed.

I've been studying selfies for about seven years as part of a larger body of social research about how identity and community are constructed on and with social media. My first chosen platform was Tumblr, practically un-researched at the time. Most academic work on social media focussed on Facebook and Twitter and relied primarily on textual content to understand people's use of, and behaviour on, the internet. However, Tumblr is image heavy, maybe even image-centric. So, during my first reconnaissance interviews and observations, it became clear that I needed to pay much closer attention to how images are a part of identity, community, relationships and the like, but selfies as such … well, to be

perfectly honest, they abducted me. Not in the alien, but the ethnographic sense of the word, although they're really not that different. In ethnography, 'abductive' is the name for a particular quality of studying the social world that is open to being steered away, kidnapped by surprising facts in the field, and allowing yourself to be led down rabbit holes where things become curious.[1]

Over the next few years, I kept studying the practices of an international community of sexy selfie enthusiasts on Tumblr and added a couple of studies on Instagram. I researched the image posting of English- and Russian-speaking pregnant women, and how women aged more than 40 and 50 years share, caption and hashtag their images through social media. I was also a part of a variety of projects with mostly young social media users. This is the empirical – or observation based – part of what my arguments in this book are built on, but naturally, I stand on the shoulders of other scholars, inspired by their studies about social media, photography, visual culture, norms, selfies and much more. This is not an academic book, so I have tried to be sparse with in-text citations, but for the curious, I offer a little if-you-want-to-go-deeper reading list at the very end of the book.

## WHY WRITE A BOOK ABOUT SELFIES?

Every day, Facebook users upload 350 million photos, Instagrammers share 95 million photos, and there are

---

1 As compared to the more widely used 'inductive' and 'deductive' logic used in social research. Inductive logic means that we let the observations of the world suggest new frameworks, concepts or theories. Deductive logic means we approach the observable world with premises of existing theories.

3 billion Snapchat snaps. Not all of those are selfies, but selfies have come to be seen as the bane and boon of internet-mediated visual practices. It is not a marginal, insignificant little blip on the radar of our culture. It is an everyday practice for many people.

I'm sure many of you are interested in social media and visual culture. After all, there must have been a reason you picked up this book, and I'm also sure you have noticed that selfies pose a conundrum of sorts. On the one hand, they have been continually and passionately discussed in popular media. People take many selfies, and no matter how intensely some people are nagged about theirs, selfies still generate more attention than much of other social media content. Studies measuring engagement have shown that posts containing images generate more attention (likes, comments) than text- or link-only posts and that selfies generate more attention than other image posts. It makes sense. We, humans, have a long history of being drawn to images, of communicating visually, and being enchanted with (our own) faces. Pictographs and ideographs preceded written communication; we've been scratching marks into available surfaces for a very long time.

On the other hand, selfies are persistently framed as unworthy of all of this attention. News articles, blog posts and social media rants pop up in our feeds. They claim that selfies are a sign of a pathological self-obsession, lack artistic merit and are the reason why people behave in dangerously stupid ways. Even before we dedicate a chapter to dissecting it, you probably believe me when I say that people don't need selfies to behave in dangerously stupid ways. We've got it covered. We're a reckless, curious, overconfident species.

For internet and social media researchers, selfies are a networked communication practice enacted by various groups on different platforms. This means that selfie sharing is similar to many other things we do on social media. Setting up a

profile on Facebook, opening a Tinder account, even playing Pokémon Go, or 'shipping'[2] a particular pairing on Archive of Our Own (AO3) are all like sharing selfies. They are all about experiencing and expressing yourself, about building and maintaining relationships. Existing research, including my own, defines selfies not only as photos we take of ourselves with an extended hand, or in a mirroring surface, and share on social media, but as, expressive acts; photographic objects; cultural practices; gestures; means for communicating and understanding ourselves; tools for reclaiming our sexuality, experiencing our bodies or performing particular versions of ourselves; addictive practices that lead to, or amplify psychopathology; tools for gaining visibility; and much more. If these make limited sense right now, I promise that in the coming chapters, I will explain this in more straightforward terms. For now, it's important to point out that by the year 2018, we have a lot of selfie scholarship, and many popular texts on the effects and implications of selfies. These interpret selfies in varying ways, occasionally veering into blinding optimism or near-apocalyptic anxiety, sometimes offering fascinating insights.

But selfies are not something that are good or bad as such. They are a way for us to express ourselves. This can be creative and help us understand ourselves better, or it can be vain, vapid and a source of abuse. What selfies mean depends on the context surrounding them – whose selfies, what's on them, where shared? What a selfie means and what it does, depending on the context, is what this book is about.

In broad strokes, I had four reasons for writing this book.

First, many people like taking and looking at selfies, but may feel judged by some of the negative ways selfies

---

2 'Shipping' means wanting or supporting two fictional characters to have a romantic relationship.

(and the people taking them) are portrayed. This book explores the different meanings attributed to selfies and situates them within the wider ecology of things we do on social media. It looks at selfies as another practice of self-expression and offers a robust explanation of why we take and like selfies and why that is mostly quite OK.

Second, some people have passionate reactions to the attention selfies get. Nevertheless, many of the available explanations about the popularity of the selfie phenomenon are one-sided, naïve, or unnecessarily anxious. This book shows how selfies are neither the first nor the only technologically mediated practice that has been met with similar reactions. It shows where these common explanations come from and contemplates the implications their historical baggage carries.

Third, popular selfie discussions veer towards totalizing generalizations that assume that all selfies can be explained the same way. For example, that it can, once and for all, be decided whether selfies are a sign of narcissism, a shameful grab for attention, or an empowering gesture of visibility. Relying on years of empirical work, this book shows how selfies, in and of themselves, are neither 'good' nor 'bad', nor can they have a universal meaning. This book demonstrates how selfies, like most other cultural practices, are multifaceted.

Finally, there isn't a lot of high quality writing on selfies for popular audiences. Most high quality work is written by, and intended for, scholarly audiences. It is wise, but thick with jargon and peppered with citations. Most popular titles are (self)-branding handbooks, arts and crafts books or low-expertise guides on 'how to live right'. However, given the global social, political and cultural context, it is important for all of us to be able to make up our own mind. Why is something popular? Why does it attract a lot of hatred? Why do some explanations – like the 'selfitis' mental disorder hoax that keeps being regurgitated by (social) media – generate

such traction even though they are fake and ridiculous? What might be behind a writer strongly arguing for a particular interpretation? This book looks at selfies like that. It goes beyond seductive simplifications, appreciates the complexity of the world and questions our preferred interpretations of it.

## KEY TERMS

The following is a very brief glossary of some words and concepts I use throughout the book. I am sure they're not new to you, but I think it's important we understand them the same way before we embark on our selfie quest. There are, of course, other significant terms and concepts in this book, but we'll deal with those later, as they come up.

### Affordances

When we think about how people use any technology or a device, we can do so through the idea of affordances. Affordances are the potential ways of using something. Affordances shape and constrain our use of a device, an app, or a platform, because they make some ways of using it more comfortable, self-evident, appealing, and thus more likely. A common example is a door handle, which because of its shape and height invites us to use it with our hand and not our foot or our forehead. This, of course, is somewhat user specific, because different people perceive affordances differently, and people do have some control over whether they follow the path the technical affordances set out. They could choose to use the device or the technology in a way that was not intended. Because of this, you'll sometimes see people talking or writing about perceived or even imagined affordances.

Some affordances direct behaviour, and these are called social affordances. In the case of social media, we often speak about socio-technical affordances, because this formulation combines the technical and the social to explain people's behaviour on the platform.

## Discourse and Rhetoric

Depending on whom you ask, discourse is a text in context; language as a social practice; a way of combining language, actions and ways of thinking to enact a socially recognizable identity; or a way of thinking and producing meaning. The emphasis and the wording varies, but the broad point is that discourse is how we use language, and it always depends on the existing social structures – what is considered appropriate for whom, etc. Discourse can also be the entity of specific communications, information, interpretations and terminology, in which case we can talk about specific discourses (medical, legal, popular, etc.) or competing discourses. Discourse make meaning by, among other things, employing rhetoric. Rhetoric is a strategic use of language for persuading others of our versions of the world. Both rhetoric and discourse are often viewed as having ideological power; they can reproduce or undermine existing ways of doing things.

## Interaction

In this book, I will say things like 'selfies gain their meaning in interaction'. When I use the word 'interaction', I mean social interaction or what we do, when we are acting and reacting to other people (arguably also non-human entities). Social interaction is a foundational concept of a school of thought called

'symbolic interactionism', which analyses the social world by looking at how symbolic meanings are attributed to it and everything within it. The basic premise of symbolic interactionism is that this symbolic meaning is constructed and then reproduced in interaction largely through language. Focussing on (symbolic) interaction helps us understand what people believe to be true and that it can have a much bigger impact on their behaviour than what might 'objectively' be true.

## Performativity

Social scientists say people's identities are performative or that we perform (sometimes enact) specific versions of ourselves, or our social roles. For example, I can perform a certain version of femininity or motherhood. This concept builds on Erving Goffman's (1959) classic work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. He proposed that everything we do in any social situation is a performance intended to influence or persuade others, and all performances always depend on their audiences. This is called a situated performance, which links the concept of performativity to the concept of interaction, because performances are situated in their interactional situations. The concept of performativity directs our attention at the constructive or generative power of some acts or utterances. By speaking of the world in specific ways, we are creating this very same world.

## Selfie Culture

The basic sociological definition of culture states that all cultures have five elements – symbols, language, values, norms, and material artefacts. All of these are learned by participation. In broader terms, we can say that culture is a particular way of life or

everything we as people do to make sense of and give meaning to our own world. We speak of culture when we try to not only understand the lifestyles and value systems of people living in different countries but also when we try to make sense of how particular groups live or how particular ways of doing things spread. This is where we speak of corporate culture, food culture or selfie culture. 'Selfie culture' is a term that is often used, but almost never defined. It seems to encapsulate 'everything about selfies'. In this book, selfie culture means people's ways of taking, sharing, posting, filtering, liking and deleting selfies, the norms and values that guide it and our collective ways of speaking about selfies.

## Social Cues

Facial expression, tone of voice and posture – all of these are social cues that our interactional partners use as information which helps them interpret what we say or who we are. Mediated communication (e.g., via telephone, a chat app or on an internet forum) is often considered to have sparser social cues than face-to-face interaction. However, scholars researching internet-based communication have found that we are quite skilled at treating a variety of information as social cues. User names function as social cues in pseudonymous spaces. Profile pictures are important cues whenever available, but so is the way you express yourself, which covers everything from eloquence and grammar to being in on the group's lingo, knowing the inside jokes or being able to understand certain memes.

## Virality

In the context of networked communication, virality (or 'going viral') means that a phenomenon emerges – for example, when

a piece of content is shared or an idea starts circulating in the form of a hashtag campaign or a meme – and it spreads across a variety of platforms, people and networks at a very high speed, reaching hundreds of thousands of people in the matter of days or even hours. Whether something goes viral or fails to do so depends on whether a vast amount of people make a decision to share that information or that piece of content with their personal networks. The ice bucket challenge was viral, many memes are viral, and YouTube videos go viral a lot. My latest favourite is that little ventriloquist girl singing George Gershwin's *Summertime* with her bunny puppet.

## Visibility

Visibility is one of those extremely complicated sociological terms that intersects with concepts of power, structure, class, race, gender, status and identity but does not have a clear single theory itself. Visibility obviously means the ability to be seen, but it does not pertain only to the ocular (which can be perceived by the eye). We can also talk about symbolic or representational visibility, which is about the legitimacy of some phenomena, people, groups or objects to be noticed, perceived or articulated.

Both in academic and popular thought, selfies are often linked to particular groups with previously limited visibility suddenly having easy access to it. Young girls, queer and trans-people, minorities, people who are not able-bodied or just people whose appearances or identity categories fall outside of the widely accepted standards have historically been invisible or visible only in specific, sexualized or pathologized contexts. The question is how to interpret this new-found visibility. For some, 'being seen' indicates having symbolic power, while others point out that being seen is a trap, as it

means surveillance and being controlled. There is no consensus among scholars on interpreting the relationship between visibility and power.

## Visuality

Visuality is a historically and culturally specific way of seeing. It is inherently political as it shapes and constrains what we think is possible to see, what we are allowed to see, made to see, what is worth seeing and what is unseen. Sometimes scholars will talk about different regimes of visuality, which indicate that there are competing sets of norms, values and hierarchies that guide what can be and is seen. Researchers working on the visuality of the internet have been talking about the regimes of (1) networked visuality which centralizes sharing, (2) emplaced visuality which centralizes movement and location; and (3) conversational visuality which centralizes personal interactions via visuals.

## Visual Culture

Visual culture is a specialized phrase within philosophy and sociology that encompasses both the practices and explanations around visibility and visuality. It refers to all of the artefacts made to be seen and looked at (paintings, photographs, movies, etc.) and our ways of understanding them and attributing meaning to them. Visual culture is all those events or situations we interpret, engage with or consume via visual technologies. Nevertheless, visual culture is also how we make everything visual make sense socially, and how we make everything in the social world make sense visually. In general terms, visual culture is everything we as people do to

make sense of and give meaning to visuality and visibility in our world.

## ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The first chapter following the Introduction answers the question, 'What are selfies?' It situates selfies in history and technology by looking at previous iterations of image making and information sharing that are like selfies, and can thus be seen as predecessors, at least in some terms. We'll discuss our species' well-documented desire to express and represent our selves visually, the cultural and technical transformations within the field of photography and the relevant developments of internet-based communication and self-representation.

The second chapter answers the question, 'How do we selfie?' It argues that selfies make sense only when we think of them in the way they are experienced by people who take and share them, not as isolated objects, but as posts within an endless flow of other posts, other people's posts, relationships, people, platforms, tropes and norms. Selfies gain their meaning in interaction, and their relevance comes from their importance in relationships. They allow people to get important feedback on how they look and who they are recognized as. This chapter highlights how selfies have multiple functions and meanings, which demonstrates why it would be impossible to answer once and for all what selfies are for.

The third chapter explores how selfies make us feel, and why they have the power to make us feel anything. It answers the question of 'why selfies matter?' by unpacking the different cultural stories and social norms attached to selfies. It dismantles the exaggerated claims that all selfies are narcissistic, inauthentic or low quality photography, or on the flipside, that all selfies are empowering. The chapter tries to

understand why and when selfies make us feel 'good' or 'bad' by analysing how selfies are a part of us feeling judged or in control.

The fourth chapter looks ahead. Starting from the premise that we are now at peak-selfie, maybe entering post-selfie it analyses how 'selfie' has become a metaphor for a variety of phenomena and practices, what that implies, and what the possible trajectories are for us and our selfies.

The conclusion briefly rearticulates what the point of this book has been and what might be the good takeaways.

Thank you for reading this book, I hope it is as stimulating an experience for you as writing it was for me.