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#selfie: digital self-portraits as commodity form and consumption practice

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ABSTRACT

Although selfies may appear to be the latest fad, their popularity has had a transformational influence on contemporary culture. Selfies invoke important issues in communication, photography, psychology, self-expression, and digital media studies – as they bring up a host of concerns about identity, privacy, security, and surveillance. This article provides an interdisciplinary overview of the selfie as both an object and a practice, and offers theoretical reflections on how the selfie can be seen as an important commodity form and consumer behaviour. The selfie is connected to concepts of authenticity, consumption, and self-expression, as well as practices of art history, media forms, and self-portraiture. Strategic use of the selfie reveals shifts in the traditional functions of the advertising photograph, from sources of information, persuasion, and representation to emblems of social currency. We position the selfie not as a postmodern anomaly but as a type of image with a history.

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Introduction

The selfie is an image of oneself taken with a smartphone or webcam, which communicates some kind of message about the self and which is shared through digital platforms. Selfies offer a convenient mode of self-portraiture to anyone with a camera phone (Lasén 2015). In the past couple of years, selfies have become not only a ubiquitous term, but also a common feature of the online everyday lives of most digitally connected people.

To illustrate, consider the two selfies reproduced in this article. Figure 1 is one of Jonathan's most popular Facebook post to date, a selfie he took with his cat, Guinevere. The photo neatly combined two dominant visual themes of the Internet – the selfie and cute cat pictures. Coincidentally, or not, considering the popularity of cats on the Internet, the other author's Google profile image is a selfie featuring Mehita with her newly adopted kitten, Buddy (see Figure 2). The rise of a vast variety of social networking opportunities, new ways of getting online, and new visual editing tools, means that selfies appear to have become – almost overnight – one of the preeminent modes through which ordinary people can make visual statements about themselves and share them with a potentially global audience. The visuality of the selfie transcends linguistic and cultural boundaries, and highlights the importance of self-promotion and personalized communication in contemporary culture. Furthermore, selfies are informed by the expressive traditions and visual practices of snapshot photography and the self-portrait.

As well as featuring prominently in both authors' (and undoubtedly also many readers') online personas, selfies, of course, have also been in the news recently. In 2013, Oxford Dictionaries

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Figure 1. Jonathan and Guinevere, 2014.

announced "selfie" as its word of the year, and a series of iconic selfies emerged shortly thereafter. In 2015, celebrity Kim Kardashian released an elaborately produced coffee table book titled *Selfish*, showcasing selfies taken throughout her prolific Instagram career (Kardashian West 2015). In December 2013, US president Barack Obama caused a media furore when he was photographed participating in a selfie with the UK and Danish prime ministers during the memorial service for Nelson Mandela. In March 2014, comedian Ellen DeGeneres famously took a selfie at the Oscars with almost a dozen of the hottest Hollywood stars and posted it live on her Twitter account, where it was promptly re-tweeted millions of times (and then quickly parodied on *The Simpsons*). Pope Francis allowed a group of young Catholic devotees to take a selfie with him, cementing his image as the people's pope. Beyoncé famously photobombed a fan's selfie in the crowd at her concert. Rapper Eminem took a famous selfie in front of the Mona Lisa at the Louvre Museum in Paris. Stars like Justin Bieber and Kim Kardashian easily achieve 1 million "likes" on their shared selfies; indeed

Figure 2. Mehita and Buddy, 2013.

some might claim that their celebrity status was partly achieved through their penchant for snapping and sharing online (Marwick 2015). These high-profile instances illustrate that selfies have emerged as an important marketplace icon.

But selfies are not just the preserve of the elite, far from it. In fact, selfies are perhaps best understood as a ground-up phenomenon. Armed with smartphones containing cameras and Internet access, anyone can take and share a selfie on an expanding number of social network platforms – and it seems that almost everyone does. At the time of writing, searches for the hashtag #selfie brought up 288,537,277 posts on Instagram. Twitter claims that in 2014 alone over 90 million tweets were sent using the hashtag #selfie (Ng 2014). Although many of these selfies show their subjects looking their "best" – acting sexy, posing, flexing or smiling – many also show subjects making faces, playing the fool, pouting, being controversial or political, or appropriating the hashtag for a totally non-relevant image. An extremely wide range of visuals are linked to the selfie hashtag, which illustrates how common and flexible the vocabulary of the selfie has become.

That millions of people around the globe are taking and sharing selfies, viewing the selfies of others, actively co-constructing the social and cultural importance of the digitally shared self-portrait, demonstrates the resonance and resilience of both the genre of the selfie image and the practices of taking them. The growing academic interest in the selfie helps confirm its significance, as illustrated by the Selfies Research Network, which currently has over 2750 members on Facebook, special journal issues, such as a 2015 special section of the *International Journal of Communication* devoted to the topic (Senft and Baym 2015), and several conferences, such as the 2016 Kern Conference on Selfies, Self-portraiture, and Social Media held in Rochester, New York. The burgeoning literature on selfies include studies that have considered the selfie's potential as a pedagogical tool in college classrooms (Johnson et al. 2014), the significance of funeral selfies (Meese et al. 2015), the politics of taking selfies in Brazilian favelas (Nemer and Freeman 2015), and the role of Instagram selfies in producing cultures of fame (Marwick 2015), to name only a few examples.

New selfie-taking trends spring up almost every week: funeral selfies (where protagonists picture themselves in front of mourners and coffins, sometimes even open caskets), selfies alongside luxury cars not owned by the photo's subject, extreme selfies (where protagonists capture self-portraits while undertaking extreme activities such as bungee-jumping, running with the bulls, skydiving, or posing in front of oncoming trains), "belfies" (pioneered by, who else, Kim Kardashian, in which protagonists take the photo in a mirror showing themselves from behind and buttocks centre-stage), sex- and after-sex-selfies in which individuals or couples snap images during or after sex, and bathroom selfies (where people record themselves while on the toilet), animated selfies with the protagonist singing along to a clip of a pop song (e.g. with the app Dubsmash). In 2014, a new gadget hit the market: the "selfie stick," allowing photographers to take more "professional" looking selfies from ever-new angles. In short, the selfie has become not only an extremely recognizable part of popular culture all over the world, but an accepted practice for millions of people.

Selfies are also used in political ways. For example, marginalized groups have turned to selfies to raise awareness about their rights. In the USA, trans men and women have used bathroom selfies and the hashtag #wejustneedtopee to fight against proposed state bills requiring people to use the bathrooms according to their sex at birth. Transgender fashionista poets, Darkmatter, also habitually use selfies featuring their avant-garde outfits in order to politicize the need to make visible non-gender conforming identities (Nichols 2015). Another trend has been the hijab selfie, in which young Muslim women fight back against Islamophobia and persecution for choosing to wear *hijab* and *niqab* by posting selfies of themselves wearing the head covering of their choices.

The rest of this marketplace icon essay serves three purposes. First, we discuss the selfie in relation to longer histories of visual representation and self-portraiture. We position the selfie not as a postmodern anomaly but as a type of image with a history. Second, we theorize the selfie as both *object* (a visual commodity form created and distributed though digital technologies) and a *practice* of consumption, both of which are deeply intertwined with neoliberal forms of self-identity and self-management. Third, we pose a number of research questions to help map out the field of selfie

scholarship. Thinking about the selfie as an image commodity with a lineage as well as a practice deeply embedded in forms of agency and identity making shaped by political-economic power assumes importance precisely because of the speed at which selfies have become a central part of popular culture, media discourses and practices, and marketing strategy.

A brief visual genealogy of the selfie as commodity: self-portraits, snapshots, and digital sharing

Selfies are receiving growing critical attention from consumption researchers and media scholars – and deservedly so. A key study led by Lev Manovich performed a quantitative content analysis of selfies in five global cities (see www.selfiecity.net), and they have been theorized as a complex form of narcissism (Tifentale 2014) as a genre of autobiography (Schleser 2014) as well as from the perspective of feminist media theory (Losh 2014). The aesthetic properties of celebrity selfies by black African stars have been theorized as a form of globalized self-commodification (Iqani 2015). Although this growing body of work is encouraging, there are still many research opportunities that arise from the growing popularity and cultural significance of the selfies as both commodity and practice.

The selfie, defined as "a photograph taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website" (Oxford Words Blog 2014), represents the latest manifestation of the self-portrait, a long-standing genre in visual culture. The self-portrait differs somewhat from most portraits – "few self-portraits aim for the excruciating realism of the identity card. Instead, the photographic self-portrait ranges from a literal reflection of the photographer's appearance to the creation of intricate narratives" (Marien 2006, 60).

According to art historian Derek Murray, selfies need to be understood within the context of a longer history of self-portraiture in fine art and photography. Murray (2015) points out how fiercely feminist values are associated with self-portraiture by artists including Germaine Krull, Marianne Breslauer, Ilse Bing, Vivian Maier, Sally Mann, Cindy Sherman, Adrian Piper, Lynda Benglis, Hannah Wilke, and LaToya Ruby Frazier:

> In their *notes to self*, young female photographers, claim a representational agency that transcends the gender-specific slights and ideological trivializing of young women's efforts to define themselves; to make themselves visible, in a cultural climate that continues to negate, ridicule, malign and sexualize them. (Murray 2015, 23)

From this perspective, selfies by women can be considered as a new iteration of the politics of feminist (self) representation. Indeed, the emerging body of scholarship on selfies is at pains to insist that the practice not be pathologized as simple an act of narcissism (Senft and Baym 2015), and that it can even be theorized as a practice of freedom (Tiidenberg and Cruz 2015).

Although all selfies do not resemble snapshots, a *snapshot aesthetic* often informs posing for, taking, sharing, and viewing selfies. Snapshots help us narrate and make sense of our lives: "we use snapshots to communicate to ourselves, and those around us, and those who will succeed us, that we in fact exist. With snapshots we become our own historians, and through them we proclaim and affirm our existence" (Jacobs 1981, 104). Arguably, snapshots and snapshot-like imagery are a way of visualizing authenticity. In order to understand the selfie, it is useful to trace a brief visual genealogy of the snapshot, encompassing precedents from the history of photography and contemporary examples.

An instructive starting point for thinking about the historical context of today's selfie is the artistic self-portrait. In the West, self-portraits emerged as an important visual genre in around the sixteenth century, typified by painters such as Albrecht Dürer and Rembrandt (Hall 2014). These painters used self-portraiture to enshrine themselves as artists, as well as to reveal the inner depths of their character. Over the centuries, using oneself as a model has assumed a central role in artistic production:

> the self-portrait as a genre has undergone dramatic development and often it not only testifies to the artist's ideas of his or her own identity, but is to an equal degree a partial 'period picture' of how we fundamentally see ourselves as human beings. (Tøjner 2012, 4)

Historically, self-portraits were rare, and produced within the realm of the wealthy or celebrated. With the boom in popular photography around the turn of the twentieth century, self-portraiture proliferated, and photographic self-portraiture remains a key genre today (Doy 2005). All self-portraiture takes expressing aspects of the self as a key premise. Artists perform, gaze, reflect, and pose in self-portraits, which can be seen as both a mirror for the subject and the society in which he or she lives. Photographic self-portraits, in particular, provide an "autobiography" of the self (Rugg 2007).

Popular photography, including chance snapshots and unposed pictures, also play a key role in the historical context of the selfie. The snapshot, although seemingly mundane and without theoretical interest, constitutes a key figure within contemporary visual culture. Snapshots have generally been associated with leisure, time "off," having fun, and family memories of good times, accentuated by Kodak's decades long marketing efforts, of course, and propelled by private uses of the snapshot (Nickel 1998; Schroeder 2002; Sarvas and Frohlich 2011; Zuromskis 2013).

Snapshots often appear rushed, carelessly composed, taken almost by chance, thus revealing subjects (relatively) unposed, "natural." As photography theorist Catherine Zuromskis writes, "Emphasizing visual simplicity and the fundamental emotional bonds between photographer and subject, snapshot photography is a mode of image-making that is constructed precisely to seem unconstructed, manufactured to be read as spontaneous" (Zuromskis 2013, 57). For brands, this visual quality can be harnessed to promote brands as authentic, to invoke the "average consumer" as a credible product endorser, and to show how the brand might fit in with regular consumer's lifestyles (Schroeder 2013). Within strategic communication snapshots invoke a realist effect that supports a range of powerful, positive associations for consumers, while at the same time valorising a sense of staged spontaneity, in the moment, "authentic" record of consumer experience. Snapshot aesthetics offers a convenient way in to participatory (via consumer generated images), sincere and less directive (more ambiguous and flexible, perhaps) marketing style (see Deighton and Kornfeld 2009). Furthermore, market researchers deploy the selfie as a research technique to understand consumer lifestyle and choices. For consumers, the snapshot remains a potent mode of authentic self-expression.

The staged spontaneity of the snapshot offers a powerful and flexible stylistic tool for representing "authenticity" – one that encompasses authenticating acts (e.g. Arnould and Price 2000; Elliott and Davies 2005), while exposing the complexities of authenticity as a concept within consumer culture theory (e.g. Beverland and Farrelly 2010). If we take a close look at how consumer imagery deploys the snapshot aesthetic, we gain insight into how visual style articulates certain assumptions about authenticity and how such articulations construct viewers as consuming subjects via "the rhetoric of authenticity" (Botterill 2007). In a similar vein, selfies need to be understood as moments of representing authenticity.

Snapshots – and by extension selfies – can be historicized by tracing a visual genealogy of photographed authenticity. As discussed by Schroeder (2013), snapshots have been used in commercial communication in order to narrate authentic consumer experience. The snapshot has been around since the invention of the personal camera and affordable film. In the digital age, the snapshot has become a key mode of communication for many socially networked individuals, who use sites such as Instagram and Facebook to record and publish a visual record of their lives. Easily caricatured as people who "tweet it rather than eat it" (in reference to their predilection to take artfully filtered photographs of their lunch or dinner before eating it), Instagrammers have made both an art form and a social movement out of their snapshots.

Apps such as Instagram, which had more than seven million users in its first year of operation (Aguayo and Calvert 2013), allow users not only to send out a feed of images snapped from one's smart phone, but also to receive a stream of images from other individuals, including celebrities and unknowns. As such, the snapshot has evolved from an analogue form into a torrent of digital images, which are circulated around the globe producing a kind of hypervisibility. Most Instagram feeds are public: anyone can log on to the URL and look at the snapshots that someone has posted, or search for hashtags, such as #lunch in order to see what visual records of that theme have been

created by the snapshot-making community. In particular, self-portrait snapshots, which have been rebranded in the vernacular of the online world as "selfies," are an extremely common sub-genre in the spaces of social networking, and represent a new moment in "photography as everyday practice and way of life" (Aguayo and Calvert 2013, 181).

The selfie is a compelling type of snapshot. In their selfies, individuals often represent themselves as at the peak of their own attractiveness, and then use this picture either as a profile image, or put it out into the public realm via, for example, their Instagram feed. The selfie represents a way of saying "look at me," "I exist," "I am having fun (or not)," out loud, in a public domain – attempts to attract attention – but also about crafting the self as a social media object in a very particular way and with very particular claims to authentic identities and experiences. The crafting of the selfie deserves further research.

It is not so easy to take a good selfie – one needs to get the lighting, framing, and context right, and to this end all sorts of tools are available (image filters, selfie sticks, Photoshop, and so forth). To what extent is the act of taking a selfie a form of labour and value production, in what ways might it be gendered, and what forms of emotive affect might it produce? What kinds of motivating factors underlie selfies – the desire to become famous, the communication of material aspirations, the craving of affirmation from others through "likes," an attempt to promote particular political identities? For many, their catalogue of selfies serves as a visual diary, capturing both mundane and important moments, all easily stored and indexed via such apps as the iPhone's automatic "selfie" sorting function that organizes one's selfies automatically using facial recognition software.

Like snapshots, selfies not only are "predictable in content and conservative in style" but also are "capable of inducing a photographic experience that can be intensely individual" (Batchen 2008, 133). Snapshot self-portraits, such as vintage prints with the word "me" and a place and date written on the back, declare "I was here!" (Batchen 2008, 135). Selfies, of course, often serve to claim, "I'm here!" – at a hip restaurant, a recognizable tourist attraction, some dangerous place, or just in the bathroom mirror (Myers 2010, 274), but selfies may also have many other purposes which, to be uncovered, require detailed ethnographic and audience research. Clichéd as snapshots are (Berger 2011), the "democratic" – or as sociologist Pierre Bourdieu would phrase it, "middle-brow" (1996) – nature of mobile phone photography allows individuals to make a claim for their presence in social life through a visual form, seemingly controlled by themselves though mediated through the aesthetics of Instagram (or whichever app is being used). Selfies "reflect the view of our selves that we want to project out into the world" (Gye 2007, 282). In highly mediated cultures, that view of the self is dynamic and constantly shifting, and it needs constant reiterature in new framings and contexts.

Theorizing the selfie: narcissism or conditionally free consumption practice?

We cannot simply write off the practice of selfie-taking and sharing as evidence of narcissism (Murray 2015). Focusing on selfies of young women and girls, Murray presents a "a productive counter-reading of the 'selfie,'" one that advances the possibility that popular forms of female self-imaging may offer the opportunity for political engagement, radical forms of community building (Murray 2015, 4). This resonates with the argument of media researchers Gunn Enli and Nancy Thumim, who claim that it is important to ask whether self-representations in social media challenge, uphold or alter dominant media representations (Enli and Thumim 2012). Answering this question in relation to selfies requires a more detailed study than is possible in this paper. For the time being, it is worth noting a couple of generic characteristics of selfies: they are taken either at arm's length or in a mirror, as such they are typically relatively close up pictures, they present the subject/self in a way that is considered attractive, good-looking or sexy by that subject, and they are entirely under the control of the photographer/subject. As art historian Amelia Jones puts it, self-portraiture is a "technology of embodiment" in which a performance of the self is exaggerated (Jones 2002).

Selfies are media commodities in two ways. Firstly, all users of Facebook and Instagram (and similar applications) are enrolled, knowingly or not, in a corporate owned service, which is ultimately profit oriented and sells advertising space (Instagram does not do it yet, but it is owned by Facebook,

so the shift to advertising sales is likely inevitable). Apart from an expressive consumer practice, we can think of the selfie as a branding tool, a market research technique, and a social media content generator. Secondly, the self-portraits turn the image of the self into a commodity that is made public and consumable by others, projecting personal images into collective space and literally "sharing" very widely self-produced messages. Considering the aesthetic properties of selfies, it become clear that they are a unique visual genre with particular forms of use and exchange value. As Paul Frosh argues, the selfie is a "gestural image" that cannot be theorized in purely aesthetic terms; it is also social and informational (Frosh 2015).

The act of sharing the selfie through social media platforms turns the self-portrait snapshot into a commodity that – although not necessarily directly bought and sold – is exchanged in different ways that produce value and have meaning (Schroeder and McDonagh 2005). Blogger Sarah Gram argues that selfies are a genre used most by young women, and as such they are a "ticket into the world of consumer capitalism" (Gram 2013). Rejecting the claim that selfies are pure narcissism, Gram argues that the selfie represents a form of labour, in which young girls in particular turn themselves into objects (commodities) in order to claim themselves as valuable in a cultural system (capitalism) that considers them valuable only in certain ways (as sexy bodies and pretty faces). On the other hand, it is important also to recognize that selfies are rooted in participatory cultures of new media forms, and as such can also be characterized as a significant form of self-expression, in which power lies in the hands of the users rather than the owners of the social networking or image-sharing site. Consumer culture offers a dazzling array of goods and services that induce individuals to participate in a system of commercial gratification. Media and consumer culture work hand in hand to generate thought and behaviour that conform to existing values, institutions, beliefs, and practices (Kellner 1995).

From this perspective, selfies – theorized as commodities – are a part of the capitalist spectacle. Having cleverly evolved in order to deliver a feeling of empowerment, in that individuals are generating and sharing their own images of themselves, the spectacle has arguably completely taken over even self-presentation. Instead of genuine self-expression, of ideas, debates, arguments (presented in visual form), selfies arguably show how individual agency has been shaped by the power of consumerist mediation (Borgerson 2013). Why else would it be so important, to so many people, to show themselves looking groomed, pretty, and fit in a collective self-portrait of millions of faces? From this perspective, selfies serve as evidence of a willing buy-in, indeed celebration of, consumer culture and consumption. As visual commodities, selfies arguably can be theorized as "brand work" (Tifentale 2014, 6), or "aesthetic labour" (Pettinger 2004) in that they are aimed at promoting particular narratives of the self (be it of an extremely marketable, wealthy and famous celebrity self or an "ordinary" person looking for "likes").

Cultural theorist Douglas Kellner argues that the spectacle "empowers audiences" in that it provides "a momentary sense of mastery and power, compensating for the decline of power in everyday life" (Kellner 1995, 69). Writing well before the age of the digital selfie, and focusing on the entertainment industry, Kellner attempts to show how visual culture (including blockbuster films, television shows, advertising and more), merely "hides ideological content" with "fast editing, dazzling high-tech images, and narrative excitement" (Kellner 1995, 69). Meaning and identity have collapsed, he claims, precisely due to technological advancements that deliver pleasure, fulfilment, and distraction at the expense of any real agency. In the digital age, media diets are increasingly filled with much more *interactive* pleasures. As well as consuming film and television shows, consumers produce digital versions of their self-identities through social networking platforms in which empty frameworks are provided that are filled in with user-generated content.

Although there is doubtless agency of some sort being exercised, arguably the trite content – such as our cat selfies – of most Facebook profiles and Instagram feeds supports, rather than negates, arguments about the operations of the spectacle. "Postmodern identity is a function of leisure and is grounded in play, in gamesmanship, in producing an image" (Kellner 1995, 242). Kellner's work is a good example of scholarly critique that treats commercial media forms as spectacles, as pure

image, in which identities explode and postmodern values shape the world of the image. Although he does examine nuances of the tension between how the spectacle can empower and alienate, he does not critically explore what the public nature of the spectacle *means*.

Selfies complicate the narrative of the narcissistic spectacle; they occupy an interesting place, quite explicitly, between the spectacle and participation, and between public and private (Lasén 2015). In the private realm, digital self-portraits are seemingly controlled by the user/photographer on almost every level. We get to choose how to frame and capture our images, how to crop and filter them, and where to post them.

As such, selfies may represent a moment of complete agency and self-expression, which is almost certainly pleasurable and meaningful, otherwise why would so many people do it? Media theorist Lilie Chouliaraki argues that new technological platforms for self-expression allow for the "mediated participation of ordinary people in public culture," which is a "new terrain of democratization" (Chouliaraki 2010, 227). Instead of being force-fed images of white, skinny celebrities in mainstream media, individuals can present themselves in all their individual glory, and enjoy looking at other "normal" people presented in their selfie feeds. However, Chouliaraki cautions that we should remain aware that technologies of self-expression are "embedded within the regulative regimes of the market or the state" (Chouliaraki 2010, 227). Although selfies can make the ordinary publicly visible, and stake important claims to recognition, optimism about self-mediation should be problematized by an acknowledgement of "the appropriation of self-mediation by market forces in the service of private profit or state control" (Chouliaraki 2010, 229). In other words, selfies serve more functions than self-expression, as they are embedded in complex webs of governmentality, attention markets, and visual technologies.

An extremely critical, some might say offensively patronizing, perspective on selfies would claim that they represent the extension of the spectacle into minutiae of everyday life and the bodily technologies of self. If critical theorist Baudrillard argued that television turned skin into a "smooth and functional surface of communication" (1998, 19) and our bodies into "monitoring screens" (Baudrillard 1998, 27), his view on selfies might have been even more pessimistic. Are they simply examples of individual subjectivity moulding itself into the image of the ideal consumer – well-groomed, attractive, self-involved, sexy and docile – just as capital wants us? Do selfies express personality, or erase it as "the fatal accompaniment to an existence which is concretely submission to the spectacle's rules, ever more removed from the possibility of authentic experience and thus from the discovery of individual preferences" (Debord 2004, 14)? Are selfies merely evidence of how the spectacle has conquered even individual subjectivity and expression, in which self-documentation becomes an expression of profound alienation (Boal et al. 2005)?

Although pessimistic arguments about selfies seem compelling, they are limited in ways that undermine real agency and claims to recognition. As Chouliaraki (2010, 228) points out, in self-mediation a "performative conception of publicness" comes to the fore, in which appearance is recognized as equally important to participation. Building on philosopher Hannah Arendt's concept of the public as a "space of appearance," Chouliaraki argues that the normative public sphere model over-relies on "linguistic rationalism" at the expense of visual recognition. Making oneself visible in a way largely controlled by oneself is important not only in terms of agency and subjectivity, but also in terms of rethinking what citizenship means and how it can be discursively constituted in the public realm. Self-produced images and texts "do not simply represent pre-existing selves, individual or collective, but constitute such selves in the very process of representing them" (Chouliaraki 2010, 229).

Conclusion

This paper has offered a theoretical and genealogical discussion of selfies. We propose that selfies can be productively conceived as both a sub-genre of the snapshot and as an important form of self-expression at once enabled by digital technologies and constrained by the political economy of consumer media. Building on this, we have argued that selfies need to be theorized as existing at the

interface of objectivity (in terms of their commodity form) and subjectivity (in terms of their role in a variety of forms of self-expression and self-branding, as well as claims to authenticity).

Selfies are fascinating objects not only due to their explosion within the popular culture domain, but also in terms of how they allow us to think about modes of making public and claiming authenticity. As well as this, selfies are an intriguing empirical object because they combine questions of subject and object, as well as questions of identity, agency, and power. Furthermore, turning to the selfie's rapid uptake as a branding and marketing tool, the selfie reveals shifts in the traditional functions of the advertising photograph, from sources of information, persuasion, and representation to emblems of social currency.

As our two "cat selfies" show, selfies can be thought about as ways of recording banal moments of everyday life: an interruption to computer work by the cat, a casual record of the ephemeral cuteness of a sleepy kitten, a playful glimpse into domestic settings and routines, a record of how we looked at a particular time and place. As disposable snapshots rather than deeply meaningful moments of expression or activism, the normalcy of the selfie becomes accentuated.

How should this ordinariness be theorized? As well as this, more work is required in order to understand how and why people all over the world, in every cultural and socio-economic context, take and share selfies. It is hard to articulate what motivated each of us to capture and share the self-portraits with cat. Was it an expression of pride in the adorable faces of each of our pets, evidence of distraction from work or domestic duties, or playful participation in what we each recognized to be a common netizen fascination with cats? What boundaries between public and private are negotiated by different genres of selfie; and how are those boundaries constantly reconfigured and redrawn by different sub-genres of selfie?

For example, how do the funeral selfie, the cat selfie and the sex selfie each produce particular versions of the private made public, the ordinary made spectacular; how are they different as commodities? Furthermore, the gendered dimensions of selfies require ongoing empirical and theoretical work. How do women and girls' selfies differ from those of boys and men, and how do gendered forms of digital self-representation produce and reproduce gendered power relations? What are the different ways in which selfies are shared (for example with or without hashtags) and what are the implications for theorizing the selfie as a commodity that arise therefrom? How do selfies contribute to the construction of celebrity brands, and how do various forms of self-identity constructed through selfies relate to claims to authenticity, self-esteem and individualized ways of being in the world? How has marketing co-opted the selfie for branding campaigns, and to gain consumer data? How do the political economies of the digital media platforms in which selfies are shared (Instagram, Tumblr, Facebook, Twitter) influence the aesthetics and politics of the types of selfies shared? How are certain selfies policed, monitored, and regulated by the platforms that host them? Which become wildly popular memes, when, how, and why, while others barely collect a handful of "likes"? These – and many more – are possible research questions about the selfie that will ensure that it remains an important site for research into consumption, markets, and culture for many years to come.

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