Fear and Selfie-Loathing in America: Identifying the Interstices of Othering, Iconoclasm, and the Selfie

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In December 2013, NBC Nightly News aired a segment entitled "Why 2013 is the Year of the Selfie," in which they posed the question, "Does our culture's obsessions with taking arm's length photos of ourselves make us selfish?" (Burkey). The discussion surrounding this new way of self-portraiture did not start or cease with NBC's question. It has been asked repeatedly in newspapers from *the Seattle Times* to *The New York Times*. Headlines such as "Narcissist's Dream: Selfie-Friendly Phone" and "What Did Narcissus Say to Instagram? Selfie Time!" are common (Italie; Wood). Epitomizing these points, *Fortune* magazine continued with this theme of narcissism in their August 2014 piece "CONTAGION—How the 'Selfie' Became an Epidemic." They write,

> What happens when advances in mobile technology catch up with ego? Hmm. . .let's see. . .what do President Obama, Ellen Degeneres and Pope Francis have in common? They've all snapped selfies in the last year. So has Miley Cyrus (she's posted 121 of them on Twitter). Plane-crash survivor Ferdinand Puentes. And astronaut Steve Swanson. And, so, I'm nearly positive, have you.
>
> (Hempel; ellipses in original)

How did phrases like "contagion," "epidemic," and "ego"—as well as the rather accusatory tone that dominates this opening paragraph—become rife in the contemporary moment? Such terms and tones promote the idea that taking a selfie is an eye-rolling yet deviant act that

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only certain types of individuals perform. There is myriad theoretical baggage inside *Fortune's* selfie sentiments, as the article's introduction presents issues that arise when we look at the structural forces of Othering in media-curated selfie discourse. In disentangling these notions, *Fortune's* discussion of the selfie serves as a jumping off point to examine these new photographic practices and their representations in the mass media and popular culture, specifically through the parameters of Othering, commodification, and iconoclasm.

At first glance, *Fortune's* "CONTAGION" piece appears to present the selfie through an idolatrous lens, as they are quick to point to the act of taking a selfie—or, a self-portrait often shot with a digital camera or phone—as something other people do, not the authors, and chastise those others for their egos. Examining such discourse is important, since "meaning does not arise directly from an object, 'the thing in itself,' but from the way in which an object . . . is represented in language" (du Gay et al. 134). An analysis of discourse surrounding the selfie provides insights into how the selfie has become a contemporary source of iconoclasm; the iconophobic vernacular used to discuss this mode of self-image making remains hypercritical. If "a picture is worth a thousand words," then turning inward to the typical content of a selfie should offer insight into exactly what is found in such an image and how the response is that of iconophobia.

Furthermore, selfie criticism is bolstered by the already capricious nature of photography, since more traditional photographic portraits are perplexing objects that muddle boundaries and narrow the distance between subject and object, identity and commodity, owner and owned (Smith 95). Selfies are a hybrid form of visual imagery due to their ability to narrow the distance between photographer and photographed, and collapse said distance thus coalescing subject and object into one. However, the selfie does not just collapse boundaries—it presents new ways to conceptualize preexisting ones. Given photograph's long-standing use as being a norm-forming art (Tagg), it is worth considering the selfie and the discourse surrounding it, in a visual practice that propagates and puts forth new notions in contemporary culture.

This work therefore explores the tension between norms undertaken by those who take selfies and the norms undertaken by those who critique selfies. Moving forward, it is important to note that in this essay, the terms "picture" and "images" are used interchangeably,

focusing only on visual imagery and excluding mental imagery, likeness, etc. Terri Senft and Nancy Baym conceive of the selfie as such a picture and image, and they argue that "a selfie is a photographic object that initiates the transmission of human feeling in the form of a relationship (between photographer and photographed, between image and filtering software, between viewer and viewed. . .etc.)" (1589). The collapsed boundary and newly formed relationship between photographer and photographed, or, rather, self and pictures-of-self, impacts how the subsequent viewer/viewed binary is constructed. Within these fluid demarcations, the ability for one to take a picture of themselves in the selfie is at odds with those who critique selfie-taking practices and dub them narcissistic. Therefore, at the root of the tension in this discourse is the conflict between seemingly authentic self-presentation and beliefs in such seemingly authentic self-presentation as "wrong." Analyzing this relationship is paramount to understanding media-curated selfie discourse and how it is negative and accusatory. How society comes to understand, process, and react to advances in image making results from macrolevel structural inequities. The selfie is no exception.

Fortune's article suggests themes of Othering and idolatry that are thus worth examining in tandem with the selfie. Such a review warrants pertinent attention to the works of W. J. T. Mitchell and Susan Sontag—who have both frequently written on these subjects—in order to understand how an image that is so ubiquitous can also be so heavily disparaged. First, the selfie is analyzed as a contemporary image through its representation in American mass media, as well as in American popular culture, in order to argue that there are certain demographic characteristics on display that make the selfie susceptible to criticism. Second, tenets of commodification are examined in order to assess how the changing photographer/photographed dichotomy influences image consumption and how this contributes to "selfie-phobia." Finally, the selfie is discussed in a way that challenges its iconophobic criticism. The goal of this analysis is to propose a theoretical conceptualization of "selfie-phobia" as a type of iconophobia, which adds future insight into the friction that exists between American mass media, popular culture, and selfie-takers. Typically, American culture discusses the selfie through an iconophobic discourse and it remains confounding as to why this is the case. With W. J. T. Mitchell and Susan Sontag as guides, media and popular

culture discussions of selfies are analyzed in order to assess how selfies are sites of Othering—which, in turn, reinforce iconophobia, idolatry, and iconoclasm. The aim of this analysis is to be intentionally superficial, as the point is not to offer close readings or media discussions of selfies as a textual or semiotic analysis. This argument is purposefully grand in order to make larger observations about the selfie in American media and culture. Such an approach lays groundwork to suggest future scholarship regarding iconophobia in tandem with selfie studies.

Selfies as Sites of Othering and Iconophobia

Images are popular antagonists, and when individuals set out to denounce them, their actions are typically highly visible.[1] With regard to what he calls "offending images," Mitchell argues,

> Two beliefs seem to be in place when people offend images. The first is that the image is transparently and immediately linked to whatever it represents. Whatever is done to the image is somehow done to what it stands for. The second is that the image possesses a kind of vital, living character that makes it capable of feeling what is done to it.
>
> (Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?* 129)

Selfie criticism is rooted in the idea that whatever is done to—or said about—the selfie is done to the individual in the photo. This is because, despite being signs and representations, photography ascribes something real to whatever is depicted in the photo, akin to a quotation, maxim, or proverb (Sontag, *Regarding the Pain;* Barthes, *Camera Lucida*). How, then, do images become so heavily criticized when they represent some variant of reality.[2] When one considers the default position for images as feminine, images become Others in line with pre-existing hegemonic, macrolevel structural, and demographic inequities, as has been argued by Mitchell and Sontag, respectively (Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*; Sontag, *Regarding the Pain*). In turn, images are policed similar to how certain demographic groups are criticized for taking selfies.

News headlines and Internet memes are examined herein as jumping off points, as they both are ways to examine how selfies are criticized on a larger scale. Limor Shifman argues, for example, that Internet memes "actually reflect deep social and cultural structures" and are "socially constructed public discourse" (15, 8). Furthermore, following Anne Burns, a meme's impact is on the macrolevel and thus offers insight into contemporary discourses that represent inequalities and inequities. Mass media news headlines serve a similar purpose, as media "produce in all of us the ambivalence we associate with images" (Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?* 217). Therefore, memes and newspaper headlines are fitting ways to lay groundwork for understanding the selfie as Other and iconophobic. They are key pieces of discursive evidence in understanding large-scale criticisms.

The following examples are from searches of the term "selfie" on Lexis Nexis, Google Scholar, Tumblr, Pinterest, and MemeGenerator. Such sites were used because of their access to American mass media articles (Lexis Nexis, Google Scholar) and their role as important hubs of American pop culture imagery (Tumblr, Pinterest, MemeGenerator). While there were results that discussed the benefits of selfies, overt criticisms were privileged for their insight into understanding selfie criticism and discursive backlashes. Only articles from the United States were given consideration for inclusion. Actual selfies of individuals were disregarded; discourse was privileged over selfies of specific individuals. This approach is similar to the one undertaken by Anne Burns in her study of selfies as Foucauldian social regulation, where she argues, "the selective approach to data collection and use, in which I made deliberate choices to include and exclude data, was appropriate . . . because I did not intend to make a claim about all discourses . . . or even one in its entirety, but only to analyze the features of the discourse concerned" (1718). Such an approach allows for the consideration of iconophobia in selfie studies, thus opening the door for future analyses to carry out more specific examinations with sturdy theoretical groundwork.

Overview of the Contemporary Self-Portrait

Anne Burns, Terri Senft, Nancy Baym, and Katrin Tiidenberg have argued that selfie criticism abounds because the initial adopters of the

selfie movement, and those who gave the practice popularity, were Others. These Others are considered to be women, racial minorities, individuals who are queer or transgender, individuals with disabilities, etc.—any person that falls outside the dominance of the American *heteropatriarchal* standard. which is understood as anything outside the ideological, hegemonic dominance of the cisgender, white, Christian able-bodied male. Because "images of women and queers of all genders tend to be more socially policed than those of heterosexual men" and "people of color find themselves under surveillance of all sorts more frequently than Whites," Others have typically struggled to be in control of their own image production (Senft and Baym 1592). The selfie negotiates this struggle by letting Others turn photography into acknowledgments of their lived experience.

This acknowledgement, in turn, gives selfie-takers, and by extension Others, agency and control in their own image production because they are no longer relying on an extra person (or, outside photographer) to take the picture for them. This makes selfie-taking mature and deliberate, and deliberation is linked in particular to the defining aspect of the selfie—the removal of the outside photographer. With this elimination, the image in the photograph (the individual) subverts the power structures normally accompanied by photography, for example, requiring someone to hit "click" for them and thus being subject, albeit ever so slightly, to their timing, lighting, positioning, and overall exterior influence. As Sontag posited, "in deciding how a picture should look, in preferring one exposure to another, photographers are always imposing standards on their subjects" (*On Photography* 6). When it comes to the selfie, the decision of what to include and exclude is made by whoever takes the photo. The subject of the image initially had very little control of the narrative not only because photographers were always imposing their own standards but also because they believed in the outside pressures of what photography could do culturally and ideologically (Tagg). With the removal of these outside influences, selfie-takers are able to take a picture of themselves that is more *them* than any photo taken by an outside photographer.

It is common for individuals to experience a disconnect with mass media, as their own lives do not resemble its images. Felicia Harris has suggested that such individuals (who are typically Others) must grapple with how to become comfortable with their own lived

experiences when they do not match those represented by the media. The selfie is a way to negotiate between lived experience and mass media. With control in the selfie-taker's hand, concepts such as racial and sexual stereotypes, as well as unrealistic body images (among many other tropes) become less of a part of said individual's cultural footprint. Instead of longing after or feeling belittled by unobtainable media frameworks, individuals are able to say: "They are wrong. This is in fact how I look, and this is how one should understand me." While the selfie is a way for an individual to represent themselves with limited stereotypes and as an act of resistance against said stereotypes, this is not intended to lead to an interpretation that the selfie is a utopian image. This does not mean that by challenging stereotypes the selfie creates immunity for the individual or has somehow found a way to overcome stereotypes. In fact, there are many selfies that are taken that align with hegemonic standards of beauty, race, sexuality, and so forth. This work simply proposes that the selfie contains more resistance than is suggested in accusations of narcissism, and that instead of dismissing selfies outright as excessive self-love, we should consider their potential in constructing new types of individual narratives instead of broad, macrolevel, generalizing ones.

Therefore, agency and control occur because one may take a selfie to be part of a larger sociocultural event (such as Twitter movements #smear4smear or #iftheygunnedmedown), or because the individual likes how they look at any particular moment. In either of these cases (or in a range of other possible scenarios), the individual's decision to take a picture of himself or herself implies an active, conscious choice to self-represent. Selfie takers are joining dialogues, deciding how to present their lived experience to the world, or simply feeling good about themselves. Although headlines such as "We Just Wish This Selfie-Free Zone Existed [In Real Life]" and "The Selfie Craze: Are We Becoming a Narcissistic Nation?" let the mass media criticize and attempt to eradicate this choice instead of acknowledging any potential benefits, in order to suppress selfie-takers. However, the selfie provides Others a way to identify the falsehoods that exist in stereotypes and talk back to the unobtainable images that saturate the American mass media. It is this fear of the selfie's ability to confront what has permeated in American culture for so long that causes discomfort.

Fear over the ability to control the readings of photographic images are not new. Debates over what constitutes a photograph can be traced back to the very inception of photography, and this can be seen in the naming of the selfie as such. While new trends do frequently command the need for new names of phenomena, it is worth remembering that language is never innocent. In naming the "selfie" as such rather than simply referring to as a self-portrait or a self-photograph, individuals may circulate a popular neologism for a trend, but the discourse also distances the selfie from traditional photographic practice. A selfie becomes different, or less than, a traditional photograph (Burns 1716). This is a way of delegitimizing those who take selfies and making their lived experiences less visible. This is problematic, since "the very existence of the photograph depends on the very real existence of the object being photographed" (Slater 222). The backlash against the selfie says that the lived experiences of those who take them are not worth viewing. This creates a paradoxical situation—individuals make up mainstream culture, but mainstream culture does not adequately depict those who constitute it.

Mass media and popular culture have turned independence and agency on their heads, blasting something that allows Others to defy power structures and blithely critiquing them for their narcissism. In a piece with the definitive headline "The Meaning of the Ubiquitous Selfie," the *Philadelphia Inquirer* reports:

> [The selfie] doesn't have to look good . . . So human beings have always done. Cave paintings bear stencils of handprints, created by blowing pigment-dust over a hand. Dean Snow, emeritus professor of anthropology at Pennsylvania State University suggests in a recent study that in some caves up to two-thirds of these artists may have been women—which jibes well with reports of a predominance of selfies by women.
>
> (Timpane)

The public voice of the selfie becomes one that is crass and uses a loosely conceived historical trajectory to justify sexist discourse. Similarly, such language becomes a rhetoric of macroscale exclusion, since the selfie is represented as trite and narcissistic. This becomes a vicious cycle—selfies are narcissistic because Others take them, and Others are narcissistic because they take selfies (Burns 1717).

Through their headline, the newspaper offers up a definitive meaning of the selfie thus reinforcing the media-curated meaning of the selfie as narcissistic and deviant.

In order to remain outside of the vicious cycle (and subsequently not narcissistic), one must not take selfies. Selfies are not merely critiqued in a discriminatory fashion, but selfie backlash also exists in such a way that American hegemonic dominance is associated with not taking a selfie. This is because deterrence acts as a "subtle yet significant form of social control and as a means for maintaining gendered power relations" (Burns 1716). Not only are these images of Others policed, but pop culture actively discourages men who fall within hegemonic dominance from taking selfies. Ideas and actions can become social norms when individuals are not just told what to do, but what not to do.

Such a hegemonic discourse is frequently on display through Internet memes. Created in a popular Internet culture fashion, Figures 1 and 2 perpetuate the ideas that (i) masculinity is the ideal standard to aim for, (ii) because real men do not take selfies, anyone that does falls short of aspiring standards, and (iii) selfies have become discursively and culturally synonymous with Others.

In the case of selfies, as exemplified in these Internet memes, teenage girls emerge as Others, since their selfie-taking behavior is constructed as deviant. Men and teenage girls are thus discursively

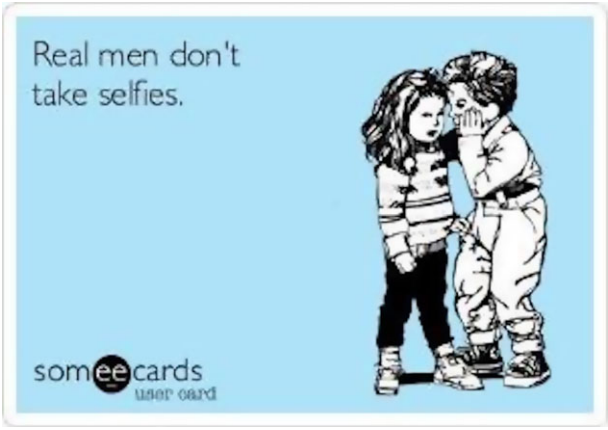

FIGURE 1. Real men do not take selfies. Source: Griego [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

constructed as polar opposites—real men do not take selfies because they are those things teenage girls take. Here, the mindset reinforced by these memes is the idea that ideological dominant "real men" do not take selfies, and that selfies are counterintuitive to hegemonic masculinity. Others take selfies, and as such, selfies discursively emerge as a lesser image.

Thus, selfies and the ideological dominance that discourages them intersect at a perplexing corner of agency and control, self and social. As photography has typically been a way to "express the values of the dominant class and to interpret events from that class's point of view," the exclusion of the outside photographer and turn to self-as-photographer challenges photography's typical use of representing dominant ideals in favor of individual narratives (Freund 4). This autonomy exists as one possible answer to the questions and critiques surrounding the previous limitations of photography. The previously shown memes discourage male selfies because male interests have typically been expressed and interpreted by photography, and selfies allow for subordinate groups to finally have their voices heard. Yet, despite the agency offered to those outside of the dominant, hegemonic individual, mainstream American critics continue to reject the selfie, delegitimizing it and describing it as a pathetic cry for help or as the hallmark of millennial vainglory.

FIGURE 2. Teenage girl selfies. Source: MemeGenerator "Selfie: You Mean Those Things Teenage Girls Take?"

However, at their core selfies are a form of user-generated content in digital participatory culture—a culture that allows for myriad voices to enter the conversation and respond to the current American standards of dominance. Such ideas are indicated by Jill Walker Rettberg who suggests, "our fascination with creating digital self-portraits is indicative of our collective coming of age where we as a culture are discovering that we have voices online and can express ourselves rather than simply accepting the mass media's view of the world" (463). The personal choice displayed in selfies allows individuals to participate in and challenge the status quo. The ability to talk back to the status quo and engage in a dialogue with it is a benefit of our digital, participatory culture.

At the root of the critique of the selfie is the dismissal of the individual. It is arguable that commonplace, everyday occurrences are important to be documented, and "the omnipresence of cameras persuasively suggests that time consists of interesting events, events worth photographing" (Sontag, *On Photography* 11). While Sontag remained skeptical of the camera's popularity as indicative of importance, it is now worth recognizing that the twenty-first century is an era in which everyone can be the self-proclaimed star of their own lives. A September 2014 article in the *New York Times* critiqued the twenty-first century's ability to turn individual fame into big business, aptly highlighting the band The Chainsmokers and their viral hit "#Selfie" in which thousands of selfie-takers submitted portraits for the chance to have it shown in the song's music video (Brodesser-Akner). The article attributes the song's success to the "shameless logic of social media," the "glory of proximity to fame," and "self-promotional oversharing" (Brodesser-Akner). What do words like "shameless" and "oversharing" signify when they are part of a blistering critique in a mainstream newspaper? While this action can be construed as an attempt to achieve micro-celebrity status on one's own social network, it can also be seen more as self-validation than validation from others. These individuals will never be celebrities, but they are celebrated authentically in their own individual narrative, no matter how fleeting.

Similar to how deliberation, agency, and control are crucial components in understanding a contemporary self-portrait, fleeting authenticity is also important. Deliberation and celebration of an individual's own narrative are what allow the selfie to engage in a

dialogue with the status quo and show that what is witnessed within the confines of one's own life is worthy of documentation. It is worthy of remembrance without stereotype or mockery. Because photography and the selfie can exist as ways for one to tell their own narrative, perhaps the tension surrounding the selfie is inevitable. With the removal of the outside photographer and the turn to photographer-as-photographed, binaries break down what have long prevailed in photography. Photography has typically had a broader use of reflecting and re-presenting society's dominant norms and values, but it now has developed an alternate and purposeful use for challenging these norms.

The Selfie and Image Commodification

No reality is exempt from appropriation. Elli Roushanzamir has argued that for years mass media has shown race, class, sexuality, and gender, presenting them in ways that best fit their needs. Typically, these images can be considered what Roland Barthes refers to as a readerly text (or, rather, a readerly image), meaning that images adhere to the status quo curated by the mass media (*S/Z* 5). Mass media also attempts to hide any elements that would open the text up to multiple meanings—the meaning presented by mass media is the only "correct" meaning. This meaning elucidates stereotypes and unrealistic representations, and such visual formations only represent the shell of a trope. This occurs because according to Barthes, in order to appropriate one must compress something, as compression makes an idea easier and more pleasurable to consume (*Camera Lucida 12*). Using Barthes as a jumping off point, it is worth considering how the selfie specifically engages in dialogue with the status quo's tendency for consumption, and how the image favors self-representation over compression into stereotype. This is an attempt to understand the selfie as a writerly text (writerly image), as opposed to a readerly image.

Barthes describes a writerly text as one that is conscious of self-expression in which there is an array of meaning to uncover. This is crucial to the selfie which favors depictions of lived experiences over that of mass media's unrealistic standards. As such,

writerly texts like selfies disregard the status quo and question its power, instead favoring a process that allows an individual to actively construct their own meanings. The selfie can be understood as a writerly image by looking at what it is not—that is, through a more comprehensive look of what is typically at stake in a readerly image. In a readerly text, there is typically the surveyor and the surveyed, consumer and consumed. In a writerly text, the initial surveyor and consumer is the self—other audiences are a secondary concern. This can be due in part to the sharing nature of social media, and while a selfie may command an audience through those platforms, it is first and foremost taken, surveyed, and consumed by the self. Sontag expands this, arguing that "to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world" (*On Photography* 4). Such a concept is indicative of taking a selfie for one's own consumption. It may be appropriated, but it is first appropriated by the individual who took and stars in the image.

The selfie is an image in which primary ownership belongs to the taker, who also stars in the picture. This counteracts former relationships of commodification with images, as well as commodification with images and women. With regard to this, Shawn Michelle Smit asks:

> If women can and do represent themselves as commodities in consumer culture, must they necessarily reproduce themselves as the objects of dominant cultural discourse and desires? . . . Can women represent themselves only by internalizing a male gaze? If women commodify themselves, do they necessarily go to market? Might they maintain a kind of commerce, among themselves?
>
> (97)

While Smith particularly addresses women in this passage, her questions can be applied to Othered groups writ large, as these groups are generally produced as the objects of dominant cultural discourse. Because Othered groups are typically represented as objects instead of subjects, the attempted dominance of the readerly text emerges. Such discourse transpires because the fundamentals of the selfie reject the theory that Others can only represent themselves through the eyes of a male gaze, predicated on masculine iconography—

that is, the iconography of contemporary American cultural hegemony. As Berger and Mitchell have argued, the power of the gaze in commodification has always been dominated by masculinity (*Ways of Seeing; Iconology*). The selfie, by allowing individuals to take an active role in the construction of their own meanings, lets people have self-commerce instead of commerce based on a masculine gaze. This notion of image and self-commerce exists in contrast to what Sontag argues regarding photographer and subject and how distance is a necessary component in conceptualizing that relationship. However, the selfie has come to be defined in opposition to Sontag and by what this particular type of self-image lacks: distance. A selfie can be for the self, by the self, and this removes the distance between subject and object, photographer and photographed. It is in this erasure of distance that selfies disrupt the appetite for photographic consumption of Others and masculine iconography.

However, selfie criticisms perpetuated by popular culture and the American mass media not only attempt to devalue the self-portrait, but the discourses attempt to reign in the selfie by critiquing this choice not to commodify for another. A common tactic for this is to police Others' actions and condemn this agency. In Figure 3, the formula $N=S/H$ illustrates that one can mathematically measure narcissism according to the number of selfies taken per hour. It is important to note that the image selected in the meme is a young woman who adheres to stereotypically dominant standards of western beauty (white skin, blonde hair). Even in the criticism of selfies, women's bodies are still put on display as objects rather than subjects. There is an intriguing juxtaposition happening in this particular image of criticism in that (i) selfies are narcissistic; (ii) only certain standards of beauty are considered attractive enough to be commodified; and (iii) the commodification persists by picturing a woman who exemplifies standards of beauty in the selfie criticism. The message is clear: Women can still be consumed and subjected to the male gaze. This hegemonic ideal continues while simultaneously decrying the selfie.

In Figure 4, featuring popular Hollywood actor Ryan Gosling, women are told they take too many selfies. Typically used in memes that empower women by encouraging confidence and agency, the Ryan Gosling meme is reappropriated in order to shame women. Because the meme operates on the premise that Ryan Gosling is

FIGURE 3. The selfie per hour. Source: BewareofImagesGroup [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

romantically interested in the viewer, this particular iteration of the meme presents the idea that the Hollywood heartthrob would not be interested in a woman who took too many selfies.

Finally, Figure 5 insists upon the necessity of a "Dumb Selfie Anonymous" group, indicating the prevalence of selfies as a mental illness or social problem that needs fixing. Furthermore, the young woman depicted is dissimilar to the woman that appears in the *N=S/H* image. She is Other, not only because she is a woman but because she appears to be non-white, casting her as doubly Othered. Furthermore, because Others take selfies, Others are pathologized.

In response to the idea of the readerly image, the selfie emerges as a writerly image. A selfie for the self destabilizes the status quo and allows individuals to insert their own meanings into photographs. While some scholars such as Andrew Mendelson and Zizi Papacharissi do argue for a more narcissistic reading of the selfie, it is important to keep in mind Rettberg's previously noted idea that selfies are a type of visual *Bildungsroman* in that individuals can play with photography in ways that help them find themselves. These individuals do not have to accept the mass media's view of the world. The selfie can be understood as a visual *Bildungsroman* because it allows people to help craft their own identities online. Such a coming of age indicates types of rejection of commodification principles, and even

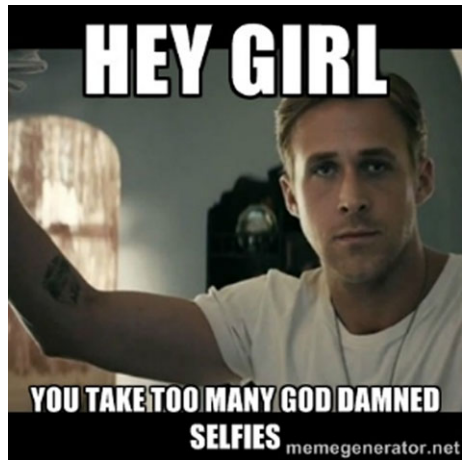

FIGURE 4. Too many selfies. Source: MemeGenerator "Hey Girl. . .You Take Too Many Goddamn Selfies" {Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com}

FIGURE 5. A "Dumb Selfie Anonymous" advertisement. Source: BeingIndian {Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com}

Mendelson and Papacharissi acknowledge the idea that "it would be more meaningful and accurate to interpret these narcissistic lapses as a step toward self-reflection and self-actualization, rather than instances of uncontrollable self-absorption" (30). Rather than the narcissism proposed by many, it is possible that selfies signify a rejection of traditional gendered commodity logic. While a selfie may command an audience through social media display, it is first and

foremost taken for the self—a crucial definition for understanding the agency of the selfie in place of commodification or narcissism. Because a writerly image is more about engaging in a dialogue than passively accepting the status quo, the selfie can be understood as a way for individuals to engage in self-contrivance. To answer Shawn Michelle Smith's earlier question, no, women (and Others) do not have to go to market solely to commodify themselves. They do, however, participate in a kind of self-commerce which privileges one's own standards over the standards of the status quo in the form of a writerly text, or image. Others can engage in agency among themselves, and this contributes to selfie criticism. In a selfie culture that no longer serves up consumption, the status quo remains famished.

Selfies and Iconophobia

An unfed status quo leads to a vexed status quo. That ire, in turn, can lead to a pervasive desire to control images and the selfie is no exception. When a new type of image or medium of image production emerges, one that disrupts the appetite for consumption, a common reaction is to demolish its legitimacy. Typically, been accomplished by idolatry and iconoclasm. While idolatry, iconoclasm, and iconophobia are three distinct concepts, they are used in an interrelated manner where (i) idolatry relates to the selfie narcissisms proposed by many; (ii) iconophobia indicates how the status quo is afraid of the power of the selfie, and (iii) iconoclasm proposes the total destruction of images (e.g., the status quo's desire to eradicate selfies in order to maintain hegemony).

Mimetic images offer stimuli by proxy for the real thing. Even without being mistaken for the real object (or person) in question, the image possesses powerful effects (Mitchell 18). These powerful effects are what iconoclasts fear, since society was dominated by the belief that art had its origins in the praise and worship of God, as well as the fear that people would mistakenly anthropomorphize the art and believe it contained the power of God. But in the contemporary moment, idols permeate culture in perhaps less obvious and religious ways (Mitchell, *Iconology* 5), and research on contemporary idolatry has examined how things such as Apple's iPod advertisements and movie trailers are construed as idols.[3] The image-saturated, twenty-first

century world shares 1.8 billion images a day, yet critics like Hempel in her *Fortune* piece condemn this proliferation as a virus that must be cured (Edwards; Hempel). By "curing" the selfie virus, one would seemingly do away with images, and by doing away with selfies, one can seemingly do away with what is depicted in them. This notion falls at the end of the spectrum of iconophobia: on one end there is total iconoclasm which is the complete destruction of images, and on the other, the desire to remove certain images from mainstream culture in order to reduce their visibility and their powerful effects.

Simply, iconoclasm is a belief about the beliefs of others (Mitchell, *Iconology*). Iconoclasts fear that those who produce images are irrationally obsessed with them, even though this may not be the case. For instance, one *Huffington Post* writer asks "'Should you REALLY post that selfie?" and a *Wall Street Journal* editorialist decrees "Get Over Your Selfie" (Stone, Dobson). At no point are selfie-takers actually consulted; the mass media merely bolsters this one particular selfie discourse into a selfie-phobia—culture needs to control these images before they control people, for example, in the form of addiction. The fear of iconoclasm resides in the thoughts of others, which, like an individual's desire to produce an image of him- or herself, cannot initially be controlled by anyone else. Fear of what one cannot control mixes with fear of Others' agency and these two anxieties have become a hybrid super-fear in the rise of the selfie.

Idols and idolatry do remain in the twenty-first century, but they permeate culture in less obvious, less religious ways. For instance, idolatry is often conjugated around the second person in conjunction with discussions of images, which is exemplified in *Fortune*'s "CONTAGION" article as they claim, "so, I'm nearly positive, have you" (Hempel). According to W. J. T. Mitchell,

> The grammar of iconoclasm can, in fact, be conjugated rather straightforwardly around the first, second, and third persons, singular and plural—"I," "You," "We," and "They." "I" am never an idolater because I only worship the true God or my images are merely symbolic forms and I am an enlightened, modern subject who knows better than to worship mere images. "They" are the idolators who must be punished, and their idols destroyed. "You," finally, may or may not be an idolator. If you are one of "Them," you probably are.
>
> (*Iconology* 19)

Among others, the *New York Times* and *Fortune* need not look any further than their own content to witness iconophobia. *Fortune's* article epitomizes what Mitchell describes: "The idea of images as living species is a very disturbing one for . . . people whose anxieties about the way human creations 'take on lives of their own' have become commonplaces of contemporary life" (89). From the title of their article through their comparison of the selfie to a living virus, *Fortune* succinctly sums up American culture's iconophobia.

What is at stake in the popular culture idolatry of the selfie? Examining the popular, self-proclaimed feminist Web site *Jezebel* is an intriguing place to start, as they critique selfies on a weekly basis by belittling female celebrities for "playing paparazzi and turning the camera on themselves" (Stewart). The title of their selfie-critical segment, "Fear and Selfie-Loathing," in its attempt at wit, reveals *Jezebel's* iconophobia. This problem is two-fold, as *Jezebel* is a popular Web site for one of the most active demographics of selfie-takers. Since women are some of the most common selfie-takers, the attempts to delegitimize their habits and experiences attack them from all angles. Second, exposing women to "selfie-phobic" backlash risks fewer selfies. Because "photos are seen as negotiated versions of reality, tools for identity formation and communication . . . and part [of] the embodiment process [of] the shaping and knowing of the self," criticizing Others as selfie-takers risks not only reducing the visibility of selfies in modern culture, but damages those who take them (Tiidenberg 2). This type of critique minimizes agency and returns images back to the status of commodities of another's gaze, with the individual depicted in the photo reaping fewer benefits. There is a problematic mixture of *Jezebel*'s and *Fortune*'s disdain with the discourse used to speak about images. The visual is often associated with feminine corporeity, since "[images] are confined to the narrow sphere of external display of their bodies and of the space in which they ornament" (Mitchell, *Iconology* 110). As Berger has argued, from their earliest childhoods on, women are taught to constantly survey themselves so that they appear how others want them to appear—but they are discouraged from surveying themselves for their own enjoyment. The selfie, however, accomplishes this task.

Thus, because selfies do not provide sustenance for the status quo, the status quo remains unsatisfied and perplexed by this new way of self-portraiture. This fear persists because mainstream culture cannot

control selfie production, and they can only respond to them by desperately "grasping at straws" in an attempt to dominate selfie-takers. Iconophobia may be the fear of another's belief, but it is a fear of another's belief that is also steeped in sexism, racism, and a myriad of other isms. Selfies complicate these isms, allowing typically Othered groups to defy the hegemonic masculine gaze, have a dialogue with the status quo, and turn the unstable, naïve photograph into a purposeful and mature image. Considering selfies as idols, W. J. T. Mitchell states,

> The idol, then, tends to be simply an image overvalued . . . by an *other*: by pagans and primitives; by children or foolish women; by Papists and ideologues (*they* have an ideology; *we* have a political philosophy). . . . The rhetoric of iconoclasm is thus a rhetoric of exclusion and domination, a caricature of the other as one who is involved in irrational, obscene behavior from which (fortunately) we are exempt. The images of the idolaters are typically phallic . . . and thus they must be emasculated, feminized, have their tongues cut off by denying them the power of expression of eloquence. They must be declared "dumb," "mute," "empty," or "illusory."
> (*Iconology* 113)

Exchange the word selfie for idol in the above quote, and the result is striking. Many people are afraid of images, and it is not because of the material—fear is based around the statement that the material makes.[4] The status quo is trying to silence the thing actively trying to engage with its discourse by making the selfie dumb and mute and shame those who take them. Selfies are a type of image *other* people take, not those of us in the status quo. By critiquing images in this manner the status quo is not just trying to delegitimize the selfie, but, according to Mitchell, trying to do away with the very individual depicted in the selfie (*What Do Pictures Want?*). Since the early adopters of selfies were typically Othered groups, the denunciation of selfies translates into a rejection of the Other.

Conclusions

This article has laid groundwork for understanding the selfie through the parameters of Othering, commodification, and iconoclasm.

Hopefully future research expands this initial scholarship through more detailed studies in semiotics or textual analysis, among other methodologies. By using iconoclasm to understand the selfie, one can see greater insights into discovering how the selfie is discursively created as something negative, when in fact aspects of selfie-taking reap positive benefits. This article goes beyond the understanding of selfies as narcissistic, deviant, or mentally ill and offers more nuanced insights into why this iconoclasm might be the case. Because early adopters of the selfie movement were Others, mass media responds to the selfie in ways that attempt to suppress the Other and cling to stereotypical images instead of authentic ones, all under the guise of wanting the ease of image consumption. By operating under the premise that whatever is done to an image is done to what it stands for, this analysis shows that mass media headlines and popular culture discourse prefer eradicating the visibility of Others' lived experience. As a result, iconophobic discourse emerges as a way to discuss selfies.

When one cannot control, one pathologizes and, as W. J. T. Mitchell warns, this is a common reaction to any new form of imagery that is introduced into culture (*What Do Pictures Want?*). New forms of images introduce new epistemologies into the world, challenging and prompting us to reconsider how we typically hold different types of images to old standards. Disconnects occur when a contemporary phenomenon is anachronistically judged. To adequately decipher this new way of self-portraiture, we must consider form in tandem with content, photographer alongside the photographed, and the self together with the selfie.

Notes

1. See, Mitchell, *Iconology*; Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*; Sontag, *On Photography*. These works discuss how when individuals criticize images or ways of image making, they often do so very publically. In fact, making sure an image critique is highly visible is integral to the very idea of idolatrous image critiques.
2. It should be noted that factually inaccurate, or Photoshopped selfies, are outside of the scope of this work.
3. See Eric Jenkins and Karen Mallia, respectively, as well as their works on how idols and idolatry permeate contemporary society in less obviously religious ways.
4. Further examples of selfie-related headlines from the mass media are notable here: "Girl Spends Whole MINUTE Trying to Take the Perfect Selfie" (Sanchez); "Should You REALLY Post that Selfie?" (Stone); "Selfie Hall of Shame: Is Anywhere Safe from Sick Snaps?" (Lytton).

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