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Self(ie)-Discipline: Social Regulation as Enacted Through the Discussion of Photographic Practice

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Introduction

This article argues that online commentary about the use and nature of selfies has a regulatory social function in that there is a connection between the discursive construction of selfie practice and the negative perception of selfie takers. Beyond a critique of photographic form or content, the online discussion of selfies reflects contemporary social norms and anxieties, particularly relating to the behavior of young women. The knowledge discursively produced in relation to selfie taking supports patriarchal authority and maintains gendered power relations by perpetuating negative feminine stereotypes that legitimize the discipline of women's behaviors and identities.

Using textual and visual examples, this article analyzes how the popular discourse regarding selfies produces social organization in two ways: First, the repeated criticism of the selfie is extended to the selfie taker in a way that brings selfies into being as problematic (Butler, 1990). Second, the denigration of the selfie is then used to enforce hierarchies and express prejudice and thus fosters an acceptance of discipline especially targeted at young women (Foucault, 1977).

The selfie occurs at the nexus of disciplinary discourses of photography, gender, and social media. In addition to combining these disciplinary strands, the discussion of selfies also illustrates Foucault's "capillary" conception of power as a dissipated social process exercised across networks through discourse (1977, p. 198). This is not a straightforward imposition of dominance on a subordinated minority but an example of the legitimization of the principles of social organization by virtue of their appearing to originate from everywhere (Foucault, 1977). By naturalizing certain knowledge—such as the narcissistic nature of selfies—as "truth," the discussion of selfies acts as a subtle yet significant form of social control and a means for maintaining gendered power relations. I argue that by devaluing selfies and by identifying them as feminine, popular discourse serves to direct disdain at young women openly—and largely without challenge. As such, the low value of women's cultural practices is used to enforce a social hierarchy, demonstrating that "culture accomplishes informally [what] political economy enforces structurally" (Fraser, 1990, pp. 64–65).

Besides legitimizing the expression of contempt for others, in particular the criticism of young women, I argue that the discussion of selfies has a disciplinary effect, as the prescription of practice—a multitude of tips, prohibitions, and the ridicule of subjects who do not follow the rules—also extends to the construction and control of subjects. By repeatedly devaluing selfie takers, the discussion of selfies not only acts as a cloaked expression of sexist attitudes but also defines and stigmatizes a specific group of subjects. As Foucault argues, the discursive construction of subjects (such as selfie takers) plays an important function in social organization and domination in that subjects identified as “abnormal” are perceived to be legitimate targets of correction (Foucault, 1977, p. 183). Therefore, selfie discourse does not merely *express* prejudice toward others; it also *justifies* their denigration by establishing punishment as a socially accepted response to certain activities (taking selfies) and subjects (women who take selfies) (Foucault, 1977).

Method

This article identifies a relationship between creative practices and discourse in the correlation between the negative perception of selfies and the criticism and regulation of women. Using approaches to discourse outlined by Foucault (1972), this article analyzes the popular discursive construction of selfie-takers.

Theoretical Perspective

Discourse is “a group of statements which provide a language for talking about [and] representing the knowledge about a particular topic at a particular historical moment” (Hall, 1992, p. 291). This article therefore approaches the evidence that it analyzes as a representation of a particular discourse about selfies in that it outlines a way to conceptualize selfies within a specific historical and cultural context.

Foucault’s approach is useful for addressing the political effects of the discussion of selfies because he identifies discourse as the point at which power and knowledge overlap (Foucault, 1978). Foucault does not characterize power as purely repressive—rather, he identifies that power produces identities, activities, and ways of thinking as much as it constrains them. Social reality and individual subjects are constituted discursively within the public sphere in that discourses “systematically form the object of which they speak” (Foucault, 1972, p. 54). Discourse is therefore to be regarded as a process of simultaneous production and discipline, as it is not just a representation of one’s thoughts but also a means by which the world—and indeed the “truth” of the world—is brought into being and interpreted (Foucault, 1972). Using this perspective, I approach the forms of knowledge exemplified by my evidence in terms of their power effects, whereby the numerous claims to the “truth” of women’s conduct and nature act to create subjects of a particular kind, which is then used to legitimize the imposition of external forms of discipline.

Besides addressing the productivity of discourse, its role in producing truth, and its position relative to power, Foucault also addresses themes that are particularly applicable to the study of selfies, as they regard the disciplinary organization and application of visibility in which processes of surveillance

(1977) and assessment of the body (1973) are instrumental in inducing subjects to self-monitor and self-regulate.

Evidence Collection

Evidence presented here was collected as part of a doctoral research project that analyzes the relationship between the popular discussion of photographic practice and social discipline. The following examples have been selected to demonstrate how selfie discourse recycles negative stereotypes in relation to women's photographic practice.

As this study considers the way in which photographic practice is conceptualized through online commentary, it is fitting to cite a variety of visual materials, including photographs, videos, and cartoons. Alongside these are textual examples in the form of anonymous reader-generated comments that were written in response to online articles discussing selfies and that were posted online from January to October 2013. Lahad (2013) identifies among the benefits of analyzing such comments that they demonstrate the social construction of cultural meanings.

Evidence was collected on the basis of quality rather than quantity and according to its ability to illustrate and develop a persuasive argument regarding a coherent discourse. This selective approach to data collection and use, in which I made deliberate choices to include and exclude data, was appropriate for this study because I did not intend to make a claim about all discourses online or even one in its entirety but only to analyze the features of the discourse concerned and what other discourses it referenced. Despite the comparatively limited scope of this article, I will show how the condemnation of women for a specific aspect of their use of photography demonstrates some of the ways in which unequal gender relations are sustained through online discourses.

Results

The argument presented in this article has two strands: Part A argues that the selfie is discursively constructed as a gendered practice, which enables it to be devalued through an assumed association with feminine vanity and triviality. Part B asserts that this gendering enables the imposition of rules governing how and when to take selfies. This is a form of regulation that extends beyond questions of photographic practice in order to secure an acceptance of—and adherence to—social norms. Furthermore, the discussion of selfies is shown to (re)produce not just forms of social governance but also concepts of selfie takers themselves as subjects of a particular type.

Part A: Gendering the Selfie

The gendered positioning of the selfie is the result of a discursive formation in which the selfie taker and selfie practice come to reinforce each other. By using the selfie as evidence of a number of negative female stereotypes, including narcissism and sexual impropriety, the close affinity that is discursively constructed between women and selfies means that criticism of the selfie acts as a thinly veiled means of undermining the subject.

I will analyze three aspects of the gendering of selfies: the divisions between male and female practice, the interpretation of selfies as narcissistic, and the interpretation of selfie taking in relation to female sexual value.

Male and Female Practice

The following examples demonstrate the gendering of the selfie as a feminine as opposed to a masculine photographic practice.

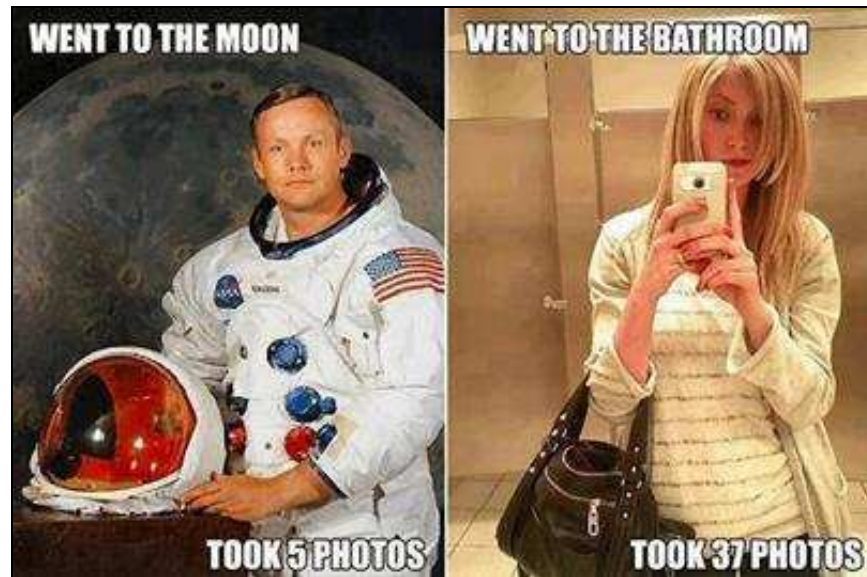


Figure 1. Moon vs. bathroom.
(Source: "Moon vs. Bathroom," 2013)

Figure 1 depicts a composite image of Neil Armstrong and a young woman accompanied by the captions "Went to the moon, took 5 photos," and "Went to the bathroom, took 37 photos," respectively. This juxtaposition uses photography to exemplify the differences between the two subjects and the gender categories that they represent. Armstrong's singular achievement is aligned with his (exaggerated) photographic restraint, a counterpoint to the woman's implied obsession with triviality. This contrast between a feminine concern with appearance and the era-defining accomplishments of men underscores the oppositional character to selfie discourse.



Figure 2. A "gAySPCA" advertisement.
 (Source: Henry, 2014)

This division is also emphasized in Figure 2, in which an advert for a faux animal-rights charity laments the pitiful figure of a gay man taking endless selfies. Such a character is constructed to identify selfie-taking as ludicrous, as a legitimate reason to problematize and ridicule others, and, most of all, as a practice that is *not masculine*.

The Selfie as Narcissistic

A prominent feature of the popular discussion of selfies is the layman's diagnosis of narcissism. This accusation reflects a poor understanding of the complexities of narcissism itself and rather serves as shorthand to chastise those whose photographic self-depiction is perceived as self-absorbed or crass.

This "common sense" understanding of selfie practice as narcissistic rests on two factors. First, the term *selfie* generates a variety of puns that perpetuate a theme of egotism: selfie-obsessed, selfie-ish, selfie-interest, and so on. Second, the gendered characterization of selfie-taking enables the selfie to be used to indicate particular qualities and habits that are culturally associated with women, such as a preoccupation with one's appearance. Once the selfie is established as connoting narcissism and vanity, it perpetuates a vicious circle in which women are vain because they take selfies, and selfies connote vanity because women take them.



Figure 3. Selfies: A handy guide for men.
(Source: Ford, 2014)

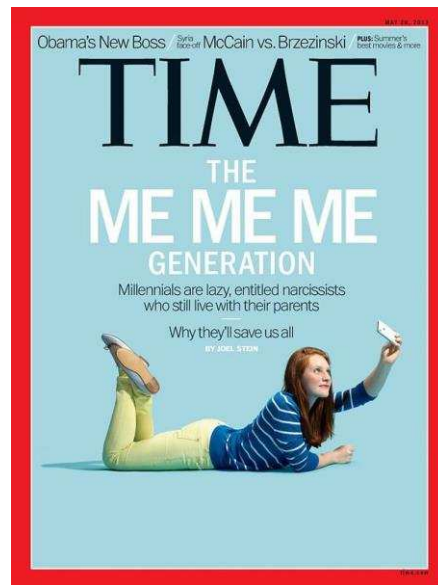


Figure 4. The Me Me Me generation.
(Source: Scarborough, Stein, & Myers, 2013)

In Figure 4, a young woman taking her own photograph is used to illustrate the “lazy, entitled narcissists” of the younger generation. Although the cover text suggests positively that “they’ll save us all,” the message conveyed is clear: women are narcissistic, and this can be observed through their use of photography. The positive content of the article is concealed behind the perpetuation of a stereotype, and it demonstrates what *TIME* assumes to be its readership’s pre-existing interpretation of selfie practice. Similarly, the following reader-generated comment vehemently presents the connection between female subject, selfie taking, and narcissism as obvious: “The western female is the most narcissistic demographic on earth. It’s no surprise that they would flood the internet with inconsequential pictures of themselves. It is simply an evolved form of attention whoring” (Comment No. 2 following Rutledge, 2013).

Here, the commenter asserts that the selfie-taking female is not just vain but is also an “attention whore,” demonstrating how certain categories of individual are constructed discursively through the interpretation of photographic practice. Entering the public sphere in ways perceived by critical online commentators as lacking value and trivial is therefore used as evidence to support prejudice. By serving as a focus for the expression and validation of such negative views, the selfie is used as a tool for social dominance, an idea evident in the creation of hierarchies contained within the following comment:

I admit to the occasional selfie, but on my camera roll they stay. Because . . . in the long term, my soul would erode and I would become a self-obsessed hag, living from one excuse to take a selfie to the next. (Comment No. 7 following Peck, 2013)

By equating the retaining of images with personal control, this commenter implicitly distinguishes him- or herself from others through selfie-taking activities. Creative practice is therefore interpreted as an explicit reflection of worth in which “taste . . . classifies the classifier” (Bourdieu, 1984/2010, p. xxix) and where the rejection of the cultural practices of “self-obsessed hags” serves to elevate the critic. Here, selfies, and by extension selfie takers, “serve as a foil, a negative reference point, in relation to which all aesthetics define themselves, by successive negations” (Bourdieu, 1984/2010, p. 50).

The use of terms such as *hags* and *whores* exemplifies how the disgust contained within selfie discourse focuses on women. This gendered quality of selfie discourse enables the open expression of misogynistic sentiments, as evident in the following reader-generated comment:

The amount of narcissistic women that post hundreds of images of themselves striking the same practiced pose over and over again on my Facebook feed is enough to make me want to verbally abuse them. . . . If those of you that are reading are guilty of this, be aware of the type of man you will attract and please stop consuming valuable internet bandwidth with your extreme vanity. (Comment No. 36 following Nelson, 2013)

By naturalizing a connection between women, selfie-taking, and problematic subjectivity, selfie discourse permits the stereotyping and devaluing of a specific section of society. Furthermore, beyond the “verbal abuse” and the issuing of warnings about “the type of man” such behavior attracts, this comment also expresses a desire for a physical hierarchy according to subjects’ engagement in selfie taking through which resources such as Internet bandwidth are distributed. Therefore, the normalized connection

between women and an abjected form of photography—achieved through repeated accusations of narcissism—impacts women’s entry into social media’s public sphere by forbidding or outright preventing certain behaviors.

Selfies and Sexuality

The gendering of selfies and the prevalent assumption that they act as proof of narcissism limit how women’s personal photography is socially valued. By extension, the associations of selfie practice impact the perception of young women. As examples below show, popular discourse contributes to the devaluing of young women by presenting them as sexually licentious, and the selfie is emblematic of their laughable or shameful engagement in self-sexualization.



**Figure 5. Facebook girls nowadays..the tragedy (sic).
(Source: "Facebook Girls," 2013)**

In Figure 5, a woman is depicted taking two selfies, the second of which is overtly sexual in comparison to the friendly simplicity of the first. Her shift from one type of self-presentation to another marks her in two ways. First, it marks her as insecure, requiring enormous amounts of praise to feel attractive. Second, it presents the display of her body as cynical and farcical because it is aimed at obtaining likes. This image re-interprets the online constitution of identity through photography as described by Manago, Graham, Greenfield, and Salimkhan (2008) and Papacharissi (2010). Instead of being a positive tool for self-exploration and for mediating a position relative to one’s peers, photographic self-expression (particularly by women) is reframed as a matter of petty and squalid attention grabbing.

As I noted above, the implications of this association between devalued practice and degraded subject are significant, as they enable women to be constructed as “whores,” “hags,” and in the following comment, not worthy of respect:

Do I, as a guy, like looking at photos of sexy women? Yep. Are they wife material? Nope!! You cheapen yourself by putting everything on display for the world to see. What reaction do you want from men—instant gratification or lifelong respect? The choice is up to you. (Comment No. 75 following Nelson, 2013)

Alongside this stigmatizing of women’s selfies exists the expectation of self-regulation, the urging of women to exercise restraint in order to get “lifelong respect” rather than “instant gratification.” By taking photographs that are read as indicating her own impurity, the female selfie taker is held as responsible for both the viewer’s disdain and for her own marginalization. This use of blame obscures the social forces and norms that devalue women’s sexualized expression, instead asserting that the subject cheapens and objectifies *herself*. Photography thereby becomes discursively established and accepted as a means by which subjects can potentially bring about—and deserve—their own low status.

The comment above acknowledges that sexualized images of women are welcomed but that they stigmatize the subject and mark her as lacking value, in contrast to those considered “wife material.” This use of binary opposites to form hierarchies is also evident in the following comment, in which the debauched selfie taker is contrasted with both the disgusted male spectator and with “more sensible women”:

The selfie-posting duckfaced pouters dressed in towels have a higher-than-average likelihood of being the orange-skinned women you see dressed in a miniskirt and a boob-tube in the middle of winter, bracing themselves against a snowstorm as they drunkenly trudge their stilhetos [sic] through deep snow from one bar to another, stopping to puke half-way through . . . the girls who grew into more sensible women did not see the value of pouty duckfaces and myspace-camera-angles. (Comment No. 120 following Moorhead, 2013)

Here, the connection between women’s selfies and an assumed devalued sexuality permits the fabrication of an entire narrative, with the camera angle and the facial expression adopted cited as evidence for a chaotic and low-status femininity. I argue that this interpretation of women’s photographic display—as indicative of a cheapened sexuality and evidence of the subject’s own failing—enables the public expression and circulation of misogynistic beliefs. Selfie discourse thereby reflects wider prejudices guiding the moral interpretation of women’s behavior and is the means by which the “truth” of certain subjects is established and maintained.

Part B: Regulation of the Selfie-Taker

Part A argued that the conceptualization of women's selfie practice as narcissistic and sexually improper is an expression of pre-existing prejudices, which regard selfie taking as indicative of subjects' being somehow abnormal or devalued. This conceptualization reinforces social inequalities by identifying women as deviant and requiring control, and thereby legitimizing the imposition of discipline (Foucault, 1977).

Part B will argue that Foucault's (1977) conception of norms can be used to analyze the connection between the low status of selfies and social discipline. Norms support disciplinary practices by establishing a benchmark for acceptability against which all behaviors—not just criminal activities—come to be judged. Even the smallest transgression is framed as abnormal, deterring irregularity and socializing subjects into accepting their own regulation and correction (Foucault, 1977). Problematizing selfie taking acts similarly, identifying norms and prescribing how to achieve them in the form of guides and advice. The focus on when, where, and how to take selfies demonstrate how "normalization becomes one of the great instruments of power" (Foucault, 1977, p. 184), especially when deployed in relation to small and seemingly inconsequential details.

Rules for Selfie Practice: Regulating the Feminine Body

I argue that there is a connection between the criticism of photographic practice and the creation of subjects in that the repetition and re-articulation of certain statements establishes the "truth" about selfies and selfie takers. Furthermore, the production of subjects who are understood to be the accepted and legitimate targets of discipline demonstrates a connection between subjectification and social ordering (Foucault, 1977). Tagg (1988) and Sekula (1986, 1987) argue that classification—dividing good and desirable from bad and abnormal—is a crucial component of this ordering, as subjective and arbitrary criteria are used to justify a social position relative to others. Furthermore, the manner in which selfies are gendered as feminine enables photographic discussion to position women as the recipients of discipline and compliance with photographic regulation to constitute "a form of obedience to patriarchy" (Bartky, 1990, p. 80).

This construction of the selfie subject as embodying a devalued femininity is evident in Figure 6, in which Snow White stares into the bathroom mirror, her right knee awkwardly placed on the countertop and her tongue poking out. She holds up an iPhone, taking a selfie with her head tilted and with a seductive expression.



Figure 6. "Mirror Mirror on the Wall," from the series *Profanity Pop*, by José Rodolfo Loaiza Ontiveros. (Source: Loaiza Ontiveros, 2014)

This image demonstrates how the discursive construction of subjectivity in relation to photographic practice presents the selfie taker as not just a psychological type but also as a physical embodiment of specific cultural prejudices. The selfie taker is therefore understood to both act and look a certain way. As such, Snow White is not simply depicted taking a selfie here: Rather, her body has been modified to become emblematic of the problematic connotations of the practice. By choosing to make her overweight and oversexualized, the artist reflects the manner in which selfie discourse emulates wider practices of devaluing women by presenting bodies as undesirable and undisciplined. Within the same series of artworks, Belle and Sleeping Beauty are shown to drink bottles of wine, and Goofy and Donald smoke cannabis, but none of these activities mark and distort them in the way that selfie taking does to Snow White. Drinking and taking drugs are presented by the artist as something that the characters *do*, whereas selfie taking impacts—and produces—the character's very *self*. The warning here is clear: You

can't take selfies without *being* a selfie taker, and selfie takers are different from—lesser than—other people.

The criticism of selfie taking and the construction of the selfie takers as devalued should be regarded as a means to an end, as it establishes selfies as not just problematic but as requiring regulation. Therefore selfies are not simply devalued—they are devalued in order to cause something to happen as a result. The regulation of photography in this context acts as a sublimated form of control over the behavior of others, exemplifying a connection between the constraint of cultural consumption and the production of “definitions of ourselves [that] fit more easily the descriptions of the dominant or preferred culture” (Hall, 1981/2011, p. 75). Here, I argue that the criticism of the selfie ultimately serves to legitimize the patriarchal ordering of society by integrating individuals into accepting being evaluated, governed, and situated discursively.

Emulating the degree to which women's behaviors are marked within wider social discourse as being in need of guidance and modification, selfie taking is conceptualized as a practice that requires instruction in order to do it right. The rules for selfie taking—evident in the examples here and across social and print media—present the practice as a skill to be mastered, one that requires self-discipline in both the performance of femininity and in one's moderate and controlled use of photography. The tone of instruction presents this specific form of photography as requiring an exceptional amount of guidance. This is not just a matter of reproducing the expected norms of feminine attractiveness—rather, these tips socialize young women into accepting regulation of their behavior and normalize society's criticism of them.

W Magazine's (n.d.) video “How to Take a Selfie Like a Supermodel,” and Wikihow's (n.d.) guide “How to Take Selfies” reflect a wider culture of feminine body discipline (Bartky, 1988, 2002) and the narrow parameters of women's photographic self-expression. These two examples demonstrate how selfie taking emulates other practices of discipline specific to women centering on gesture and appearance. These practices may seem harmless individually, but together they comprise a form of subjection (Bartky, 1988). This disciplinary effect is evident in the parallel between Wikihow's promise to show the reader “15 Steps (with Pictures)” and Foucault's idea of “a multiplicity of often minor processes” that combine to “gradually produce the blueprint of a general method” (1977, p. 138). Selfie taking is therefore part of a wider process by which subjects are encouraged to adhere to a specific framework of behavior laid out by experts such as *W Magazine's* supermodels and popular YouTube presenter Michelle Phan (Figure 7).

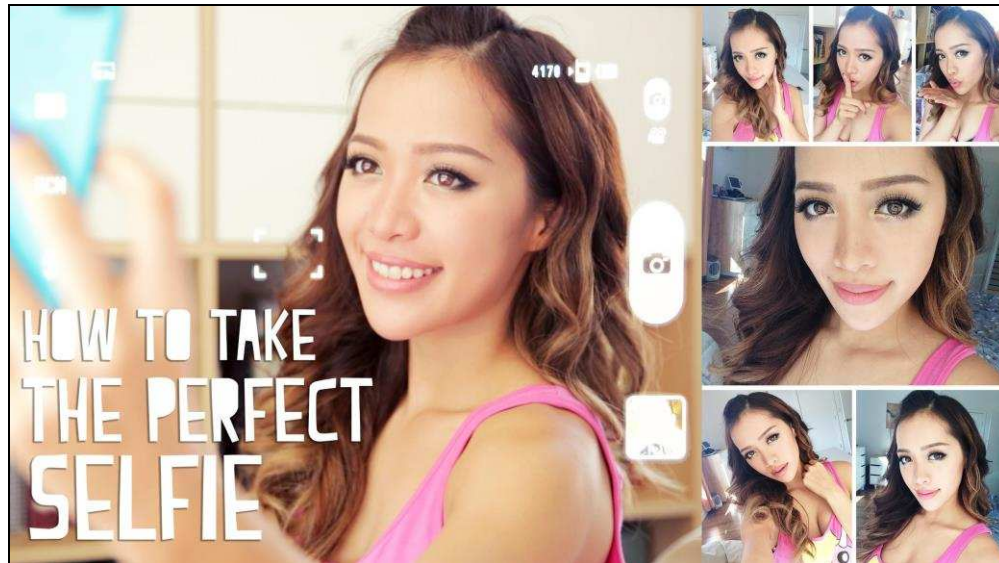


Figure 7. How to Take the Perfect Selfie, by Michelle Phan. (Source: Phan, 2013)

Phan incorporates into her selfie-taking guide components of feminine discipline as described by Bartky, including “discreet body display, restricted spatiality and grace” (2002, p. 16). Phan’s advice demonstrates how the selfie rules reflect the values and expectations of the dominant social group: that women should use photography to display their adherence to a specific form of normative, passive femininity. Elongation of the neck, the use of natural light to flatter the skin, and the selective cropping and angling of the image to streamline the face are included in a range of “techniques necessary to maintain the current norms of feminine embodiment” (Bartky, 2002, p. 17) and serve to marginalize those who do not display the required level of competence or compliance.

Rules for Selfie Practice: Regulating Public Participation

Besides the regulation of women’s bodily display according to normative expectations of femininity, selfie discourse also defines the criteria for women’s acceptable entry into the public sphere. This predominantly takes the form of limitations on both the quantity of selfies they take and on how these images depict the subject in relation to others. The expectation that selfie takers will adhere to these norms (and the implied threat of exclusion and humiliation should they fail) demonstrates how cultural practice can be used to “privilege the expressive norms of one cultural group over others” as a form of gatekeeping, whereby “discursive assimilation [acts as] a condition for participation in public debate” (Fraser, 1990, p. 69).

As this article argues, the prevalent acceptance of intervention into the lives of others through a photographic practice relies on the construction of selfies and selfie takers as excessive. The following

comment demonstrates a connection between selfie taking and a lack of self-control: "Selfies only once a week . . . for the hoi polloi, this is helpful for encouraging self-restraint" (Stamell, 2013).

Such limitations imposed on selfie takers position them as inferior and undisciplined and serves as the catalyst for condemnation, regulation, and the imposition of hierarchies. There is also a gendered quality to the accusation of overindulgence, in that women are urged in multiple ways to exercise constant self-denial (Bordo, 2003), be it of food, sex, or in this case, selfies. Here we see the connection between selfie discourse and social control, as the assertion that selfie takers lack self-restraint implies a need for regulation.

Certain instances of selfie taking are interpreted as displaying an improper participation in social life and social spaces through the perception of subjects as showing concern for themselves rather than others. It is the naturalizing of assumptions that the selfie indicates selfishness or narcissism that enables certain photographic behaviors to be regarded as legitimate grounds for criticism. Furthermore, selfishness is a particularly barbed insult when directed at women, as it references the subject's transgression of the norm of feminine self-sacrifice.



**Figure 8. Selfie-ish! By Paul Martinka.
(Source: Martinka, 2013)**

Figure 8 demonstrates the discourse of the antisocial selfie by depicting a woman taking a photograph before a background of a bridge on which a man is being attended to by emergency services. The newspaper's commentary on the photograph asserts that the woman is taking a selfie of herself with a suicidal man. Termed "the Worst Selfie Ever," it was held to depict an extreme example of the self-centered selfie-taking woman. This interpretation of the image as not just a breach of etiquette but indicative of sociopathy illustrates how certain instances of selfie taking are accepted as grounds for discipline.

The "selfie-ish" interpretation of the bridge image references a wider narrative where selfies are equated with antisocial and vain subjects and where the regulation of women's photographic practice has been normalized. The angle of her phone would probably not have captured the scene behind her as suggested, and she might well just be photographing the famous bridge. But the image taken by the reporter has been framed in order to create a story of the selfish selfie with knowledge that this references wider discourses of photography, propriety, and the perception of women's selfie taking being out of control.

The reception of this image demonstrates that the popular criticism of selfies has implications beyond the discussion of photographic practice, as it perpetuates existing prejudices and proscribes rules for entry into the public sphere. The naturalization of such processes of exclusion and regulation enables selfie discourse to function as a particularly subtle and insidious form of gendered social control.

Conclusion

This article has analyzed a connection between the popular discussion of photography and social organization, arguing that online discourse regarding the selfie enforces compliance with social norms and governs the participation of women within the online public sphere. Foucault's (1977) conceptualization of power and discourse has enabled me to analyze how regulation is enacted in relation to selfies: Principally, selfies lack association with any specific source, and this lowers popular resistance to their disciplinary effect and makes it appear natural and legitimate. This discourse fosters problematic divisions and dynamics within society evident in the degree to which it legitimizes the exclusion and regulation of women.

By being discursively constructed as both problematic and feminine, the selfie enables the targeted discipline of young women by perpetuating stereotypes, maintaining hierarchies, and normalizing the punishment and correction of subjects perceived to be abnormal. Once the subject is discursively brought into being as devalued, selfie taking then becomes an accepted indication of a subject in need of regulation. The criticism of selfies is therefore both an expression of misogynistic sentiment and an effective vehicle for social organization because it conceals a promotion of normative models of conduct and the punishment of those who do not comply beneath a veneer of photographic discussion.

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