

Sample Essay 1

This research essay was written by Greta Negrave, a student in a first-year Interdisciplinary Studies course on popular culture.

Selfie Generation: Simulacrum of Individuality

With the rising popularity of social networking sites, selfie photography has become a defining form of self-expression among today's youth. This style of photography's popularity has exploded in recent years in correlation with the accessibility of the Internet and availability of front facing camera smart phones, making it possible to easily upload photos straight to social networking sites such as Myspace, Facebook, or Instagram. Their popularity is not only due to recent technological advancements, however. I have applied Jean Baudrillard's theories of hyperreality and simulacrum to my own understanding of selfies as a member of the generation that popularized this style of photography. In addition, I have found research examining the habits of college students on social networking sites, the most common environment to find selfies. As I will demonstrate, I have concluded that selfies are a cultural product of a generation of North American youth raised to value individualism in an environment that has experienced

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a contemporary societal shift to become a “culture of the simulacrum” (Storey 193). Selfies simultaneously represent both subject and object: a declaration of identity and an endlessly reproduced image.

North American culture has grown increasingly individualistic as a result of the celebration of fame and the popularity of cultural products centred on self-focus (Twenge 11). Examples of such cultural products would include gossip magazines and reality television shows that idealize the lives and achievements of individuals. These media reproductions of reality are known for providing a sensationalized reality in favour of entertaining consumers. Pictures of celebrities in glamorous red carpet dresses are shown alongside photos of celebrities caught at their worst. Reality television shows such as *American Idol* or *So You Think You Can Dance* take regular individuals and hand them a chance at fame; providing viewers with a dramatized struggle of what is as much about the heartbreak and struggle as the talent of the competitors.

These media representations of course are not a true reality, however, but a dramatized, edited, simulated version presented to us for our entertainment. Context is removed, meaning becomes skewed, and what is real and what is merely part of the simulation becomes lost. This situation of undifferentiated reality and simulation

is what Baudrillard coins 'hyperreality' (Storey 193). As Storey explains Baudrillard's idea of hyperrealism, "the distinction between simulation and the 'real' implodes; the real and the imaginary continually collapse into each other" (193). Storey clarifies this to mean that it is not that people are unable to tell the difference between real and fantasy, rather that "in some significant ways the distinction has become less and less important" (195). The truth becomes irrelevant and the simulation is prized over the reality as the "ordinary, everyday world seems bland and lifeless" (Walters and Kop 282) in comparison. In regards to our cultural products and media then, it would appear that they simultaneously reflect modern society's value of individuality as well as our ambivalence to reality; we want a look into others' lives but we want the exciting, dramatized version.

This cultural shift from traditional moral values to an individualistic culture has had profound effects on the latest generation of youth (Walters and Kop 279). Self-reported interviews conducted by Jean Twenge overwhelmingly indicate that today's youth have grown to be more self-focused, and he notes a "generational shift towards individualism" (12). To put it bluntly, Twenge has found my generation, today's young adults, to be more narcissistic than any preceding. The accessibility of the internet and explosive popularity of social

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networking has provided a new medium to enable the individualistic nature of today's youth culture. Though not all may have the opportunity to gain recognition on reality television, the Internet has empowered individuals to create their own fame. Notable examples include Tila Tequila becoming a Myspace sensation and Justin Bieber gaining popularity for his self-made videos that catapulted him to real-life stardom. The Internet provides individuals more than a medium to access a worldwide audience, however; it is a controlled environment providing individuals with an opportunity for role-playing and highly controlled impression-management and identity construction (Zhao et al.).

Social networking profiles allow the user to control what information is shared and allow users to construct an identity based on their "hoped-for", possible selves (Zhao et al.). Zhao et al. have concluded through their examination of a number of college students' social networking profiles that socially desirable traits are emphasized, whereas undesirable or gating features that might prevent an individual from achieving a desired identity are concealed. They have observed a show-don't-tell policy where identity is implicitly shown rather explicitly proclaimed, most commonly through photos (Zhao et al.). The "most telling piece of self-disclosure or image construction" on social

networking sites such as Facebook or Myspace is the profile photo, providing the first impression of a user to other members of cyberspace (Hum et al.). Hum et al.'s survey of a number of profiles found that profile pictures most commonly consisted of a posed, inactive, single subject, all characteristic of selfies. It can be assumed then that a large proportion of profile pictures are self-taken.

The importance of image in identity construction is consistent with Baudrillard's theories that contemporary culture has grown to become a culture of signs and representations. In a digital culture of consumers grown accustomed to smart phones, Google, and easy access to information (Walters and Kot 284), profile pictures cater to the modern expectation of instantaneous information. They provide an opportunity for a snap-shot judgement through implicit means. Users who are well-accustomed to the world of social networking are able to quickly and accurately glean a large amount of information about an individual based on the implicit information shared on a social networking profile (Buffardi and Campbell 1311). This seems to indicate that the youth who have grown up in the fast-paced digital age are well-equipped to communicate through symbolism to the point that it is second nature.

It could be argued that in nonymous environments such as Facebook where online connections are based on offline relationships,

identity construction would logically be somewhat limited in that it must be consistent with offline identity. While I agree that claims of identity cannot outrageously deviate from reality, I argue that the relationship between online and offline identity is more complicated than “reality” vs. “edited reality”. Online identity, I believe, has an implosive relationship with offline identity in that its real world consequences indicate a blurred distinction between the two. In this sense the online identity is neither real nor solely the fantasy of its creator. It is hyperreal, “the abolition of the real not by violent destruction, but by its assumptions” (Baudrillard qtd. in Chen).

Online profiles give individuals control and allow them to “stage a public display of their hoped for selves that were unknown to others offline” (Zhao et al.), giving users control over their public impression. Zhao et al. further suggest that, because online identity is often our idealized selves, users “seek to coordinate their online identity claims with their offline performance”. Users are able to create the version of themselves they would like to be, and try to live up to these identities. Hum et al. claim that maintaining an online presence leads to increased social contentment, and higher levels of social networking activity and perceived attractiveness increase social capital. It would seem that individuals are increasingly becoming shaped by their online identities

as much as their offline. The blurring between virtual and real world identity and social interaction is consistent with the popular claims that digital technology has become an integral part of everyday life.

As mentioned earlier, the trend in social networking is to show who you are through implicit means, most commonly through photos (Zhao et al.). Selfie photography allows users the perfect opportunity to communicate their identity implicitly while having ultimate control. Unlike a candid shot where subjects risk unflattering shots, selfies allow for complete control over lighting, pose, angle, and filters, as well as the freedom to take as many needed until the perfect shot is found. For example, a common strategy notorious among Myspace users is to take a photo from above the horizon to allow for a flattering angle, often wearing full makeup if female (see Fig. 1). Poses to accentuate or hide certain body parts also allow an individual control over the attractiveness of their online identity.



Fig. 1. Common Myspace style shot and classic selfie(FallenUnique)

Selfies not only allow for control of attractiveness but provide opportunity to make implicit claims of identity. A photo taken in the mirror in full workout gear, perhaps flexing or with visible abs, makes the implication that the subject is healthy, active, and in shape (see Fig. 2). Photos holding alcoholic drinks or with friends imply an active social life. A famous landmark in the background might demonstrate the user is adventurous and well-travelled, while a picture wearing attire featuring a logo could demonstrate the subject's loyalty to a certain sport or subculture (see Fig. 3). Identity thus becomes constructed around these symbols and implications, allowing observers to make conclusions based on the images they are presented.



Fig. 2. Gym Selfie (matt)



Fig. 3. Identifying with sports team (Niall Instagram)

Through the use of implications, I argue that selfies moved beyond presentation of individuals to become a series of representations where individuality and subjectivity is lost, and the subjects become “only episodic conductors of meaning” (Luke). That is to say, the photograph is no longer about the subject, but rather the subject is part of a photograph that carries more meaning than the subject itself. For example, if I hypothetically took a photo of myself in work out gear, it

would cease to be a picture of Greta; it would be a workout selfie. The pervasiveness of selfies and their acceptance as a cultural movement means that they have become a ‘simulacrum’, which Storey defines as an “identical copy without an original” (193).

In addition, popular image websites such as Instagram or Tumblr enable users to add hashtags to images so that they might reach a wider audience. Searching a hashtag means that a number of photos that have been similarly tagged result. A search of the tag #selfie on Instagram produces over five million results. In this way, the photograph loses all subjectivity and becomes self-referential and a representation of a wider movement. Furthermore, I have noticed a trend to mock the very idea of taking selfies and their history as presentations of attractiveness by taking purposefully unattractive self-photographs to be posted online. Examples include exaggerated double chins and parodies of the infamous duckface. This is no longer merely a selfie, but a selfie of a selfie. It is a “quotation of irrelevant cultural representation” (Chen 80). Walters states that in Baudrillard’s “final stages of hyperreality, signs and codes replicate without any purpose or rationality”, terming this stage as viral (282). The original context and subject involved is lost, and meaning is shifted from the image itself but rather through its reproduction.

Selfies are simultaneously a proclamation of identity, an idealized simulation of reality, and a reproduced self-referential image. Born of an individualistic culture, selfies are a compromise between contemporary North American society's value of individuality and its shift to become a culture based on the production of information. As is common with youth movements, their wide acceptance and canonization likely signals that selfie photography has reached its peak in popularity. As a new generation moves in, the meaning and context of selfies will likely fade to leave behind nothing more than a cultural relic.

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