
Online Self-Presentation: Selfies in View of Goffman's Dramaturgical Model

Zaldy Dueñas, III
St. Scholastica's College Manila

Abstract

Since its commercial introduction in 1839, photography has permeated aspects of human life as a source and repository of information about human experiences (Wells 2009, p. 11). In the advent of digital technology and social media, photography's use has changed. It is no longer just used for remembering but as a tool for communication and self-presentation. In this regard, this paper traces how photography's use as a form of self-presentation specifically through selfies contribute to the discussion of how people view and present themselves online. It highlights how the concepts of consumerism and misrecognition of self in technology affect online self-presentation. Furthermore, it showcases how self-presentation through selfies echoes Erving Goffman's dramaturgical model.

Keywords: selfies, social media, self-presentation, Erving Goffman, Dramaturgical Model

Photography has become a widespread social activity that has changed how people view and experience the world. For Susan Sontag (1977), American activist and author of *On photography*, photography has become a social rite like a tool for power. People have incorporated photography in viewing oneself and the world and of certifying one's experiences. According to Sontag (1977, p. 10), "Photography has become one of the principal devices for experiencing something, for giving an appearance of participation." It became an essential social practice in framing and presenting experiences that it has become a part in establishing peo-

ple's identity and idealization. Photographs serve as pieces of evidence for people's experiences. To have an experience is to have it photographed like "everything exists to end in a photograph" (Sontag, 1977, p. 24).

People's desire to see oneself is not new and is as old as painting and photography (Harad 2014). Since its introduction in the nineteenth century, photography has been popularly used as a medium for portraiture. This prevalent use became more intensified because of the development of handheld digital cameras and camera phones together with the rise of the internet and social media. In the past decade, self-portraiture had its renaissance as digital self-portraits or popularly known as selfies. Though self-portraiture is not a novel human practice and activity, self-portraiture reached a new height of popularity. In 2013, selfie became Oxford Dictionaries' Word of the Year as it appeared in various social media platforms and in popular culture. Selfie is a catchall term pertaining to digital self-portraits made popular by the explosion of camera-phones and social media such as photo-sharing sites and social network sites. Selfie refers to a self-taken photograph of oneself that is usually uploaded and shared online. The selfie phenomenon happened in the rise of social media in the last decade. Social media refers to a group of internet-based applications made available by the technology of Web 2.0 that provided for the creation, exchange, and collaboration of user-generated content. The technology provided by social media and mobile phones ushered the new frontier of human communication that allowed new forms of visual communication to emerge (Katz & Crocker, 2016).

This widespread use of social media and practice of photo sharing manifest some of the prevailing problems in the notion of 'self' and 'self-presentation' in disciplines like psychology, philosophy, sociology, and popular media. For example, in philosophy, this proliferation of selfies adds to the discussion of how human think, gain insight through, or even develop arguments via images (Katz & Crocker, 2016). As such, this study of selfies explores how these digital representations reflect how people present themselves, how people communicate and socialize with others, and how technology changed and continuously change how people view themselves. In line with this, this paper discusses self-presentation in the advent of digital technology, social media, and prevalence of selfies. In particular, this paper highlights how issues of consumerism and misrecognition of selves in digital technology and selfies echo Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical model of social interaction.

Online Self-Presentation through Selfies

As individuals immerse in a social situation, each plays a certain role or roles. Self-presentational behavior explores the social side of the self. It suggests a kind of behavior intended to create, modify, or maintain an impression in the minds of others or an attempt to lead people to think in a particular way about oneself (Brown n.d.). It is a crucial aspect and prevalent feature of the social self as it facilitates social interaction, a matter of social gain, and self-construction (Brown, n.d.). Self-presentation raises questions on identity formation and social behavior making it a key concept in understanding how people construct and regulate themselves in a social setting. Given the use of digital technology and social media, the concept of self-presentation has transformed. Nowadays, the use of digital technology can be seen as a mark of social coming-of-age of a person (Nicolescu, 2016).

One popular concept of self-presentation is discussed by the American sociologist Erving Goffman in his 1959 work entitled *The presentation of self in everyday life* which presents the dramaturgical model to describe human interaction and socialization. He compares social interaction to the imagery of the theatre, the self to an actor on a stage portraying different roles, and other people as audience observing and reacting to performances. Goffman (1959) says that an individual in appearing before others controls one's impressions in accordance with the situation he or she is in. For Goffman, the self has awareness of the multiple roles that one has to perform in various situated contexts (Elliott, 2001). Hence, the individual in creating self-identity is a creative and reflective agent who decides on how to carry out and stage these various roles (Elliot, 2001). Moreover, Goffman said that social interaction has two regions or stages, the front stage and the back stage. The front region refers to the stage where the actors face the audience while the back region points out to the backstage where actors and individuals can be themselves away from their roles. Goffman states that the frontal aspects of self-presentation routinely involve the bracketing-out or screening-off of aspects of identity which are felt to be inappropriate to the social setting or encounter which is contrasted to the back region where the individual does not worry about one's projected image (Elliot, 2001). Goffman contends that this theatre performance imagery best describes how people present themselves to others. The individual's self-presentation provides identity for the self as it presents impression for the audience to give meaning and confirm. While Goffman recognizes that this impression management can be viewed as deceitful or manipulative, he highlights that this allows people to act and behave appropriately in a social setting. It should be noted though that the dramaturgical model does not necessitate that everyone is aware that one is per-

forming roles or is always acting as if one is performing on stage.

According to Rettberg (2014), self-representation online began in text, sometimes accompanied with images and sounds, when graphical browsers were introduced. Rettberg (p. 3) says, “The visual turn in social media has been particularly strong in the last few years, especially after smart phones with cameras and fast broadband connections for downloading images and video files became increasingly accessible.” In visual self-portrait history, some artists’ even before the advent of digital technology have incorporated their bodies in their art and have represented themselves through their art. For Rettberg (2014), some of the most interesting pre-digital self-portraits are those created by early photographers. Accordingly, just like our modern day digital cameras and camera phones, the first cameras served as powerful extensions of the photographer’s body which sometimes represent the fragmented versions of their selves. Compared to early photographic self-portraits, digital self-portraits or selfies are shared on social media and are not intended to be exhibited in art galleries. Using digital technologies, selfies as forms of self-representations are as well a kind of self-documentation. Rettberg (2014) states that in posting online one does not only think of how to present oneself to others but also about recording moments of one’s life. Digital technologies allow people to see their reflection and at the same time record it. Digital technologies provide people a way to represent themselves in a far greater degree than that of analogue cameras. Rettberg (2014) contends that creating and sharing a selfie is an act of self-representation in a way that creating and sharing selfies is a form of self-reflection and self-creation. She argues that creating selfies are like creating texts. In social media, people view others as texts that will be read and be interpreted. As such, as readers of texts, people view other people’s self-expression as self-representation.

Because of the over extension of internet and undeniable popularity of social networking sites, people are somehow forced to be drawn in virtual society like it is a necessary and essential human activity (Taslim & Rezwan, n.d.). As such, most people now possess virtual identities that they use to connect and interact with other users. In posting or uploading selfies in the social network, one is very much aware that one’s image will be looked at; that is why in photographing oneself, one applies his or her own gaze and ideology to the photograph one aims to produce (Taslim & Rezwan, n.d., p. 80). Taking and posting selfies allows its creator to present and express his or herself in one’s own idealized self. Unlike a mirror image, he or she could control, modify, appropriate, or decorate one’s image. Echoing this is Warfield (2014) who discusses selfie as a camera, a mirror, and a stage for young

women. According to Warfield:

"Many young women contemplated the ethics of self-presentation in online spaces too. For instance one young woman said; "I look for the best [image] but I won't post a selfie taken in my bedroom, by myself... you know the ones people are chastised for taking." Another young woman said "I'd post a cute one on Facebook, but not a sexy one. If it was a sexy one, maybe I'd put it on Instagram." (Warfield, 2014, p.4)

She explains that these inhibitions and consciousness on posing and sharing selfies reflect how these young women police their actions in online, offline, public and private spaces. As identities in virtual spaces is partially defined by the self and is partially defined by others, it is logical to note that selfies are created and shared in view of how one manages his or her impressions to others. As such, they create their selfies based on their perceived and imagined audience and construct their images in relation to their environment and how they understand others. The image being produced is not only a visual representation of the self but a visual discourse with different meanings and contents.

In another view, according to Andrea Chester and Di Bretherton (2007), online impression management reflects impressions that are socially desirable aspects of offline personality and a desire to present an authentic impression regardless of how online contexts provide unique opportunities to manage impressions. Online impression management or synonymously known as self-presentation is motivated by the desire to express unexplored parts of one's identity or aspects that are inhibited in face-to-face interactions. People in online spaces are driven more by their desire to develop identity than to deceive or manipulate. This entails that online selves may be in some form of idealized images but these are said to be just a positive spin on an existing personality trait or an attempt to attract others by putting one's best foot forward. Though people seek to attract others and build relationships, online self-presentation highlights self-exploration as a strong motivation in constructing and managing impressions of digital selves. Moreover, compared to its early years where only few people are engaged with it, the Internet today is used by millions of people and treats it as part of their lives. The cyberspace, treated before as a separate world from the offline world, is considered now as a transactional space embedded in everyday life (Chester & Bretherton, 2007). The Internet is embedded in people's daily interactions and is no longer viewed as a differently. Though cyberspace is a virtual world and a virtual system, it mirrors and is very much connected to the lives of people outside it. Hence, people's online

selves regardless of the capacity of manipulation and control are no longer different from their offline selves and cannot be considered as inauthentic. Accordingly, “the Internet is, after all, a part of our real life” (Chester & Bretherton, 2001, p. 235).

Given these, the concepts of consumerism and misrecognition of self in technology and selfies will be discussed. This aims to further shed light on how self-presentation are done through selfies and social media.

Consumerism in Selfies

With selfies used as tools for online self-presentation, issues of consumerism have emerged in the age of virtual interaction and socialization. With digital technology and how people interact and socialize through social media, people have faced issues with regard to how people create their online or virtual selves and identities. As such, questions like “How do people present themselves in the internet?” and “Can virtual identities be authentic?” have emerged.

Schau and Gilly (2003) discuss self-presentation and consumption in digital virtual spaces. According to them, consumption can be a self-defining and self-expressive behavior as the products or brands people use are self-relevant and can communicate self-identities. In the advent of digital technologies and computer-mediated environments (CMEs), virtual worlds became new avenues for consumers to present themselves. CMEs are virtual digital places that occupy neither space nor time and are inherently discursive spaces where people actively interact with one another either for work, learning or entertainment.

Some thirty years ago, this consumerism through photography was discussed by Sontag. According to Sontag (1977), to photograph is to put oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like power. Before the age of social media photostream where people attempt to control, frame, and package their idealized lives for presentation to others and themselves, Sontag has foreseen how people nowadays purposefully manipulate and portray themselves pictorially on Facebook, Instagram, and the like (Popova, 2013). That is, it is a kind of social media violence of self-assertion in which people forcibly frame their identity for presentation, idealization and currency in an economy of envy.

Furthermore, Schau and Gilly (2003) say that consumers communicate through symbolic and digital stimuli and use personal Web space to construct digi-

tal collages to represent and express their self-concepts. Consumers who create personal websites are engaging in authenticating acts and revealing their "true selves" and "multiple true selves". Accordingly, new modes of consumer self-expression reveal innovative self-presentation strategies that inform the discourse on self-presentation and possessions. Accordingly, self-presentation as desired impression is consumption oriented and dependent upon individuals displaying signs, symbols, brands, and practices. This idea agrees with Rettberg (2014) who says that self-presentation may express different images or micro-narratives about oneself. Self-presentation is about manipulation of signs and an embodied representation and experience.

On the one hand, Warfield (2014) discusses how young women sought a sense of bodily, experiential, and expressed 'authenticity' in the selfies they produced. Accordingly, these young women who were the subjects of her research sought for their selfies that feel authentic and satisfying. Warfield (2014) states:

One young woman said, "I have a tendency to plaster on a fake 'photo smile' which I do not like because I don't look genuine. So any of those are scrapped and the best is the one in which I look happy or think I look pretty/confident/nice etc." Parallel to this young women said they sought an image that felt 'real' and "natural". One young woman said "the photo that I choose as the best is the one where my skin looks the best, face looks the slimmest, smile is the most 'genuine', the one I look the prettiest in."

For Warfield (2014), these statements show the multi-subjectivity of the image producer as she mediates between one's photographic self and what she feels to be authentic self. Selfies allow people to control one's representation of the self. She continues that they sought for the kind of images that look 'not forced' or 'not fake' and images that feel 'real' and 'authentic'. That is why for some authenticity relates to selfies that look natural and not prepared or seem staged.

On the other hand, while virtual space may be a venue to show one's true self, Yoo and Kyoung-Nan (2015) show how consumption have affected people's search for their authentic self online using selfies. Accordingly, because it is a practice that involves a creator who is simultaneously the subject of the image, they explain that selfies are consumed in forms of image modification, storing, and self-appreciation. Taking and posting a selfie is a practice regarded as self-consumption as it promotes the self while pursuing authenticity in a virtual space created by so-

cial media. More than a practice of self-consumption, selfies are considered as a kind of social consumption managed and orchestrated in the context of taking, posting and sharing photos in social networking sites. Yoo and Kyoung-Nan, (2015), (p. 302) contend that the culture of selfie is a newly emerging practice of exploring the authenticity of self. Selfies are people's attempt to present their photographed self-imageries based on who they think they are and who they want to be. These self-imageries are socially shaped through online interactions with others by posting, sharing, and receiving feedbacks. In selfies, the real self is discovered and pursued in the process of social consumption practice. For Yoo and Kyoung-Nan (2015), authenticity can be presented in several ways. It can emerge in the reflective process of the self or self-consciousness in figuring out what one wants and values. It can also be discussed in relation to consumption where people search for authenticity in consuming commercial objects and services. Accordingly, this search for authenticity of consumers is their response to modern society where societal experiences are commoditized and virtualized. As an activity-based concept, authenticity is equated to a kind of consumption that generates creative and cathartic feelings that make consumers feel more expressive and truer to themselves in a way that gratifies their desire for identity.

Misrecognition of the Self in Technology and Selfies

Selfies are characterized by its ubiquity, of being everywhere or omnipresent. According to Wendt (2014, p. 7), "It was perhaps unforeseen that people would generate an astronomical amount of selfies and that our desire to capture and share selfies would become a global phenomenon." She uses Canadian philosopher and media theorist McLuhan's (1994) reframing of the Narcissus myth in explaining people's fascinations with their mirror images in the form of these digital self-portraits or selfies in the age of social media. Narcissus is the Greek mythology figure who is popularly known to have fallen in love and got fixated with his own reflection in the water. His name is the origin of the word narcissism which pertains to excessive admiration of oneself.

In contrast with the known version of the myth, McLuhan (1994, p.41) in *Understanding media: The extensions of man* explains that Narcissus did not fall in love with himself but rather he became numb to his own reflection as he fails to recognize his own reflection. Narcissus thought that his image is an image of another. McLuhan (1994, p. 41) traces the mythological character's name from the Greek word 'narcosis' meaning 'numbness'. He says:

"The youth Narcissus mistook his own reflection in the water for another person. This extension of himself by mirror numbed his perceptions until he became the servomechanism of his own extended or repeated image. . . He was numb. He had adapted to his extension of himself and had become a closed system."

Narcissus while looking at one's reflection became numb to it that he has failed to recognize it as his own extension. McLuhan is pointing out using the Narcissus myth the fact that people are fascinated by any extension of themselves in any material other than themselves. Wendt (p. 19) argues people are attracted to themselves and always wanted to view themselves because of the numbness and misrecognition.

With digital photography producing editable images and technology of artistic filters, misrecognition increases leading to more fascination with oneself. For Rettberg (2014), filters as technology provided by smart phone applications that people use have become an integral part of today's visual culture. As popularized by the social network site and application Instagram, people are given a tool to make selfies and other photos appear "brighter, more muted, more grungy, or more retro than real life" (Rettberg, 2014, p. 21). These photo filters allow people to show images that are different from the world they are used in seeing. Rettberg states that one reason why photo filters fascinate people is the way it gives images strangeness that defamiliarises their lives. In terms of using filters in selfies, Rettberg (2014, p. 27) contends:

"Putting a filter on our selfies, or framing them by placing them in a blog or an Instagram feed, gives them a distance that makes them new to us. We see ourselves and our surroundings as if we are outside of ourselves, through a retro filter or in the same poses and layouts as we see fashion models or homes in magazine spreads."

Through artistic filters, images are given a new appearance that makes everyday life seem unfamiliar. Agreeing with McLuhan's (1994) idea of misrecognition, people are fascinated with the unfamiliar images they are able to produce through photo filters. Thus, "users create many digital selves with many different looks, compulsively abstracting their appearances as if compelled by an external force" (Wendt, 2014 p. 19). People are so involved with the extensions of themselves that they perceive it to be separated and different. Like Narcissus looking at his reflection in the water, people use technology to do the same. In turn, the me-

dia as extensions of selves are not recognized as their own selves. Wendt (2014, p. 20) says that taking and sharing selfies in the social media enables people to be larger than life. This sense of a never-ending cycle of images provides people of frequent numbness and amplification in taking and viewing selfies.

Selfies in View of Goffman's Dramaturgical Model

Considering the above discussions, there are three ways in which self-presentation through selfies echoes Goffman's dramaturgical model. First, with the concept of consumerism in social media, selfies are being made to present the idealized self to others. While it may or may not display authenticity, the manipulation or staging of the self through selfies showcase impression management raised by Goffman. This is done through the creation of multiple selves made possible by the functions of social media. Accordingly, these multiple selves and fronts are created based on the impression one desires to obtain from his or her perceived audience. This signifies that self-presentation through selfies allows the individual to perform various images or roles. Beyond this ability given by digital technology and social media to manage and present the desired self, an important point raised here also is how people give consideration on what others think about them. Just like in the dramaturgical model, the self is compared to an actor on a stage who portrays roles for the audience to watch and react to. Given the reality of socialization in social media where others can easily like, share, or comment on people's post, our online self-presentation are socially shaped to the extent of being commoditized to please others or to get good impression from them more especially that existence in social media depends on the amount of interactions we get from other users.

Second, the concept of misrecognition of self in technology further strengthens how one performs or presents the self through selfies. Using McLuhan's (1994) reframing of the Narcissus myth and idea of misrecognition of the extensions of selves in technology, self-presentation using selfies create idealized self that fascinates oneself and others. Through the use of filters and other tools made possible by social media and mobile applications, people are able to produce self-images that are strange and unfamiliar but are able to amplify how one view the self and how one appears to others.

And third, Goffman's idea of the front stage and back stage is also noticeable in online self-presentation. The line drawn between online self and offline self may somehow represent the idea of front stage and back stage. Similar to front stage, the online self makes use of impression management through presentation of iden-

tities or aspects of the self that are hidden or inhibited in face-to-face interaction or the offline world. Meanwhile, the concept of the back stage can be likened to the offline self which technology or photography cannot stage or idealize compared to our virtual posts like selfies. The offline self, while can be regulated, does not have the same tools or functions provided by technology and social media. Keeping in mind the amplification that technology can do to self-presentation, the projected image produced in selfies will allow idealization and manipulation which can have a different effect. However, the blurry line between online and offline self should be noted. As reiterated previously, the use of internet and digital selves are very much embedded in the everyday life today that it is no longer regarded as separate or different.

Conclusion

Looking at the various notions related to selfies, this paper emphasizes how digital technology and social media continuously transform how people communicate and socialize with one another. The exposition of the issues raised serve as points in investigating further online socialization and the vast virtual space and its communities. While taking and uploading selfies might seem like a simple activity, it opens up new discussions on how these images can be used for visual communication and how these images can be interpreted to examine sociological, philosophical, or psychological concepts. And most importantly, the study of selfies contributes to understanding social media, internet culture, and social practices in view of technological developments.

References

- Chester, A. & Bretherton, D. (2007). Impression management and identity online. In *The Oxford handbook of internet psychology*, eds. Adam Joinson, Katelyn McKenna, Tom Postmes, and Ule-Dietrich Reips, 223-236. Great Britain: Oxford University Press.
- Elliot, A. (2001). *Concepts of the self*. 2nd ed. London: Polity Press.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Doubleday Anchor Books.

- Harad, T. (2014). *I, me, my selfie: Self-portraits are passe – the "selfie" is the order of the day if you own a smartphone and wish to post your own mugshot on some social media*. *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (January), 78-79.
- Katz, J., & Crocker, E. (2016). Selfies as interpersonal communication. In Benedek A. & Veszelszki Á (Eds.), *In the Beginning was the Image: The Omnipresence of Pictures: Time, Truth, Tradition* (131-138). Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang AG. Retrieved November 13, 2020, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2t4cns.15>
- McLuhan, M. (1994). *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- Nicolescu, R. (2016). The social media landscape. In *Social Media in Southern Italy: Crafting Ideals* (31-60). London: UCL Press. Retrieved November 5, 2020, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1gxxpdq.6>
- Popova, M. (16 September 2013) *Aesthetic Consumerism and the violence of photography: What Susan Sontag teaches us about visual culture and the social web*. Brainpickings.org. <http://www.brainpickings.org/2013/09/16/susan-sontag-on-photography-social-media/> (accessed October 31, 2020).
- Rettberg, J. W. (2014). *Seeing ourselves through technology: How we use, selfies, blogs and wearable devices to see and shape ourselves*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Schau, H. J. & Gilly, M. C. (2003). *We are what we post? Self-presentation in personal web space*. *Journal of Consumer Research* Vol. 30, No. 3 (December). 385-404.
- Sontag, S. (1977). *On Photography*. New York: Picador.
- Taslim, I. & Rezwan, M. Z. (n. d.). *Selfie re-de-fined: Self-(more/less)*. *Wizcraft Journal of Language and Literature*, Vol. II, Issue IV, 77-84.
- Warfield, K. (2014). *Making selfies/making self: Digital subjectivities in the selfie*. Image Conference Berlin, Berlin.
- Wells, L. (1997). *Photography: A critical introduction*. London: Routledge.

Wendt, B. (2014). *The allure of the selfie: Instagram and the new self-portrait*. Amsterdam: Network Notebook.

Yoo, J. K. & Kyoung-Nan, K. (2015). *Consuming the objectified self: The quest for authentic self*. *Asian Social Science*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 301-312.