「先別吃!我拍個照。」－美食自拍與圖像敘事

摘要

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研究指出,自拍的動機可能源自追求注意力或身體吸引力、自戀常態化或對身體的不滿。這些起源和動機通常意味著與自拍新生代有關的負面信息。尤其是自戀之說,令人對自拍的產生負面的印象。

然而,雷切爾西蒙斯等學者則高度重視自拍。「在社交媒體上分享自拍讓女孩有機會宣傳自己並控制自己的形象。」鑑於女權主義,自拍有其益處,因為自拍是數位時代自我主張和自我表達的體現。現代技術和網絡空間為我們提供了一個自拍和分享的共同平台,亦可以有限度地享有隱私。

不管是負面、正面或二者兼有的自拍,都是數位時代的圖形與意象。每張照片都試圖講述一個故事。自拍想要講述什麼故事?或者,正如馬歇爾‧麥克盧漢告訴世界的那樣,「媒體就是信息」,而自拍媒體試圖傳遞什麼樣的信息?

本文試圖將自拍這一現代現象解讀為一種圖像敘事形式,旨在了解其功能、內容、應用及影響。立足於文學研究的面相,本文試圖回答以下問題:自拍作為一種敘事形式有何意義?自拍作為一種圖形敘事形式,能否作為一種文學媒介?雖然應用於文學體裁,例如食物敘事,食物自拍會增強食物敘事、自我認同,還是兩者兼而有之?自拍是一種潛在的文學敘事形式嗎?本文的研究和論述應針對上述問題進行。

關鍵詞:自拍、自拍、圖像敘事、飲食敘事、文學形式

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"Nobody Eat! Let Me Take a Selfie."—The Food Selfie as a Graphic Narrative

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Abstract

Scholars point out that the motivations for taking selfies may originate from pursuits of attention or physical attractiveness, normalization of narcissism, or body dissatisfaction. These motivations usually connote negative messages and images of the selfie generation. Narcissism, in particular, carries most of the bad names for the selfie.

Other scholars like Rachel Simmons, on the contrary, value the selfie highly. In light of feminism, the selfie helps because it is the embodiment of self-assertion and self-expression in the digital times. Modern technology and cyber space offer us a universal platform for taking and sharing selfies where people's images and identities may be secured.

Negative, positive, or ambivalent, selfies are digital images and graphics. Every photographic image is trying to tell a story. What story does the selfie try to tell? Or, following Marshall McLuhan's maxim "the medium is the message," what kind of message does the selfie medium try to deliver?

This essay attempts to read into the modern phenomenon of the selfie as a form of graphic narrative, with an aim to understand its function, its content, its application, and influences thereof. In the interest of literary studies, this essay attempts to answer the following questions: How is the selfie significant as a form of narrative? Will the food selfie enhance food narrative, self-identity, or both? Is the selfie a potential form of literary narrative? The research and discourse in this essay shall be conducted accordingly in response to the questions stated above.

KEYWORDS: selfie, food selfie, graphic narrative, food narrative, literary form

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The Selfie: Three Motivations, Narcissism, and Four Functions

Photography, in digital times teeming with handheld devices, is no longer an exclusive art for the devoted few. Far-flung coverage of the Internet service, the portable and potent smart phones, and free-download and easy-share SNS apps—all these make possible the present world where taking a photo is no longer an sesthetic decision to make but a daily routine to follow or even a habit you cannot break. Among the photographs people take daily and casually, I would like to focus on one form and one content: the selfie (the form) and food (the content). The focus of this essay will be on the food selfie—selfies taken with preferred, special, or recommended food, featuring or suggesting on culinary experience or alimentary pleasure. This essay on the food selfie is to comprise three major sections: the motivation of the selfie, the symbolism of food, and the significance of the food selfie as a new ritual of food culture in the modern time.

In recent researches, when it comes to the selfie, scholars often rely on Instagram for/as a reliable source and archive. The first selfie with a self hashtage was posted in the year 2011 (Sung et al 16). The selfie movement soon went from popular to viral. In the year 2015, on the same platform of Instagram, the annual uploading of selfies skyrocketed up to 29 millions (Etgar & Amichai-Hamburger 81). This is, however, one of the very few things, selfie scholars agree upon. Most selfie scholars can be divided into two groups: those who take the selfie as a negative social phenomenon and whose who take the selfie as a positive progress in the digital times.

Three Motivations: technology, feminism, and rituality

The positive progress subsumes at least the following three motivations: 1. A product of the age, 2. A boost on feminism, 3. A new ritual. The selfie, among other taken and posted pictures on social media and the act of producing such pictures, is a natural development at the present time. As Alexandra Jamieson asserts, "now, in the age of the selfie, no one can escape the pressure of the camera" (155). It is therefore an act of blending in and fitting into the modern time of handheld technology and ubiquitous cyberspace. Another camp of the positive side, like Rachel Simmons, takes a most particular and in-depth view of the selfie, championing the idea that taking and posting selfies can actually better fulfill feminism and gender awareness in the digital times. "Sharing selfies (self-protraits) on social media gives girls a chance to promote themselves and to take control of their own image" (Simmons 64). It is reasonable and

understandable that if the traditional trend and media are controlled by the male dominance and the traditional society never encourages demonstration of femininity unless when catering to its taste and purposes, the digital access to various platform for self-assertion and the handheld devices to convenience and benefit from such access signifies a stylish revolution in the digital world which has already become part of the 21st-century reality.

The third motivation, part of the focus of this essay, is the establishment of a new ritual by the new generation. By taking and posting selfies, particular in daily activities like taking meals, the younger generation is forming a new ritual of the everyday experience by giving it a minimalist ceremony in making a record of and sharing a memory of a moment that is appreciated and digitized. We will come back to the establishment of a new ritual later in the main body of the essay.

Narcissism

On the negative camp, scholars tend to think of the selfies phenomenon as a demonstration of behavioral addiction, narcissism, or the synergism of narcissism and materialism. In terms of behavioral addiction, scholars supporting this view are inclined to delve into causes and symptoms of addiction and accordingly explain the selfie phenomenon by fitting it into those causes and symptoms. In *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked*, six ingredients of behavioral addiction are mentioned: "compelling goals that are just beyond reach; irresistible and unpredictable positive feedback; a sense of incremental progress and improvement; tasks that become slowly more difficult over time; unresolved tensions that demand resolution; and strong social connection" (Alter). Although the six ingredients may constitutes behavioral addiction in some cases, it is inevitable that any social phenomenon, when taken ill in the first place, is pre-determined to receive a negative review by the researcher's collecting evidence to prove his/her foregrounded opinions against it.

In terms of narcissism, scholars on the negative camp would probably define narcissism before the selfies phenomenon is fitted into their discourse:

Narcissistic individuals often hold exaggerated positive self-perception, particularly of their physical appearance, social popularity and status […] SNSs are ideal outlets for narcissists who use interpersonal relationships for self-enhancement and promotion to manage their self-impressions. (Sung et al 18)[1]

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[1] According to Sung et al, these views are informed and shared by Bradless & Emmons, Campbell et al, and Wallace & Baumeister.

Selfie, in their [mis]understanding is a sheer manifestation of self-importance, and, mostly likely, it is a case of psychiatric case. This point of view will rest the cultural study of the selfie on a universal mental problem and will gain nothing else but an arrested development of an originally viable and potential cultural understanding of digital media and ritual formation.

Some scholars further their opinions based on narcissism into materialist discourse. They see narcissism and materialism closely related because in capitalist society, a narcissist is inclined to purchase designer's products to enhance his/her self-image. Hence materialism based on consumer capitalism answers to their need; hence, "for narcissists, displaying their material possessions is a way to distinguish themselves from others and be regarded as generally capable and powerful" (Sung et al 19; Christopher & Schlenker). "Materialists," following their reasoning, "tend to locate material possessions centrally in their lives and to judge their own and other's success by the quantity and quality of their possessions" (Sung et al 19; O'Cass; Richins and Dawson). With such reasoning, the consumer culture serves to manifest narcissism; the digital technology serves to manifest narcissism; the Internet all development related serve to manifest narcissism. It is a convenient point of view and yet inevitably over-simplifies cultural trends, technological development, and the interaction of the two.

I suggest an opposite position in hope for diverse interpretations and cultural ambiguity of the selfie. In preceding sections, we see that no one in our time can escape the camera and that the selfie helps the management of female impression. In addition to these, I'd like to point out a concept shared by scholars. The selfie can stand alone as a meaningful cultural phenomenon without much relation to narcissism. "The digital generation's level of tolerance on those narcissists and excessive attention seekers is higher than previous generations" (Sung et al 67). That is to say, the selfie is something happening to and among most of us; the opposite of it is rare. Naming it a case of psychiatric abnormity will fail to stand. When the selfie is a new normalcy and commonly practiced. We need understanding of its motivation beyond narcissism.

Four Functions: communication, documentation, relationship, and self-image.

Following such understanding, "[t]aking and posting selfies has been less associated with narcissism and low self-esteem. They [younger generation] view selfies and more as a way of communication, life recording, relationship management, and impression management" (Zhang et al 68). Here we see the functionality of the selfie. It benefits communication, documentation, relationship, and self-image. These functions of the selfie cannot be examined in the framework of narcissism. Other than

these three functions of the selfie, Etgar and Amichai-Hamburger point out three motivations of the selfie: self-approval, belonging, and documentation (81). In addition to documentation, which is found in both two groups of scholars, self-approval is closely related to self-image as belonging is to relationship. Although it is unnecessary to prove two schools of scholars on the same positive camp supportive of the selfie and its social functionality, it is good to know that they agree highly on each other's observations and research results.

It is crucial to single out the fact that the selfie, a product of photography, should be taken as a genre of photography. While speaking of its functions and motivations, we place the selfie under the discussion of cultural studies; while speaking of the selfie as a genre of photography, we offer it a place in art and allow it a discursive spectrum bordering on aesthetic discourse and cultural studies. To begin with, when the selfie is taken as a genre of photography, we can "interpret it via concepts of photographic theory, like index, composition and reflexivity" (Musil et al 59; Frosh). It makes sense that if we can read into a work of photography for what it refers us to, for its meaning ("index") then we can read into a selfie for the same thing. If we can read into a work of photography for its deployment of various elements ("composition"), we can read into a selfie with the same pursuit. If we can read into a work of photography for its revealed message ("reflexivity"), we can read into a selfie for the same purpose. For, the selfie is after all a product and production of photography.

Food and its Symbolism

Food is of course one of our basic needs to support our lives. And yet, other than the function of providing nutrition, food has in human civilization offering more than just physical need. As Yasmin Ibrahim draws our attention to the fact that "[w]ith the tele-visualisation and tabloidisation of food, food imagery entered an era of the spectacle…but removed from the immediate pleasure of consuming and ingesting food" (147). It is obvious that food functions as more than a source of nutrition. Food can serve as a reminder of someone special; food can trigger childhood memory; food can enliven special occasions. Food helps along the everyday life and marks the moment of celebration. Food is where life begins and moves on from. Food is also the root for a personal taste and a base for the public market.

When food is transformed from a staple to a "spectacle," it is there more to see and than to eat. So, what do we see in food?

> Food as a subject of human connection can transcend cultural boundaries and is often considered a product of cultural diplomacy in terms of tourism and national

identity. Food images become tools to personify self, communicate intimacy and to connect to a wider audience of similar and disparate interest. […] Food, then, is a medium and metaphor for this representation and the preservation of the self through the image economy. […] the symbolic metaphor of food, recognizing it as an ephemeral entity, but seeking to prolong and immortalize it through the image. (Yasmin 149)

Food connects people, transcend boundaries, and communicates cultures. On a smaller scale, food spells out a person's identity and speaks of a person's taste. Most of all, when food with its image becomes a metaphor, a symbol, or a language, it then exceeds its nutritional function and physical form. It becomes an immortal existence of symbolism.

From Ibrahim's observation, we sense that food is itself a medium. "Food provides a means to document and memorialize the everyday and the eventful. […] food production also signifies the production of the self and diarisation of everyday life" (148). Ibrahim's description of the symbolism of food reminds us of the functions and motivations of the selfie. Both food and the selfie serve communication and documentation; both food and the selfie make statements of life experience. In other words, the food selfie can be more than a genre of photography but conveyer of a duo-medium message. The selfie is a medium and so is food. A food selfie picture can be a work of selfie-conveyed symbolism or a work of food-conveyed self-representation. Digital image production has never been so excitingly involved and practicable at the same time.

The Signification of the Food Selfie

In addition, Ibrahim also points out a very positive side of the trend of the food selfie or other food photography before meal. "New rituals around food consumption including the uploading of the food image before consumption, integrates seamlessly into a UGC [user-generated content; e.g. graphics or texts on Facebook, Instagram, etc.] economy where content creation and human behaviour fuse together to manifest new social conventions and rituals" (ibid). Contrary to what narcissism-attributing scholars believe, the selfie is not a problematic rare case but a mainstream production of rituals, cultures, and even values in accordance with the consumer economy. Since the consumer culture is the lead of our time; the food selfie, is the co-production by the traditional food symbolism and the revolutionary selfie ritual.

Handheld devices like smartphones of course enhance the accessibility to such rituality. As part of our way of life rather than an option, the use of smartphones and the

practice of food rituals have become a popular genre of the Internet content creation. It is believed that in the consumer society of ours and the "prosumer economy online,"[2] photographic creation of food can form "a site of both personal consumption and collective desire" (Ibrahim 14). It also "provides a mechanism to create social capital and currency online and to produce these to document the everyday and to renew connections with a wider community" (Ibrahim 149-150). All these are made possible because food can be personal and public at the same time. As one can be particular about one's culinary choices, almost all people are familiar with the concept of three certain meals at three certain times. Food, food images, and food rituals make part of online business possible; food and digital technology are two indispensable elements in modern life. Food, food images, and food rituals make recording of life experiences easy and shared in circulation; food and digital technology are two indispensable elements in traditional interpersonal relationships.

Because of the aforementioned recording and sharing, the distance between people and cultures are drawn nearer than ever. In Ibrahim's examples, we find ideas like "McDonaldization of society, the increasing curiosity and acceptance of world cuisines to the exoticisation of the ordinary meal" (147). In addition, Claude Fischler's observation is mentioned that food tradition is not challenged or endangered but adopted to the large-scale circulation of food cultures around the world.

Conclusion

My overall viewpoint on the food selfie is optimistic. It is a way of life; it is a creation of new life rituals; it is a trend responding to the development of technology. In addition, it is a trend. That is to say, it is a good thing can not be stopped. We do not see any objective shortcomings of it other than hatred harbored by older generations who maintain a different way of life.

Food as the subject matter of the selfie is another benefit. Like designer's products, food speaks of one's taste; unlike designer's products, food speaks mostly of one's taste in enjoying life rather than spending a fortune because one can. Food as a subject matter of the selfie or any photographic creation has something that designer's product do not have—a non-discriminating inviting nature to good life.

Food is at the same time a medium for communication and a vessel of symbols. To have food in another medium like the selfie is to further enrich the meaning of a

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[2] "Prosumer" is a compound word which means "producer and consumer in one person," designating any SNS user (as a consumer) who posts texts and pictures on social media (as a producer or creator) and enrich the content of the used social media in return; Ibrahim's choice of word (148).

UGC in circulation. A picture I take of a thing I do with a kind of food I choose to show you what I am—the self-reflexive frame device of the food selfie opens an new portal for artistic creation.

The multi-layer art of the food selfie goes beyond narcissism, aims for communication and documentation, and syncs with our consumer economy and digital technology to increase our online currency and enhance our self-impression with a taste for good life. Next time when you hear, "Nobody eat! Let me take a selfie." maybe you will hear the good of it.

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