Refugee Selfies and the (Self-)Representation of Disenfranchised Social Groups

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As a cultural object, the selfie is a contested image, most often encountered and analyzed in an archetypal and reductionist form, as vain self-portrait or vapid social celebration. However, it is important to acknowledge that there is a wide range of selfie genres, informed by specific motives and circumstances, and socially read and policed in complex ways. Unconventional selfie practices—including the refugee selfies explored here, but also other specific genres like soldier selfies, or selfies at funerals—can expand our understanding of the selfie and of the functions it can perform. This essay aims to contribute to this emerging conversation by unpacking the complexity of the refugee selfie as contested cultural object. Specifically, I explore the function of the refugee selfie as documentation of and by othered bodies, with a focus on these selfies' potential to both subvert and maintain the power dynamics inherent to self- and cultural representation.

With civil war raging on in Syria, more than 4 million Syrians have fled the country, in what the United Nations has called the worst refugee crisis in 25 years.[1] According to the International Organization for Migration, the number of refugees who entered Europe in 2015 alone exceeded 1 million, with more than half of them coming from Syria.[2] The influx of refugees has divided public opinion in Europe and internationally, bringing up important questions about national and cultural identity, acculturation, racism, and xenophobia. The issue of welcoming refugees—or, conversely, denying them entry—has also been used as political ammunition between right-wing and left-wing groups; the recent terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels added further fuel to the debate, with security concerns threatening to derail the humanitarian advances that have been achieved.

In reporting on the refugee crisis, many commentators have noted Syrian refugees' extensive use of mobile technology, and in particular smartphones. Indeed, smartphone has become an essential tool for survival, as refugees rely on these phones to communicate with family and friends back home, find their way using GPS technologies, or tap into the network of refugees who have made similar journeys.[3] However, Syrian refugees' use of smartphones has been met with negative reactions both in the press and on social media. Anti-refugee groups commonly voice the assumption that refugees should not even have smartphones; refugees are expected to be poor, and smartphones seemingly signal financial wellbeing (or at least non-poverty). Despite the fact that one's financial status should have no bearing on qualifying as a refugee, anti-refugee groups have used this argument to claim that these people are "economic migrants" rather than real victims of war.

Anti-refugee commentators on social media have been especially vitriolic regarding one particular way refugees use smartphones: taking selfies. These images of refugees taking selfies – and, significantly, not the selfies themselves - have been published in various media outlets, from Time Magazine to The Daily Mail and The Daily Mirror.[4] Following their publication online, the images are then picked up and circulated via social media (especially Twitter, Facebook and Reddit), where they are fodder for further discussion and, most often, outrage. As Senft and Baym note, the practice of taking selfies "remains fundamentally ambiguous, fraught, and caught in a stubborn and morally loaded hype cycle."[5] The discourses of mockery and pathologizing that are often used to comment on selfies and selfie takers are, ultimately, about discipline and power. Importantly, such discourses are used to assert moral superiority over certain social groups—especially women and people of color—while maintaining extant power dynamics.[6] Indeed, studies have shown that selfies taken by women and people of color tend to be "socially policed" to a much higher extent.[7]

Seen in this light, the mockery of refugee selfies is a way of disciplining refugees' bodies, but it is also anchored in archetypes of othered bodies as figures for Western consumption. As Edward Said famously argued in his discussion of Orientalism, Western representations reduce Middle Eastern people to "a kind of human flatness, which exposed its characteristics easily to scrutiny and removed from it its complicating humanity"; these fictional and essentialist representations are rooted in a "subtle and persistent

Eurocentric prejudice against Arab-Islamic peoples and their culture."[8] Orientalism is a hegemonic discourse in its assertion of Western superiority. Thus, given their function in reasserting power, archetypes of Middle Eastern people—which continue to be reinforced in contemporary popular culture—play a significant role in the decoding of refugee selfies.[9]

Gender, like ethnicity, plays a role in how refugee selfies are interpreted in Western media. Middle Eastern masculinity is often seen as threatening, as Arab men are frequently stereotyped as rapists driven by a predatory sexuality.[10] Unfortunately, these negative stereotypes were further reinforced by the recent attacks against women in Cologne on New Years Eve. Most of the photographs of refugees taking selfies that have been circulated by the media show groups of men, rather than women or families. This has exacerbated negative reactions on social media, where anti-refugee commentators accuse the selfie-taking men of cowardice—another stereotype of Middle-Eastern men—for fleeing the war-torn areas and leaving women and children behind.[11] For example, comments posted on Twitter in response to an image of a group of male refugees taking a selfie (Figure 1) accuse them of being "too scared to stay in their own countries, but happy to leave their women and children there!" and note that they are "all men of fighting age too... Cowards".

Figure 1. A group of Syrian refugees take a selfie upon arriving in Lesbos.

Much of this contention has to do with opinions about when and where it is appropriate to take selfies, and who should or should not be engaging in this practice. To a large extent, the negative reactions in response to refugee selfies are the result of a clash between the cultural associations surrounding the selfie, and, respectively, those surrounding the refugee. Selfie takers are often assumed to be narcissistic, vacuous, and self-absorbed; the classic illustration of this view is a selfie taken by a young girl making duck faces in the bathroom.[12] The act of posting a selfie is read as an example of vanity, where an idealized physical snapshot is shared with the aim of receiving attention (often sexual or romantic) and compliments. These associations contradict the widespread image of the refugee as highly distressed and only concerned with survival. Additionally, there are commercial associations with the selfie that similarly clash with predominant assumptions about refugees. In advertising, for instance, marketers deploy selfies to signal that one is young, fun, happy, and connected.[13] This fundamentally conflicts with the image of the refugee in our cultural imaginary, in which refugees are presumed to be sad, disconnected, and uprooted.
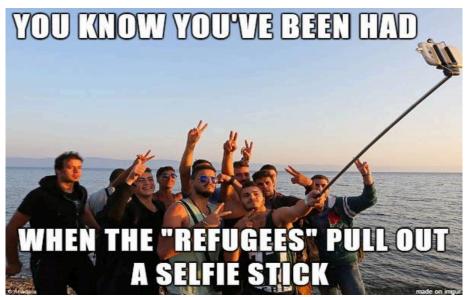

Figure 2. The image of the refugees taking a selfie in Figure 1 is later turned into a meme and circulated via social media.

When the selfie is taken with a selfie stick—made visible by photos circulated in the media—the negative reactions are further intensified, since the selfie stick is not congruent with the idea of the refugee fleeing with only the bare necessities. For instance, the photo of the selfie-taking Syrian men mentioned previously (Figure 1) was met with heavy criticism on social

media. Twitter was flooded with sarcastic comments ("Oh I'm fleeing my home, I must remember my selfie stick!!!"[14]; "Lost my passport very first day...but saved my selfie stick all the way to Germany"[15]) and the image was even turned into a meme (Figure 2), with the addition of bold white text saying "You know you've been had when the 'refugees' pull out a selfie stick."

But while there is power in looking, and in reinforcing the archetypal representation of othered bodies, practices of self-representation, including the selfie, are imbued with counterhegemonic potential. When taking and sharing a selfie, one makes the deliberate choice "to be seen,"[16] and moreover to be seen in a particular way: the way one wants to be seen. Thus selfie, "in its original production, effects a kind of agential looped gaze in which the photographer and the photographed are conflated subject positions."[17]

As scholars have shown, the act of taking selfies, as a form of documentation and communication, can be empowering, especially for disenfranchised communities.[18] While "for ordinary people, selfies provide a form of empowerment by (re)constructing confidence and receiving acknowledgement,"[19] the agency derived from the practice of taking and sharing selfies by marginalized or disempowered social actors is a different form of empowerment. Specifically, much of this empowerment lies in the nature of the selfie as intentional authorship and self-representation.[20] As Frosh aptly puts it, the selfie is more than an image; it is a "'gestural image,' which says "not only 'see this, here, now' but also 'see me showing you me.'"[21] Thus, selfies often function as a means of witnessing[22] or presencing,[23] which can be an important source of empowerment.

The role of the selfie as both "possessor and producer of knowledge"[24] also illustrates its significance as a means of documentation. As Oliver Wendell Holmes observed, a photograph is a "mirror with a memory";[25] the selfie can thus be read as an auxiliary memory device: a personal, deliberate instrument for facilitating the collection and storage of memory. It is also interesting to note that, in contrast to the most common function of the selfie as "positive" evidence—flattering bodies, fun times, beautiful scenery—the memories stored in refugee selfies are not always positive. To illustrate, although most of the refugee selfies circulated by the media are taken on the Greek beaches upon the safe arrival of their boats and are thus seen as celebratory, some selfies are meant to capture the pain and suffering experienced by refugees along the way. In a report published in *Time* magazine, 30-year-old Mehar Ahmed Aloussi from Damascus says they take

selfies because "we want memories from the bad trip we had. When I go and settle down in another country, I want to remember my way."[26] This is an interesting contrast to the more sanguine sentiments generally associated with the taking of a selfie, and points to the importance of adopting a wider and more complex view of the practice of taking and sharing selfies.

In addition to its function as self-representation and (self-)documentation, the selfie is a sociable practice and its communicative aspect is key. Scholars have called for the analysis of selfies not, or at least not primarily, as an act of photographic self-representation, but as a form of mediated communication: a kind of "visual chat."[27] For Frosh, the selfie represents "the production of the mediated phatic body as a visible vehicle for sociable communication with distant others who are expected to respond."[28] Although photographs of refugees taking selfies have been widely circulated in the press and through social media, it is nonetheless important to acknowledge that we, the Western public, are not the intended audience for these selfies. In most cases, the selfies are meant for refugees' family and friends back home, as a way to maintain contact with loved ones, reassuring them that the journey has been made safely and that the travelers are well. That the two key functions of refugee selfies are documentation and communication echoes the findings of other researchers studying selfie practices in disenfranchised communities.[29]

It is crucial to consider the circulation of these images through both mainstream media and social media, and the ways the selfies' intended meanings and functions are re-coded by other audiences and within different frameworks of power. The self-representation of othered bodies is vulnerable to re- or counter-interpretation. Unfortunately, it is easy to see how the traces of empowerment and agency by the refugees gained through the intentional acts of self-representation, documentation, and communication can be shattered by the circulation and repurposing of these selfies, as we have seen, for example, in the meme about the selfie stick. As Brager notes, once a selfie is shared online, it has a second life; as it travels, it "is subject to disjunctures of meaning, to misinterpretation and appropriation." Importantly, this has crucial implications in for the images' power dynamics, as "the selfie ceases to be agential and becomes an object of another's political narrative."[30]

Of course, the encoding and decoding of refugee selfies is extraordinarily complex, and it is important to acknowledge that individual experiences differ. To be sure, beyond the theory-based analysis of media artifacts and of

the public discourses around such practices, there is a need for deep ethnographic research that engages the refugees themselves in conversations regarding their media use—especially given the fact that their reliance on mobile technologies has been such a significant aspect of the current refugee crisis. It is therefore vital to listen to the experiences of the refugees themselves, as their voices are most often missing in both the research and the public discourse surrounding this topic; this becomes particularly important when inquiring about issues of empowerment and agency.

Notes

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