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DECIPHERING DIGITAL IMPRINTS OF IDENTITY

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Abstract

Portraying the self has always been a favourite theme of artists and authors, seen manifested over the years in self-portraits via varied forms, generally as cartoons and paintings in art and autobiographies in literature. With the advent of technology bringing about drastic changes in the field of communication, the digital media has taken the society by storm. Human beings are subjected to incessant technological impact like digital exposure and overwhelming tons of information. Social media sites are vying with each other by filling in for literary expressions. Worded expressions of the self are mirrored on digitalized social platforms like blogs and Facebook. Today mobile cameras are tremendously popular and have taken over the role of the painter and the traditional photographer. Selfies and groupies have become the norm of the times. These multifarious digital versions of identity have provoked myriad critical readings and given rise to a plethora of interpretations based on their diverse natures as forms of lived awareness in the contemporary world. This paper takes into consideration two modes of digital imprints of identity. The first mode posts that point to the self, made on social media sites and blogs. The second mode examines selfies/ groupies posted online from a cultural studies perspective. Analysing this, the study attempts to observe how far such digital imprints have gone to be recognized and accepted as artistic or literary expressions of identity.

Keywords: self, technology, identity, digital media, cultural studies, social media, blogs, selfies

Introduction

The humanities is an umbrella term for a discipline that attempts to probe and document every facet of human beings' lives on earth via varied disciplines like arts, literature, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, archaeology, psychology, history, cultural studies and so on. The study of the humanities provides a venue in which the expression of doddering interpretations and experiences can be recognized and areas of common interest explored (White 263). Humanities scholars explore ethical issues, and discover how the past informs the present and the future. Humanities research teaches us about the world beyond the classroom, and beyond a job. Researchers delve into the discourses that construct gender, race, and class. We learn to decode the images that surround us; to understand and use the language necessary to navigate a complex and rapidly shifting world (http://www.theguardian.com/).

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Portraying the self has always been a favourite theme of artists and authors, seen manifested over the years in self-portraits via varied forms, generally as cartoons and paintings in art and autobiographies in literature. The paper 'Deciphering Digital Imprints of Identity" wishes to consider two avenues of the current digital world – writings on social media, and selfies taken using mobile phones –perceived as members of the present generation who have come down a long ancestral line: writings on the self which have descended from the field of autobiographies, and selfies, which can be seen as the successors of the artistic realm of self-portraits.

Digitalisation has impacted the world in many possible avenues, and academic as well as artistic spheres are keenly influenced by this. Starting as replacements, the digital world is now to be seen as modes of recreations which demands new definitions and paradigms. David M. Berry in his article "The Computational Turn: Thinking about the Digital Humanities" tries to examine and understand the complex field of understanding the "contemporary born-digital culture and the everyday practices that populate it" by focussing on the digital humanities wave.

> The digital humanities try to take account of the plasticity of digital forms and the way in which they point toward a new working with representation and meditation, what might be called the digital folding of 'reality', whereby one is able to approach culture in a radically new way. (www.culturemachine.net).

The multifarious digital versions of identity projected on social media sites and through selfies have provoked myriad critical readings giving rise to a plethora of interpretations based on their diverse natures as forms of lived awareness in the contemporary world. Analysing this, the study attempts to observe how far such digital imprints have gone to be recognized and accepted as artistic or literary expressions of identity.

Digitally Worded – Writings of the Self on Social Media Platforms

Autobiographies have had their existence since antiquity, at least through fragmentary references to the self in epics and religious texts of yore. According to Linda Hutcheon, "The autobiographical memoir has a long history in fiction as a form of asserting the primacy of individual experience" (161). The appeal and quality of self-expression of a person who is otherwise of note or repute has always been a subject of interest. The element of subjectivity as reflected in autobiographies is considered to be a strong point of analysing the character and personality of the writer, as this often surpasses the person's ideas and reflections presented objectively through conscious and studied documentations of the objective mode.

Social media may be treated as a synonym of the present world and its best used popular mode of expression. It not only combines the author/artist's primary desire for publicizing one's devices and fruits of expression, but also helps one to attempt experiments of creativity till the feeling that the time is ripe gets developed and the works are made available for perusal, appreciation and criticism to a world whose borders can be determined by the creator's will. View-edit-comment options, privacy settings, hash tags and key words are now passwords for an author/artist on the tricky road of one's determination to express and the decision to expose. Social media sites are vying with each other by filling in for literary expressions. Perhaps a reversal of history, in the digital world of expression, it was the worded expression first, and the pictorial expression next.

Worded expressions of the self are mirrored on digitalized social platforms like blogs, Facebook, Twitter or Whatsapp. Just as the world of writing itself, keyed-in words on the social media defies limited categorisation. Starting from usual greetings, it moves on to speak on the happenings of the day, experiences, people, travel, passions, interests, politics, religion, fashion, family and the like. As this paper brings to focus, it also speaks of the self.

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This segment of the paper tries to look into two aspects of digital writing as expressions of the self.

1. What is the possibility of identifying social media writings as specimens of digitalised autobiography? And,

2. what are the possibilities of considering social media scribbling from an academic perspective?

Digitalised autobiographies are a possibility of the social media. Some features that point to this are discussed here. The significance of the writer is a feature of social media writing. The writer's identity is often established, sometimes starting from a small circle of readers, the nomenclature of which are expressed with terms such as friends, followers, members and the like. Paul de Man in his article "Autobiography as De-facement" remarks that,

> Autobiography seems to depend on actual and potentially verifiable events in a less ambivalent way than fiction does. It seems to belong to a simpler mode of referentiality, of representation, and of diegisis. It may contain lot of phantasms and dreams, but these deviations from reality remain rooted in a single object whose identity is defined by the uncontested readability of his proper name (172).

Just as in conventional literary practices, here too the reader becomes the best advertiser. Expressions of oneself, if found captivating by a member of the select friends group, can have the honour of being shared by that member to another circle, and thus the spark spreads to newer turfs. This causes a glancing back upon the identity and personality of the writer.

Writer's control of accessibility is a feature offered in some social media. Parallel to the days when the writer kept a personal diary to oneself, a practice from which we have evolved expressions such as 'dear diary', the social media writer can keep a log of one's own, to be read and reflected by the self alone. A novice in writing is helped and prompted to take faltering steps, check to find out a personal impression of one's own creativity, style

and content, and do make modifications until the mind gets ready to open up the post for public or restricted viewing. Limiting viewership to a select audience too is a feature of advantage of the autobiographer.

Respecting the Living Writer is a break-away from the traditional modes of autobiographical writing. Acceptance of autobiographies came often posthumously, or at least when the writer has crossed a higher point either in age or in social acceptance. With the coming of the social media and their demand to live in the present, an autobiographer is not venerated for a lengthy account of his past, but is accepted for his captivating notes on his every day, on his present. It can even be seen as a "scriptotherapy" as Ranjana Harish delineates in her article "Autobiography as 'Scriptotherapy' ":

> Writing an autobiography may be a literary activity, but more than that it is a spiritual journey and a therapeutic act... Despite popular belief that autobiography spring from human aspiration for posterity, self-glorification, self-assertion or self-justification, it has to be acknowledged that the powerless often inscribe their self-narratives to exorcise their past. To them autobiography is a "scriptotherapy" (10).

Criticism paralleling creativity is a feature that marks digital self-expressions differently from conventional writings. Social media options of 'like', 'comment' or 'follow' can be well used by a writer who is open to critical views. The advantage here is more for the autobiographer who may wish to have others reflect on his observations on himself, his life and all that is around him. Synchronous feedback, as well as the possibility of twin exposure and cross exposure (where the original writing as well as all points of criticism are available to both the writer and the critics) are among the unique features of the field.

The academic relevance of digitalised self-expression is an aspect of significant interest. With digitalisation creating inroads into academics, digital platforms can be used for creative self-expression. The present day student may be happy to create a

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post on the class blog than slog upon the composition book, jotting down sentences to fill in for his assigned task, which is to 'write 30 sentences on yourself'. Self-expressions in social media open up new trends in expository writing, and an analysis of the same can help evolution of new standards and principles. A study on this level is needed, or else the relevance of social media as a platform of literary expression will go unanalysed. Biographical criticism will need to stretch its wings further to bring the digital and fragmentary modes of self-expression under its compass.

Theoretical studies on autobiographies have come up recently. This is not just through a study on autobiographies as such, but also through studies in contemporary critical theory. "Theorists have begun to pay close attention to autobiography for the questions it raises about referentiality and about the nature of the literary subject." (https://muse.jhu.edu). An approach to digital autobiographies as an academic subject will offer much challenge, as the variety of the field and the spread of its reach are very vast, and a systematic approach will demand much labour and effort. The field of digital autobiography is an academic arena which promises many interests and insights, especially when juxtaposed with its parallel field of digital self-portraits.

The Touch that Clicked – Selfies and Groupies in the Social Media

…the self is the message and the selfie is the medium (www.newyorker.com)

We live in a world largely dominated by technological culture, that being non-tech savvy is no longer considered an option, but rather a utopian delusion. Critics have even commented that technological culture has turned out to be the new colonial culture, the coloniser being technology and almost the entire human race being the colonised. One of the ramifications of incessant technological impact and exposure in recent times is the rise of a new global phenomenon, the selfie culture. Culture, in a general sense, deals with the world of lived reality, spanning shared notions of beliefs, traditions, values and behaviour of a particular community. Selfie culture can be taken as a 'web of

significance' as C. Geertz in *The Interpretation of Cultures* remarks: "…man is an animal suspended in a web of significance he himself has spun,I take culture to be those webs" (5).Studies on culture have come a long way and the discipline of Cultural Studies derives its intellectual resources from a plethora of disciplines ranging from literature, psychology, sociology, mass communication, anthropology, linguistics, media studies, arts, history and technology. Anything can be deemed a text, be it literary/non-literary, verbal/non-verbal, graphic/visual, and it reflects the cultural aspects of that specific age in which it is produced. This discipline has enabled critics and readers to critique any text in the current sociocultural context.

Mobile phone cameras are today tremendously popular and have taken over the traditional roles of the painter and the photographer. Taking selfies is a relatively new development in society, a progression from the days when one had to rely on strangers to snap the perfect picture. Selfies and groupies have become the norm of the times. However, just like the fact that blogs can be seen as successors of autobiographies, selfies are also neither a relatively new phenomenon nor an exclusively modern concept. Krithvi Shyam in the article "Return of the 'selfie' " opines that the selfie-craze is not a modern phenomenon but one that has been given a new lease of life. The article elucidates that several of the world's most famous works of art are actually selfies in disguise. The BBC has noted that the Spanish painter Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, a 1656 painting is an example of a spectacular selfie. The article adds that over thirty of Van Gogh's best works are self-portraits. Wikipedia says that the first selfie was probably taken in 1839 by an amateur chemist and photography enthusiast from Philadelphia named Robert Cornelius.But on the other hand, the digital self-portrait uploaded online on social media sites, is a fairly recent development. Every day we are bombarded with selfies of various kinds uploaded on social networking sites and going 'viral' on the internet. Oxford Dictionary had even announced their word of the year for 2013 to be "selfie", and defined selfie as "a photograph that

one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website."

It is said that a single picture is worth a thousand words and conveys layers of meanings. In this section, I have tried to study the tremendous growing popularity of the selfie and multiple versions of the self that it produces thereby giving rise to multiple critical readings and cultural interpretations based on its hybrid nature. Selfie culture has given rise to multiple cultural identities. An individual presents to others different personalities or identities in order to be viewed as a particular kind of person. People often don different identities while playing out varied roles during different phases in their lives.

In Cultural Studies, the identity of a person is dependent on the different roles (*personas*) played by the person and the cultural signs that designate that person which are constituted through his/her life experiences. Stuart Hall in his seminal article "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" has investigated the realms of cultural identity and representation. According to Hall, all individuals write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. Hall adds that whatever we say is always 'in context', positioned and hence it is worth remembering that all discourse is 'placed', and the heart has its reasons. In the aforementioned article Hall outlines the following two different ways of thinking about cultural identity:

The first position defines 'cultural identity' in terms of one shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self, hiding inside the any other, more superficial or artificially   imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning. (Hall 1990: 222-37)

Selfies epitomise one's "social self / selves" via the social media. It is argued that such online selves are strikingly different from the real self of the person. Kate Losse who had worked at Facebook

writes about the culture of technology in her article "The Return of the Selfie" in the *New Yorker* says that new software has contributed to the selfie renaissance and that "the self is the message and the selfie is the medium"(www.newyorker.com).

Selfies have become a way to narrate our own existence. Based on sociological and psychological studies three types may be categorized as follows.

• **Narcissistic selfies**

On our smartphones, we keep on clicking and deleting our photos till we are satisfied with idealised versions of ourselves. Narcissism it seems has reached new heights and can be numerically calculated by a formula, 'N=S / h' where S stands for the number of Selfies clicked in an hour. This formula was suggested by the American Psychiatric Association (APA), who sees this phenomenon as an obsessive compulsive disorder, with a unit of measurement termed 'selfitis'. According to the APA, there are three levels of selfitis,

> Borderline Selfitis: Taking selfies at least three times a day, but not posting them on the social media.
>
> Acute Selfitis: Taking selfies at least three times a day, and sharing them all on social media.
>
> Chronic Selfitis: It is defined as an uncontrollable urge to take one's own pictures round the clock and posting them on social media platforms more than six times   a day.(http://www.newsgram.com/andhttp://adobochronicles.com)

Extreme narcissism has also led to evolution of a kind of viral self which is the compulsion to take selfies and viral the self in order to become popular.

• **Confessional selfies**

We have become a "confessing society" and selfie culture has in a way made confession ubiquitous. We click pictures of our activities regardless of whether they are mundane and even trivial and post them on social media. After having uploaded the information on the internet we then

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wait anxiously to see who's liked it, as though we are so insecure that we desperately seek validation. We love to talk about ourselves, our hopes and dreams and believe that we have the obligation to tell the rest of the world the story of who we really are, and what better way than with a quick selfie? This has led to the emergences of maniac and dare-devil selves, those who are obsessed with taking selfies with no concern for their safety or others.

Groupies are also a common sight these days on social media platforms. Usually posted online by groups of relatives, friends or colleagues, two types of groupie identities can be seen.

- **Socio-Political selfies**

Selfies are used to convey social messages and also in politics. Our Prime Minister Narendra Modi's had launched the "Selfie with Modi" campaign to reach out to tech-savvy voters. He still uses it to strengthen international ties. Selfies are used by our government to promote social causes like 'Selfie With Daughter' a nationwide social media campaign (beti bacchao, beti paddao, selfie banao) as part of 'Save the girl child in India'. The recent elections also witnessed the rise of the 'pollfie' an interesting phenomenon as an essential part of political campaigning. "Candidates cutting across political lines have woken up to the persuasive power of the selfie. They have more clout over individual voters than conventional billboards, posters, graffiti, and banners do" ("The selfie goes 'Pollfie'").

- **Consumerist selfies**

We live in a global market culture. Selfies are used a lot for advertisement purposes and can be called 'Cultural Intermediaries' as termed by Pierre Bourdieu the French cultural theorist (www.monoskop.org). The best example is the Oscars groupie that went viral in 2014, later revealed to be a marketing stunt of Samsung who paid a reported $20m (£12m) for its advertising "integration". During the broadcast of the Oscars show, the host Ellen De Generes's star-studded groupie – the picture, taken by actor Bradley Cooper and featuring a scrum of celebrities including Meryl Streep, Jennifer Lawrence, Brad Pitt and Kevin

Spacey, was forwarded on Twitter more than two million times. By the time the ceremony was done, it had caused the social media site briefly to collapse while ensuring that coverage of the awards focused almost less on the winners than on the groupie(www.theguardian.com).

Selfie culture creates and propagates not just one but multiple cultural personas as a form of lived awareness in the contemporary world.The nature of traditional photography was to capture something enduring about the person or whatever was focussed, the essence of the subject. The selfie is very different; it's about capturing the nature of a moment. Selfies and groupies are not meant to last, and to linger in our memories. The selfie is all about creating an image of yourself for the world as Kate Losse rightly claims that selfies make one feel as if he/she is at the centre of the universe. She remarks that "…the selfie has come full circle, from a sign of the subject's marginality to a sign of his or her social-media importance" (www.newyorker.com)

Conclusion

We have tried to analyse the different identities projected by blogs and online self-portraits. It is found that autobiographical blogs are conscious portrayals that come from within the self whereas in selfies, interpretations may be read into each digital self-impression. With digitalisation creating inroads into academics, digital platforms can be used for creative self-expression. A study on this level is needed, or else the relevance of social media as a platform of literary expression will go unanalysed. An approach to digital autobiographies as an academic subject will offer much challenge, as the variety of the field and the spread of its reach are very vast, and a systematic approach will demand much labour and effort. The field of digital autobiography is one of academic promise, and an academic approach into the area promises interest and insights, especially when it is seen along with its parallel field of digital self-portraits.

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