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## **Brand selfies: consumer experiences and marketplace conversations**

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## **Brand selfies: consumer experiences and marketplace conversations**

### **Introduction**

The brand selfie is a particular selfie photograph showing an everyday consumption activity involving a brand. It consists of at least four heterogeneous and interacting elements, including a person, a brand logo or physical product, different types of physical surroundings, and technology. The magnitude of the brand selfie trend has made it a mainstream phenomenon of mediated brand culture (Schroeder and Salzer-Morling, 2006), nourishing consumer tribes (Cova et al., 2007) and confirming or contradicting marketer-controlled institutions and spaces (McQuarrie et al., 2013; Scaraboto and Fisher, 2013).

This study explores the brand selfie phenomenon on two levels: consumer brand experience and marketplace brand image. On the level of consumer brand experience, we focus on how brand selfie practices add new features to brand experiences and consumer brand relationships. The brand selfie photograph goes beyond the symbolic role of brands (e.g. Belk, 1988; Holt, 2004) to include the material and technological facets of consumer brand relationships. The extended self in the virtual world is not void of “things”, and consumers use brands as easily shared social signifiers in their digital and mobile identity kits (Belk, 2013). This study expands this understanding by exploring the role of brands in hybrid spaces, that is, spaces in which mobile devices and smartphones blur the traditional boundaries and distinctions between the physical and the virtual (de Souza e Silva, 2006). Extending consumers’ brand experiences to the realm of hybrid spaces adds a new dimension to the consumer brand relationship. Extant branding literature discusses consumer brand relationships (e.g. Fournier, 1998; McInnis et al., 2014; Fetscherin and Heinrich, 2015); thus, required now is an examination of how the use of mobile technologies, and the brand selfie phenomenon in particular, can inform and expand insights into consumer brand relationships.

On the level of marketplace brand image, we explore how consumers contribute to marketplace conversations by posting brand selfies in social media and how this practice shapes and changes brand image. McQuarrie et al. (2013) show that “ordinary consumers” as fashion bloggers can build a position as leaders of taste for an acquired audience. The current research focuses on the brand selfie as an online aggregate (Belk, 2013) or crowd phenomenon (Kozinets et al., 2008) in which many “ordinary consumers” post and share brand selfies. Brand selfies are cultural vernacularisms of brand meanings and brand experiences (Burgess, 2006), and when these aggregate in online crowds, they can affect

marketplace institutions (Parmentier and Fisher, 2015) and conversations (Burgess, 2006; Kozinets et al., 2008). We examine how consumers collectively and in relative harmony with the existing market logics take part in the construction and deconstruction of brand meanings through brand selfie practices (Belk, 2013; Vallaster and von Wallpach, 2013; Parmentier and Fisher, 2015).

To explore the interactions among material, symbolic, and technological elements of brand selfies, we join a research stream that views selfies as assemblages connecting self, space, technology, and social networks (Hess, 2015). This study contributes to the existing literature in several ways. First, we explore how consumers actively contribute to the visual production and consumption of brand meanings, signs, and symbols at the marketplace level (Schroeder, 2004). In particular, we analyse how consumers become part of the process of construction and deconstruction of brand meanings by posting brand selfies. Second, by examining the material and technological interfaces of brand selfies in the hybrid space of social media networks, we enrich understanding of the role of brands beyond the symbolic domain. Third, this study addresses the gap in visual communication research by focusing on consumer-made brand imagery and extending the visual communication paradigm into the realm of mobile enabled technology. Finally, we develop a visual analysis methodology based on the principles of photographic composition (Ang, 2006) and polytextual thematic analysis (Gleeson, 2011).

## **Theoretical background**

### Selfie phenomenon

The selfie's instantaneous spontaneity and widespread sharing, enabled by new technology, set it apart from the traditional self-portrait photograph. The selfie has evolved its own unique structural autonomy and formal logic constituting a new visual genre (Saltz, 2014; Donnachie, 2015). By sharing selfies in the social media, people seek human connection (Rutledge, 2013) and wait for confirmation from others in the form of likes and comments. Selfies are "our letters to the world" (Saltz, 2014, What they say, ¶ 2) or "mini-me's that we send out to give others a sense of who we are" (Franco, 2013, ¶ 12). The selfie represents "the shift of the photograph from memorial function to a communication device" (Batchen, quote in Colman, 2010, ¶ 10), therefore "changing the photography itself" (Colman, 2010, ¶ 10). In the visual culture, verbal conversations are not enough to communicate feelings. As people's social lives become more digital, selfies become "tools of communication more than marks of vanity"

(Franco, 2013, ¶ 10). They typically depict a person in casual and private settings, such as a bedroom or a bathroom, adding intimacy and vulnerability. Selfies shot in private settings offer a peek into a person's unseen life, often revealing rich details that convey meanings of which the maker is unaware. In doing so, private selfies offer the viewer cues to attribute values, motives, aspirations, social background, and social status to the person in the selfie (Barthes, 1970).

#### Materiality and mobile technologies: hybrid spaces

Mobile devices integrate with consumers' everyday life activities, creating a hybrid space in which the virtual is part of reality and reality is part of the virtual (de Souza e Silva, 2006; van Doorn, 2011; Hess, 2015). As "digital wayfarers", consumers are continually moving between online and offline realms (Hjorth and Pink, 2014). They are present in the virtual space in the form of digital images and text, but digital images have a second-order materiality; they are not direct reproductions of the real world, but rather metaphors transmitting meaning from one reality to another (Friedberg, 2006). The use of mobile technologies materially alters the body by expanding its presence in space and time (Sloop and Gunn, 2010), enabling users to be in two places at once (Sutherland, 2012).

Mobile technologies also blur the public-private distinction, as actions formerly performed at home on a desktop computer connected to the Internet can now take place in public spaces. People share public moments with others who are not physically present (Hess, 2015) and bring complete strangers into their private homes and intimate settings (Sloop and Gunn, 2010). Similar to the material world, digital self-representation often relies on commercial referents (Schau and Gilly, 2003), and brands are popular shorthand cultural signifiers (Holt, 2004) to share and connect with others in hybrid spaces. In hybrid spaces, user-generated and marketer-created content blends in a constant and often seamless stream of imagery.

#### Role of visual communication in consumer brand relationships

Marketplace institutions and culture are saturate with visual brand imagery (Schroeder, 2004, 2008b). Consumers are both viewers and producers of brand images. However, visual media literacy (i.e. "the ability to access, analyse, evaluate, and communicate messages in a variety of forms"; Aufderheide, 1993, p. 6) is crucial for participating in this process and contributing to the marketplace (Chen and Wu, 2010). Both consumers and marketers need to be able to access the images made by others and engage with them in some way (e.g. make a judgement

about liking or not liking them). They also need to be able to use the technology, such as the smartphone, to produce interesting images of their own. This process often involves taking several photographs, evaluating them to select the best, and then editing them to improve their likelihood of making an impact on the viewers (e.g. receive a large number of likes on Facebook). The selfie assemblage, with its own expressive codes, is a mainstream cultural activity demanding high levels of visual media literacy. Selfies are photographs of the self in social media; therefore, they require both photography literacy and social media literacy.

Corporate communication often relies on visual images to convey information about the company and its products and services. Most of these images include pictures of people, such as models, celebrity endorsers, spokespeople, consumers, managers, and employees (Schroeder, 2012). Notable about the images is that unlike with verbal statements, it is difficult to detect whether they are true or false. Even when consumers know that the image is part of a company-created marketing campaign, it can still have persuasive power and influence their perceptions (Schroeder, 2008b). The reason for this is that images can establish recognition by association with consumers' own experiences (Schroeder, 2008b). Sometimes brand visual imagery connects with the desirable self enacted in the virtual space. The images can become incorporated as consumers' experiences in which the real-world and virtual-world imagery merge.

The apparent realism of photography is part of its persuasive power. Therefore, many companies have adopted snapshot-like aesthetics with high authenticity and staged spontaneity. Snapshot-like images differ from traditional advertisements in that they appear less formal and casual and resemble an un-staged real-life situation (Schroeder, 2008a). Breaking technical rules of good photography and allowing the photograph to be out of focus, off lighting, or poorly framed add authenticity, which helps companies connect with consumers (Schroeder, 2012). Snapshot-like ads try to appropriate the cultural codes of brand selfies and blur the line between company-created marketing communication and consumer-to-consumer cultural production and consumption of visual imagery (Schroeder, 2008a).

### Brand selfie as an assemblage

An assemblage consists of a combination of heterogeneous elements, specifically material bodies and objects (referred to as 'content') and statements and acts (referred to as 'expression'). Such arrangements of heterogeneous elements are a productive (or machinic) entity (Parr, 2010) and have the capacity to act in different ways depending on their

configurations (Palmas, 2007). The result of an assemblage can be a new expression that produces a new reality, by making numerous, often unexpected connections (Parr, 2010).

A selfie is an assemblage featuring “the corporeal self, understood in relation to the surrounding physical space, filtered through the digital device, and destined for social networks” (Hess, 2015, p. 1629). Following this logic, we theorise a brand selfie as an assemblage that comprises content or material elements, specifically the person, the brand (the product or the logo), the surroundings in which the selfie is taken, and the technologies of distribution that allow the selfie to be shared. As a collective mainstream Web 2.0–enabled phenomenon, the selfie further contributes to the understanding of brands as social assemblages (Parmentier and Fisher, 2015). Brands include not only components under the direct or indirect control of marketers; audiences also actively participate in the brand assemblage by publishing brand selfies.

Understanding brand selfies as an assemblage allows us to explore the dynamics of brand meanings, which the brand selfie is capable of producing. An assemblage “provides its component parts with constraints and resources, placing limitations on what they can do while enabling novel performances” (DeLanda, 2006, p. 34); thus, brand selfies are “casual agents acting back on the material out of which they are formed” (DeLanda, 2006, p. 34). For example, consumers use brands as material brand selfie’s components to express something about themselves and, in this way, express something about the brands, which in turn affects the brand meanings.

The concepts of territorialisation and de-territorialisation (DeLanda, 2006) help explore the stabilising/consolidating and destabilising/dissolving (respectively) processes of the brand selfie as an assemblage. Territorialisation is the process that defines or sharpens the spatial boundaries of material territory of the brand (i.e. the brand community mediated by technology). In this sense, territorialisation pertains to the “content” component of the assemblage (Palmas, 2007). It also refers to the symbolic, expressive space of relationships among brands, people, and technology. Conversely, de-territorialisation involves the extension or blurring of the material boundaries when the combination of heterogeneous elements destabilises the symbolic identity of the assemblage.

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and DeLanda (2006) propose a new materialist ontology that explains the identity of entities through the existence of immanent processes that follow patterns of self-organisation (relationships), giving rise to structure (Palmas, 2007). Specifically, assemblages are characterised by relationships of exteriority, which have three key features. First, each component part of an assemblage can be detached from it and

plugged into a different assemblage in which interactions are different (DeLanda, 2006). In the case of the brand selfie, this can be the brand, the logo, the person, and so on, which exist outside the phenomenon of selfies and can be part of more than one selfie. Second, the properties of the component parts can never explain the relationships that constitute the whole (DeLanda, 2006). The unit of analysis is the brand selfie assemblage, not its components' properties. Therefore, for example, the meaning of the brand in the brand selfie cannot explain the whole brand selfie. Third, and crucially, is the notion of the space of possibilities. The properties of the assemblage are not the result of an aggregation of the components' own properties but of the actual exercise of their capacities (DeLanda, 2006). The capacities of the parts depend on the properties of the parts but cannot be reduced to them; they emerge from their relationship to the other interacting parts of the assemblage. Each assemblage is a specific configuration of components, which gives rise to the properties of the assemblage. A formal study of brand selfie assemblages means understanding the compositional variations and the "degrees of freedom" that the brand selfie permits. In summary, our analytical focus is on conducting a formal study of brand selfies' possibility spaces by providing a typology of brand selfies and illustrating the dynamics realised in the brand selfie assemblages.

## **Methodology**

### Data collection

We conducted a search on different social media platforms (e.g. Instagram, blogs, Tumblr, Pinterest, Facebook) to collect brand selfies in the period January–May 2015. We used the search engines Webstagram and Google and search phrases such as "brand selfie", "my (name of the brand)", "me and (name of the brand)", and "selfie campaign". In the sampling, we applied three criteria for classifying a photograph as a brand selfie: (1) a photograph that one has taken of oneself with a smartphone, webcam, or a camera with self-timer; (2) a brand shown in the photograph as either a physical product or a logo; and (3) a photograph uploaded to a social media website. To limit data collection, we screened the sampled selfies and selected those involving leading brands with powerful identities. This resulted in approximately 250 brand selfies. It is important to note that many selfies do not prominently feature a person's face. For example, shoe selfies often show only legs, or clothes selfies show only the body. Therefore, we decided to select photographs showing any body part, not only a face. A secret board on the Pinterest platform (only visible to the owner and the people he or she invites) became a shared selfie bank for us. A board on Pinterest is a visual

bookmarking tool that allows collecting, organising, and storing online-published images and links to their location (i.e. web address).

### Visual analysis

The analytical framework is consistent with the assemblage theory framing of the brand selfie phenomenon. We approach brand selfies as rich visual texts (Gleeson, 2011). In the brand selfie, material components assemble in a specific configuration (i.e. the photograph). These components bear symbolic meanings and can deliver new meanings by forming relationships with each other (Parr, 2010). In an effort to expose these relationships and explain the dynamics brand selfies are capable of generating, we apply principles of photographic composition, semiotics, and thematic analysis. Our approach to visual analysis comprises four key steps: descriptive analysis, response analysis, formal analysis, and polytextual thematic analysis. The author team followed the steps systematically and repeated the analysis in multiple iterations, to sharpen the analytical insights. We retained the most informative exemplars of the different brand selfie themes to use in the analysis section. Although we base our theory development on the entire data set of 250 brand selfies, we use only a representative subset in our data presentation.

#### Step 1. Descriptive analysis

The first step in the process is to objectively describe the photograph. The purpose of the description is to report “what you see”, without making any inferences about the meaning of the photograph. The process can start from anywhere in the photo, and it begins with a brainstorming of words (e.g. nouns, verbs, adjectives) describing the content. Then, the researcher uses these words to write descriptions of what he or she sees in the photograph. This first stage allows identification of different types of brand selfie assemblages based on the description of the visual content (or material elements) in the photo. Then, the selfies are compared using the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1968). The first author perused all the selfies and created initial coding categories reflecting the consistency that emerged for different brand selfie assemblages. The exemplar selfies were selected from each category for further visual analysis. The second author repeated the procedure, paying careful attention to the selfies the first author identified as exemplary. The third author, who was not involved in the initial data analysis, assessed the inter-rater reliability of the coding, categorisations, and conceptual validity of the categories.

### Step 2. Emotive response analysis

The aim of this stage is to explore emotions evoked by a brand selfie. In a collaborative process similar to what is described in step 1, all three authors compared initial emotions evoked by the selfies. In this way, the research identifies variation in terms of selfie content as well as the capacity of the selfie to provoke different emotions. Different people are likely to react in different ways to an image, but the responses were relatively similar across the authors. More complex selfies evoked “mixed feelings”, so we coded them as such. For example, the brand selfie of the woman and the Chanel bag in selfie 13 appeared to be somewhat complex. It was “sweet” and “funny” but also gave a feeling of “uneasiness”. In contrast, selfie 26 for the same brand (a woman kissing a Chanel perfume) did not evoke contradictory feelings. It evoked “love” and “passion” and had an “energetic” feel to it.

### Step 3. Formal analysis

In the third stage, we applied principles of photographic composition to explain how the visual content or material elements and their arrangement deliver the image meaning (Ang, 2006). Visual content refers to ‘objects’, but more specifically to their shapes, lines, colours, and space occupied or between objects included in the selfies and how these objects are arranged in the frame of the selfie. Objects can be persons, things, natural, or geometric. The inclusion within the frame of the selfie of different material elements brings them into relation to each other. Specific arrangements of the elements determine different types of relationships (e.g. relationships of emphasis, dominance, or subordination). According to the rule of thirds, an image can be divided into nine equal parts by two equally spaced horizontal lines and two equally spaced vertical lines; the salient compositional elements in the photograph distribute along these lines and intersections (Peterson, 2003). The brand in selfies 10, 13, and 27 is placed in the bottom-left intersections of these imaginary lines and therefore “stands out in the image”. A narrow depth of field is another technique to deliver emphasis; for example, in selfie 9, the tulips and the Starbucks cup are placed on the top-left intersection (rule of thirds) and further stand out because they are in focus against the blurred background. The formal analysis enables us to apply the principle of relationality from semiotics, whereby we unpack how visual elements assemble into particular kinds of messages (Goodings and Brown, 2011). It is important to state that these principles apply to any image, independent of the level of expertise of the photographer. An expert photographer, due to his or her higher level of media literacy (Meyrowitz, 1998), may exercise more control over these elements, but the principles apply to any photograph. Formal analysis helps explain why brand selfies, which include

similar visual elements, may evoke a different response. We therefore looked at the various selfies several times and carefully described the features of the photographs. Then, we compared the selfies according to their assemblage of elements.

#### Step 4. Polytextual thematic analysis in the consumer cultural space

We use Gleeson's (2011) polytextual thematic visual analysis to elevate our analysis at the contextual and consumer cultural level. This type of analysis is polytextual because it assumes that all texts (including visual texts, such as brand selfies) are based on one another, and each can only be read by reference to others (Gleeson, 2011). Therefore, the selfies we analysed here can only be read by concurrently considering the meanings attached to all the elements, that is, the brands included in the selfies, the mobile technological reality in which the selfies are made, and the social media conversational space they occupy. Our analysis is also thematic because it attempts to identify repetitive features or themes in the data to discover underlying dimensions and patterns (Gleeson, 2011). In an iterative process we examined the selfies many times, making notes on how the brand experiences are depicted in them. This process led to the identification of themes and dimensions and continued until no further distinctive relevant theme emerged.

The analysis and iterations in the four analytical steps form the basis for theorizing and identifying underlying theoretical dimensions. Figure 1 summarises this analysis into a typology of brand selfie assemblages.

Insert Figure 1 about here

### **Findings**

In this study, we explore how brand selfie assemblages enhance our understanding of consumer brand experience and marketplace brand image dynamics. First, we provide a typology of brand selfie assemblages. Second, we illustrate the territorialising and de-territorialising processes of brand selfies on, respectively, two levels of analysis.

#### Typology of the brand selfie assemblages

We propose a typology of brand selfie assemblages based on two dimensions: (1) level of information density in the photograph and (2) level of staging by the photographer. We operationalise the first level by adopting a high/low context concept from intercultural communication literature (Hall, 1976). High context communication is indirect and implicit

and involves “more of the information in the physical context” (Hall, 1976, p. 79), while in low context communication “the mass of information is vested in the explicit code” (Hall, 1976, p. 79). Context in our case refers to the surroundings in the selfie photograph. The high context selfie surroundings involve many elements, while the low context selfie surroundings have few elements; they are simple and explicit. We operationalise the second level by using the concept of “staged photography”, which refers to the degree to which the photos “are preconceived by the artist” (Wells, 2009) or the degree of staging that takes place in the image. In low levels of staging, only staging of the subject occurs (i.e. self-staging of the photographer in front of the camera). High staging involves more extensive levels of conceptual engineering, including staging of the object by constructing or arranging an object or situation for the purpose of the photograph and staging the picture itself by transposing the camera output into a meta-structure, either photographic (e.g. montage of multiple photos) or multi-media (e.g. collage) (Müller-Pohle, 1993). Figure 2 shows a sample of brand selfie assemblages distributed along the two dimensions. We created a public Pinterest board containing several of the brand selfies that we use in the analysis (see <https://uk.pinterest.com/purpleredsky/examples-of-brand-selfies-ejm/>).

The dimensions create a matrix with four variations of brand selfie assemblages: simplistic, framed, revelatory, and constructed assemblages. We sampled one exemplar selfie from each type of selfie assemblage in Table I. Simplistic brand selfie assemblages correspond to brand selfies in the most basic form; they are low context and low staging, showing the person and the brand but little else. Framed brand selfie assemblages are low context and high staging. They are relatively simple selfies, with little or no content apart from the individual and the brand; the surroundings are however intentionally included and become a key part of these selfies. For example, in selfie 11, the person stands in front of the sports car to document the encounter, and nothing else is visible in the selfie. Revelatory brand selfie assemblages are high context and low staging. They are selfies with rich details in the surroundings (e.g. a messy kitchen in selfie 7; the interior of a bedroom in selfies 14 and 15), which are incidentally included in the selfie and happen to fall within the camera frame. Finally, constructed brand selfie assemblages are high context and high staging. They are similar to revelatory selfies in terms of the richness of information, but they represent more sophisticated photographic efforts. The elements in the photo are props used to construct a visual storyline, with the brand and the self as protagonists. For example, in selfie 10, Dunkin’ Donuts brand shown on the cup becomes a companion during a nice spring day. Sometimes the self and the brand story are exposed by multiple brands or multiple images. Selfies 20, 21,

and 22 create a story that combines different brands (e.g. Starbucks and Luis Vuitton), while Selfies 23, 24, and 25 include several brands and several images that are purposefully brought together into a selfie.

Insert Figure 2 and Table I about here

### Brand selfie assemblages: consumer brand experience in hybrid spaces

In this section, we analyse how different types of brand selfie assemblages reflect new features of consumers' brand experience and consumer brand relationships in hybrid spaces. Brand selfies are a way to preserve and extend a consumer brand experience (Belk et al., 1989) as the experience's physical context transfers into hybrid spaces in which physical and virtual are no longer perceived as separate entities (de Souza e Silva, 2006). For example, when on holiday, a consumer can communicate about a brand with someone back home (Gordon and de Souza e Silva, 2012). When consumers capture the brand as part of their selfies, they extend the brand physical territory from the marketing-controlled physical space to the consumer-defined social network. However, this is a simplistic view of the selfie's role in the material territory of the brand. The suggested typology of brand selfie assemblages allows us to provide a deeper understanding of this process and systematically analyse brand experiences in hybrid spaces.

Simplistic brand selfie assemblages usually include only the person with the brand and little or no other detail. They document the consumer relationship with a brand (Fournier, 1998) but also often demonstrate the intensity and quality of this relationship. A consumer purposefully holds a product next to his or her face to emphasise a consumer-brand connection, and the face expression highlights a relationship with the brand—for example, an ironic smile (selfie 3), a kiss (selfie 12), or a sinful/addictive expression (selfie 2). The deliberate effort in selfie poses discussed in Murray (2015) is especially evident in the simplistic brand selfies that project an emotion about the brand into the networked space. The person in selfie 12 expresses love to the brand by kissing the mini Nutella; with eyes wide open and a dirty mouth, the person in selfie 2 boasts gluttony and love for the brand; and the quirky smile in selfie 3 suggests a playful brand moment. Brands in these cases act as active relationship partners (Fournier, 1998), and brand selfies document the relationships in the same way as a family photo documents person-to-person relationships. The brand selfie becomes a way to converse with someone else about the feelings evoked by the brand (Cova and Pace, 2006) and, in this way, to externalize inner brand experiences. Moreover, the

consumer brand experience becomes de-territorialised by extending into the hybrid space and taking on a ‘different kind’ of materiality in the form of digital images online (van Doorn, 2011). This expands the consumer brand experience in space and time (Sloop and Gunn, 2010) and therefore adds new dimensions to this experience. In this way, the selfie acts as both a communicative tool (Franco, 2013) and a brand experiencing tool.

Framed brand selfie assemblages are also characterised by relative simplicity; however, the surroundings are an important and intentional part of this selfie. For example, in brand selfie 11, the encounter with a sports car motivates the consumer to take a selfie. The photo works as a surrogate for possessing such a car (Sontag, 1977). However, such a selfie is qualitatively different from mere digital association with the brand (Schau and Gilly, 2003) as it depicts a real-life consumer experience being physically close to the car in some capacity. The sports car becomes a part of the consumer’s extended digital self (Belk, 2013). Such dematerialisation of the extended self allows consumers to “cyber-consume” status products (Arsel and Zhao, 2013) by including them in their brand selfie narratives. Thus, being a digital image online and a material experience at the same time, the brand selfie represents a hybrid space phenomenon that allows consumers to go beyond their material and geographical constraints (Arsel and Zhao, 2013).

The distinctive feature of revelatory brand selfie assemblages is that they often reveal private physical contexts to the networked audience in the virtual space. When consumers take advantage of the linking value of brands (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001) and speak to the Duck and Cover brand community (selfies 7 and 15), the Nike community (selfie 14), or the Chanel community (selfie 13), the material surroundings of their living room (selfie 13) or bedroom (selfie 14) are “brought along” with them. They disclose cues to their private lives more or less incidentally in the effort to document the consumer brand relationship, and complete strangers can get a peek into their private homes and intimate settings, leading to “publicized privacy” (Sloop and Gunn, 2010). These selfies let viewers see the person’s unseen life and the small details that carry extra or “third” meanings (Barthes, 1970). This insight creates a story around consumer brand experience, making this experience a part of the consumer’s life narrative.

Constructed brand selfie assemblages are deliberate and information-dense portraits of consumer brand relationships. Their background locates the brand in a personal story—a day out in the park (selfies 4 and 8), a shopping trip (selfie 6), and a beautiful spring day (selfie 10). By publishing brand selfies, consumers capture a personal moment and share it with people who are not physically present (Hess, 2015). For example, the Dunkin’ Donut cup is

the focus of selfie 10, with the consumer playing a supporting role, represented by showing the hand wearing an identifying ring. The composition locates the event in a spring day by enclosing the image in a “bouquet” of white flowers. Moreover, by capturing the building and the reflection of a car on the street, it expresses movement and everyday routine. That is, by capturing something that is commonplace and easily overlooked, this brand selfie adds value to the consumer experience (Murray, 2015). The brand in the selfie facilitates the articulation of a story to the online audience. It becomes a companion (Fournier, 1998) or co-protagonist of real-life experiences. The consumer’s own real-life experiences seem more worthy to tell because they include a well-known brand. This creative and deliberate effort is also evident in selfies 23, 24, and 25, in which consumers build a collage to create new expressions (Parr, 2010). Multi-image selfies are not limited to one image or one frame but allow for more complex articulations of stories. Selfie 25 summarises a week in pictures, including packages received, a dog, a wasp on the wall, Coke Zero, and snapping on the go (from the text accompanying the selfie). Selfies 19, 20, 21, and 22 express multiplicity of meanings by including different brands within the frame of one selfie. The consumers tell their story through a combination of multiple well-known brands. For example, in selfie 20, a man identifies himself as the ‘perfect southern gentlemen’ (text accompanying the selfie) by combining Polo, Ray-Ban, and Croakie brands with a bow tie. Thus, the constructed brand selfie assemblages articulate a story consistently and clearly through carefully composed combinations of meaningful visual elements including brands.

In summary, brand selfie practice changes consumer brand experience in three ways. First, brand selfies extend the brand experience in space and time and transfer it into the hybrid space of the consumer-defined social networks. In these networks, consumers use brand selfies to document their relationships with brands and communicate their feelings about brands. The brand in the selfie becomes a part of the consumers’ stories communicated to the online audience; it adds meaning to the stories, making them worthy to tell. Second, brand selfies often unintentionally expose consumers’ private homes and intimate details and, in this way, make consumer brand experience a part of the consumer’s life narrative. Third, brand selfies allow consumers to go beyond their material constraints and include status products into their narratives by just taking a photo next to them.

Brand selfie assemblages: marketplace brand image

By publishing brand selfies, a critical mass of empowered “ordinary consumers” contributes to marketplace conversations (Kozinets et al., 2008). All types of brand selfie assemblages

have the potential to territorialise or de-territorialise marketer-constructed brand image by either confirming and reinforcing the existing brand meanings or extending and changing them (DeLanda, 2006). However, brand selfie assemblages vary in the capacities exercised in doing so. In this section, we first compare two brand selfie assemblages of the same type (revelatory) to illustrate how similar selfies can either territorialise or de-territorialise the brand; second, we highlight the expressive components of each type of brand selfie assemblages to illustrate their territorialising and de-territorialising potential.

Insert Table II about here

The brand selfies in Table II, the “Duck and Cover man” and the “Chanel girl”, represent assemblages of three expressive components: the commercial iconic brand, the consumer identity brand, and the physical space they occupy. Each of these components bears social meanings, and the degree to which these meanings converge or contradict each other contributes to the territorialising processes of the brand selfie assemblage. These selfies are revelatory, as they have a relatively high context (a lot of information in the surroundings) and a relatively low level of staging. Both subjects are posing, but the surroundings do not appear manipulated or arranged in any deliberate manner. At first, the two selfies appear similar, as they both are photographs of a consumer with branded products in an everyday context. A deeper look reveals different relationships between the elements in these visual texts. The first example is largely void of contradictions or tensions; the Duck and Cover man appears strong and unaffected by the messy surroundings. He is holding his phone (on charger) and has an expression suggesting “I am ready”. His sleeves are rolled up, and his tattoos are on display. It is a complex but honest image, and little surprises the viewer in this selfie. The Duck and Cover brand itself stands for honesty as expressed on its website: “We need something solid in these transparent times. In a circus of reality TV fakery, identikit politicians and hollow hipsters. The only antidote is honesty.... We deal with the business of the real.” (<https://www.duckandcover.co.uk/our-story/>). All the selfie elements—the man, the brand, and the messy kitchen—confirm, stabilise, and territorialise both the Duck and Cover brand and the consumer identity brand. This type of brand selfie illustrates how consumers use commercial brand images to construct “spaceless” consumer identities (Belk, 2013) and, in doing so, how they confirm and reinforce existing brand image. The dynamics in the Chanel girl selfie is rather different. This selfie is a complex and heterogeneous mixture of material components. The private space captured in the photograph contains material

elements revealing the subject's identity (e.g. the mundane setting of her home, children toys in the corner reveal her identity as a mother). Although she also positions herself next to an iconic brand, she is a more complex character in this assemblage. By smiling playfully into the camera, the girl engages with the viewer in a voyeuristic experience, which grounds the Chanel brand in her everyday reality. The Chanel brand becomes de-territorialised by breaking down its social border of exclusivity and high class. At the same time, the consumer identity brand is territorialised by the aspiration to escape low-class cultural capital and connect with the aggregate Chanel consumer cult (Belk and Tumbat, 2005). The brand serves as a visual megaphone for this aspiration (McQuarrie et al., 2013). Although this selfie is hardly controversial, it reveals the capacity of brand selfies to produce a deep clash of symbolic spaces (Epp and Velagaleti, 2014).

Similar territorialising and de-territorialising processes exist to varying degrees in all the selfie types. However, the expressive components involved and their territorializing capacities may differ. Being scarce on details, simplistic selfies have fairly explicit and uncomplicated capacities to territorialise or de-territorialise the brand. For example, by expressing love or appreciation (e.g. kissing the mini Nutella in selfie 12), consumers show their acceptance of existing brand meanings and, in this way, territorialise the brand. Selfie 2, in contrast, shows gluttony and hints at addiction, which differs from the marketer-created image of the Nutella brand as a wholesome family brand (<http://www.nutella.com/en/uk/values>).

Framed brand selfie assemblages are also low in context, but their territorialising processes slightly differ. These brand selfies mainly document the encounter with the brand and therefore are similar to selfies taken with celebrities (Hooton, 2014). They function in the same way as "autographs" did in the pre-selfie era. In selfie 5, a group of tourists wearing Mickey Mouse ears jumps in front of a castle at Disneyland. In selfie 11, a young man poses in front of a sports car. Despite their similarities, these selfies territorialise the brand in different ways. Selfie 5 acts as a testament of having fun in Disneyland and therefore territorialises the Disney brand, while selfie 11 clearly establishes the territory of the brand by exclusion: the young man is not the owner of the car, and thus the brand territory is unchanged by this selfie.

Constructed brand selfie assemblages are the most sophisticated selfies with large potential to territorialise or de-territorialise the brand. They are highly staged and high context selfies and therefore display a substantial level of visual media literacy. For example, selfie 30 combines an unhappy expression with snow and the Jeep. The accompanying text helps

interpret the meaning: “Old man winter is back 😊 so the top is back up!...”. This selfie is a visual diary of brand ownership and is consistent with the brand values of “freedom, passion, authenticity and adventure” (<http://www.jeep.co.uk/life/#jeep-history>). Thus, it territorialises Jeep’s brand image. Both “Redbull at the picnic” (selfie 27) and “Dunking Dounughts on a spring day” (selfie 10) display similar territorialising processes because they confirm the existing brand image. In contrast, selfies 19, 20, 21, and 22 and multi-image selfies 23, 24, and 25 display de-territorialising processes by combining several brands in an event of symbolic bricolage (Lévi-Strauss, 1967). For example, in selfie 21, Starbucks is associated with Lorde’s music on a road trip (text accompanying the selfie) hinting at the addictive nature of Starbucks coffee. A coherent visual story lies at the centre of the constructed brand selfie assemblage, and brands become connected with one another in a visual storytelling process. By appropriating the brands and vernacularizing them into selfie stories, consumers re-combine brands’ expressive components in numerous assemblages and express new brand meanings. In this sense, constructed brand selfies are capable of expanding the symbolic brand territory.

Thus, the brand selfie both uses and reconfigures brand myths and meanings in processes of sacralising everyday life experiences (Belk, 1988). Brand selfies act as visualisations of consumers’ feelings and thoughts about brands; they are also visual documentations of the secret life of brands in which brands serve as co-protagonists of consumers’ visual statements shared in social media.

## **Discussion**

Mobile devices integrate with everyday life activities to create a hybrid space, and brand selfies are a way to preserve and extend consumer brand experiences into this space. A selfie is an assemblage of material elements, specifically the person, the brand (the product or the logo), the surroundings in which the selfie is taken, and the technologies of distribution that allow the selfie to be shared. Our findings illuminate how different types of brand selfies influence consumer brand experiences and relationships, which is an important contribution to the branding literature. Brand selfies deliver a qualitatively different way to engage with brands. In hybrid spaces, consumers in the selfies become a kind of “avatar” of themselves (Belk, 2013), and their brand experiences also become “avatars”. The selfie photograph does not just play a memorial role (Colman, 2010)—that is, it is not just a surrogate for possession (Sontag, 1977) or a way to preserve the sacred (Belk et al., 1989) although framed brand selfies can serve this function; rather, it is a new kind of brand experience extended in space

and time. For example, revelatory brand selfies extend the brand experience territory by revealing private physical contexts, while constructed brand selfies add a new element to the brand experience through a collage making activity (e.g. by combining different objects within the same frame or combining multiple photos taken at different times). Selfies also document consumers' relationships with brands, for example, feelings about the brand are externalised through the selfie as in the case of simplistic brand selfies. By building on the extensive literature on consumer brand relationships (Fournier, 1998; McInnis et al., 2014; Fetscherin and Heinrich, 2015), we show that brands can be companions of real-life experiences and facilitate the articulation of those experiences into the virtual space by brand selfie practice. Brands in brand selfies act as visual megaphones (McQuarrie et al., 2013) and provide the link between the individual's brand experience and the community of brand fans (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). Moreover, the brands add new meaning to consumers' personal stories and enrich their life narratives.

The study also shows that brand selfies have the potential to contribute to marketplace conversations and shape the marketplace brand image. As our findings reveal, brand selfie assemblages possess capacities to territorialise or de-territorialise the marketer-constructed image (DeLanda, 2006). Some brand selfies confirm and reinforce the brand meanings by providing a coherent and unproblematic interpretation of the brands, while others destabilise brands' meanings by delivering heterogeneous elements and symbolic clashes. Territorialising and de-territorialising processes exist in varying degrees in all selfie types. However, the expressive components involved may differ. For example, the Chanel girl selfie (selfie 13) de-territorialises the Chanel brand into a mundane private space, breaking down the exclusivity and high-class associations created by Chanel's corporate communication. In this way, we emphasise the significant role of consumers' visual communications in the construction and deconstruction of brand meanings and expand the literature on visual communication (Schroeder, 2002, 2004).

Furthermore, this study proposes a new typology of brand selfies based on two dimensions: level of information density in the photograph and level of staging. The emerging typology of brand selfie assemblages includes simplistic, framed, revelatory, and constructed selfies. These brand selfie assemblages have different capacities depending on their configuration and therefore produce different effects both at the level of consumer brand experience and at the level of marketplace brand image as mentioned above. The suggested typology represents an important theoretical contribution to understanding the brand selfie phenomenon and provides a background for further research on this topic.

Finally, we develop a method of visual analysis based on the principles of photographic composition (Ang, 2006) and polytextual thematic analysis (Gleeson, 2011). Previous research discusses the nature of images (e.g. Rose, 2012); however, the current study contributes by providing a practical guideline on how to read these types of visual texts. By describing each step in detail, we establish the rigour of our analysis and give future visual studies the opportunity to adopt a similar approach.

## Conclusion

New mobile technologies are changing consumers' way of life. This makes the results of the current study of great interest to brand managers. It is important to understand that consumers consume and co-produce brands and brand meanings in hybrid spaces, which means that the "territory" in which companies should promote their branding has changed. This study discusses how this development has influenced consumer brand experiences and consumer brand relationships. Brand marketing strategies need to understand and incorporate the impact of new consumer roles and consumer-controlled technology in visual communication and construction of brand meanings. Consumers empowered by digital technology are no longer passive recipients of corporate communication, but active participants and co-creators of marketplace conversations.

This study has limitations but also opens up avenues for further research. We focus on brand selfies involving mainstream leading brands with well-established marketplace images. The question is whether lesser known brands carry enough expressive capacity to produce marketplace conversations and contribute to territorialising and de-territorialising processes. Future studies could also examine selfies with niche brands in the subcultures of consumption (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). Niche brands possess strong symbolic values recognised and shared by a small group of highly dedicated and engaged consumers. Are the same processes at play in niche brand selfies, or do they primarily focus on drawing the boundaries of the sub-culture territory?

Moreover, we wonder how the selfie phenomenon will evolve in the future. We believe that brand selfies will continue to exist; however, their visual format may change. Consumers can use the brand in many different visual contexts. For example, young people are increasingly using vines (i.e. six-second-long video clips) and sharing them online. These new formats of visual communication may have different kinds of functionality and dynamics. Further research is necessary in this direction.

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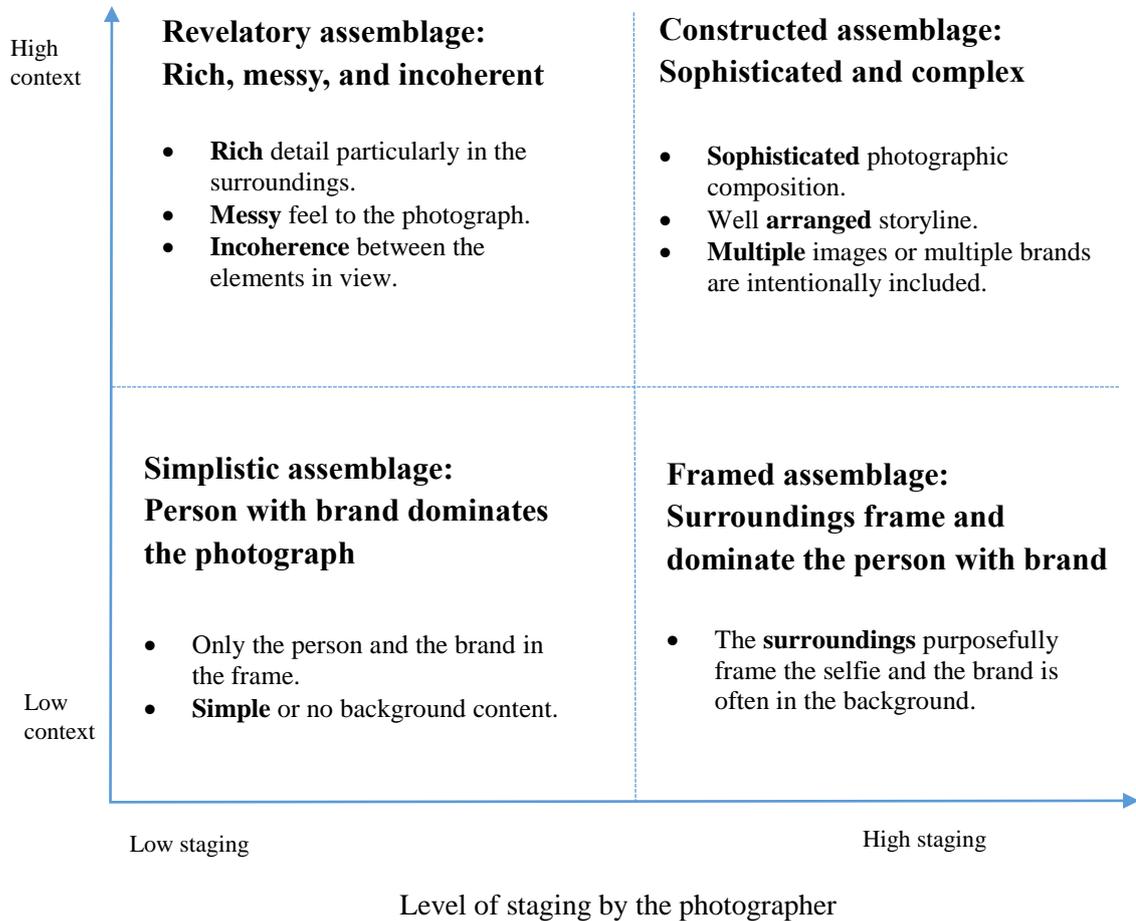
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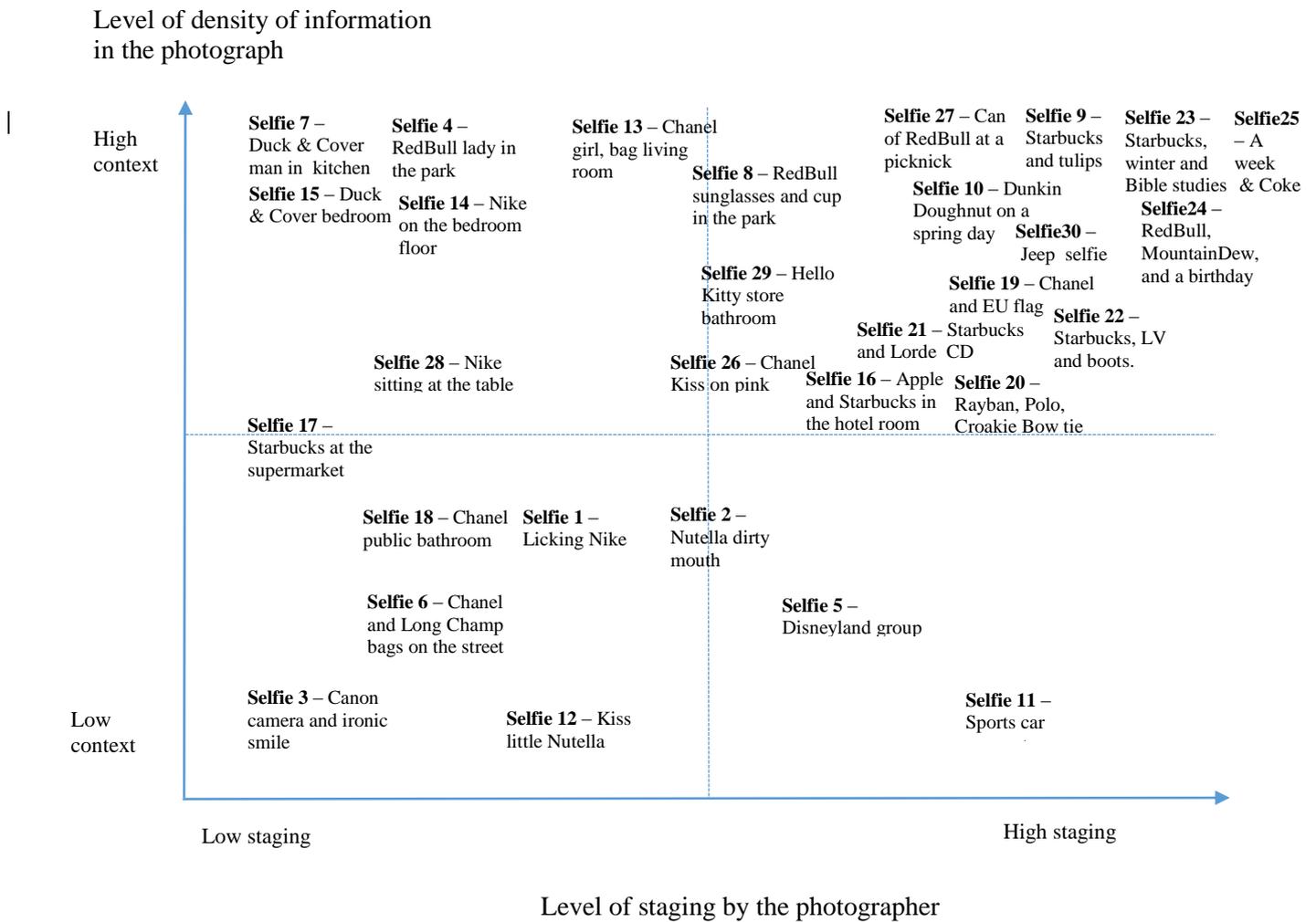
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**Figure 1.** Types of brand selfie assemblages

Level of density of information  
in the photograph



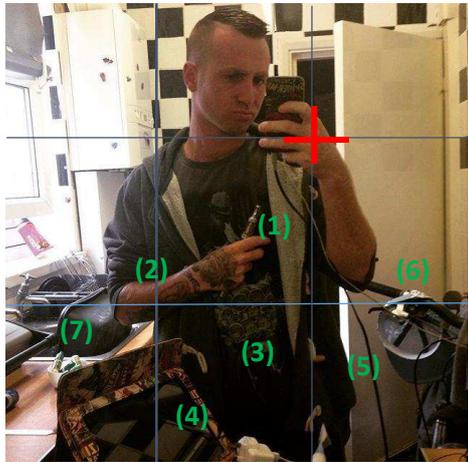
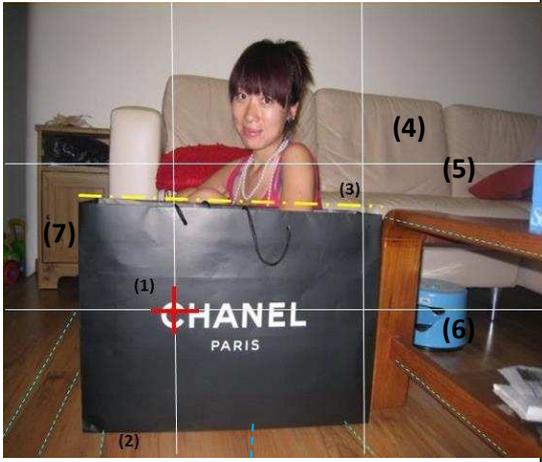
**Figure 2.** Illustration of the distribution of brand selfies along the typology dimensions



**Table I.** Exemplars of each type of brand selfie assemblage

<p>Revelatory – selfie 7 (high context, low staging)</p>  A man with short hair and a beard is taking a selfie in a kitchen. He is wearing a dark jacket over a t-shirt and has a microphone clipped to his shirt. The background shows kitchen cabinets and a window.	<p>Constructed– selfie 24 (high context, high staging)</p>  A collage of four images. Top left: A Red Bull Esports League banner. Top right: A man wearing a Red Bull cap. Bottom left: A Red Bull can. Bottom right: A Red Bull 'The Blue Edition' can.
<p>Simplistic – selfie 3 (low context, low staging)</p>  A man with long hair and a beard is holding a camera in a selfie. He is wearing a plaid shirt and a camera strap with 'EOS DIGITAL' written on it.	<p>Framed – selfie 5 (low context, high staging)</p>  A group of people, including a woman in a white dress and a man in a black suit, are posing in front of a large, ornate castle with multiple spires and towers.

**Table II.** Expressive components of the revelatory brand selfie assemblage

	<p align="center"><b><u>Selfie 7 - The Duck and Cover man</u></b></p> 	<p align="center"><b><u>Selfie 13 - The Chanel girl</u></b></p> 
<p>The numbers applied to the photographs refer to specific visual elements.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expressive codes</li> <li>• Relationships between components</li> </ul>	<p>The man dominates this image. The viewer is drawn in to follow his gaze into the phone, which displays the image so it is an invitation to make sense of it. This is a busy image, with many objects and lines, but with relatively simple colours. The black and white tiles make a binary statement in the background and frame the individual expression. The man is posing, but to himself. The messiness of the image makes the viewer curious about what it is meant to convey; is it the state of things? The more the viewer looks at the image, the more he or she notices details about this person's everyday life: the vape kit (1), the tattoos on the arm (2), and the drawing on the T-shirt (3); at the front, there is a tablet (4) and a phone being charged (5). In the background, there is also a bicycle with a baseball cap (6) and a</p>	<p>The bag of Chanel, with its striking white logo in the focal point (rule of thirds, (1) stands out, and behind the bag a woman smiles and looks into the camera. The leading lines of the table and flooring all point to the central subject (2), and drive the viewer's gaze to the brand logo. The girl is sitting on the floor, placing the Chanel bag in front of her like a personal poster or visual megaphone. The bag marks a large horizontal line (3) that, by contrast with the other leading lines, stops the viewer's gaze. The girl is almost inside the bag. The bag is also a dress, which she accessorizes with a pearl necklace and a humble smile – a staged show of the perfect Chanel girl image assemblage. Her gaze is flirtatious as if she is interacting with an audience. Behind the Chanel bag and her, there are cues to her ordinary life: a beige</p>

	sink full of things (7). This selfie comes across as a matter of fact.	sofa (4), untidy red pillows (5), a blue stool (6), and a toy in the top left corner (7).
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