When Selfie Culture Meets Commercial Stock Photography: Who is the "Self" in Stock Photography Selfies?

The selfie has become prominent as a key vernacular photographic genre, with millions of people taking and sharing selfies every day worldwide. What happens, however, when commercial photography mimics or appropriates this extraordinarily popular everyday genre: when professional photographers and paid models create 'selfies' designed to be sold by stock photography companies like Getty Images, Shutterstock and others? How do these commercial 'selfies' compare visually to the selfies posted by ordinary users to social media? Do they articulate idealized or generalized versions of what a selfie should look like? And, given that selfies are performances of self-representation, what kinds of 'self' are constructed by these commercial images?
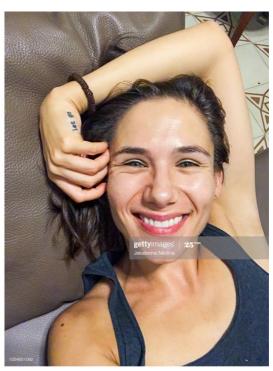
This study investigates stock photography selfies to understand the relations between amateur and professional practices in a period in which vernacular photography has expanded massively thanks to smartphones and social media. Selfies produced by three main international stock companies' outlets were collected over the course of one year (April 2020–April 2021): Getty images, the world's largest stock agency, the successful 'microstock' website Shutterstock, and iStock (a microstock subsidiary of Getty images). These images were then compared with "top post" Instagram selfies from the same time period.

The analysis indicates that while stock selfies are produced by professional photographers, they deviate substantially from overtly professional visual conventions and tend to be more "technically challenged" than user-generated selfies. Poor lighting, fingers partially blocking

lenses, irregular cropping: these appear frequently in professionally produced stock selfies

(see Figure 1) but were notably absent from selfies posted onto Instagram.

Figure 1. a 'poor quality' stock selfies: Poor lighting, fingers partially blocking lenses,

irregular cropping

Stock companies were thus generating a 'poor quality' version of selfies that seems barely to exist on one of the most popular platforms for sharing everyday images. Second, stock selfies appear to be 'delayed' in comparison to user-generated selfies, trailing several years behind in fashions, gestures, and trends. Gestures such as the peace sign, sticking one's tongue out, making a "duck face", or winking, which might have been trendy in social media photography several years ago but have disappeared almost entirely from Instagram user-generated selfies, are still quite common in stock selfies (see figure 2).

Figure 2. 'delayed' stock selfies: the peace sign, sticking one's tongue out or "duck face"

I conclude that while stock selfies draw their meaning and legitimacy from user-generated selfies, their underlying significance is totally different. While the latter seek to reveal the personal (e.g., personal experience, personal emotions, personal life etc.), stock selfies represent a generic, *impersonal* selfie. Stock selfies are not, therefore, meant to imitate any contemporary selfie, but to construct a 'generic imaginary' of the selfie as a cultural form, producing a collective common perception of a what a selfie is.