

- 7 Writing Lab
- ▷ A common scene in hospitals today would be the new parent texting about a baby's birth. What is the significance of having the texter be the infant himself? What does this add to the cultural critique at work here?
 - ▷ Why do you think Stevens only shows the baby's hands? How would showing the baby's head, face, or body have changed the emphasis of the image?
 - ▷ Why include the nurse in the frame? What does she contribute to the cartoon?
 - ▷ **Write.** This cartoon makes an argument about one generation's interaction with technology and social media. Sketch either a single-panel or multiple-panel cartoon that provides an argument about an older generation's relationship to technology.

■ **Peggy Drexler, Ph.D.** is a research psychologist and assistant professor of psychology at Cornell University. She is author of two books about modern families and the children they produce. In this article, originally published as a blog post on Psychology Today in September 2013, Drexler reflects on why we take selfies and what they say about us.

What Your Selfies Say About You

Peggy Drexler

EARLIER THIS WEEK, a Texas mother of four, Kimberly Hall, made national headlines with her online manifesto to teenage girls prone to taking and posting self-portraits on social media. "Who are you trying to reach?" the mom asked. "What are you trying to say?" Girls who keep this sort of thing up, the mom went on to write, will be blocked in her household, because "Did you know that once a male sees you in a state of undress, he can't ever un-see it? You don't want the Hall boys to only think of you in this sexual way, do you? Neither do we."

Though her post is rife with sexism—the post runs beneath a photograph of her own three

boys shirtless on the beach and includes no mention of the responsibility of the viewer, or her sons, in how he/they respond to such images—Hall makes a valid point. Ever since smartphones came equipped with cameras that face not just outward but also backward at the user, the self-portrait—dubbed the "selfie"—has taken over social media, particularly Instagram. (It's popular on dating sites, as well.) Because of the selfie's close-up nature, it's far more intimate than, say, the portrait your sister took of you standing in front of the Grand Canyon. Many selfies carry sexual undertones, especially since the majority of selfies are, obviously, user-approved, and designed to leave

a positive impression or elicit a positive response. But it's not just technology that has driven the selfie—and it's not only teenage girls and singles using it to take control of how they present themselves to the world.

Sarabeth, a 40-year-old, married chief operating officer of a digital media company, routinely wove magazine-worthy photographs of herself lounging seductively on the beach, laughing by candlelight, and snuggling with her kids into her Instagram feed. They weren't all posed, though all were flawless, and served to project a certain image, that of money, power, and love of what, by all visual accounts, was her amazingly fun-filled life. "I don't put much thought into what I post other than if it's a nice photograph of a meaningful moment, I like to share it," she told me. "But no, if I look god-awful, that's not a photo that will see the light of day."

On the surface, the trend is sort of affirming, if undeniably self-absorbed: Women, whether rich and powerful like Sarabeth or otherwise, increasingly have a healthy image of themselves. That's a good thing. *Girls* creator Lena Dunham is a big fan of the selfie, both on social media and through her show—which shares with selfies a confessional quality. On TV, Dunham's character often appears naked or in various states of undress; in real life, her Instagram selfies aren't necessarily flattering by typical standards. They challenge the "Hollywood ideal" and that, too, is a good thing, especially when size 0 celebrities dominate so much of the modern day visual barrage. The more we see a range of body types, the better.

5 And yet selfies are also a manifestation of society's obsession with looks and its

ever-narcissistic embrace. There's a sense that selfie subjects feel as though they're starring in their own reality shows, with an inflated sense of self that allows them to believe their friends or followers are interested in seeing them lying in bed, lips pursed, in a real world headshot. It's like looking in the mirror all day long, and letting others see you do it. And that can have real and serious implications. Excessive narcissism, studies have found, can have adverse effects on marriage and relationships, parenting, and the workplace. One study found a link between excessive narcissism and violence.

What's more, a recent study out of the U.K. found that the selfie phenomenon may be damaging to real world relationships, concluding that both excessive photo sharing and sharing photos of a certain type—including self-portraits—makes people less likeable. The same study found that increased frequency of sharing self-portraits is related to a decrease in intimacy with others. For one thing, putting so much emphasis on your own looks can make others feel self-conscious about theirs in your presence. The pressure to be "camera-ready" can also heighten self-esteem issues and increase feelings of competition among friends.

The trick with selfies may be to look at why you're taking them—and what they do for you. Posting affirming selfies can be empowering. They can help readjust the industry standard of the beauty ideal. But they can also help reinforce the idea that what matters most in this world is how things, and people, look. For Sarabeth, the problem she noticed first, before she even noticed her increasing fixation with her own appearance and that of her family, was the fact

that she was so busy controlling her image that she'd often miss the moment in real life. Capturing something on camera took priority over reacting to something in person. "Documenting the experience took precedence over living it,"

she said. "And finally I realized, well, how can I expect others to pay attention to what's happening in my life when I can't even say the same for myself?"

REFLECT & WRITE

MyWritingLab

Many would consider "selfies" to be a frivolous or shallow topic for an essay. How does Drexler give it merit and traction as a persuasive argument? How does she establish her own authority, and what other authorities does she evoke to make her points convincing?

How does Drexler draw in the reader? Find at least two particular strategies that she uses in the article that are designed specifically to engage her audience.

Drexler's article focuses on one selfie-taker in particular, Sarabeth. Why do you think Drexler chooses Sarabeth as a focal point for her analysis? What does Sarabeth represent? What arguments about selfies does Sarabeth support, if she is considered a type of evidence or case study?

Write. Drexler concludes by stressing the importance of considering why you are taking selfies and what they do for you. How would you answer her question for yourself? Do you think your experiences with selfies are typical? Imagine that you are posting a comment to respond to Drexler's original post. How would you respond? Which parts of her argument do you agree with? Why? What other perspectives would you share on the topic of selfies and self-image? Write a one- or two-paragraph response in the style you would use in an online comment thread for a public audience.

The selfies on the next page, submitted by student readers of Envision, are representative of the "selfie phenomenon" written about by Drexler and others and resemble many of the types of photos that appear everyday on social media platforms. Each one offers a moment of self-representation and identity construction, carefully composed to make a particular argument about the person represented.

