"Does my sweater match these sprinkles?":
Selfie Studios and Brick-and-Mortar Experiences in the Digital Economy

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Abstract

Selfie studios and selfie museums are retail locations where customers pay to take pictures with multiple highly aestheticized backdrops, props, and set pieces. In the last year alone, over 200 such businesses have operated across the United States, ranging from swanky pop-ups in large cities to new storefronts in decaying suburban shopping malls. They are characterized by two production dynamics: that of the selfie studio owners and personnel who design the sets and maintain the space, and that of the customers who use the space to take photos and create content for social media. This thesis attends to each production dynamic while also considering the aesthetic and spatial composition of these spaces themselves, suggesting that selfie studios are part of a larger trend that I term *studiotization,* in which all sorts of physical spaces—commercial, public, and domestic—have been reconfigured to be more camera-ready and "Instagrammable" in the age of social media.

In this thesis, I draw on critical media industry studies scholarship and use mixed methods to take four different approaches to the selfie studio phenomenon and its overlapping production cultures. First, I trace a genealogy of selfie studios' historical antecedents by exploring similar enterprises that have focused on providing customers with an *experience* of photography and/or media production, including photo booths and in-mall recording studios. In the second chapter, I draw on interviews with selfie studio owners to examine these businesses' unique position at the intersection of brick-and-mortar retail and the digital economy. Next, I describe the selfie studio experience, using interviews with customers to consider their production process from selecting the right outfit to utilizing ring lights and other equipment to editing and posting photos after the visit. In the fourth chapter, I argue that selfie studio sets serve as material templates for social media content creation by considering how their aesthetic, spatial, and thematic attributes structure and facilitate customers' creativity.

Keywords

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

"But first, let me take a selfie!"

"You've heard that a picture is worth a thousand words, but could a selfie be worth $100,000?"

— Jennifer Ann Wilson, WXYZ News, July 7, 2021

Last summer, three Black women in Metro Detroit made national headlines when their small business earned over one hundred thousand dollars in its first three months. Though a resounding success by any measure, their feat was especially notable for the pandemic era, when restrictions on in-person activities had devastated many brick-and-mortar businesses the year prior. Soon the owners—Danielle Hughes, Danielle Penson, and Kiera Henderson—were appearing on podcasts and in news stories, and even had their own feature in *Essence* magazine (K. Wilson, 2021). In these interviews, the owners talked about their business, which grew out of a desire to bring joy and healing to the community after a year of pandemic-inflicted loss and isolation, including the death of Hughes's beloved stepfather. They offered their advice and encouragement for other entrepreneurs, especially Black women looking to start their own businesses, and discussed their plans for growth and expansion moving forward. Their story had all the hallmarks of an idyllic American success story: resilience, community, empowerment, et cetera. Their winning idea? The Pose Experience in Southfield, Michigan, a place where customers come to take photos of themselves and their loved ones in a space with multiple immersive, highly stylized sets to choose from. At long last, it seemed, someone found brick-and-mortar success in the digital age, and simply by harnessing the power the selfie.

Indeed, this is the era of the selfie-centric businesses. Though particularly notable for its success, The Pose Experience is just one of about two hundred such places to spring up in the United States in recent years. This thesis focuses on this burgeoning enterprise of *selfie studios*

and *selfie museums,* retail locations that offer spaces where customers can take pictures for their social media accounts. A typical visit to a selfie studio goes like this: Guests pay an entrance fee for access to multiple booths, installations, or rooms featuring bespoke backdrops–sometimes interactive, often themed, and generally bright and colorful – where they can pose for photos. Some of these exhibits use props and set pieces to prompt visitors to do things like throw confetti or blow bubbles. Most come complete with professional-grade lighting via ring lights or other setups. Unlike a traditional photography studio, though, patrons are generally responsible for taking their own photos (using either a timer or a Bluetooth remote) and editing them afterwards.

Despite the significant volume of new selfie studios and related businesses to open in recent years, this topic has not yet been given much scholarly attention, particularly within media studies, something which this project aims to correct. This research can be used to inform future inquiries into the material accoutrements and built environments of a digital world. Selfie studios are an intriguing case study because they represent both an interplay between industrial and consumer-driven production cultures and the retooling of older business models to appeal to a social media-crazed public. These enterprises follow a business model which combines brick-and-mortar retail with the logic(s) of social media, creating an appealing 'experience' for customers through which social media content is produced.

This phenomenon is truly transnational: selfie studios and museums enjoy global popularity, with new locations recently opening across the globe from Hyderabad (Tiwari, 2022) to Stockholm (AFP, 2022) to Peoria (Roberts, 2022). However, due to geographical constraints and limited resources, this project focuses only on the selfie studio enterprise in the United States, where the amount of selfie studios has increased tremendously in the past few years. The American context of this study allows us to consider the selfie studio trend within larger

economic and cultural patterns in the United States, such as the supposed decline of brick-and-mortar retail and slow-burn 'death' of American shopping malls. Though selfie studios are located in various types of physical settings across the country, popular press coverage often hails their contributions to the revitalization of several dying shopping malls and city centers. And while there are some franchises such as Selfie WRLD and Original Selfie Museum, the overwhelming amount of American selfie studios are small businesses run by individuals, families, or small collectives of co-owners, many of whom are women and/or people of color.

Selfie culture and commodification

The widespread availability of camera phones and photo editing applications has turned self-portraiture into a routine part of everyday life in the present. In addition, the popularity of photo-sharing platforms like Instagram and Snapchat have encouraged users to frequently engage in the production and distribution of images of themselves in return for some amount, however modest, of self-satisfaction, social capital, and/or real money (Marwick, 2015; Abidin, 2016). These factors propelled the 'selfie'—term used to describe personal photos created using the front-facing camera on most cellphones and laptops—into the cultural zeitgeist of the early 2010s.

Media scholars began theorizing the selfie and its distinct aesthetics and economies almost immediately. Frosch (2015) described the selfie as "the gestural image" (p. 1608) for its transcendence of pure visuality to include the kinetic and spatial elements which define it, such as the extended arm which holds the camera out. He also noted that the selfie was the "progeny of digital networks" (p. 1607) that facilitate and incentivize photo-sharing. Soon selfies were everywhere; media scholar Alice Marwick (2015) noted that they had "become a genre unto themselves, with their own visual conventions and clichés" (p. 141) that offer insight into the aesthetic tastes and economic attitudes of both the user and the social platforms onto which the

selfie is being posted. In an early and comprehensive overview of the selfie phenomenon, Senft and Baym (2015) argued that "the selfie signifies a sense of human agency" (p. 1589) which necessitates its consideration as a social and cultural practice. In particular, they considered its intersections with concepts such as authenticity, control, morality, and data grabbing. Liu (2021) highlighted the centrality of both space and practice in the selfie-taking experience, concluding:

> [Research allows] us to consider selfie practices to be simultaneously a technology of self and reflexive performance. People construct diverse selves in extraordinary scenes, submit superficial expressions of identity to others, and create an obsessive way of seeing, consuming, and communicating shaped by wider digital cultures and social norms. (p. 249)

Selfies have thus become a crucial tool for curating and maintaining a digital persona. P. David Marshall (2010) explained that the digital age has put social media profiles, photos, and posts into the "props and accoutrements of the stage" (p. 40) of self-representation. Selfie culture, then, has promoted a particular performance of the self that is open-ended and ongoing by at all times vesting users with the means to take a photo of themselves, channels to distribute it, and audiences to receive it. And, as Crystal Abidin (2016) pointed out, producing and sharing selfies and other images from daily life can even be a means of making a living for some users.

The emergence of the selfie studio business model represents both the reimagination and convergence of several tried-and-true enterprises, from souvenir photography studios to high-concept museum and entertainment spaces to fit the selfie era. Regardless of whether or not *every* visitor to one of these spaces is active on social media, their very existence is rationalized by the logic(s) of social media which encourage the producing and sharing of carefully constructed images of the self. Political economist Vincent Mosco (2009) uses the term *imminent*

commodification to describe the processes through which "commodities produce their own new commodities" (p. 141) which generally support the growth and legitimacy of one another. In short, demand for the selfie studio is born out of social media and rationalized by the idea that customers will be able to post the photos they take online later. And in a world where higher levels of engagement and attention on social media are increasingly understood as shorthand for various types of social and financial capital, the idea of paying a modest entrance fee for access to professional-grade lighting and various unique photo backdrops becomes easier to rationalize.

Mosco (2009) uses the television ratings industry as an example of the ways in which imminent commodification has functioned in traditional media and communication sectors (p. 142). In the digital age, many of the best examples of immanent commodification concern the gathering and measurement of user data, supporting Mosco's observation that new commodities which contribute to the management of the old were usually the first to spring forth from them (p. 141). But just as virtually every part of our daily routines has gone somewhat digital, many entrepreneurs have searched for ways to make this digital world tangible and 'real'. Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin (2020) detail numerous services which turned Instagram content into keepsake objects such as photo albums, blankets, and cookies; they suspect that these ventures were born out of a desire to "make [digital] content material" (p. 194). By that logic, retail experiences like selfie studios would also fit the bill, as they center the production of content and rely entirely on the ubiquity of social media to rationalize their existence.

Selfie studios and selfie museums in the United States

The precise origin of this phenomenon is somewhat unclear – it really depends on what you call it, as some localities have a "first selfie studio" *and* a "first selfie museum" to boast. Some sources refer to a studio called TakaPhotoo in New York which apparently pioneered this model

back in 2009 (Chang, 2014), but evidence of its existence is hard to find beyond occasional name references. Early selfie-centric experiences in the United States were usually pop-ups in large cities like New York, Los Angeles, or San Francisco; this gave the model a close association with influencer culture by emphasizing exclusivity and temporality. Most selfie studio "origin stories" point to the opening of The Museum of Ice Cream in New York in 2016 as the clearest impetus for the current global trend, though others had certainly existed elsewhere by that point, including at least one in Hong Kong called Snaparty which operated in 2014 (Chang, 2014).

This trend grew rapidly, with numerous selfie experiences operating in the United States by 2017. Most early pop-ups had corporate sponsors, ranging from fashion brands like Aldo, to apps and services like Tinder, and electronics manufacturers like Dolby. An article in *Wired* insinuated that their artistic value was thus "complicated by commercialism" (Pardes, 2017). The apparent frivolity and vanity of these experiences elicited eyerolls[1] from cultural commentators, who tended to frame them as emblems of a culture that has descended fully into brazen self-obsession. An article in the *New York Times* (Hess, 2018) lamented the "existential void" of these experiences, while *Bloomberg* suggested that the appropriation of the word "museum" in this context risked eroding the public's trust in *real* museums. A piece in the *Washington Post* (Judkis, 2021) described them as "Build-A-Bear Workshop[s] of visual cliche" and wrote:

> The notion that these spaces were about experiences, and that experiences are superior to objects, was always a false one. Visits generated images — digital objects — that were stylish but no more virtuous than the pictures snapped on roller coasters. Experiences are still commodities. (Judkis, 2021)

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[1] For a while I struggled to find a word to characterize the punchy criticism that selfie studios received in the popular press, so I am very grateful to Dr. Ryan Milner for suggesting "eyeroll" – it's perfect!

Despite this criticism, this industry only continued to grow, with one *Vanity Fair* article labeling the 2010s the "Instagram Experience Decade" (Bryant, 2019). Soon entrepreneurs across the country were opening their own selfie spaces, pulling this model away from its big city pop-up roots and establishing it as a fixture in malls and shopping centers in all corners of the country. This shift in favor of permanent locations over pop-ups had vested selfie studios and museums with a new sort of cultural relevance (Bryant, 2019). The quick migration of selfie experiences into the suburbs also bred new press narratives about them, usually highlighting their rejuvenation of a decaying commercial space and the entrepreneurial spirit of their owners. Soon there were selfie studio franchises, such as the Des Moines-based Selfie WRLD, which operates around thirty selfie studios across the country.[2] The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic shuttered some of these businesses (Way, 2020; Carman, 2021), but their numbers began rapidly increasing again when restrictions were relaxed in mid-2021. At present, there are around two hundred selfie studios operating in the United States alone, with new locations each month.

As unabashedly made-for-Instagram experiences, selfie studios and museums are obvious products of the *aesthetic society,* a concept developed by digital culture theorist Lev Manovich (2017, 2020) to describe the increasing reorientation of social and economic life towards the visual in the age of social media. He wrote:

> Since content-creation skills and an understanding of digital platforms and styles
> of expression and communication are what matters here, Instagrammers can also
> be thought of as *knowledge workers* in a *knowledge society.* However, I would
> like to propose different terms: *aesthetic workers* and *aesthetic society* (i.e., the

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[2] At the time of writing, though, most selfie studios and selfie museums in the United States are standalone businesses.

society of aesthetically sophisticated consumer goods and services). In such a

society, the production and presentation of beautiful images, experiences, styles,

and user-interaction designs are central to economic and social functioning.

Rather than being a property of art, aesthetics is the key property of commercial

goods and services. (p. 197)

On what exactly counts as *aesthetic* in this context, he elaborates:

I use "aesthetic" to refer to a combination of visual style, photo techniques, and

types of content, since in Instagram photos they usually go together. These

aesthetics (there are more than one) follow their own conventions, but because

they have emerged very recently, they may still be less fixed than those of

professional photographs. (p. 198)

Aesthetics primarily function as a tool for naming visual styles popular on the Internet[3], and thus

selfie studio sets can be thought of as physical manifestations of the aesthetics which are thought

to have the most widespread appeal. Most selfie studios, particularly selfie museums and pop-

ups, could be described as adherents of the "millennial aesthetic" (Fischer, 2020; Budds, 2021)

which emphasizes cool fonts (often spelling out vaguely contrived inspirational or humorous

messages), understated lines, pastel colors, and cute accents. Described in *New York Magazine* as

a "fundamentally commercial aesthetic," this style characterized the visual and material culture

of the United States in the 2010s (Fischer, 2020). This style embodies the logic of the aesthetic

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[3] Because they are often enacted through fashion choices, *aesthetics* often described as the "subcultures" of the Internet: e-girl, cottagecore, kawaii, VSCO girl, et cetera. Others differentiate between the two, noting that people have less incentives to perform their aesthetic offline, whereas subcultures generally structure lifestyles and social relations (Pradeep, 2022). In the context of this study, though, *aesthetics* refers broadly to visual styles derived from the Internet based on a certain approximation of what is most popular online.

society because, well, it is intentionally and fundamentally photographable (re: Instagrammable) by design—a natural fit for made-for-Instagram spaces like selfie studios.

Selfie studios sit at the intersection of the *aesthetic society* and the *experience economy,* as they offer customers an immersive production experience anchored by pre-made visual elements and defined by the creation of visual content. In a famous 1998 article in the *Harvard Business Review,* Joseph Pine and James Gilmore welcomed readers to the *experience economy,* or the economy's fourth stage following its earlier agrarian, industrial, and service phases. They explain that businesses are rapidly reimagining their products and services into distinct *experiences,* a framework previously reserved for theme parks and the entertainment industry but which has permeated all sectors in recent years. As they explain, a sense of experience manifests across two dimensions: customer participation and environmental connection with the product, event, or performance in question. Selfie studios thus create an experience by positioning the customers to create their own content during their visit, and offering an affective, interactive space to stimulate creativity. Therein lies both the market appeal of this model and the sense of what makes these places seem *so* characteristically modern. And as one how-to e-Book for those interested in opening a studio instructs, "Even if your selfie studio does not have 'experience' at the end of your name, you should always be providing one!" (Hughes, 2021)

Critical media industry studies

For some, these selfie studios are an actual place of employment. Accordingly, their workplace culture, practices, and procedures may impact the modes, forms, and aesthetics of the media texts which are produced there. Their dynamics, then, are ripe for scholarly consideration.

Havens, Lotz, and Tinic (2009) explain that "industrial practices have moved closer to the center of our understanding of contemporary media phenomena" (p. 235) in the wake of globalization and the proliferation of digital media. They outline a research approach, termed *critical media industry studies,* which concentrates on the social dynamics of media production from the vantage point of "particular organizations, agents, and practices" (p. 236) operating within larger contexts. This approach is derived from both political economy and cultural studies scholarship, situating itself somewhere between the two by incorporating elements of each with the goal of "one day [becoming] as synonymous with cultural studies as are the practices of textual and reception analysis" (p. 236).

A *critical* approach differentiates itself from other traditions of media industry research, usually commissioned within the industry to support commercial and financial interests. Accordingly, this kind of research must eschew impulses which might automatically privilege quantitative analysis (Havens et al., 2009; Hesmondhalgh, 2014). This research should aim to generate knowledge about the logics and practices which structure these industries, derived from observations and experiences from industry personnel themselves. Leading media industries scholar John Thornton Caldwell (2008) introduced the notion that industry personnel regularly engage in patterns of *self-theorizing* through which they usually speak "from an instrumental and inductive perspective" about the work they do, the industry they participate in, and the media they create (p. 18).

Expanding on Caldwell's work, Herbert, Lotz, and Punathambekar (2020) characterize this area of media industry studies research as examinations of *production cultures,* explaining:

> One common feature of this scholarship is the consistent interest in looking at
> media production as a site of meaning making – not necessarily the meanings that

are made in media texts and commodities, but more in the meanings and values

that media workers hold about themselves and their jobs.

The selfie studio is unique, though, in that the dynamics of production are shared between employees and customers, both of whom remain engaged in the generation of media content. In these spaces, though, most of the 'typical' production work is assigned to the guests themselves, who often stage and capture photos themselves and on their own devices. In this sense, guests do more work which can be understood as 'aspirational' than selfie studio personnel, even though this unique model does afford some workers (though likely only those considered 'skilled' or managerial) opportunities to engage in certain artistic tasks which may lead them to feel less alienated from their work than other retail employees. Owners and employees contribute to production by constructing and maintaining the production space. Their work includes the creative labor of designing the studio's backdrops and arranging its lighting as well as standard maintenance such as customer service and, particularly in the age of COVID-19, providing a safe and clean environment for guests.

As previously stated, selfie studio employees play various roles—often more than one—owing to the fact that many of these enterprises are small businesses with only one proprietor or a handful of employees. Lori Kido Lopez (2021) uses the term *micro media industries* to characterize this type of media enterprise. Applying this framework to the study of selfie studios allows for more thorough consideration of the organizational complexity and overlapping responsibilities that generally characterize this and other small-scale media enterprises. Lopez explains that micro media industries "shift our notion of authorship, due to [an] emphasis on multiskilling over labor differentiation" (p. 8) which, paired with the simultaneous production of

media content by visiting customers, highlights the innate complexity of the work occurring in these production spaces.

Accordingly, this project attends to these overlapping production cultures, asking both customers and personnel about the behaviors, attitudes, and motivations which contribute to their work as well as, simply, asking them what they *think* of the work they are doing (Herbert et al., 2020, p. 51). Focusing on customers' experiences of the space as well as their perceptions of the content they are creating – including subsequent editing and posting – might generate new insights into contemporary cultural understandings of self, image, and authenticity. Focusing on the perceptions of employees and owners might offer new perspectives on logics of experience, entrepreneurship, and taste illustrated by the ways in which selfie studios are designed (both spatially and aesthetically) and marketed.

Research goals and methods

Based on a review of the literature above and my preexisting understandings of the selfie studio industry, I developed a set of research questions which aimed to provide a comprehensive analysis of this phenomenon which accounts for both industrial and experiential data. They are:

1. **Research Question 1:** What are the origins and key components of the selfie studio phenomenon?

2. **Research Question 2:** How do selfie studios represent a material/brick-and-mortar dimension of the social media economy?

3. **Research Question 3:** What kinds of visual styles and production practices characterize the selfie studio experience? How do customers experience these spaces?

This study takes a *critical media industry studies* approach to the study of selfie studios in the United States. Havens, Lotz, and Tinic (2009) outline this framework, explaining that it aims to examine media industries and enterprises from a "helicopter" view which bridges some of the gaps between cultural studies and political economy approaches. They recommend the use of mixed qualitative methods to collect data about the experiences, values, and perspectives of individuals who perform media work, writing:

> [Critical media industry studies stresses] the imperative of case study methods that shed light on the ways in which members of the media industries define the conventions of production and distribution based on their assumptions of the prevailing cultural values and issues of the time. (pp. 249-250)

Accordingly, my research uses mixed methods and thereby consists of five main components intended to complement each other and jointly advance the goal of providing a comprehensive view of the selfie studio phenomenon. This follows Caldwell's suggestion for an "integrated cultural-industrial method of analysis" of media production which synthesizes multiple data sources to interrogate the nuances of production practices and industrial narratives (p. 4). He explains that the use of mixed methods in industry studies allows for "cross-checking" (p. 4) which produces stronger analyses. Unlike other studies which move from one stage or phase of research to another, these components occurred simultaneously. The components are as follows:

Textual analysis

Throughout the course of my research, this study has involved textual analysis of news stories, official websites and corporate documents, and social media posts related to selfie studios and similar establishments in the United States. This component was not systematic and was instead

meant to supplement interview responses by identifying trends and important figures with in the selfie studio industry, as well as to give me a vocabulary for describing these businesses and their key features in my subsequent analysis.

Directory

The next component of my research was to assemble a working directory (see Appendix A) of selfie studios and similar businesses in the United States. I created this directory between November 2021 and January 2022 from a series of regimented Google Searches using the following terms: "selfie studio", "selfie museum", "selfie spot", "selfie station", and "selfie gallery" followed by the name of each of the states and territories which comprise the United States. This was supplemented by additional browsing of news stories, Facebook and Instagram profiles, and other sources as necessary to construct a comprehensive directory. Whenever I found a new entry, I recorded the name, location, website, Facebook and Instagram handle, and email address of each selfie studio. When I finished the directory in January 2022, there were 203 unique entries, including some selfie studios which were about to open and a few which had closed in weeks during which I was assembling the directory. This directory was then used to construct the mailing list for the survey component of my research. The zany and otherwise unpredictable nomenclature of selfie studios and museums, though, means this tally is likely somewhat incomplete.

Survey

The next component of this study was an industry survey meant to generate a snapshot of the selfie studio industry and gain insight into the management, challenges, and trajectories associated with these enterprises. This survey was distributed via email to every selfie

studio/museum listed on the directory, except those which had already closed. To contact each, I used the email address listed on their website and/or social media page. The survey, which was administered using Qualtrics, remained open for six weeks. A reminder email was sent out midway through this collection period. In the end, the survey yielded relatively low participation ($n=22$) but was nevertheless useful in recruiting interview participants and gaining a few limited insights into the industry itself.

Site visits

Taking cues from Daniel Herbert's (2014) ethnographic approach to the study of video stores in *Videoland*, I visited several selfie studios and museums to experience this type of business firsthand. During these visits, I paid particular attention to the atmosphere, design, and built environment of each site. A friend accompanied me during each visit so that I could also partake in the social experience of the selfie studio as well as blend into the environment as a kind of participant observer, and we certainly took lots of photos during each visit. Sites were chosen based on proximity and convenience; during this process, I visited three sites in Virginia and one in New York. Throughout this thesis I supplement my analysis with personal experiences to support and clarify the trends identified elsewhere in the data.

Interviews

The bulk of my analysis is derived from data collected during a round of sixteen semi-structured interviews. There were two participant populations for this study: selfie studio customers ($n=12$) and selfie studio owners ($n=5$).[4]. Anette Lareau (2021) explains that interviews offer "rich data on the ways social and structural forces intersect" (p. 261) while privileging the perspective of

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[4] There were seventeen interviewees in total, as one interview was done with a couple who operated a selfie studio together.

the individual. Semi-structured interviews are precisely the kind of methods needed in critical media industry studies, as they can "shed light on the ways in which members of the media industries define the conventions of production and distribution based on their assumptions of the prevailing cultural values and issues of the time" (Havens et al, 2009, pp. 249-250). Interviews with selfie studio owners provided me with a richer, more nuanced understanding of the industry vis-à-vis hearing about owners' experiences in their own words. This also allowed me to ask questions about interviewees' business which could not be answered by promotional materials or social media posts. Similarly, I opted for customer interviews in order to attain deeper and more nuanced understandings of participants' experiences of visiting a selfie studio and creating audiovisual content there. Conducting in-depth interviews offered me a chance to consider the logics and motivations which inform ordinary people's use of selfie studios to create their own media content.

Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber (2017) makes clear that semi-structured interviews afford participants "some latitude and freedom to talk about what is of interest or importance to them" (p. 112) and therefore encourages a more organic conversation. This supports Caldwell's (2008) suggestion that industry research attend to participants' own self-theorizing about their work. In-depth interviews are focused on a central topic or experience (Hesse-Biber, 2007), in this case owning or visiting a selfie studio. During each interview, I followed guides (see Appendix B) tailored to each population. The customer interview guide contained questions about the individual's visit to the selfie studio as well as their social media use in general. Naturally, the guide for industry personnel focused primarily on their business. In addition, I began each interview with some questions about participants' background and social media use in order to situate their responses within a broader context. Deviations from the order of questions were

frequent, and the looser structure of the interview allowed me to share my own selfie studio experiences with participants when appropriate.

As previously mentioned, this study was limited by restrictions placed on in-person gatherings due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, all interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom. Meetings were recorded using the Zoom's built-in recording feature, with backup recordings generated using the Voice Memo feature on my personal iPhone. Following the interview, these audio recordings were used to create an AI-generated transcript using the transcription service Trint, which was then line edited by the researcher for clarity.

Sampling and participants: Customers

For customer interviews, participants were recruited using criteria designed to construct a purposive sample of selfie studio customers: any individuals aged 18 or above who had visited a selfie studio or selfie museum in the past five years[5] were eligible. Despite initial plans to recruit interview participants in-person during site visits to selfie studios and museums, logistical concerns related to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic instead led me to rely on snowball sampling. I began by posting an Instagram story on my personal account in January 2022; this post consisted of a photo of me taken during a site visit overlaid with a caption announcing my study and soliciting participants. I followed this up with another story that defined *selfie studio or selfie museum* as "a retail location where you can pay money to take photos in front of cool backdrops" to clarify. These posts were viewed by around 700 of my own followers, and directly yielded several participants who volunteered to be interviewed. Other followers responded with

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[5] This five-year limit roughly corresponds with the emergence of the selfie studio/museum industry in the United States, and also accounts for two years' worth of pandemic-related disruptions to travel and leisure activities. Still, most participants' visits had occurred within a year of their interview.

offers to put me in touch with friends and acquaintances of theirs who might be interested. I supplemented these by directly messaging a few others who posted pictures from selfie studios during this time.

The final sample of selfie studio customers consisted of twelve participants. Ahead of each interview, participants were asked to complete a brief survey that asked them to share certain demographic information such as gender, age, and race, as well as their preferred pronouns and some information about their social media use. Eight participants identified as women while four identified as men. Five identified as Black or African American, five as White, one as Asian, and one as Hispanic or Latino. The participant pool skewed young; all interviewees could be considered either millennials or Gen Z. It is important to note, however, that the sample consisted of ten United States residents and two American expatriates living abroad. Accordingly, my findings may not necessarily represent the experiences and perceptions of selfie studio/museum visitors across the globe. Interviewees in this population were given a $10 gift card of their choosing in order to incentivize participation.

Sampling and participants: Personnel

Selfie studio personnel were for interviews during the survey period. The email sent out to all of the businesses listed in my directory included both a link to the survey and a message asking for interview participants; two participants responded directly to this email and volunteered to participate. Furthermore, the final question of the survey asked respondents if they would be interested in doing a follow-up interview and left space to their contact information. Only two interviews were scheduled using this information, though I reached out to most participants who indicated interest. In total, the final sample consisted of five participants representing four businesses, each located in a different state. Interviewees in this population were not directly

compensated for participating, but instead asked to contribute in order to bolster understanding of the unique needs and experiences of people working in their industry.

Typology of selfie studios and related businesses

The "selfie" in *selfie studio* is sort of deceptive, as in this context it refers to all sorts of self-portraiture and not just the typical arm-extended, front-camera selfie. Nevertheless, most businesses in this industry embrace the term, but what comes afterwards is more contested. Though I am primary using the term *selfie studio* to capture the totality of this industry and cultural phenomenon, both models are accounted for in this study. It is worth noting that this name is not necessarily the only way to refer to these businesses, though; other recurrent terms include "selfie museum", "selfie station", "selfie gallery", "selfie spot", and/or an amalgamation of words like "interactive" and "visual" and "experience". Even so, these terms typically refer to the same thing. Although it might be confusing, the decision to collapse these terms under one umbrella is intentional. By using *selfie studio* primarily in this study, I am attempting to forge a sense of a unified industry that includes various businesses who may think themselves dissimilar but are aesthetically and functionally alike.

In January 2022, long-standing animosity between two selfie studio companies resulted in a lawsuit being filed in the U.S. District Court in Miami. The suit, filed by the Los Angeles-based Museum of Selfies, alleged that the Denver-based Original Selfie Museum franchise had infringed upon their trademark for using the words "selfie museum" (Hurtibise, 2022). An earlier attempt by the plaintiff to register the name with the United States Patent and Trademark Office in 2017 was initially rejected, as both "selfie" and "museum" could not be trademarked (Harris, 2019). Although this was partially reversed, granting the Los Angeles business the rights to

"Museum of Selfies" (in that order), the rivalry that developed between the two[6] led to several periods of antagonistic "online trolling" in which one would leave negative reviews for the other, and so on (Harris, 2019). A federal judge threw the case out a few months later (Poritz, 2022), but this incident nevertheless underscores the importance of terminology in this industry. This section offers a quick typology of selfie-centric businesses in the United States which will be useful moving forward.[7]

Selfie studios more closely recreate a studio experience by explicitly selling themselves as places meant to photography and videography. Sets are demarcated clearly, and usually have distinct themes and/or color schemes rather than contributing to one unified concept. Ring lights and other equipment are generally available to guests for use and are visible within the space of the selfie studio itself. This model is more widespread than any other, and these businesses often appear in malls and shopping centers in suburban communities. This model is more likely to be run by a small team consisting of an owner and only a few employees, if any. These are usually not pop-ups. Examples include most businesses in the directory (see Appendix A) and franchises like Selfie WRLD and Original Selfie Museum. [8]

Selfie museums, on the other hand, borrow heavily from museum experiences, privileging experience over production by discouraging (and sometimes disallowing) the use of ring lights, selfie sticks, and tripods. These spaces are usually significantly larger than selfie studios, and guests move from room to room during the experience instead of from set to set. Each room is

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[6] Asked about the rivalry in a 2019 interview, Original Selfie Museum co-owner Alex Kurylin is quoted saying, "I'm from Ukraine. Those guys are from Russia. Some people get jealous." (Harris, 2019)

[7] These definitions are my own. They are derived from my experience researching this industry and should not be mistaken for any sort of "official" or legal definition.

[8] Most often when a business explicitly describes itself as a "selfie museum", the business in question more closely matches the definition of *selfie studio* outlined in this section. This is the case with the entire Original Selfie Museum chain. Those which match the *selfie museum* definition in this chapter are usually less explicit.

heavily decorated to suit a certain theme or unifying concept, with multiple interactive elements or photo-ops in each room. Selfie museums certainly still encourage and facilitate photography, but their spaces are ostensibly designed to be immersive aesthetic environments above anything else. These are usually run by a team of full-time staff and may be a short-term pop-up that moves between large cities. Examples include The Museum of Ice Cream, Candytopia, Color Factory, and JAMNOLA.

A third category, *immersive art installations,* plays less of a role in this thesis but is, at least in my view, fundamentally related to the other categories. These experiences are generally high-concept art exhibits—designed by professional artists whose names are affixed to their work—and which have some sort of immersive component to them (Haubursin, 2019). They are frequently traveling pop-ups, and thus may be considered more exclusive, serious, or esoteric than the others. These experiences are among the most Instagrammable places out there, and usually allow guests to take pictures during their visit. Exhibits like these likely inspired the original selfie studios and selfie museums but are technically *art* before anything else and therefore would not consider themselves akin to places which exist for the sake of production. I had initially intended to include these in my study, but none of those I contacted expressed any interest in participating. Examples include the three Meow Wolf locations, Snarkitecture's interactive installation *The Beach* (Haubursin, 2019)*,* and a slew of immersive Vincent Van Gogh exhibits which are travelling around the world at this time.

Looking ahead

The following chapters take four distinct approaches to the study of selfie studios that together provide a comprehensive look this phenomenon. Chapter 1 constructs a conceptual genealogy of the selfie studio by highlighting several of its historical antecedents including photo booths and

theme park-style novelty photography. Chapter 2 surveys the selfie studio industry in the United States and considers its unique place at the crossroads of the brick-and-mortar and platform economies. Chapter 3 explores how ordinary customers experience the selfie studio and use it to create content, covering the entire process from getting dressed ahead of time through to posting pictures afterwards. Chapter 4 considers the visual environment of the selfie studio, arguing that these spaces serve as material templates for social media content creation by examining a selection of recurring themes and visual styles found in most studios. Finally, the conclusion outlines an agenda for future research by considering how selfie studios and museums relate to larger patterns of *studiotizaiton*, or the spatial reconfiguration for the sake of media production.

Chapter 1

A Genealogy of Selfie Studios

Popular press coverage of the selfie studio trend in the United States has tended to focus on their supposed novelty. A steady stream of news stories over the past decade have portrayed these spaces as conceptually and functionally *new*—an ambitious young entrepreneur's bright idea, perhaps, or a means through which a dilapidated shopping center might get a fresh lease on life. These narratives also cast selfie studios as quintessentially contemporary – a silly-seeming business idea rationalized by a time and culture in which social media and selfies are fixtures in daily life. This discourse of newness, however, obscures the selfie studio's historical roots and its connections to larger media industries in the present-day. This chapter debunks the presumed novelty of the selfie studio by outlining a genealogy of its historical antecedents, aiming to position the selfie studio as a *media* venture while also using it as a reference point for understanding the historical and ongoing development of photographic enterprises.

Indeed, selfie studios and selfie museums can be understood as the latest commercially viable iteration of the classic photography studio which has existed since the introduction of the camera. Despite the vast amount of scholarship dedicated to photography as art or documentary medium, there has been comparatively little significant study of the business of American photography. This is particularly true for smaller-scale enterprises like photography studios. In fact, it is even difficult to find a suitable name for the photography studio industry, as both "commercial photography" and "retail photography" are established terms which generally refer to a genre of photography which focuses on consumer products and retail spaces, rather than describing the storefronts and other enterprises which comprise the actual industry of studio

photography itself. Consequently, this chapter explores various industrial histories of American photography in the process of tracing the origins of the selfie studio.

Selfie studios are perhaps most notable for repositioning the customer as the photographer and for reimagining photography itself as an *experience*. Therefore, the selfie studio embodies a dual nature as both a brick-and-mortar retail enterprise and a space where ordinary people generate their own photos and digital content. Tracing the genealogy of the selfie studio moment thus requires balancing histories of popular and commercial photography. Accordingly, this chapter compares today's selfie studios to earlier business models which emphasize self-representation and interactivity, such as photo booths and purikura. Furthermore, this chapter highlights selfie studios' unique position at the intersection of both the brick-and-mortar and platform economies by exploring 'selfie culture' itself and interrogating the material and economic conditions which render this type of business profitable and appealing to customers and entrepreneurs alike.

Photography studios

The dawn of photography in the nineteenth century marked a revolutionary shift in the worlds of art and technology. Decades of experimentation by various inventors culminated in the French artist Louis Daguerre's introduction of the first widely available photographic process—his namesake *daguerreotypes*—in 1839. The French government declared this invention "free to the world" for use and further experimentation, accelerating the so-called Visual Revolution that would forever change the ways humans imagine themselves, their societies, and their world (Kovarik, 2011, pp. 117-118). The subsequent development of photography and videography have led to the emergence of a robust and expansive global photography industry comprising a

range of contributors, from multinational corporations like Polaroid and Fujifilm to small-scale operations like camera shops and, yes, selfie studios.

The photography studio, the earliest and most basic photographic enterprise, emerged alongside the medium and has endured through to the present as the core business model of professional photography. In the beginning, photographic process necessitated a physical studio, as photos needed to be developed almost immediately after they were taken. Dozens of studios opened in the months immediately following Daguerre's announcement in August 1839, and it took only a few weeks for the new technology to reach the United States (Kovarik, 2011, p. 118). Early studios served multiple roles – as means of introducing photography to the public, as centers of experimentation with the new medium, and as business ventures in their own right. Despite this dynamism, the studio model was rather simple and borrowed heavily from the traditional portrait studio, merely replacing paintbrushes with cameras. The physical environment of the studio, constituted by the affordances of the space itself, led to the formalization of *studio photography* as that which is "performed indoors, in a managed setting where the photographer has complete control over all of the elements that go into creating a photograph" (Capper, 2019). Like portrait studios before them, early photographic studios mostly catered to wealthy clients or public figures who had the resources to commission photographs, giving the medium an air of status and exclusivity. These studios also became closely associated with the name and style of individual photographers who ran them, a tradition that continues today.

In the decades that followed, though, increased public interest and technological advances made portrait photography more available to the masses. New studios quickly began to spring up in all corners of the United States to meet demand. The increased affordability and

availability of photography to the average American provided the steady market needed to sustain studios, demonstrating the lucrative potential of the medium while also highlighting its wide appeal to those who were eager to generate images of themselves and their families (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004). Self-representation (or self-visualization) thus became photography's defining promise, quickly establishing the medium as a touchstone of modern life.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also saw the growing legitimization of photography as a profession distinct from other artistic and/or technological endeavors. For most career photographers during this era, the studio was the primary site of work. Trade publications attended to this aspect of the profession by routinely publishing articles which offered advice on all aspects of running a studio from marketing services to managing finances. *The Photographic Journal of America* (1915-1933) ran a monthly column titled "The Studio: Practical Papers on Studio Work and Methods" which collected and reprinted articles on studio management from other photography publications around the world. Many such articles grappled with the duality of the photographic enterprise as both an exercise in artistic skill and entrepreneurial prowess. A column reprinted from *The British Journal of Photography* in March 1917 explained:

> Whether the photographer is an artist or not, he must all the time be a business
>
> man. … In photography, the business end must be developed with the artistic, and
>
> *vice versa,* and the photographer must enlarge and improve his business methods
>
> as he improves his work under the light. ("Good Business Methods", 1917)

These publications are also particularly useful for understanding the ways in which personnel configured and managed the physical space of the studio to create a functional environment conducive to both business and photography itself. The range of topics covered provide insight

into the day-to-day business of the studio while also illuminating the most common challenges

facing the industry at the time, such as:

- The introduction of electricity and how to balance it with natural light ("On Finding and

  Fitting a Studio", 1920)

- Furnishing the studio and creating backdrops ("Inexpensive Decoration", 1917)

- Selecting an opportune location for the studio storefront based on existing commercial

  activity and foot traffic ("On Finding and Fitting a Studio", 1920)

- Balancing work with wealthy and poor clients in a small town ("Business Getting", 1917)

- Working efficiently to avoid long waits ("Keeping Customers Waiting", 1920)

Publications like *The Photographic Journal of America* also highlight the logics and industrial

standards which undergirded the studios of the early twentieth century, many of which persist in

the present. For instance, they reveal that managerial spirit and attention to the customer

experience were central to the expectations of a photographer wishing to operate their own

studio. While these attributes have little if anything to do with the formal elements of

photography, they demonstrate how photography has been regarded as a *service* which can be

commodified and monetized. (Re)defining photography as a service does not entirely disregard

its artistic and technological attributes, but instead uses them to appraise both the quality of the

product and the value of the service and provider themselves. For example, the best and most

valuable photographs would presumably come from a 'trained' photographer who uses their

expertise to produce a visually appealing photo on professional-grade camera equipment. The

mastery of both the stylistic and technical elements of photography is therefore what constitutes

the work of a photographer as a legitimate *service* worth paying for. When a physical studio is in

question, the photographer must also maintain good business practices in order to boost and

maintain the value of their service. Elements like reception, cleanliness, and efficiency thus emerge as criteria on which the overall success of the enterprise is hinged.

In truth, the traditional photography studio and the selfie studio are about as alike as they are different. Both are interior spaces which usually contain many of the same things—sets and backdrops, lighting appliances, staff attendants, etc. Perhaps the clearest distinction between the two lies in *who* exactly is taking the pictures. Whereas photography studios usually have at least one trained photographer to work with customers, selfie studios instead invite their patrons to capture their own photos – hence the use of the word "selfie" in the name. Accordingly, the sense of auteurism and the adherence to formal styles and structures which often characterize studio photography give way to a freeform experience in which the customer is placed in near-total control of the content they are creating. The responsibility of the selfie studio, then, is to provide guests with a studio *experience*.

The mere persistence of the term 'studio' from the time of daguerreotypes through to the selfie studio moment emphasizes the importance of space in imagining this *experience* of photography. Until mass-market photography equipment was made widely available in the twentieth century, the studio was likely the most frequent context in which photography occurred. Furthermore, the term is by now so closely identified with photography that it likely just seems natural to use the word "studio" to describe any place where photos are routinely taken. The demarcation(s) of studio space as that which is particularly conducive to 'good' or legitimate photography distinguishes the selfie studio and its offerings from the kind of camera-ready environments customers might encounter elsewhere. This is achieved through the curation of camera-ready backdrops and lighting concepts as well as maintaining an atmosphere that

encourages production. Taken together, these elements create an atmosphere which both inspires and facilitates the photographic process for customers.

Celebrity portraiture and glamor photography

Photographic portraiture has been central to the development of modern celebrity, producing images which can be widely disseminated to bolster visibility and maintain a certain public persona. Heads of state were among the first people to be routinely photographed, creating flattering images which were circulated amongst their subjects. This led to the association of photography—of being photographed—with a sense of status early on, an association reflected by the integration of photography into the mores and customs of nineteenth century life. In 1854, French photographer Andre Disdéri patented the *carte-de-visite,* a photographic calling card which could be printed in bulk on sheets of ten portraits. His process spurred an international craze known as "cartomania," and soon Disdéri oversaw a photography empire which spanned Europe. His studio in France, for example, employed a staff of ninety who developed an average of 2400 *cartes* each day and promised a 48-hour turnaround on new orders (Gernsheim, 1986, p. 55). Though intended to be used as calling cards, *cartes* quickly became collectible items, particularly for the lower classes, who took a newfound interest in seeing the likenesses of the public figures, athletes, and inventors they had heard about (Marchant, 2007). Soon, celebrity photographs entered mass production and could be purchased "at stationers' shops as picture postcards are today" (Gernsheim, 1986, p. 56). Their widespread availability jumpstarted the rise of modern celebrity culture by forging "the 'chains of attraction' … between the celebrity subject and the viewing and collecting public" (Marchant, 2007, p. 99).

Several decades later, Linda Marchant (2007) recounted, film stars began commissioning portraits en masse to boost their popularity and personal brand. Hollywood film studios took

notice, and publicity photos quickly became an industry staple meant to showcase contracted stars – the studio's most valuable assets. The circulation of studio photos generated a new aesthetic and stylistic genre: glamor photography (Marchant, 2007). Soon celebrity images became a mainstay of visual media, particularly in magazines and fan publications, further cementing celebrities as easily accessible touchpoints of style and taste in the public eye.

Patrick Keating (2017) explained that the availability celebrity images made them easy and exciting to imitate: "The visual culture of magazine photography encouraged viewers to see their images differently, recognizing that glamour was a cluster of traits that could be replicated and revised, both by the image makers and by the consumers themselves" (p. 131). This impulse to imitate celebrity styles and attitudes continues into the present, where the emergence of social media influencer culture has only blurred the lines between bona fide celebrity and self-presentation (Duffy & Pooley, 2019; Marshall, 2021). Selfie studios and museums capitalize upon this desire to act and look famous, if only for an hour or so, by fashioning the customer as the subject of a glamorous photoshoot. Using elaborate sets and lighting concepts, selfie studios skillfully construct glamor into their build environments; this is accentuated by the behaviors or many customers, who often wear special outfits and hairstyles to look their best for their visit.

Portable photography

Public interest in photography naturally led to its increased availability to the masses, giving ordinary people the ability to take their own photos. The development of portable photography equipment and mass market cameras marked a crucial turning point in the history of photography, equipping more people than ever before with the tools needed to document their lives and experiences. By the beginning of the twentieth century, advances in camera technology had established photography as part of everyday life around the world. Portable equipment freed

professional photographers from the spatial limitations of the studio, allowing them to shoot events on-location and in-real-time. Hired photographers quickly became a staple of family events such as weddings and birthdays, imbuing photography with a sense of occasion and cementing its place in American life cycle. Furthermore, the gradual availability of early mass-market camera models such as the Kodak Brownie camera (first unveiled in 1900) invited ordinary people to document their lives and communities from their own point-of-view. Portable photography allowed the masses to create visual records of their daily lives by taking off-the-cuff snapshots of the world around them. Film rolls could be used up and replaced, "[providing] a radical new sense of abundance" (Sturken, 2017) which felt in step with the profusions and possibilities of modern times. The portability of photography thus vested ordinary users with the tremendous power of capturing the moments they would want to remember forever; after all, pictorial mementos could only be revisited if they were photographed in the first place.

As camera ownership became more commonplace, manufacturers sought to educate the public on their products' uses by staging elaborate marketing campaigns which showcased their features. Marita Sturken (2017) noted that companies like Eastman Kodak were instrumental in "shaping how nonprofessionals understood, engaged with, and used photography in their lives," and noted that this was largely achieved through advertising. One such example is the "Take a Kodak with you!" campaign, which began around 1908 and continued for several decades. An emphasis on portability was the core element of this campaign, as media historian Haidee Wasson (2021) explained:

> There was no particular destination or event specified. What they were selling
> was a new kind of disposition in the world, one that entailed carrying a camera
> wherever you went. … These were not just picture-taking devices but little

optical-mechanical wonders interwoven with our increasingly mobile, modern

selves that in Kodak's eyes inhabited a world reconceptualized as eminently and

perpetually photographable. (p. 24)

With the suggestion that a camera could, and should, go *anywhere*, this campaign's slogan—imprecise and open-ended—illustrated the boundless possibilities of photography. Underlying these ads was an implication that each person had a life worth capturing, and thus the availability of the portable camera furthered the medium's promise of self-representation by remaking its owner into the subject of a documented life. For example, many ads from this campaign feature a 'Kodak girl' character – a fashionable young woman shown exploring a picturesque beach or cliffside vista with a Kodak camera around her neck (see Figure 1). Hers was a stylish and exciting life – the kind of modern lifestyle for which the ubiquitous presence of a camera made sense. Sturken (2017) argued that the use of these characters appealed to women consumers by framing cameras as a means through which "a young woman is entreated to affirm her own 'viewpoint' of the world," underscoring the emancipatory capacity of photography through the production of images from one's own point-of-view.

As thousands upon thousands of consumers invested in their own portable camera, "a new folk art" (Davidson, 1970) of everyday photography was born, setting amateur photography on a course that would lead to the eventual explosion of image-sharing on social media. But while camera owners could take their own photos wherever and whenever they wanted, there was little guarantee that these photos would be *good* – and certainly not as good as those of a professional photographer. The amateur-professional dynamic has long been a central force in the development of new media technologies and their corresponding cultural forms, with both sides often coopting the forms and styles of the other in order to stay fresh and relevant. Patricia

Figure 1. A Kodak camera advertisement from around 1910 that features the "Kodak girl" character.

Zimmerman (1995) theorized that amateurism arose as "the cultural inversion to the development of economic professionalization" (p. 7) in the period between 1880 and 1920. Indeed, while portability liberated photography from the spatial confines of the studio and new mass market products put cameras in the hands of the masses, these developments nevertheless failed to make the studio entirely obsolete during this period.

Instead, the everydayness of photography inadvertently ascribed studio photography with a new sort of appeal – a sense of occasion and an air of legitimacy. For customers in the market for a more 'official' portrait, studios promised a sort of technical precision that could not be achieved at home. A high-quality image produced by a trained professional in the right environment was still worth paying for, at least every once in a while. Furthermore, a trip to the studio for a portrait session could itself be an occasion, accentuated by special outfits and vested with a stronger sense of purpose than a casual snapshot at home. Professionals both then and now could distinguish their services by appealing directly to customers' desire for an experience of photography that exudes both quality and occasion – an experience which the customer could not easily replicate on their own.

The selfie studio model notably inverts the amateur-professional dynamic. Instead of being a professional photographer who stages and captures photographs, the selfie studio owner is tasked with maintaining a space that is built to facilitate others' creative endeavors. Though they certainly have a hand in creating the image, vis-à-vis designing the backdrop against which it is shot, the responsibility of taking and editing the photo into its final form falls to the customer. The studio owner's primary role is to manage the *experience* of photography by creating an atmosphere that structures, inspires, and facilitates photography for the amateur. For many visitors, then, a visit to a selfie studio is an *occasion,* one during which they can create

high-quality photos of themselves, from their own point-of-view, without relying on chance to place them in a cool, camera-ready environment— a guaranteed 'Kodak moment' in which anyone's life is exciting and aesthetically-pleasing enough to be documented.

Souvenir and novelty photography

As many Americans' leisure time and expendable income grew and stabilized in the postwar era, so did their proclivity for travel. Vacations thus emerged as the kind of thing that *should* and even *needed to be* photographed. Modern tourism and photography are closely intertwined, exampled by Deborah Stevenson's (2019) assertion that destinations are therefore "encountered as a space of the image/imagination rather than geography" (p. 266) and therefore tourism and travel are "framed through imagery" (p. 266). Photographs thus serve as both visual and material souvenirs which can be taken away from the destination. *Souvenirs,* described by Walter Benjamin (1985) as "the complement of the 'experience'" (p. 49), are the material objects into which memories are transubstantiated. Goss (2004) expounds upon Benjamin's view, observing that souvenirs are "the commodity form that most effectively denies its commodity status" (p. 328) due to their association with one's lived experiences. Photographing a trip or vacation, then, guarantees a material record of that experience which can be revisited in perpetuity.

Accordingly, the commercial history of photography is rife with examples of business ventures geared towards travelers and/or concerned with focused on documenting, preserving, or creating precious 'memories' to be appreciated sometime in the future. Goss (1999) argued that a photo is the ideal souvenir "because it re-*presents* an incontrovertible material trace of the past and distant times and places" (p. 59). Souvenir photographs are often site-specific, in that they depict guests with a character, logo, or vista that vests the photo with a specific sense of place. Many theme parks set up photo-ops at ideal locations around their property, usually manned by

photographers and attendants who mechanically churn out photos. Beginning in 2004, guests at Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida could take advantage of the resort's PhotoPass service, in which staff photographers around the park capture photos which are then linked to a guest's resort account and can be accessed later (Southard, 2019). Walt Disney World and other theme parks have also invested heavily in elaborate on-ride photo mechanisms, which capture photos of guests mid-experience, usually on rollercoasters or thrill rides. These photos are made available for purchase immediately after disembarking from the ride vehicle, though many forego buying them. Nevertheless, most guests still flock to their display monitors for to catch a glimpse of what they looked like in the photo – the funnier it looks, the more likely it is to be purchased.

While most souvenir photos are site-specific, others rely on elements such as costuming and set design to transport customers to another time or place. These photos are often referred to as *novelty* photos for their campy, quirky nature. Perhaps the most recognizable genre of novelty photography is the 'Old-Time' variety that long been a staple of boardwalks and historical attractions. In the United States, these Old-Time portrait studios are generally themed after the Civil War or the Wild West – loosely interpreted and questionably accurate – and photograph guests in costume as cowboys, saloon girls, soldiers, Southern belles, et cetera. Goss (1999) observed that these studios "ingeniously [double] the pathos of photography" (p. 59) by recalling a time in which photography itself was less accessible, therefore restoring a historicized sense of occasion to this photography experience, and subsequently providing the customer with a final product that serves as "proof of [their] imaginative presence in the ideal past" (p. 59). This analysis assists our understanding of novelty photography as both aesthetically powered and divorced from clear context, instead driven by the subject's performance of place and character.

The business of creating bespoke souvenir photos and rapidly developing them onsite has become a staple of many tourist economies. The title page of a 2011 business guide from Novelty Photo Software, LLC describes the industry as "business for fun and profit" (p. 1). This guide highlights various operational perks which might attract those which are looking to get started quickly, such as low operational costs, a short learning curve, and lots of opportunities for family members to contribute. While these attributes are certainly important to potential owners, the manual also stresses the emotional rewards of working at this kind of business, most notably the satisfaction of helping customers make memories:

> Novelty photos are keepsakes. You're helping event guests capture the moment in a way that only a photo can provide. It's not like a T-shirt that will undoubtedly end up in a drawer somewhere, worn a few times and forgotten. Your produce will probably end up on a mantle or a wall, perhaps a reminder of a great family trip. (Novelty Photo Software, LLC, 2011, p. 6)

Industrial discourses such as those seen in this manual encourage novelty photographers their role in creating and materializing memories for their customers as a sort of higher purpose for their business. To satisfy this mission, novelty photos need not be especially good or artful. Instead, they simply need to look indicative enough of the destination or primary experience which they are tied so that they can act as a proxy for all the other memories from that time. Accordingly, novelty photography has developed its own stylistic conventions which engender this sense of place. Green screens and postproduction editing software are frequently utilized. Photographers at zoos and aquariums, for example, might prompt guests to pose a certain way and then quickly superimpose an image of an animal—usually one which would be unsafe or unfeasible for guests to get close to, such as a shark or lion—onto the final print. This provides

guests the kitschy satisfaction of having posed with the animal despite its obvious inauthenticity, employing the photograph as a stand-in for all the *real* encounters they had during their visit.

Selfie studios share many of the same characteristics of the novelty photography industry, particularly because they are popular with tourists and often used to celebrate an occasion such as a birthday or bachelorette party. (Indeed, many selfie studios can be rented out for corporate events and private parties.) Both selfie studios and novelty photography enterprises rely heavily on theming; hyper-stylized backdrops, props, and costume convey a sense of time and place which is key to structuring the experience of photography, and the final products thereof, in each case. Perhaps most notably, both exist to produce something unique which is understood to be unavailable elsewhere while following a basic model that is familiar enough to customers that it could, with a few thematic alterations, exist anywhere.

Photo booths and purikura

The increased portability and everydayness of photography greatly increased the value of the visual image by further integrating photography into the economic, political, and social routines of ordinary life. Consequently, entrepreneurs sought to capitalize on this rejuvenated public appetite for the image with new ideas on how to incorporate photography into everyday scenes and situations. Perhaps the most successful of these innovations was the automatic photo booth, which brought instant photography to all sorts of public places, from marketplaces to cinemas to city streets.

The initial concept of the photo booth dates to the late 1880s, when inventors began experimenting with 'photo machines' which automated the photography process. The first technologically-sound and commercially viable model, the Photomaton, was unveiled in New

York City in September 1926, the brainchild of a Jewish immigrant from Russia named Anatol Josepho. This model used a coin-operated camera to take eight snapshots in quick succession, which then developed on pre-sensitized paper in about eight minutes (Strasbaugh, 2008). The Photomaton was an instant hit, with around 28,000 customers in its first six months, including celebrities and the incumbent governor ("Photomaton", 1927). So successful was the Photomaton, in fact, that an April 1927 report in *Time* humorously speculated:

> Soon street sheiks, titian cashiers, small-scale honeymooners and spreeing butter-and-eggers will start raining quarters into Vanity Fair's newest coffers to make sure what they look like. … Business may get bad for passport artists and proprietors of half-moon parlors. Photomaton, Inc. looks for lively trade from police departments, commutation ticket offices, license bureaus—wherever quick recording and identification are needed. ("Photomaton", 1927, p. 19)

The Photomaton's rapid success was such that Josepho, whose immigrant-to-entrepreneur story was heralded by the press as the pinnacle of the American Dream (Doherty, 1927), soon sold his business for a million dollars (*Time,* 1927). Within the year, the Photomaton had spread to various other cities, causing a frenzy wherever it landed. Mary Elizabeth Prim, in a report for *The Boston Evening Transcript,* raved:

> You need no longer be dull in Boston if you have twenty-five cents and a face. Go to the new Photomaton in Filene's [department store] basement, some noon, and see how romance and adventure have been injected into the hitherto grim business of having your pictures made. (Prim, 1927, p. 302)

As evidenced by this report, the sheer novelty of photobooths made them an enticement in and of themselves in those early days. While marketed as a testament to the marvels of automation, the Photomaton was initially manned by attendants tasked with explaining the machine, monitoring the crowd, and performing maintenance whenever needed. In her report, Prim observed that these attendants "became automatons, herding the prospects into line with one hand, guiding the immediate sitter with the other, while muttering directions to both" (1927, p. 303). In 1930, another innovation called the PhotoReflex allowed users to compose their own scene in front of a mirror before clicking a button that would reveal a hidden camera behind the mirror to snap the photo, producing a dozen prints at a price "considerably under standard studio rates" ("PhotoReflex", 1931). Around that time, photobooths entered mass production and eventually became fully automated, no attendants or electric buttons required. A British distributor called Photo-Me was established in 1946 and continued manufacturing photobooths into the twenty-first century, offering models for both amusement and for passport/ID card photos ("Photo-Me", 2007). Widespread installations in bars, movie theaters, and shopping centers facilitated the photobooth's development into a sort of side attraction in spaces where consumers already gathered.

Photobooths are characterized by a duality between privacy and publicness. Though most often encountered in public places such as at parties or in retail areas, photobooths are also notably intimate, as users must enter into them and pull back a curtain to be photographed. For many, this relative privacy has long been part of the photobooth's appeal. Mark Hayward (2013) observes that the notion of the photobooth as a tool for self-representation "resonates with the notion of commodities as tools for both consumption and cultural resistance" (p. 200). Queer couples, for instance, have historically used photobooths to take affectionate photos in times and

places where displaying affection in public could be unsafe or illegal (Morgan, 2014). The built-in intimacy of these machines thus provided an opportunity for authentic self-representation that was otherwise unavailable. However, Hayward (2013) also warns that the bureaucratic utility of these machines is often underestimated. Pointing to their use in the creation of state documents such as ID and passport photos, he argues that technologies like photobooths and PhotoReflex have contributed to the "naturalisation and internalisation of the technique and technologies of visual surveillance" (p. 200) through which "neoliberal modes of individuation" (p. 200) have been fabricated and rationalized. In a similar manner, selfie studios facilitate a form of photographic self-representation which can be personally empowering but may also reinforce certain neoliberal and consumerist notions of personhood endemic to social media.

New variations on the photobooth gradually developed to include sound and video. In the World War II era, for example, Voice-O-Graph machines invited users to record about a minute of monologue onto a small vinyl disc. These booths offered a sort of self-representation a camera could not yet provide: a chance to hear one's own voice, perhaps for the first time (Schweitzer, 2015). Voice-O-Graphs also appealed to users' aspirational senses by stressing the experience of *making* the recording, likening it to those of celebrity recording artists, demonstrated by a 1940s International Mutoscope Reel Co., Inc. Voice-O-Graph advertisement (Figure 2) that reads: "What a thrilling, happy experience! It's a fundamental fact that no one can resist the chance to make personal recordings—there's a little Bing Crosby or John Barrymore in all of us!" Mutoscope, which also manufactured the its own photobooth models, obviously recognized the lucrative potential of a technology which allowed customers to produce their own media. The ad in Figure 2 is ostensibly aimed at selling Voice-O-Graph machines to other businesses, such as

Figure 2. A Voice-o-Graph advertisement from the 1940s created by the International Mutoscope Reel Company.

amusement parks or movie theaters, framing them as "A tremendous profit maker for <u>YOU</u>!"

and stressing that "You just can't miss making money with Voice-O-Graph!"

Later, in 1989, a Minnesota-based company called Short Takes unveiled a booth where

guests could record an "instant video greeting" ("Lights! Action! Roll'em!", 1989) lasting up to

ten minutes onto a blank cassette tape, which could then be mailed off to friends and loved ones.

An article in *Time* announced that the company also had plans to unveil another product called

Baby Takes, which would be installed in hospital maternity wards for families to use to

"introduce the newest ham in the family" to their relatives ("Lights! Action! Roll'em!"*, 1989).

Both Voice-O-Graph and Short Takes demonstrate the ways in which vending-style booths were

imagined as a sort of communication infrastructure. The advertisement in Figure 2 frames Voice-

O-Graph machines as a means of interpersonal communication while also underscoring the

unique experience of using it: "Like talking on the phone… but a thousand times more thrilling!"

Indeed, among the Voice-O-Graph's frequent users were departing soldiers looking to send a

message to their families back home (Ida, 2017). Furthermore, these examples also expanded

photography's promise of self-representation to other media by making audio and video

recording technologies available for public use. These experiences were largely affordable—

especially compared to the cost of recording equipment—and were ready for use at the

customer's convenience, no special skills or setup required.

Another notable variation on the photobooth comes from Japan, where interactive

photobooths called *purikura* – a shortened version of *purinto kurabu,* or 'print club' – allow

users to decorate their photos with stickers, filters, and text after taking them, leading reporter

Elise Hu to dub them "the original Snapchat" (Hu, 2017). Purikura, which debuted in 1995, were

inspired by an earlier trend among Japanese girls to create "graffiti photos" using stickers and

other enhancements. In the years since, they have been an enduring staple of Japanese girl culture, often functioning as a social experience for school-aged girls, who pack into booths to take pictures in groups (Miller, 2003). Purikura photos are shot in front of green screens so that customers can try out different colorful backgrounds in post-production, when stickers and captions can be added before printing. Users may also edit certain aspects of their appearance, such as the color of their hair or eyes. While using one of the machines, Hu and her colleague noticed that their skin tones were lightened and eye color changed (to blue) automatically, suggesting that the machines are programmed to enhance physical features to match beauty standards aligned with a male/Western gaze (Hu, 2017). Despite this, Miller (2003) reported that purikura photos are primary circulated amongst girls' friendship groups rather than shared with parents or love interests, allowing girls to "engage in inventive forms of self-display" (p. 40) which might involve naughtiness, gender parody, and cultural critique.

Both selfie studios and photobooths offer their customers a more playful, more personal photography experience than a traditional portrait studio. The primary difference between the two, however, concerns their spatial arrangement: photobooths are compact and selfie studios are expansive. The photobooth camera concentrates on subjects' faces and shoulders with limited capacity for movement; selfie studios encourage full-body shots and provide props, interactive set elements, and ample room to pose. These spatial differences also affect the social experience of each space. The open space of the selfie studio allows various degrees of interaction with staff and other customers, a sort of publicness which can either put subjects at ease or make them feel more awkward, as noted by many of my interviewees. The enclosed space of the photobooth, as previously discussed, creates a sort of privacy and intimacy that might result in more naturalistic expression. Crucially, though, both selfie studios and photobooths give customers near-instant

access to their photos, either a physical printout or a backlog of selfies to be sorted through. Considering these two models in dialogue with one another demonstrates both the importance of space in structuring experiences of photography and the ways in which business models have been designed to provide quick access to the end products of each visit.

Mall media

The postwar economic boom accelerated the suburbanization of the United States, during which large industrial firms and small businesses alike moved away from urban centers, taking wide swaths of the population with them (Steinnes, 1982). Capitalizing on an unmet need for public space in these new communities, indoor shopping malls emerged as centers of economic, social, and cultural life in the suburbs.[9] Malls have since become a fixture of American popular culture, often as visual signifiers of youth, prosperity, and consumerism. They are featured prominently in music videos such as Tiffany's "I Think We're Alone Now" (1987) and the New Radicals' "You Get What You Give" (1998) as well as in iconic scenes from teen films like *Fast Times at Ridgemont Hight* (1982) and *Mallrats* (1995). These examples and others were shot on-location in real malls across the country, bringing Hollywood-style media production into the suburbs for local audiences to experience firsthand. More recent examples such as the television series *Stranger Things* (Netflix: 2016-present) and the music video for Kacey Musgraves's "simple times" (2021) have used malls to express nostalgia for the relative placidity and material abundances of suburban life in the 1980s and 1990s.

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[9] Displeased with the mall's fashioning of retail commons as civic space, critics often likened the mall experience to television, similarly charged with masking commercial messages as entertainment. For instance, Kroker et al. (1989) dismissed malls as "liquid TVs for the end of the twentieth century" (p. 208), while Goss (1993) considered malls a "surrogate television experience" replete with their own "multidimensional programming" (p. 39).

As prolific sites of media distribution and consumption, malls have also emerged as important media spaces. Video retailers, music stores, and movie theaters have been early and enduring features of the mall scene. In addition, malls have long hosted talent showcases, fashion shows, and celebrity meet-and-greets, while emerging musical artists often embark on 'mall tours' to promote their debut albums.[10] Critical and scholarly emphasis on malls as sites of consumption, though, has obscured their long tradition of acting as sites of media production. Portrait studios have long been staples of mall directories, either with their own storefronts or within department stores; JC Penney's portrait division, for instance, reportedly employs over 9,500 associates (JC Penney Portrait, 2022). Photo booths are fixtures along mall corridors, serving as a mindless diversion in between stores or as an end-of-visit ritual for tween mallrats waiting for their parents to pick them up. And in this era of mobile photography, restrooms and dressing rooms are frequently used for mirror selfies, often to the ire of mall employees.

In addition to these more obvious examples, there are several lesser-known histories of in-mall media production. In the 1990s, for example, lip synching booths[11] allowed patrons to live out their dreams of starring in a music video by standing in front of a green screen and mouthing the words to a popular song (Spool, 2012).[12] Afterwards, employees would quickly add some low-budget effects to the recording and give guests VHS tape of their performance to take home. Some malls were also home to professional-grade walk-in recording studios meant to "offer passers-by a chance to record themselves singing their favorite tunes" (Ball, 2007). In the

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[10] Notable examples include Tiffany's The Beautiful You: Celebrating the Good Life Shopping Mall Tour in 1987 (Churm, 1987) and Britney Spears's L'Oréal-sponsored Hair Zone Mall Tour in 1998 (Roldan, 2016).

[11] Information about these businesses is disappointingly hard to come by these days. Their names are mostly forgotten, but some disparate posts on Reddit recall businesses called "Startacks" and "Soundtracks".

[12] One of my interviewees, Daisy, recalled doing something similar at King's Dominion theme park in Doswell, Virginia in the early 2000s. She did some digging and eventually found and shared her (hilarious) video with me, which was instrumental in reconstructing the experience here.

late 2000s, the success of talent competition shows like *American Idol* (Fox: 2002-2016) saw

many malls install recording booths for customers looking to record a song for an audition or the

like (Elber, 2011). One such offering, MyStudio, encouraged users to directly upload their video

to its own social networking site, MyStudio.net, described by *Wired* as a combination of "the

ease of YouTube with the egalitarian awfulness of *America's Got Talent* [emphasis original]"

(Raferty, 2008). Around the same time, Club Libby Lu, department store Montgomery Ward's

in-store adjunct aimed at young girls, offered its clientele bespoke McBling[13] makeovers and

diva-esque photoshoots in its uber glittery Style Studio (Lawrence, 2021). Club Libby Lu's

write-up in *The Washington Post* criticized its brazen and uncritical embrace of celebrity culture,

describing a birthday party "pilfered from the pages of *Us Weekly"* (Copel, 2006) and recounting

an instance in which several elementary school-aged girls arrived in a limousine for a makeover.

From audition tapes to makeovers to music videos, it is worth noting that each of these

business ventures reproduced recognizable media forms associated with wealth, fame, and

celebrity status. These in-mall media production experiences used production equipment

(runways, green screens, soundproof booths, etc.) to appeal to customers' aspirational senses. In

his observations of similar enterprises in the Mall of America, cultural geographer Jon Goss

(1999) suggested that these businesses provide their customers with "fantasies of their own

discovery, transportation to stardom, and prospects of immortality" through fame (p. 59). It is

also crucial that customers left with a material product of their experience, as these objects are

instructive of customers' apparent ability to create a media object of professional quality

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[13] "McBling" is a term retroactively used to describe the maximalist styles and aesthetics popular in the United States around the mid-2000s. Hallmarks of this style include Juicy Couture-style tracksuits, bedazzled accessories, oversized jewelry, and bright colors, especially hot pink. The term, a portmanteau of "bling" and "McMansion", was coined by a popular Facebook page in 2016. Evan Collins, the page's admin, described the style as "very excessive, luxury-oriented, and nihilistic" (Crenshaw, 2017).

regardless of their talent, resources, or actual desire to be famous. This alone demonstrates how, rather than simply selling the end product itself, these businesses sold a certain *experience* of production that emphasized process over product. By accentuating a participatory experience of photography, selfie studios and museums continue in this tradition, even if their customers' general familiarity with their phone cameras gives them a better understanding of the production process and a stronger idea of what they want out of the experience than before. And though selfie studios have sprung up in numerous (sub)urban locations, most of them are located in malls or shopping centers, placing them at least somewhat within this tradition of in-mall media production.

Conclusion

Popular narratives which swirl around selfie studios have tended to ascribe them with a sort of distinctive newness. In this chapter, though, I have complicated this discourse by piecing together a genealogy of photographic enterprises which pioneered the core elements of today's selfie studio trend. Selfie studios and museums are, like many of their forerunners, defined by a sense of occasion, the use of hyper-stylized aesthetics, and an emphasis on self-representation and self-expression through photography. Though they perhaps more notably rely on curating and delivering an *experience* of photography than their antecedents, I argue that this emphasis on experience has long been a central component in the structuring and marketing of photography enterprises for centuries. Accordingly, selfie studios combine many of the material, industrial, and cultural dynamics of earlier forms of photography to create a unique experience which, in its unique fusion of in-person experience with digital sociality, seems distinctively 'new'.

As evidenced by this chapter, the history of popular photography has been largely defined by two concepts: *leisure* and *aspiration.* As industrialization led to the differentiation between

work and leisure, those with time and money to spend became increasingly interested in creating images of themselves and their surroundings. The gradual proliferation of camera equipment also led to the belief that amateur content depicting everyday life could perhaps be valuable to some audience, somewhere. The success of television shows like *America's Funniest Home Videos* (ABC: 1989-present) reinforced this idea by encouraging ordinary people to submit their home movies to be aired on national television (Fore, 1993). Entrepreneurs have long capitalized on public's aspirations—be they for true fame or merely for a sense of legitimacy—by providing authentic-seeming media creation experiences. At the height of the *American Idol* era, recording booths like MyStudio were framed by their operators as useful infrastructure for those wishing to achieve fame on their own. Still, it seems likely that most customers craved the legitimacy of a 'real' recording studio more than they desired fame itself. Similarly, while selfie studios are popular with bona fide social media influencers, the vast majority of customers are ordinary people who merely want to look good in the eyes of their existing social circles. Thus, the base appeal of selfie studios and many of their antecedents is creating 'real' media simply for the sake of it, as more of a casual pastime or leisurely activity than a true aspirational project.

Following Marita Sturken (2017), I also showcase the way in which marketing strategies, corporate imaginaries, and industrial logics became highly influential on the way we use cameras and think about photography in general. The examples in this chapter also demonstrate the ways in which numerous photographic enterprises have been positioned within the industry itself. Both the Novelty Photo Software, LLC manual and the Voice-O-Graph ad in Figure 2 demonstrate how manufacturers sold both their products and the *idea* of operating a photography business to potential entrepreneurs. In the next chapter, I will describe some of the selfie studio industry's strategies for recruiting new owners including eBooks and virtual classes for potential owners.

In this chapter, I have used selfie studios' antecedents to position them within a larger history of photographic enterprises. This genealogy is concise and therefore incomplete. Even so, outlining the conceptual history of the selfie studio is essential for interpreting the dual nature of production which occurs in these spaces. The rest of this thesis will highlight the unique attributes which render selfie studios an *evolved* form of traditional photography studios, rather than a mere continuation of them, by examining the experiences of both selfie studio owners and customers. The chapters that follow attend to the ways in which selfie studios continue, revise, and eschew their predecessors' methods and underlying logics.

Chapter 2

The Selfie Studio Industry

The number of selfie studios in the United States has grown tremendously in recent years, with a particular surge in new locations as pandemic restrictions eased in 2021. These businesses have sprung up in virtually every corner of the country, with only a handful of states lacking at least one.[14] When I first set out to make a directory of all the selfie studios, selfie museums, and other selfie-centric businesses in the country, I estimated that there would be around 80. After a few weeks of searching, my final count was 203, including some which had recently closed and some which would soon open. The rapid expansion of selfie studios across the United States has formed something of a makeshift *selfie studio industry* comprised mostly of independently-owned businesses with a few franchises—namely Selfie WRLD and Original Selfie Museum.

The selfie studio industry employs a host of personnel whose various jobs range from designer to docent. Owners, clerks, and social media managers engage in the operations and marketing of these spaces, often sharing responsibilities amongst positions in smaller businesses. Designers serve as regulators of tase by creating the backdrops which will later be projected onto numerous social media profiles. Some selfie studios even hire docents to hype up customers throughout their experience, a more common for pop-ups and selfie museums, which generally have bigger budgets and larger staffs. Before entering the Museum of Ice Cream, for example, a docent with an ice cream-inspired codename shares some fun facts about ice cream and briefs visitors on the "rules" before seeing them off on their adventure. (Rule #2 was "Take lots of

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[14] The states without an active selfie studio were Hawaii, Montana, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wyoming, as well as all the U.S. territories and the District of Columbia. Some of these places have had selfie studios before, but none are currently open. During the course of my research, Oregon and South Dakota lost their only selfie studios when Selfie WRLD PDX and Selfie WRLD Sioux Falls closed, respectively.

pictures!") Though these workers may be less actively engaged in the creation of content, their attention to both the space and the customers who enter is a crucial, if nearly invisible, production infrastructure.

The popularity of selfies studios in the United States and around the world highlights a need for critical media industry studies to expand its scope to include subjects which go beyond traditional notions of "industry" to include small-scale enterprises and nontraditional media production experiences. Moreover, critical media industry studies approaches have become more urgent as the global economy becomes further entangled with digital technologies, particularly social media platforms. On what exactly counts as an 'industry' in the scope of media industries research, Vondreau (2019) writes: "'Industries' is a flexible term that may variously comprise markets, networks, or entrepreneurs as much as creative workarounds where data gathering may be objectionable" (p. 69).

Selfie studios likely have much more in common with retail workplaces than they do with film studios in terms of their day-to-day operations. Despite this, they *are* dynamic sites of media production and are indicative of wider economic ramifications of the embeddedness of social media in everyday life and routine. In fact, Caldwell (2013) argues that "contact zones and subcompanies are actually more real than industry's mythological centers and they are as important to those industries as their centers" (p. 164-165). He also cautions that these media *para-industries* can also present a "buffering commercial shadow" (p. 159) which, if not attended to with intention and precision, could hinder critical scholars' ability to effectively consider the scope and scale of the phenomena they are examining. Asserting that media production is not solely confined to a certain places and organizations embraces notions of

production which reject esoterism and essentialism. Anchorage, for example, is a far cry from the glitz and glamour of the Hollywood film circuit, but there *is* a selfie studio there!

This chapter begins by constructing a rough picture of the current selfie studio industry in the United States using data from an industry snapshot survey I sent out to owners earlier this year. Next, I consider the industry through the eyes of its personnel, drawing on interviews with owners of four selfie studios across the country. Throughout, I argue that selfie studios occupy a unique position at the intersection of the brick-and-mortar and digital economies that structures the responsibilities and attitudes of its owners. Finally, I grapple with the ultimate existential question of the selfie studio: *Are these photography studios or something different?*

Examining the selfie studio industry

Despite the increasing number of selfie businesses the industry, most selfie studios in the United States would be considered *microbusinesses.* This term is used to describe businesses with four or fewer workers, usually headed by a self-employed owner. Many survey participants' businesses had few full-time employees, with only one having more than two; several reported having zero full-time employees. Part-time employment was higher, but still many selfie studios seemed to be owned-and-operated by the same team, often owners and their families; over half of survey participants described their business as "family-owned" (*n*=14). Working in close quarters with family members causes interesting workplace dynamics. One owner, Taylor, shared that one of the biggest struggles for her as a business owner was learning how to manage her employees—her parents. Another married couple, Deidre and Jerry, who spent months' worth of late nights together transforming their retail space, jokingly assured me that if their marriage can survive building and opening a selfie studio, it could survive anything. Alisha's studio is open seven days a week, meaning that her young children often accompany her to work;

her son, she told me, relishes coming up with new ideas for sets. These examples highlight the immense time commitment associated with running a business, but also suggest that family-run enterprises may be a way to make up for time spent away from home as well as combat the emotional isolation of precarious work.

Microbusinesses are the most likely to be owned by women and minorities, and likewise tend to hire workers from disadvantaged backgrounds at higher rates than larger firms (Valdez, 2016, p. 34). About three-fourths of survey respondents described their business as "woman owned" (n=16) while about half indicated that they were "Black/African American owned" (n=10). The results of this survey suggest that women and racial minorities make up a significant proportion of the selfie studio industry, particularly as owners. Sociologist Zulema Valdez (2011) takes a critical look at the intersection of identity and entrepreneurship, noting that marginalized communities' motivations for entrepreneurship often differ from those belonging to privileged classes as they are informed by the "context of their hierarchical and intersectional position within the unequal American social structure" (p. 61) Accordingly, they may view entrepreneurship as a means of winning better working conditions and a stronger means of economic mobility for themselves and their communities (Valdez, 2011, p. 61-62). Recent scholarship within media industry studies has also turned to consider the experiences of small-scale media enterprises, exemplified by Lori Kido Lopez's (2021) incisive exploration of *micro media industries* within the Hmong American community. Her work attends to the ways in which small-scale media work, like owning a selfie studio, complements larger projects of identity articulation and community empowerment, particularly among groups who have been traditionally underserved by mainstream media.

The relative flexibility of the selfie studio business model has made them fixtures of the *hustle economy*, an emergent economic phenomenon in which ordinary people are compelled to work multiple jobs to get by. Sociologist Tressie McMillan Cottom (2020) notes that many workers, particularly women and people of color, are "adding entrepreneurship as a type of second or third shift on top of a formal job arrangement." Over half of survey respondents ($n = 12$) reported that their selfie studio was their owner's secondary source of income, demonstrating the appeal of this type of business for people looking to supplement their income. Several interviewees echoed this sentiment: Taylor works as a nurse and manages the business side of her selfie studio while her parents staff it during the day. Rachel's selfie studio is attached to the marketing agency she owns and leads but remarked that it felt like a side hustle for her because she is responsible for opening the studio for weekend customers and special events, which often cuts into her free time. Though Rachel's selfie studio is part of her full-time employment, her experience nonetheless illuminates McMillan Cottom's (2020) observation that many *side hustles* monetize free time by filling it with precarious, ad-hoc work. Furthermore, Brooke Erin Duffy explained that the aspirational appeal of many side hustles "has glamorized work just when it is becoming more labor-intensive, individualized, and precarious" (p. 228), obscuring patterns of exploitation and uncertainty and leading many into risky financial arrangements which threaten their long-term wellbeing.

As the industry has started to grow and consolidate, some within it have begun offering peer support through e-Books (Hughes, 2021; Holly-Carothers, 2022) and digital classes meant for entrepreneurs looking to open their own selfie studio. These materials can be costly and are likely an additional revenue stream for their owners. I spent around $75 to procure to e-Books to read for this study: *A Dollar & A Dream: How to Open a Selfie Museum in 30 Days (...without*

breaking the bank!) by Maddy Holly-Carothers, a co-owner of the DREAM Selfie Museum in North Carolina, and *Pause. Play. POSE: Make $100k in 90 Days with Your Selfie Museum* from the POSE Experience team in Michigan. These books and their corresponding classes often play to the aspirational senses of their audience by emphasizing the profit potential and a certain blithe freedom which comes from running a business and being your own boss. Ostensibly meant to empower others to start their own business, these e-Books are important intra-industry texts which demonstrate industrial knowledge is always constructed to promote certain aspects and obscure others (Caldwell, 2008).

Being brick-and-mortar

The rest of this chapter uses selfie studios as a starting point for exploring the intersection between the brick-and-mortar and platform economies, beginning here with a consideration of their brick-and-mortar attributes.

Selecting a location

Selfie studios can be found in various locations in their communities, but survey data (*n=22*) indicated the majority are located inside shopping malls (*n=11*) or in shopping centers/strip malls (*n=7*). I suspect that they often set up shop in these environments due to the surplus availability of retail space amidst the ongoing "retail apocalypse" (O'Donnell, 2020). When searching for a location for her business, Alisha noticed that lots of other selfie studios were inside malls, so she reached out to the one near her:

> ALISHA: Our mall has worked with us very well. Being a small business owner
> and not having the capital to open in a place that's going to, like, *explode* ... we
> talked to our local mall. And when we pitched the idea to them, they had already

had it in their heads that they wanted something like this in their mall! So, I was, like, in the right place at the right time.

The reaction to Alisha's idea suggests that developers and retail managers recognize selfie studios as the 'right' kind of business for the times, likely because it repurposes (otherwise empty) physical space using the logics and aesthetics of the internet. The arrival of a new selfie studio is often hailed by local politicians and business leaders as proof that brick-and-mortar spaces have a place in a future defined by e-commerce and platformitization. In March 2022 alone, for example, local Chambers of Commerce sponsored opening day ribbon-cutting ceremonies for new studios in Arlington, Texas (Greater Arlington Chamber of Commerce, 2022) and Hinesville, Georgia (Hall, 2022). Similarly, popular press coverage of selfie studios has regularly highlighted them in revitalization narratives in run-down commercial areas or dead/dying shopping malls (Williams, 2021; Hebron, 2022).

Despite this enthusiasm, operating inside the mall has some downsides for owners as well. Several participants expressed frustration with being a "business inside a business" whose operations are limited by decisions made by mall management. This dynamic was particularly pronounced as malls have attempted to adapt to changing public health guidelines during the COVID-19 pandemic. When asked if she had been able to strike up any partnerships with other businesses in her mall, Taylor told me she felt like her business lacked the "leverage" required to form partnerships with chain stores and felt that their differences in size would hinder any meaningful partnerships anyways. Accordingly, she has found it much easier to work with other small business owners and community groups, such as local boutiques whose models will come in and take pictures to advertise new merchandise.

Converting the space

Transforming vacant retail space into an environment conducive to photography is perhaps the stage which requires the most strenuous work—both creative and hands-on—from selfie studio owners and their employees. This work begins well ahead of opening day, when owners begin designing their first round of sets and procuring the materials necessary to make their visions a reality. Opening a selfie studio also requires making significant changes to the interior spaces which will house these sets, usually to make them more photogenic but occasionally to make them better suited for business. Doing so requires not only the grit of the owner and their team, but also the cooperation of several external factors. Several studio owners referenced their difficulties procuring necessary building materials at an affordable rate due to the lumber shortage and other supply chain issues related to the pandemic.

Changes to interior space happen fast. Within a month of getting the business idea, Rachel and her colleagues had moved all their office furniture upstairs and converted the ground floor of their space into their selfie studio. They did the work themselves, taking a break from the normal chaos of marketing agency work to design and build each set:

RACHEL: The great part for us is that we're a team of creatives. So, like, my "labor" work is legitimately my team learning how to use power tools. … We're doing all of it, like we're doing the wallpaper, we're, you know, constructing everything. We are just a bunch of creatives, so when you give creatives creative freedom, it's really easy to come up with ideas. We don't look at like what other places are doing.

Soon each individual workspace had been transformed into a different set. Rachel's old office,

for example, became a swimming pool-inspired room, complete with a ball pit, inflatable beach

balls, and a "No Diving!" sign. Rachel now sets aside a few days throughout the year for her

team to brainstorm, design, and build new sets for their selfie studio, explaining that the ability to

be creative on a collective project has been the best aspect of the studio venture:

> RACHEL: [The most rewarding part would be] how much fun my team has had
>
> with it and knowing that we have a creative escape. Agency world is demanding
>
> and crazy. We have amazing clients that I would never trade for the world, but it
>
> can be a lot of work and really stressful. So, it's just nice that I know four times a
>
> year we can just have a day to go build something and, yeah, do something cool.

Rachel's testimony emphasizes the creative labor involved in starting and maintaining a selfie

studio, but it is important to remember that these spaces are designed to be both aesthetically

pleasing *and* functional. Taylor transformed a former salon into a selfie studio, which required

building a new reception area at the front. Furthermore, health concerns related to the pandemic

have led many selfie studios to reengineer their spaces to account for ever-uncertain public

health recommendations, such as attaching cannisters with wet wipes in them to the sides of

studio sets and putting up cloth barriers to reduce contact. Many studios have also shifted to

privileging (or requiring) online bookings, accentuating their use of platforms and other digital

business tools which will be discussed in further detail in the next section.

Working with (and through) platforms

The present conditions under which business is conducted in the United States would likely

render selfie studios reliant on social media and other platforms even without their uber-

connected premise and business model. McMillan Cottom (2020) sums it up nicely, writing: "While the 'digital economy' is often pictured as start-ups in the Silicon Valley tech industry, today all entrepreneurship is digital." Digital platforms now facilitate most routine commercial exchanges, from payments to advertising to talent management. Reliance on these systems for both cultivating and maintaining an audience or customer-base has led many entrepreneurs to become *platform-dependent* (Poell et al., 2022), vesting platforms with tremendous power and reorienting cultural production around metrics and data-driven solutions. Many of the interviewees' insights discussed in this section stemmed not from explicit questions about platforms but instead from ordinary questions about business practices. This demonstrates the centrality of platforms and their logics to running a successful small business in this day and age. These responses have been divided into three subsections which explore how platforms have informed three aspects of day-to-day selfie studio management: conducting business, networking with other owners, and creating promotional content.

Conducting business on Facebook

Maintaining a digital presence, which allows businesses to reach new audiences as well as interact with existing customers, has become a near-essential aspect of owning and operating a business of any scale. Numerous platforms exist for the sole purpose of business management, but small business owners' limited resources mostly relegate them to using whatever is most affordable. Facebook[15] has thus emerged as crucial platform for small business development, used widely to buy ads and create a page that lists important information such as location, operating hours, and contact information. Though most selfie studios maintain some form of

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[15] Used here, "Facebook" can be understood as the whole suite of platforms operated by Meta (the artist formerly known as Facebook), as business owners can also use the Facebook interface to buy ads for Instagram or chat with customers via Messenger, and promotional content is often cross-posted between the two.

official website, Facebook was by far and away the easiest way I found their essential information when conducting research for my directory. Even so, multiple owners I interviewed expressed dissatisfaction and outright frustration with the platform:

> TAYLOR: It's not great. It's just not. It's not very customizable, if that makes sense. Like, they give you the option to use a lot of different filters to, you know, target a specific audience. But even after finding that audience it's just—and I think this is because we are a smaller business—it's just a little bit difficult to get people to actually engage with it without feeling… without it feeling too personal.

Platforms like Facebook rely heavily on the use of metrics to rationalize their use and incentivize further investments into targeted ads (Poell et al, 2022). Even so, many owners have trouble getting their content to reach its intended audience in the first place. Consequently, keeping the eye on the numbers can lead to frustration, as evidenced by Deidre's experience with Facebook:

> DEIDRE: It's a terrible platform for business. I mean, not all of our followers see our posts! No matter how hard you try, it's like – we have about 1300 followers on Facebook and we'll basically get like "120 people have seen this post." … But we do have a lot of people who follow us on there, especially after [we were on] the news. I feel like the demographic that watches the news [is on there more].

Analytics dashboards report each advertisement's reach back to owners, giving them a sense of how well their content is doing. As Deidre told me, though, simply knowing these numbers breeds a sort of anxiety and frustration about performance which stems only from having these metrics so readily available—a sort of chicken-and-egg problem for the platform era. This frustration might accumulate over time to a point that the business owner would begin to spend

more on targeted advertisements in order to boost metrics, if only for the satisfaction of doing so. These experiences demonstrate that selfie studio owners and other platform-era businesspeople must not only concentrate on the aesthetics and verbiage of their promotional content but also on the numbers, further cementing these businesses' dependence on the platform in the process.

Networking with other owners

Platforms also provide owners with crucial opportunities for networking and peer support via intra-industry communication channels. Many belong to a Facebook group called "Selfie museum/studio owners" where industry members routinely ask questions and share ideas.[16] This group, which was started less than a year ago, offers owners precious opportunities to connect with their peers in an industry which is largely de-centralized. The selfie studio industry is rather new, so many owners are at similar stages in the development and growth of their respective business. Few have been in the industry long enough to answer questions about strategic planning or longevity, and there are obviously no guilds or professional organizations for owners to use as resources. Similarly, the fact that most are independently run microbusinesses with few employees would suggest that selfie studio owners have few opportunities, if any, to ask specific questions relating to this business model. Whereas franchisees with Selfie WRLD or Original Selfie Museum might have internal communication channels and can seek support from their corporate partners, independent owners are almost entirely reliant on networking to get the help they may need. The Facebook group thus acts as an important place where owners can "figure out" this industry together:

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[16] I attempted to join this group in February 2022 to get a sense of what was being talked about. Unfortunately, however, I was never granted permission by the moderators. Later, during one of my interviews, I found out that my study had actually been the subject of posts within the group, so I guess *I* was what was being talked about!

ALISHA: We had some hurdles, but I think we've overcome them now. I think we're sort of on the trend upwards, but we're in a new industry that no one knows anything about, so it's learn as you go. … I sort of stumbled on a group on Facebook and, I mean, there's a lot of brick-and-mortar studios and they're doing the same thing. We're just trying to figure it out… how to figure this industry out.

Accordingly, selfie studio personnel are uniquely platform dependent—any material or practical sense of a unified selfie studio/museum industry exists *only* on Facebook. This sentiment was echoed in my interviews with owners, many of whom were sort of indifferent about the group's usefulness but acknowledged the importance of being in it and having it as a resource just in case. Deidre remains active in the group but admits that the professional relationships she has developed with other owners via Instagram are more pertinent to her needs, which often relate more to the small business side of things such as liability forms and community partnerships. Indeed, interviewees seemed to agree that the most useful part of the group was sharing ideas for set decorating. Group members often trade old or unused materials amongst each other, and these groups are often used to liquidate set pieces and other inventory when another studio closes.

Creating promotional content

Virtually all small business social media content is promotional, used to cultivate brand identity by showcasing products, services, and personnel. Using social media to reach new audiences is particularly important for businesses like selfie studios, which explicitly cater themselves toward people who are presumed to *already* be online. In other words, selfie studios need not invest in getting people online in the first place, nor should they aim to digitize people's existing routines. Instead, they must sell themselves as in-person enhancements of the online experience, usually by maintaining an active presence on social media, particularly Facebook, Instagram, and

TikTok. Creating and posting promotional content is thus an essential part of the day-to-day work of running a selfie studio, so central to the experience that several of my interviewees noted that it took up most of their down time during the day. This alone supports Tamara Kneese and colleagues' (2022) observation that "retail's experimentation with platform technology and e-commerce has multiplied the duties workers are expected to perform" (p. 365) by effectively requiring them to maintain a strong social media presence in order to support their business. When asked how she spends a normal day at work, Alisha laughed and responded:

> ALISHA: A normal day? Man, it's not normal here. [laugh] On a normal day, I'm usually just coming up with content ideas because we're still trying to educate our public on what we do. And so, on a normal day we're constantly putting out content. If it's not a crazy TikTok—it's mostly me making TikToks—just trying to [showcase] how fun we are!

Social media content creation is a key form of creative labor for store owners like Alisha, who must generate various forms of content to highlight their services. New content is often cross-posted on various platforms at once to reach the most customers possible. Promotional content for selfie studios often highlights sets, placing emphasis on the visual environment in order to catch the attention of social media users and allow them to envision themselves being photographed there. When sets are changed out or redesigned, social media posts are often used to showcase changes and catch the interest of customers. Many also post "behind the scenes" style content which chronicles renovations and redecoration, giving followers a glimpse of how this type of business works. For example, one of my hometown selfie studios—Lost Planet Mirror Maze & Selfie Adventure in Virginia Beach—closed for the winter off-season to remodel its space, but remained active on Instagram by consistently posting photos, stories, and videos of

the ongoing renovation. This type of content can reach two subsections of the selfie studio audience at once: prospective customers who may like what they see enough to plan a visit, and former customers who may use the new sets as justification for a return visit.

Selfie studios also derive a large amount of social media content from their customers, distributing the creative labor required to maintain a robust online presence between business and audience. When customers post pictures from their visit, selfie studio accounts often share or repost their photos. This strengthens the connection between the customer and the business by amplifying content generated during the visitor's experience, while also using the customer's content as a form of free advertising. Many selfie studios will even approach customers to be featured on the company Instagram during their visit. Content like this often takes a "behind the scenes" approach to the production process from the customer's perspective, often by to the side of a set or behind a ring light and capturing them in the process of taking a photo. If a customer is tagged in a post on the company account, they are likely to share it on their own social media, helping the selfie studio reach new customers by tapping into the existing customers' networks and follower-bases. In other words, spotlighting customers' content or featuring them during their visit virtually guarantees a sort of word-of-mouth promotion by affording each customer an opportunity to be showcased on a more "legitimate" account than their own.

Indeed, selfie studios' most effective form of advertising comes not from its owners but from its customers. In this type of content, though, selfie studios serve as the background, not the main attraction, meaning that the actual business often goes uncredited. Owners are thus forced to rely on the dutiful location tagging of customers, and the curiosities of their followers, to gain clicks and new followers to their customer pages. Content filmed at a certain business may go

viral without its owners even knowing, such as when Deidre noticed her business in the background of a viral TikTok:

> JERRY: The first day we had a dance troupe that came in and a girl posted a [TikTok] video of her rolling around and it got an insane—

> DEIDRE: It was like 4.3 million views! And the crazy part is the way I found out about it. We weren't tagged in it, so I didn't know. And I follow [an artist in the UK who made a print that hangs in one of the rooms]. *She* made a post and shared [the viral TikTok] and was like "Look, my art print is trending!" And so I was like "Hey, wait, our that's our business!"

A more reliable way to ensure content is properly tagged, then, is to form partnerships with influencers and other local creators. Some studios host special events for creators, inviting them to visit free of charge in exchange for spreading the word. One how-to e-Book encouraged new owners to cultivate relationships with both established influencers and those who are still growing their following in order to reach as wide an audience as possible (Holly-Carothers, 2021). Rachel's selfie studio is affiliated with her social media marketing agency, and she regularly invites her clients—many of whom are successful influencers with dynamic multiplatform presences—to create in the space, particularly when there are new sets to show off. Many other owners, such as Deidre and Jerry, regularly rent out their space to other companies for special shoots with brand ambassadors or spokespeople.[17] Taken together, these practices demonstrate how selfie studios and other businesses have been arranged into a sort of

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[17] On one occasion, Jerry and Deirdre even stepped in front of the camera when several brand ambassadors failed to show for a product shoot, inadvertently becoming influencers themselves!

imagined infrastructure of aspirational work in a time when influencer labor is becoming increasingly professionalized (Lopez, 2021, p. 122).

Conclusion

Perhaps the most pressing existential question facing the selfie studio industry is *"Isn't this essentially the same as a normal photo studio?"* Early coverage of made-for-Instagram pop-ups regarded them as inventions of a culture which privileged self-image over all else. Subsequent coverage of the selfie studio trend as it has 'migrated' out into the suburbs has similarly focused on its supposed ability to revitalize forgotten retail spaces with a fresh new idea. Even so, and as this thesis has already demonstrated, the answer to this question is rather complicated and depends on which specific attributes are being discussed. In the course of my research, though, I became fascinated by the degree to which it seemed like the industry itself could not seem to agree on a specific stance. On one hand, these spaces *were* new, or at least they were supposed to feel that way. Early customers and passersby seemed puzzled by the selfie studio's self-service approach to photography, presenting an early challenge to studio owners and forcing them to rehearse and revise the phrasing they used to pitch their business:

> TAYLOR: We spent the first month or two just, like, trying to get the wording
> right. Because [at the beginning] nobody understood, which was really strange.
> People know what selfies are, but whenever *we* say it's selfie, it didn't click…
> Like, nobody could really get what we meant when we said it. "Yeah, it's a selfie!
> You come in and you take your pictures." And they were like "Well, who's taking
> the pictures?" And we said "Well, it's a selfie, you know, like, *you* come in and
> take it!" and [still] nobody would get it. So, we've had to kind of tweak around

how we pitch it. … We settled on: "You come in, you take your own pictures, we give you the backdrops."

Still, public comprehension of the concept remains a little hazy, even though selfie studios serve many of the same purposes as traditional photography studios. The hole left by the decline of portrait studios, particularly those which were more affordable and therefore more accessible, was something Alisha, a trained photographer, quickly gleaned from her customers:

ALISHA: I opened it up to do more professional photos … because I noticed people are like "Well, I'm not into like the selfie thing, but I'm looking for a photographer for my kid…" or something like that. … You know, there used to be like JCPenney studios or Wal-Mart studios. Well, they don't have that anymore, right? I just want to bring that back, but just do a little bit of a little fun twist to it.

This response illustrates that Alisha and other owners perceive a logical connection between their selfie studios and extant models of photography which are familiar to her and to many of her clients. Her task, then, is imbuing the selfie studio experience with the elements that made JCPenney Portraits such a familiar and enduring experience for her and her customers: a sense of occasion, a sense of legitimacy, and a sense of purpose. She occasionally must explain to some clients that, unlike a portrait studio, the selfie studio experience does not come with prints. *But it could!* Alisha told me that she has considered installing a self-service photo printing kiosk in her store, similar to those found in Walgreen's and other drugstores, for customers to use at the end of their visit. Until then, and moving forward, Alisha hopes people will think beyond the "selfie" name and consider the versatility of these spaces for all kinds of clients:

ALISHA: A lot of people that don't know what we are. They think that we're just selfies. I just say, "You've got to think a little bit beyond what our name is." More than just taking your phone and holding it up, you know, we're there to provide for the photographer that doesn't have studio space. We're there for the influencer. We're there for the some of the boutiques that want to have a model come in and take pictures in front of our stuff to get content for their [social media]. We're all things, really.

Adapting to suit both clients' needs and their expectations has been a defining factor of these early days of the selfie studio industry, an industry that is still growing, changing, and defining itself. Whether designing new sets or filming promotional TikToks, selfie studio personnel routinely engage in creative labor, which is matched in this case by the technical skills and business savvy needed to run a small business. Selfie studios sit at the intersection of the 'old' and 'new' economies, confounding linear suggestions that e-commerce and digital entertainment will ultimately overcome brick-and-mortar by fusing the two. Media industry studies should orient itself towards the study of these businesses to understand how platformitization and metrification impact small business owners, as well as understand how the creative labor of social media posting has become a central component of running a small business in an age of increasing economic precarity.

Chapter 3

The Selfie Studio Experience

A visit to a selfie studio is an inherently productive activity, regardless of one's knack for photography or penchant for social media. Selfie studio customers go to a physical place for the purpose of producing new social media content, and these places serve as useful spaces where they work to articulate and perform certain aspects of their self and persona online. These spaces are, in their very name, defined by the kind of cultural production that occurs within their walls. Their interiors are designed to be camera-ready and exceptionally Instagrammable. This chapter attends to the creative work of ordinary visitors, examining the feelings, logics, and tastes which inform the content they create during their visit. In this chapter I draw primarily on interview responses ($n=12$) to consider the decisions and dynamics which structure the average visitor's experience of the selfie studio space. I use their experiences to demonstrate how selfie studios structure the creation of content into phases which parallel those of professional production, from pre-production (getting dressed beforehand) to shooting (experiencing the space during the visit) to post-production (browsing, editing, and sharing) and everything in between.

Content creation in broader context

Social media platforms like Instagram rely heavily on a steady stream of user-generated content to populate their feeds and keep user bases engaged, blurring the lines between producer and audience in the process. Elizabeth Bird (2011) observed: "It is harder than ever before to define specific acts of media use; being a media 'audience' member is basically what people do continually." (p. 512) Her work highlighted the shifting notions of producer and audience which have been upended by the proliferation of digital media. Consequently, media scholars have spent the last few decades grappling with this shift, offering various interpretive frameworks for

making sense of the increasingly inextricable fusion of creation and consumption. Among them is *produsage* – a portmanteau of production and usage – which conceives of a "hybrid process" (Bruns, 2007) in which users both consume and contribute to digital culture. Individuals caught up in this dynamic, referred to as *produsers*, often unwittingly or inadvertently participate in the creation of content vis-a-vis posting and commenting. In a seminal essay about cultural production on the internet, Tiziana Terranova (2000) described this work as *free labor* because users are rarely compensated for it even though it is immensely profitable for platforms. Reliance on user-generated content and data has since evolved into the sustaining model of most Internet platforms (Nieborg et al, 2022). This is particularly true for social media companies like Instagram, rely on users to engender the norms, conventions, and styles which keep their platforms fresh and relevant (Manovich, 2020, Leaver et al., 2021).

Potts et al (2008) noted the economic and cultural value of processes of *consumer co-creation,* through which "consumers participate creatively in the productive process both in production of content and innovation of services" (p. 4). The selfie studio model harnesses this co-creative approach by inviting ordinary people to create their own content against someone else's pre-made backdrops – backdrops which, in turn, have been stylized to suit a certain approximation of what visual aesthetics are already popular with users on the platform (Manovich, 2017; Manovich, 2020; Leaver et al, 2021). Selfie studio owners design backdrops based, at least in part, on insights gleaned from their own experiences as ordinary social media users. Indeed, Axel Bruns (2007) explained that the blurred lines of the digital era have also led to "fluid movement of individual produsers between different roles within the community and the produsage project." Therefore designing sets for a selfie studio relies on a sort of imagined consensus on what exactly customers might consider 'Instagrammable'. Likewise, taking photos

and videos at the selfie studio generally involves mimicking and/or remixing poses and styles commonly seen online.

In fact, producing digital content has emerged as a wildly lucrative enterprise in the era of influencer culture that is increasingly professionalized (Lopez, 2021, p. 112). Alice Marwick (2013) introduced the concept of *aspirational production* to describe the kind of work done by individuals looking to improve their social status – real or perceived – by engaging in routines of self-presentation and self-branding which generate idealized images and other forms of content intended for display and circulation. Crystal Abidin (2016) argued that selfies act as "latent commodities" (p. 15) that can give users more access to social capital and, in the case of influencers, financial rewards. Thus digital self-images should be understood as constructed texts, and media research should attend closely to their production and distribution, regardless of if their maker is an influencer or not. Understanding the creation of self-images in the selfie studio context requires us to consider the structural and affective elements of production and how these relate to the material and spatial dimensions of these places.

Although this concept is most frequently used to examine the content and persona of bona fide social media influencers, it might also be extended to the study of selfie studios as a framework for understanding the kind of production that takes place in these spaces. Terms like *influencer* or *micro-celebrity* certainly could not accurately describe the entire selfie studio customer base, but visitors to these spaces *are* willingly and enthusiastically partaking in similar processes of aspirational production that generate flattering images intended to be shown off online. This chapter therefore takes an expansive approach to the aspirational production framework, imagining the work of ordinary selfie studio customers as informed by the broader context of influencer marketing rather than necessarily contributing directly to it. The

overwhelming majority of selfie studio customers are stuck somewhere between *produser* and *influencer,* consciously creating content intended for a wider audience without chasing a dream of being a professional influencer.

Preparing to visit

Participants expressed various motivations for visiting a selfie studio, but each acknowledged that they were intrigued by the base premise of taking cool photos to post later. Most participants visited with groups of friends, usually for some sort of occasion like a birthday or while on vacation. Each participant reflected heavily on the social dynamics during their visit. Will visited a selfie studio as a bonding experience with teammates from work. Rebecca needed new pictures to post to celebrate her birthday and announce a new job. Three participants—Ricky, Kiara, and Chrissy—went on dates to the selfie studio.[18] Each of these visits fit into existing social routines while also retaining a crucial sense of occasion which motivated them to both pre-plan to some degree, usually by selecting a special outfit, and post photos afterwards, legitimizing their visit as *something that happened* which might be appealing to their followers.

For others, a certain sense of exclusivity may even be a primary motivator for visiting a selfie studio in the first place. For many, knowing that crowds of other people had visited was part of the overall appeal. Ryan reflected on how exclusivity can also be derived from a sense of temporality, as pop-ups and installations in large cities like New York, where he lives, are often open for a limited time only. He and his friends would plan in advance to avoid missing out on short-term engagements such as 29rooms, Refinery29's "funhouse of style, culture, and creativity" (R29 Brand Experiences, 2021), or the free-to-the-public Museum of Feelings:

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[18] See Appendix C for short biographies of each participant which list their motivations for visiting a selfie studio in greater detail.

RYAN: "It just felt really exclusive. You could tell that people were really there intentionally for this. I remember it was a thing that was circulating like, *the thing to do* was to go to the Museum of Feelings."

Few, if any, participants expected that their visit to a selfie studio would serve as a launchpad toward wealth or influencer status. Still, these spaces were understood as sites where they could "feel themselves" in ways that were fun, glamorous, and affirming. Participants also seemed to understand that these spaces *could* be used in earnest by influencers and other industrious individuals looking to churn out content and boost their status online, even though none of them explicitly stated that they visited in order to do so.

Looking the part

Many explained that the creative process began even before arrival, usually when selecting an outfit to wear. Ricky, for example, ordered new clothes online specifically to wear for his visit. Others coordinated outfits with friends, while some even looked at images of the selfie studio in advance in order to determine which looks would work best. Looking good on social media was the primary motivator behind dressing a certain way, but Ryan also considered the way his appearance might look in the moment:

RYAN: You have to prepare. I think… I know, especially going into these at the height of when I felt like I was always going to be on camera, so I was always dressing my best because, outside of even taking your own selfies, you can always be in someone else's photos.

Indeed, the right outfit remained a consideration even during the experience. David told me that when he first got into the sprinkle pool at the Museum of Ice Cream, he felt sort of unsure how to

pose for photos in it. All he could remember was thinking, "Does my sweater match these sprinkles?" His thinking demonstrates the in-the-moment strategic theorizing that many selfie studio visitors do during their visit. Though these places are ostensibly meant to be immersive experiences, visitors' minds stay concentrated on taking pictures, and David's instinctive thought about his sweater's visual compatibility with his surroundings suggests that these spaces are primarily navigated through the lens of the camera. The camera in question is most often a phone camera, and occasionally through a social media platform's in-app camera feature themselves. The phone (and its applications) therefore becomes an essential physical attachment during the experience, whether customers like it or not:

> WILL: I'm honestly not a huge selfie person, so it was kind of annoying to have to keep using my phone to do the activity. … To have fun with it, you have to use your phone.

Both Will's and David's reflections illustrate the ways in which selfie studio/museum customers are guided through these spaces by production logics focused on securing the best photos and social media content. Visitors thus explore selfie studios as a sort of avatar, readying themselves to be photographed at any time. This networked mindset is a defining part of the selfie studio experience, demonstrating that these spaces are *used* by customers at least as much as they are *experienced* by them.

Many participants explicitly reflected on what they wore, with some admitting to regretting their choice in hindsight—some wished that they had worn a more neutral outfit, while others should have gone bolder. A few remembered noticing that their selfie studio had an onsite changing area, which would have allowed them to bring multiple outfits. Rebecca was the only

participant who mentioned that she actually used this booth, jokingly recounting that her frequent

outfit changes probably drew the ire of the photographer who accompanied her.

Considering outfits (and makeup, hairstyle, etc.) before, during, and after a selfie studio

visit demonstrates the individual's responsibility to produce a camera-ready version of

themselves in time for their visit. Selecting the right outfit often involved balancing a desire to

compliment the backdrop while also standing out enough to be the obvious subject of the photo.

These experiences also demonstrate participants' consciousness of the *glance,* which Diana Zulli

(2019) described as an awareness that one is being or might be observed which impacts the ways

in which they engage in self-presentation. Because the selfie studio is widely understood as

something which is meant to be shown off, most customers make several decisions ahead of their

visit which impact the final product of the content they create there. Outfit choice is irreversible,

so visitors must get it right before they arrive to guarantee that their photos are useable.

Being social

In addition to their productive affordances, selfie studios also constitute a dynamic social

environment for customers and their peers. Individuals take on various in-group roles meant to

assist in the production process, from acting as a 'hype person' to keep their friends at ease in

front of the camera to holding jackets during shoots. Perhaps the most important of these roles is

that of the *designated photographer*, a role which is either formally bestowed on an individual or

which changes based on the scene or who is in front of the camera. Ryan, a photographer by

trade, found himself playing this role by default, pairing his technical knowledge with his

familiarity with his friends' style to create bespoke shots for each:

RYAN: As the designated photographer [in my group], I feel like I called the shots. I also understand my closest friends' social media profiles and presence, so it's like some people are like "Oh, *show me!*" while other people are like "Oh, let me hide my face…"

The role of the designated photographer can also be determined by the camera technology itself, as in Daisy's case:

DAISY: "I actually took all the photos, and that's because my phone was better than my friend's. I feel like that's always a conversation when you're going to any place with friends and you know that you're going to take photos."

In almost every case, the designated photographer is chosen in order to generate the highest quality images. Ryan was chosen for his skill, while Daisy was chosen because she had the better phone. That groups make designations like this suggests a desire to generate flattering, high-quality images in the space rather than simply take pictures. While being the designated photographer might be a badge of honor, it also comes with a serious set of responsibilities. Ryan discussed how this role required him to be "the person who would get on the ground and all…" in order to secure the best angles for his friends. The stakes are higher than they seem, and failure to perform might even result in being reprimanded or replaced!

Many explained that it was often hard to decide how to pose with certain sets, especially when there weren't as many props to facilitate the pictures for them. Accordingly, another key social experience of the selfie studio was observing others for inspiration. This was often done while waiting in line or walking to the next destination:

RYAN: There was a lot of waiting, but I would see someone taking an image and

be like "Wow! I like that angle." … so we had to stay behind a little bit to take it

in that same pose.

Several participants had similar experiences and reported that patterns of watching sometimes

led to camaraderie with strangers. Daisy talked about how she and her friend repeatedly engaged

with other visitors during their experience, often hyping each other up and suggesting poses for

each other. While these patterns of watching and interaction were largely perceived as positive,

they occasionally inhibited the photographic process. For example, Ricky suggested that he and

his date felt uncomfortable showing public displays of affection as a result.

Managing equipment

Though visitors are expected to furnish their own cameras, most selfie studios provide tools

meant to assist with the photographic process, and thus tweaking and managing equipment have

become a key aspect of the customer's selfie studio experience. Accordingly, attending to

customers' use of these tools offers invaluable insight into the production logics which guide

them as they create content in these spaces. Using these tools is not expressly required to

participate, but could be necessary in order to attain a certain level of quality, as is often the case

with lighting, something many participants recognized as essential for taking photos:

MICAH: If you're going to do a selfie museum – or, like, a selfie *anything* – you

have to have good lighting. It defeats the purpose if you don't!

In order to guarantee good lighting, most selfie studios provide their customers with ring lights,

high intensity lighting appliances which have become closely identified with selfie culture

themselves thanks to their widespread use in influencer-type spaces. This familiarity, paired of

course with their utility, has established ring lights as a fixture in the selfie studio model, where their presence is ubiquitous. On one site visit, for example, I counted nearly twenty-five ring lights which had been set up by the studio staff, including at least one stationed at each backdrop.

Ring lights help put the *studio* in a selfie studio by filling each set with light and aiming it directly at the subject in a manner reminiscent of a film set or traditional portrait studio. Most ring light models even allow users to alter the intensity, color, and saturation of the light to suit their preferences. Even so, the relative simplicity of ring lights design means that users need little to no understanding of these elements to decide for themselves which settings look best for their photo. In addition, ring lights are frequently used to hold the camera in place, as many come with a built-in phone clip and are attached to tripods which can be adjusted for height.

Many selfie studios also provide remote control phone attachments – referred to as "clickers" by many participants – which allow users to snap a photo while posing. When these tools are available, they give customers the ability to frame the perfect shot from wherever they are. They also allow the entire party to appear in a photo together. Without a clicker, either another person would have to take the photo or the customer would be relegated to front-camera selfies, which often cannot capture the full set and complicate the use of some props.

> RICKY: It was actually really convenient, because we would just set up the phone and then one of us would stand behind the camera to see if the angles were good and everything … and then just come [back into the frame] and take the picture using the clicker.

Despite these conveniences, though, using clickers requires some creativity in order to obscure them from the camera's view, usually by posing a certain way:

CHRISSY: In some pictures I have my hand on my hip or like behind my back strategically, because [the remote] came with a long string that wrapped around your wrist. So you had to get it to where it wasn't noticeable. … I chose poses where I could hide it more easily."

RICKY: If you don't hide it, it's very obvious … because it's, like, a black remote and it's very contrasting against, like, a neon green background. We would always try to hide it by either putting it behind us or, you know, crossing our arms and tucking it in there.

Hyper-visible clickers and/or glares from ring lights, for example, could necessitate an instant delete-and-try-again. Attention to these tools carried on even after visits concluded. Chrissy explained that she chose not to edit and post certain pictures because of a visible clicker, while others worried that their workaround poses were too obvious. Managing the (in)visibility of equipment thus becomes the responsibility of the customer, who must keep them in mind when framing each shot as well as be on the lookout for them in "post-production."

Editing and sharing

Since selfie studios and museums are designed to be uber Instagrammable, editing and sharing photos from their visit is a crucial step in customers' production process. Though most edit and share their photos after their visit, some begin sharing *during* the experience, usually via Instagram or Snapchat stories. Rushing to post during a visit further echoes Rebecca Coleman's (2020) notion that digital media have led to a heightened feeling of "always-onness," a mediated experience of the present in which one feels constantly and instantaneously connected to others via digital media despite time or physical location. Selfie studio customers therefore must make

decisions about how to document and broadcast their experiences in the moment, if they are doing so at all. Miranda, for example, cautioned that posting in the moment leaves little time for editing, so she recommended posting things that are more casual or playful, like Instagram stories or Boomerangs. When asked how she determined which sets were best for Boomerangs, she explained:

> MIRANDA: We mostly took a lot of photos, but there were some videos. There were some things at the Museum of Ice Cream—especially the first [visit], when it was more of an experience—that you wanted to take a video or a Boomerang of. Like, they had swings in the rooms, so like that made a fun Boomerang.

Making these sorts of decisions often involve quick forethought about the ways in which content will be used later on, leading many to intentionally differentiate the form, tone, and channel of the content they post during the visit from those they will use later. Belinda also posted a few stories during each of her visits, showing off the sets or 'previewing' the 'real' photos still to come. Testing content out with followers ahead of time via stories and other 'soft' forms of posting gives customers a working sense of how their followers would react to their posts later on, while also providing a sense of fulfillment and framing the visit itself as something that is *happening.* Ephemeral posts like stories, which often disappear after a certain time, also took some of the pressure off customers and allowed them to be more playful or to try new things. Belinda, for instance, liked that the stories allowed her to add music or stickers to the scene, something which she knew she would not do in the eventual Instagram post.

As with many other commodities, the selfie studio is rarely the only location where a certain image or social media post is 'worked' on, as much of the editing, tagging, and posting of the content occurs offsite and later down the road. Still, many participants explained that the

process began onsite during their visit, usually by determining which photos might be good enough to post:

> JESSIE: Going into a space like this, you already know that you're going to be posting on social media. I just remember my roommate – already, while we were there – was like already going through her photos, 'favoriting' them, picking the ones that she was going to put online. And so I was like… 'I guess I should do the same thing? … We spent the subway ride [home] instead of, you know, just chatting with each other, … we're looking at our phones and we're, like, choosing the photos.

Mobile phones offer instant access to photos and videos taken during a selfie studio visit, whereas visiting a portrait studio usually incurs a wait time during which the photographer edits the photo. Jessie's response highlights the role of this innate instantaneity in the selfie studio experience by speaking to the ways in which it structures 'down time' in the studio space and beyond. Customers spend a portion of their visit setting the scene and posing in front of the camera, while also working on their products behind the scenes. A rush to edit and post also influences the social dynamics of the group by keeping their focus on the phone and photos even after the experience has ended. Micah noted that she and her cousins spent several minutes sending photos back and forth between each other at the end of their visit, as the images had been scattered between their phones. Despite having little to do with actual editing, this kind of coordination is nevertheless a key aspect of the production process.

When it came time to actually edit and post the photos, many participants found themselves with several hundred 'raw' (read: unedited) images to choose from. Some credited the overwhelming number of photos with their decision not to post immediately, or to only post a

few highlights at first. Participants generally followed their own logics when creating posts out of the photos, keeping the audience in mind while doing so. Ricky, for instance, arranged his photos in ROYGBIV order according to the color of the backdrop and added a corresponding caption about living life "in color" Others followed different schemes based on their assumptions about what their followers might want to see:

> KIARA: "When it comes to posting pictures, I try to, like, balance it.. For example, if I'm doing, like, peace signs in some pictures, and in other pictures like I'm holding my hands, I try to, like, spread out the peace signs. … So like basically, it will not be like, 'Dang! This is the same exact thing every time!'"

Some, like Kiara and Ricky, chose to post the photos in a single Instagram post – a 'photo dump' – which made balance and cohesion more important. Others, like Miranda, trickled them out over time in a series of posts which often focused on one color or one set in particular. Making conceptual decisions like these demonstrates strategic thinking on the part of selfie studio customers, who must balance their desire to post photos with both their capacity to edit them and their followers' appetite to see them. Creating a summary photo dump might yield more likes and comments all at once, whereas trickling them out slowly might sustain engagement over time and allow for more careful editing. Rebecca, for example, used photos from different sets for different reasons: one to celebrate her birthday, another to announce a new job and a move overseas, and others to post for fun. This backlog of photos demonstrates the sort of abundance (Sturken, 2017) that has been a key affordance of photography throughout its history. Customers leave the selfie studio with plenty of photos to sort through and post later, and therefore it is likely that their followers will only see a precious few while the rest of the photos are left unposted but nevertheless retained by the customer for use or viewing sometime in the future.

Social dynamics also played a large role in determining which content to post, particularly in the case of those who visited on a date. Ricky, who visited on a first date which never really panned out into anything, posted only solo pictures of himself. When her relationship ended, Kiara noticed that her ex had either archived or deleted the post from their visit, so she did the same. Her decision to do so several months after her visit reflects the long afterlives of selfie studio content, while also affirming their connection to the experience of visiting with someone.

Conclusion

As image-producers working in a distinct production environment, interviewees often exhibited the kind of reflexivity and self-theorizing (Caldwell, 2008) about their selfie studio experiences as media professionals generally do about the production spaces they work in. For instance, several participants reflected on the *convenience* of the selfie studio for people who otherwise would not have access to professional-looking backdrops. Marshall (2021) observed that digital media emphasize a sense of *industrialized agency* characterized by new levels of cultural comfort with the visibility and commodification of the self. Selfie studios appeal to an individual's sense of industrialized agency through the promise of a more authentic or professional production space where one might produce tantalizingly glamorous photos of themselves without the burden of having to arrange these things for oneself:

> RICKY: The only thing you have to worry about is posing and looking good. … It seems like such a professional setting, so you'd think you would need, like, a high quality camera or something like that. The fact that you can use your phone and still feel like you're still getting that professional photoshoot set feel is really cool.

Especially with the [remote control clicker] and all that stuff … it really makes it

convenient to get the pictures you want without having to do a lot.

The selfie studio's highly stylized, made-to-be-photographed interiors are notable because they

do not necessarily attempt to be realistic, but instead aim to be fun and evocative. Many

participants reflected on the feeling of performing for the camera with the selfie studio as a sort

of stage. This is something which really stuck out to Daisy, who felt like they were an

unintentional commentary on the superficiality of Instagram and social media writ large:

DAISY: Yes, it's forced, but we're in on the joke. We know it's forced. That's the

whole reason we're here. You know, versus taking lots of photos posed in another

situation. I know it's goofy, I know that it's silly – that's why we're here. … It's

so campy, and I think that's why I was surprised how much I liked the experience.

I thought I would feel weird taking pictures in front of other people, but everyone

was just like "Yes! That looks so good." or "Let me take a photo for you!" So,

like, everyone is doing some sort of performative camp… because when else am I

sitting in a throne surrounded by flamingos? With flowers everywhere? When

else would you stumble across a room made of disco balls? It's a manufactured

environment on purpose. It's fake on purpose.

The idea that selfie studios are "fake on purpose" encapsulates the logic of being photographed

simply for the sake of being photographed. Daisy's invocation of *camp* is reminiscent of a

passage from Susan Sontag's *Notes on Camp* (1964) which stated that "Camp sees everything in

quotation marks" (p. 4). Nothing in the selfie studio is attempting to replicate the scenarios and

settings which its visitor would encounter in real life; doing so would make them seem obsolete.

Instead, these environments suspend reality to certain degree and transport customers to aesthetic

dreamscapes in order to produce images which are inherently glamorous, silly, and flattering. The next chapter demonstrates how the distinctive visual culture of the selfie studio places quotation marks on everything its sets are trying to represent— among them "youth", "money", and "history"—and reimagines them within the bounds of current aesthetic styles and tastes.

Furthermore, Jessie noted that the atmosphere and built environment of the selfie studio facilitated the production process in a way that an ordinary setting would not:

> JESSIE: You go into these things already knowing you're trying to get the right shot or trying to get something that will interest or attract other attention. … And I think there's a reason why it's not, like, just concrete. You could go into a place that has nothing. And then, I guess you could take some photos, but it's like there has to be some kind of, like, object or some kind of, like, focus or sensory thing and, you know, making it all like…. lights and glitter and stuff. [It] makes it fun.

This quote reminds us that the selfie studio is, in fact, an experience of photography so much as it is a physical space or media enterprise. Underlying this logic though, is its purpose: these spaces are meant to be *used,* and customers must still make deliberate choices about how they will use them. From dressing to posing to operating equipment, selfie studio customers are engaging in what Crystal Abidin (2016) calls *tacit labor,* or work that is "understated and under-visibilized" (p. 10) yet underlies content creation. Visitors' consciousness of themselves and their appearance, derided by some cultural commentators as a manifestation of vanity and self-absorption, is more of an acknowledgement that people will be seeing the photos they are creating (Zulli, 2019). Selfie studio visits often involve lots of in-the-moment experimentation, further judgment being ascribed to photos in the 'post-production' stage that follows, during which rounds of selecting and editing also occur. These choices reflect their own tastes and

consciousness of what kinds of photos suit both their physical bodies and their social media personae.

Chapter 4

The Visual Culture of the Selfie Studio

Selfie studios are hyper-stylized aesthetic environments whose physical interiors are designed to be photographed. Studio personnel arrange set pieces, props, and lighting elements into cohesive ready-made photo backdrops meant to evoke a certain time, place, or vibe—and often all three at once—that facilitates the picture-taking process. Though they are physical, material spaces, these three-dimensional spaces are designed to complement the aspect ratio and image quality of a user's camera, usually on a mobile phone. One writer described a popular selfie museum as "a little rough around the edges, but that doesn't matter in a 1:1 photo" (Mazouri, 2018). While other sensory elements like music, scent, or taste (as in the case of The Museum of Ice Cream or pop-up experiences that serve photogenic foods) may be incorporated into a certain set, these things are usually less prominent than those which can be captured by the camera, and instead serve as added perks which accentuate the visitor's experience of the space. Hence the selfie studio is a space clearly oriented towards the visual, and accordingly this chapter explores their visuality by surveying the tropes and trends which most often characterize their design. I use the example of selfie studio sets to examine how this emerging concept of *templatability* (Leaver et al., 2020; Abidin & Kaye, 2021) can be expanded to include material and spatial templates for social media content.

Templatability on social media

Intrigued by the visual sameness of many users' Instagram content, Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin (2020) developed the concept of *templatability* to describe the prevalence of easily reproducible aesthetics and forms in modern digital culture. They define *templates* as "visually memorable and memorizable visual stylings, settings and practices that can be replicated with

relative ease to the extent that they become, for a period of time, iconic" (p. 214). A template

emerges when a certain content style is widely mimicked, remixed, and proliferated across the

platform, spurred by the virality of similar posts and subsequent use by influencers, brands, and

other influential users. Though templatability was first used to describe the repetitiveness of

visual content, Abidin and Kaye (2021) quickly expanded the concept to describe audio content

on TikTok, where the creation and sharing of reproducible 'sounds' created by other users is a

defining feature of the platform. This incorporation of templatability into TikTok's design and

user experience illustrates a phenomenon Kaye, Chen, and Zeng (2021) term *circumscribed*

creativity, in which digital content creation is structured and facilitated by platform affordances.

On Instagram and TikTok, for example, the use of templates is encouraged by *both* algorithms

and peer engagement, thus "[resulting] in a wealth of content that ends up being aesthetically

similar." (Abidin & Kaye, 2021, p. 60). The following sections describe the visual environment

of selfie studios, illuminating how their design promotes templatablity to suggest that selfie

studio sets themselves can be thought of as *material templates* for content creation.

The visual environment of selfie studios

The visual environment of the selfie studio is made up of interactive, evocative elements that

make up "a complex and richly varied whole" (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 3). Attending to

the visual culture of the selfie studio thus requires consideration of both the sets themselves, built

by owners and personnel, and the ways in which customers use and make sense of these sets.

Selfie studios are sites of what digital culture theorist Leve Manovich characterizes as

aesthetic visual communication (Manovich, 2017, p. 41), noting three common types of

Instagram photos: casual, professional, and designed. Photos taken in selfie studios would be

classified as *designed* because they evidence the convergence of formal photography and modern

graphic design (Manovich, 2017, p. 67), even if their camera-readiness effectively automates some of the work that usually goes into creating aesthetic-matching content in the first place. Selfie studio personnel do the work of bringing these visions to life. While themes and set decoration may vary, selfie studios across the country tend to follow a similar visual style. This style is defined by bold, attention-grabbing visuals such as bright colors, strong lighting, and large set pieces. The elements of this style are rarely understated, and few sets strive to recreate scenes which can be found elsewhere in everyday life. Instead, most embrace their fabrication head-on, embodying playfulness, fantasy, and a certain degree of abstraction. That most of these businesses default to this style on their own demonstrates the pervasiveness of what Manovich (2020) termed *Instagramism,* a new artistic and cultural *-ism* which "[focuses on] mood and atmosphere rather than the representation or communication of emotions" (p. 200).

Selfie studios also rely on clear delineations of space in order to maintain order. These spaces are built to be navigated at least partially through the lens of a phone camera, and the design of these spaces often accounts for the ubiquity of phones in its design. These include interactive elements such as QR codes and touch screen displays that assist with navigation or give ideas for poses at each set. And sets are highly stylized, the spaces in between are often left plain or untouched—concreate floors, overhead lighting, etc.—to provide a sense of contrast that simultaneously highlights the various sets *and* transports the customer between them. Even at more highbrow selfie museums like The Museum of Ice Cream, hallways and corridors are left relatively plain and understated in order to facilitate movement and disincentivize rogue picture taking. In this sense, selfie studios are very similar to a theatre, with obvious differences between onstage and backstage areas, both of which must be carefully managed by personnel.

Transitions between onstage and backstage areas, for example, must be reliably smooth to avoid disrupting the creative process or taking customers "out" of the experience. Even though backstage areas are visible to (and utilized by) customers during their visit, even the tiniest lapses in illusion can be detrimental to the content they create. During our interview, Micah recalled some set walls being low enough that industrial features could be seen in her pictures, which required a lot of corrective editing on her part and simply disqualified some pictures from being posted. "Of course you know it's a set, but you don't want to see, like, the ceiling," she remarked. Hoping to avoid a similar situation, many selfie studio owners make extensive alterations to their spaces before opening; Deidre and Jerry, for instance, had all of their electrical wires rerouted through the ceiling so that outlets and wires were not visible in photos.

Visual and thematic hallmarks of selfie studio sets

While a vast array of selfie studio sets exist around the country, during my research I have identified four recurring trends which persist throughout: color, nostalgia, juvenescence, and aspiration. Each has its own distinct visual and thematic style, which I explore in detail below.

Color

The use of bold colors is foundational to virtually every selfie studio set and provides them with an immediate sense of visual cohesion. Sets are usually anchored by one color, painted on walls *and* floors in order to *flatten* the space, a process which helps transform the three-dimensional space of the set into a two-dimensional image (Zilberman, 2020). Manovich (2020) writes that designed photos on Instagram often "flatten the space and use large areas empty of any details" (p. 201) to accentuate the subject. Indeed, selfie studio sets—particularly standard sets which are organized around color—emphasize only a few props or set pieces while leaving most of the

space plain enough to be flattened. From an architectural perspective, Nitzan Zilberman (2020) considers *flattening* the definitive strategy used by selfie museums to articulate their design, and notes that the flattening of space does not only affect its visual depth:

> By using this method, the Selfie Museums make the case that they are not simply a green screen into which anyone can Photoshop themselves, but a physical and constructed spatial occurrence. … The room and photograph are flattened one on top of the other and are recognized as both a space and as an image; as two-dimensional and three-dimensional; as both art and commerce. (p. 126)

As Zilberman describes in her work, flattening is what makes selfie studio sets functional by neatly facilitating the transition from space to image. This strategy directly aids in the production of social media content by ensuring the selfie studio's compatibility with image-based media, thus highlighting selfie studio designers' built-in contributions to the content creation that occurs in these spaces. This strategy also serves to distinguish selfie studios and selfie museums from other spaces where photos and videos are commonly taken, such as "real" museums, by underscoring the intentional camera-readiness of selfie studio interior spaces.

Some selfie studio sets forego conceptual theming and merely rely on color to create an environment that is aesthetically pleasing and stimulating enough for customers to take photos in. These rooms usually pair colorful set pieces with matching walls to create a distinct space defined by color. Slight variations in shade, gradation, and texture spare these rooms from being truly monochromatic, instead using the chosen color as a unifying theme for the space. These rooms are often decorated with some sort of funky seating, like a red couch shaped like pursed lips in a red room, and corresponding décor in the same color. These color schemes are rarely repeated throughout the selfie studio in order to distinguish sets from one another and encourage

visitors to utilize each. This variation is both a visual strategy and a business one, as it guarantees that customers walk away with a swath of content which looks obviously different regardless of their poses or other stylistic choices. The color scheme of each set might also influence when and how it is posted online; in the last chapter, for example, Ricky shared that he arranged his photos in rainbow order before posting.

For some selfie studio customers, plain colorful backdrops are Instagrammable enough on their own. During her visit, Belinda watched some of her friends purposely avoid set pieces and props in order to get shots against the colored wall:

> BELINDA: Instead of using the whole background with the props, some people just used the colors. You know, red room, green room, orange room, pink room. Some just wanted to take pictures with the colors in the background and, I guess, have *them* be accented instead of the props and stuff.

Others might not be so impressed, evidenced by some guests' puzzlement when presented with a simple set consisting of colored walls and a matching sign:

> TAYLOR: We did have one area that was—it was very pretty—it was like a very bright teal. And it was just like a really pretty teal area… and nobody went there! I think we had like a vinyl "Passion" [wall art] or something on the wall. But they were like "Well, there's nothing to do right here." So, they [moved on to] something where they could pick something up and put it on or, you know, like hold on to something or touch something… Even if it was *just cute*, they weren't going to do it because it wasn't anything for them to actually do.

Indeed, sets with props and interactive elements tend to eclipse simple colored sets in popularity.

Even so, themed sets like the ones which will be described in the next few sections also rely heavily on color to create a certain look or atmosphere, particularly through lighting. Colored lighting is frequently used to add a sense of allure to each space, most often emanating from a neon-style sign that is prominently displayed on the wall. These signs spell out a word or phrase meant to give some context to the space, these are sometimes the only elements added to their set. Examples include a sign that reads "Feelings" in a red room, since red is commonly associated with love and romance, or "Don't worry, be happy" in a yellow room, since yellow is often linked with happiness. Their words can also be tied to themes or specific set pieces, as evidenced by the set in Figure 3 which emblazoned "Hotline Bling," the title of a popular 2016 song by Canadian rapper Drake about longing for a call from a lover, above a set of four vintage telephones. Regardless of their message, these signs function as a sort of built-in caption for the photos taken in these spaces, and therefore often tacitly prompt the poses and behaviors being captured. Colored light also effectively acts as a material filter for a customer's photo, eliminating some of the need for post-visiting editing by incorporating visual effects into the experience of the space. The image in Figure 4 shows a room at the Museum of Ice Cream where little else besides pink, fluorescent light fills the space.

Nostalgia

Another hallmark of selfie studio style uses certain sets and props to invoke cultural nostalgia for simpler times. Nostalgia is most often enacted through atmosphere, relying on the tactful arrangement of several material and visual signifiers to give off a sense of the past that is both affective and satisfying. Kinston and McHugh (2015) explained that nostalgia "is less about time (a specific history) and more about diffuse longing – less about home (a specific geography) and more about cultivating sensual environs (pastness)" (p. 488). Nostalgic selfie studio sets render a

Figure 3. A set from Selfie WRLD VB in Virginia Beach, VA featuring vintage telephones and a neon sign.
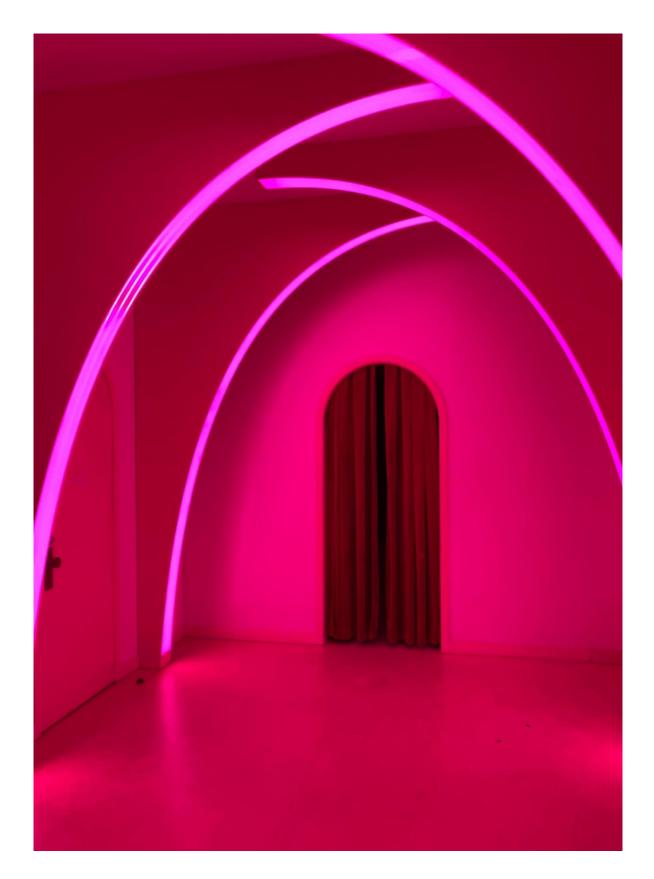
Figure 4. A room at the Museum of Ice Cream in New York City, NY that is illuminated by pink light.

blissfully uncomplicated version of the past which matches the bold visuals of the selfie studio and the aesthetic tastes of the present. Black-and-white visual histories become colorful and vivacious, while statis pasts are reanimated and made material, tactile, and interactive. For instance, many selfie studios offer a 1950s-style diner counter set straight out of *Happy Days*, complete with leather swivel barstools, a colorful jukebox, and checkered linoleum floors. Visitors can be photographed sipping a milkshake with their love interest, but these sets need to be versatile enough that singles can use them too, so there are usually enough milkshakes to go around.

For younger guests, these environments can serve as a sort of imperfect encounters with historical artifacts, such as old phones:

> ALISHA: And then there's the "old-timey" phone, which is not really—I grew up with cord phones, so it's not really "old-timey" for me. But yeah, it's funny seeing the younger generation be like "What is that?" Or the records… They'll be like "Those are cool CDs!" And it's like… "No." [laugh] So there's an educational value too…

These selfie studio histories histories rarely strive for authenticity, eschewing accuracy and instead presenting a sort of abstract vision of the past meant to be more Instagrammable than representative. Certain artifacts are largely removed from their original contexts and functions. Vinyl records are strewn all over the walls without a turntable in sight, repurposed into visual shorthand for the midcentury era. Indeed, the popular visuals and styles of one period either fall into obscurity or become visual shorthand for an approximated past. Nostalgic selfie studio sets, like 'Old-Time' novelty photo studios before them, seek to satisfy a certain "collective longing" (Hagwood, 2022) for the simpler times by placing customers into a feel-good, no-strings-

attached version of the past which they can enter and exit as they please. While nostalgia sets can be found in selfie studios everywhere, some even base their whole premise around it, such as the Home of the '90s Museum in Concord, North Carolina. In this space, a converted house which originated as an Airbnb, guests can ditch the terrible 2020s for a refreshing dose of Nicktoons, *Fresh Prince,* and girl power. Because, as owner Jessica Jones put it in an interview with *Travel Noire*: "The 90s is that one decade that everyone loves" (Taylor, 2021).

Juvenescence

Many selfie studios deal in a sort of restorative juvenescence, a return to childlike wonder and amazement, using sets which recreate various artifacts of childhood such as swings, slides, and—perhaps most famously—ball pits. These sets exude an air of playfulness that appeals to customers' fond memories of their own childhood. Scholars have observed that nostalgia for childhood encourages the reenactment of certain activities or consumption practices from one's youth, a trend which has increased significantly in recent years (Baxter, 2016; Cross, 2018). Indeed, the popularity of childlike selfie studio sets demonstrates that childhood nostalgia similarly motivates people to seek out affective experiences of play that remind them of their youth. One such set I visited included several large inflatables—donuts, gummi bears, ice cream cones, fruit, et cetera—a child-sized chair and table set, and a foam puzzle piece floor mat (see Figure 5). These elements were used to create a highly aestheticized vision of childhood that was both visually stimulating *and* interactive. In particular, its designer(s) played around with scale to convey their vision. From an adult's perspective, some elements (such as the inflatable ice cream cone) were oversized, making the subject look smaller in comparison. Others, like the table and chair set, were too small and thus made the subject look giant. This incongruency accentuated the childlike setting by eschewing glamor and seriousness, instead mandating a sense of playfulness.
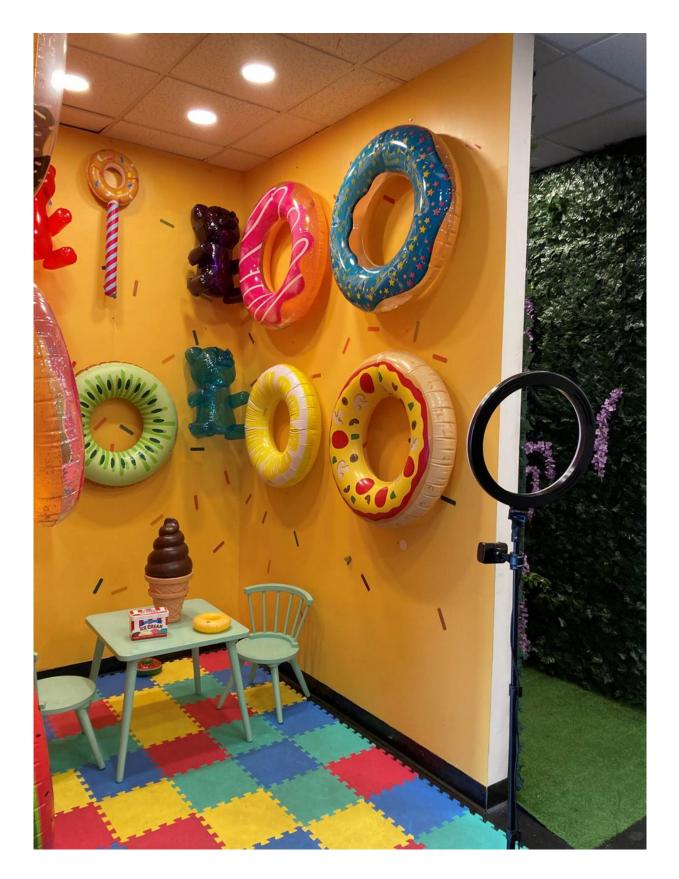
Figure 5. A set from WerkItRVA Selfie Museum in Richmond, VA that features sweets and childlike elements.

Selfie studios have gained a reputation for featuring adult-size playground equipment, with many popular press narratives about selfie studios focusing on their use of ball pits. The original ball pit concept is usually attributed to Eric McMillan, a playground designer who unveiled the first ball pit (originally dubbed the "ball crawl") in Canada in 1972. They became immensely popular in subsequent decades, largely due to their widespread installation at Chuck E. Cheese-style pizza parlors and in McDonald's PlayPlaces (Goukassian, 2019). Though they were initially designed as an easy-to-clean alternative to other play areas, anxieties about safety and sanitation eventually led to a short decline. In recent years, though, ball pits have had a sort of revival, likened to the adult coloring books and other forms of nostalgic escapism popular in the 2010s (Goukassian, 2019). In the process, ball pits have regained visibility as a sort of selfie studio staple[19], where they are widely acknowledged customer favorite:

> ALISHA: We just got a cast iron bathtub and filled it with little play balls, and that is probably our number one favorite room. I had bought a thousand of those little play balls and then put them in that bathtub... and they would go everywhere. But everyone enjoys it. … All ages, from like babies all the way to like fifty-year-olds, they just jump in that bathtub. So that's one product that we'll probably never get rid of, because we get so much laughter out of the whole bathtub experience.

For most selfie studio visitors, set pieces like ball pits and slides need little explanation. Their kinetic orientation also helps to reframe the selfie studio as a true *experience* rather than a simple

[19] Selfie studio ball pits come in all shapes and sizes. Some are "classic" ball pits—standard containers filled with balls—but other times they are bespoke creations meant to match a larger theme, such as The Museum of Ice Cream's sprinkle pool, which is filled with long, pastel-colored plastic "sprinkles" instead of spherical balls.

photography studio. Set elements like these also facilitate a more authentic photo-taking process by giving users something to do in the photo, particularly if they are not inclined to posing:

> DAISY: [It worked best] when it was an obvious environment like, you know, even the ball pit. Because then it's like me *doing something* in the ball pit versus like… standing next to the ball pit. I guess it's like the active motion part of it, where I'm doing something so it doesn't feel like I'm posing.

It is important to note, though, that it is not so easy as merely transplanting a playground slide into a selfie studio – these things instead must be *adapted* to suit the space and the grown-up sensibilities (and physicalities) of their audience. In other words, these set pieces must be big enough to fit adults, aesthetically appealing enough to entice them in (and to be photographed), and—particularly in the case of swings and slides—thrilling enough to deliver a truly mirthful experience. For example, the giant slide at the Museum of Ice Cream is several stories tall and, although it was our favorite part of the visit, my friend and I were both surprised by how fast it moved. (This also precluded us from taking photos while sliding down!) But while these elements must be reworked to accommodate adults, they are usually done so in a way that will not preclude children from partaking either. We visited the Museum of Ice Cream on a Saturday morning—prime birthday party hours—and found many playground-style pieces swarmed by *real* children. (Needless to say, their parents were snapping tons of photos as they played.) Accordingly, we found it funny (and were a little relieved) when we arrived at the infamous Sprinkle Pool to find an adjacent pool marked "Adults Only."

Aspiration

Practices and patterns of made-for-social media self-portraiture have been heavily influenced by celebrity culture. Marwick (2015) explains that those social media users who are most successful in "gaining attention often reproduce conventional status hierarchies of luxury, celebrity, and popularity" (p. 139) in their content. Unsurprisingly, then, many selfie studios feature sets designed to convey a sense of glamor. This usually involves mimicking settings often associated with luxury and exclusivity, as with several studios' sets themed after the 'VIP section' at a nightclub. Set elements such as a velvet rope barrier and props like (fake) liquor bottles and ice buckets make the set more interactive and thus are crucial in creating a club scene that is instantly recognizable to both customers and their followers. By surrounding customers with the accouterments of a VIP lifestyle, these sets immerse the customer into the scene and encourage them to channel their inner celebrity or influencer into the photos and videos they are creating.

Several participants referenced sets which had been configured to look like a private jet. Posing in these sets often involved sitting in a window seat–with lots of legroom!–and clinking (prop) champagne flutes before an imagined take-off. Playing around with these props evoked strong feelings of status and self-assuredness, placing participants in a dreamlike scenario where style comes with ease:

> CHRISSY: I felt really fancy in that one. It was, like, all white furniture, and they'd painted like sky blue skies with a little bit of clouds. They had, like, fake champagne glasses and that, you know. It felt like a manifestation in a way.
>
> RESEARCHER: Manifestation of…?

CHRISSY: I was about to say "influencer." Of being rich and, you know, fabulous. Here I am on my private jet… just another day in the life!

For some, sets like the private jet encapsulated the overall appeal of the selfie studio in the first place by pointing to an innate desire to see oneself living in style regardless of whether someone is actually trying to be an influencer:

BELINDA: First of all, flight tickets–expensive!–and you can't even afford First Class. And when you're in First Class, no one's actually sitting there taking pictures of you! But when you look at these celebrities… whether it's paparazzi or them having people taking pictures of them, they set the scene … like, 'Dang! She's on a flight!' You know like 'Kim K.'s on a flight or Beyonce's doing this, and I want to do that too!' And these selfie museums give people the opportunity to feel like that. You take the same pictures as those celebrities and you can post it and be like, yeah me too! I'm poppin' too … it just gives that vibe, right?

These sets contribute to what Marshall (2021) describes as a "parallel world of everyday commodified activity" (p. 169) based on the widespread emulation of celebrity tastes, attitudes, and behaviors in larger patterns of the commodification of self and image. Instagram, like most social media platforms, is filled with lifestyle influencers whose extravagant consumption practices give structure to their day-to-day lives, transforming *their* mundane into something aspirational (Marwick, 2015; Abidin, 2016). The plastering of influencers' lifestyles across the platform, increasingly done through sponsored advertisements made to look like ordinary posts, offers passive instruction on how one should act if caught up in the vestiges of a glamorous lifestyle. As Belinda noted, flying First Class or on a private jet is out of reach of most people, but virtually everyone seemed to know how the private jet set was encouraging them to act.

While the aforementioned sets recreate stylish experiences and material things, several studios have sets that simply feature money itself. Some use "money guns" to simulate a money shower using fake dollar bills, while others might cover a background wall in play money. So pervasive are these money sets that Deidre and Jerry recognized them as essential even before opening their business. "You've got to do some form of money," Deidre assured me. When designing their money set, the couple knew they wanted it to stand out. They had heard from other owners that the "money guns" jammed easily and that paper money ripped and wore out quickly, so they decided to construct a ball pit-style attraction using an old waterbed frame that would be filled with pearls and wads of cash made out of squishy foam. It quickly became one of their most popular sets, and has been instrumental in winning over some skeptics:

> JERRY: They love it. It's a real ice breaker. Judges, lawyers, and professionals turn into kids in that thing, because you throw money in the air and they see themselves with money falling all around them… they turn into, like, a teenager. And they're like "You know, you've got something here! This is something good." And we tell them this is what we intended to do!

The sheer popularity of Deidre and Jerry's money set highlights the widespread appeal of looking and feeling rich, even if only for a quick photo. Money sets are usually accentuated a cheeky word art slogan about being rich or making money, such as "All About the Benjamins," "Dirty," or "Hustler." Slogans like these emphasize a particular ethos of money that prompts the user to flaunt their imaginary wealth, while also sort of suggesting that the make-believe money in question may be somewhat unclean. During one of my site visits, I took photos in a set that

Figure 5. A set from WerkItRVA Selfie Museum in Richmond, VA featuring money bags and a laundry machine.

featured an old laundry machine[20], lots of loose play money, several burlap sacks with a dollar sign on them, and wall art that said "Wash & Dry." While interacting with this set, I filmed an Instagram story of my friend, a former bank teller, swiftly counting the play money as she would have at work. This bit was humorous for us, but likely deviated from the standard and intended uses of the money set, as we were not emphatically "raking it in" so much as we were carefully crunching the numbers. Though we certainly took pictures which showed off the money—fanning ourselves with it, throwing it up in the air, etc.—our experience underscores the fact that, while selfie studio sets may serve as templates for a certain theme or style of content, they do not necessarily restrain creativity or automatically reproduce the same images over and over again.

Conclusion

The concept of *templatability* (Leaver et al., 2020; Abidin & Kaye, 2021) can be expanded even further, this time to include material and spatial templates which facilitate the production of social media content. Just as museums instill the public with a sense of what is tasteful and what is not (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 49), the visualities of selfie studios and selfie museums make tacit statements about what is and is not photogenic or, in this case, what should be viewed as good social media content. Selfie studio personnel design their spaces to convey a certain theme or match a specific visual style, usually derived from what already appears to be popular on Instagram and other platforms. Thus, selfie studio sets are indirectly "shaped by millions of authors connected by and participating in Instagram and other social networks" (Manovich, 2020, p. 196) in similar fashion to the other templates described above. Accordingly, selfie

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[20] Laundry machines are used in many selfie studio money sets to cheekily suggest that the money in question is "dirty money" that has been acquired amorally. Laundromats became associated with organized crime due to an urban legend about Al Capone's money laundering activities, though earlier uses of the term *money laundering* likely actually referred to a program in which the United States government routinely pulled dirty currency from circulation to clean it in specially designed washing machines in the early 1900s (Debczak & Thompson, 2021).

studio sets function as *material templates* which allow users to quickly step in and out of different genres and styles, snapping pictures as they go. These sets are camera-ready on arrival and are assumed to be photogenic from virtually every angle, and the all-you-can-photograph buffet of different sets ensures that customers can quickly and efficiently generate an abundance of content in one visit.

The social environment of the selfie studio also supports this templatability. Waiting in line for a set, or even just passing by, affords customers the opportunity to catch glimpses of how others are using the space. These interactions may, in turn, inspire the customer's own creative decisions later on. One of the main perks of the selfie studio, then, is the opportunity to create an abundance of content which looks and feels different during one visit. Whereas a visit to the Eiffel Tower would yield only pictures of the Eiffel Tower, selfie studio customers materialize in all sorts of different settings, regardless of the length of their visit. The price of admission alone incentivizes taking photos with as many sets as possible, regardless of whether they match personal tastes, in order to get the full experience and maximum value.

I do not consider selfie studios as *material templates* to dismiss the creativity the owners who design them, nor do I mean to insinuate that customers who use them are being unoriginal. In fact, the Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin's (2020) choice of the word *template* suggests that the content in question is merely derived from popular styles, not a wholesale reproduction of it. Selfie studio sets do not necessarily limit creativity, but instead facilitate the production process by providing something workable. Customers can decide for themselves whether to follow each set's apparent prescriptions, and many often approach these sets looking for fresh ideas:

RYAN: I always try to think about it from the perspective of like "How do we take a space that I know so many of us are going to and make it interesting? How do we find something new?"

Even though Ryan and his friends attended a pop-up selfie experience because it was "the thing to do" at the time, they expected to use the space in a way that was more authentic to them, rather than just trying to emulate others' posts wholesale. Imagining selfie studio sets as templates for social media content creation thus allows us to understand both their appeal and their utility. Selfie studios remind us that there are lessons to be learned both from difference and from sameness, particularly where culture is concerned.

Conclusion

"All the World's a [Studio]…"

The Kodak girls of yesteryear brought their cameras with them wherever they went in order to document the sights and goings-on of their interesting lives, anchored by the revolutionary suggestion that anyone and everyone lived a life that was worth documenting. In the years since, it seems we took their advice in stride: In today's age of mobile photography, our cameras are so attached to us that they are virtually inseparable from our daily routines, social interactions, and most basic senses of self and personhood. The rise of Instagram and other visually driven media platforms has meant that we can no longer sit around waiting for something interesting enough or beautiful enough to happen to us. Instead, we have become increasingly invested in experiences which ensure something good enough to photograph, and which are thus fundamentally made-for-Instagram. Above anything else, selfie studios and selfie museums offer their customers a guaranteed photo-op, something to post and share online in a world where doing so always seems to be at the forefront of our social, cultural, economic, and political livelihoods. Indeed, we are living in a culture of "doing it for the 'Gram" (Mazouri, 2021).

In many ways, selfie studios are exceptionally contradictory spaces, defined by patterns of *intersecting* and *overlapping* which occur in various dimensions, each of which have been explored in this thesis. Indeed, selfie studios and museums are characterized by *two* production cultures: that of the personnel who create and maintain the space and that of the customers who make use of it. They are also a contact zone between the brick-and-mortar economy and its digital counterpart, at once exemplifying the throws of platform dependency (Poell et al, 2022) while symbolizing for many a new step in the revitalization of traditional retail spaces. Finally, selfie studios represent a confluence of the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1998) and the

aesthetic society (Manovich, 2022), offering customers a sort of embodied experience of social media in a physical space designed to be viewed, at least partially, through the lens of a phone camera. As these nuances demonstrate, selfie studios are dynamic media spaces which illuminate several of the most fascinating questions of the present.

Limitations

This study focused on the selfie studio and selfie museum trend in the *American* context, therefore neglecting to attend to the cultural specificities of the trend in other countries as well as the transnational appeal of this trend in a global context. Future research can and should head in these directions, particularly to consider how the visual styles and aesthetics which characterize American selfie studios are taken up, rejected, and/or remixed around the world, particularly in the context of *templatability* (Leaver et al., 2020; Abidin & Kaye, 2021). Doing so might advance scholarly understandings of the visual culture(s) of the Internet as well as the global flow of style, tastes, and culture via media. Indeed, this would also answer calls from other scholars to adopt a more global/transnational approach to the study of digital culture. Marwick (2019) repudiated the Anglocentrism of internet studies, issuing an imperative to explore these phenomenon "in a wide variety of cultural contexts, nations, and diasporic conditions." (p. 165)

This study was also somewhat limited by the sheer scope of its approach. Media industry studies lends itself well to the use of mixed methods (Herbert et al, 2020), which allow us to balance the self-theorizing of industry personnel with other forms of data that help paint a more comprehensive picture of the object of study. In this case, though, my decision to use mixed methods on a study of this side resulted in what felt like both too much and too little data at the same time. I felt like I was taking four different approaches with four different trajectories, and accordingly hope that I have been able to synthesize them into something legible and promising.

In future work, I would like to focus in on one or two of these approaches and their corresponding data sources in order to take a deeper dive into each aspect of the selfie studio phenomenon in the United States and afar.

Suggestions for future research

The arrival of new media has tended to reconfigure old spaces and produce new ones in its stride, ranging from home media rooms (Spigel, 1992) to video stores (Herbert, 2014) to internet cafes (Burrell, 2012) with many other examples in between. Attending to these spaces not only investigates the social and economic integrations of new media, but also examines its impact on aesthetics, design, and material culture. Selfie studios and selfie museums are the latest entry in this list of media spaces, and as such present an exciting new frontier for media studies research. This thesis has accordingly attempted to provide a comprehensive analysis of the selfie studio phenomenon in hopes of contributing to future conversations about the interrelation of physical space and digital culture. By adopting a critical media industry studies approach and utilizing interview data, I have sought to bring selfie studios to life and examine how these spaces are defined by the production of content for social media.

As I see it, selfie studios and their counterparts are part of an ongoing and much larger trend of reconfiguration of physical spaces to better suit the aesthetics, practices, and logics of an increasingly mediatized world. Just as Spigel (1992) theorized the *theatricalization* of the home that resulted from the advent of television, I propose an agenda for future research which focuses on the nascent and ongoing trend of *studiotization* which has transformed our built environments to be more camera-ready and conducive to photography and videography. Studiotization has taken hold of our world, rapidly remaking it according to the logics of the aesthetic society (Manovich, 2020) and opening it up to our consumption through bespoke experiences and

ubiquitous consumer products such as ring lights. Selfie studios and selfie museums represent the studiotization of commercial space, using the promise of good aesthetics and good lighting to revitalize abandoned retail space and reorient it towards production. Various "selfie stations," single-set backdrops akin to selfie studio sets, have been integrated into shops, restaurants, transportation centers and serve both as free marketing for the business and a sort of place-marker for customers. Meanwhile, DIY selfie walls have become a staple of parties and events, providing guests with a designated space to stop for quick pictures throughout.

It isn't just about selfies, either. Studiotization has become a key aspect of the pivot to telework spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic, leading people to frantically rearrange their offices and interior spaces to appear on Zoom, inviting their coworkers into their home in the process. In those early days of the pandemic, bookshelves were rearranged by color and miscellaneous clutter was hurriedly disappeared in order to create the perfect slice of domestic space to appear online. Consumer products like ring lights, podcast microphones, and in-home green screens have blurred the lines between production space and domestic space, enshrining media production with a sort of intimacy which had never before existed (Ruberg & Lark, 2021) and spawning several new cottage industries of media production such as livestreaming. Moreover, studiotization even extends into public space, remaking parks, highways, and tourist attractions into camera-ready environments. Many cities have commissioned "selfie murals" to attract business to certain business districts, and often contribute to a city or locality's branding strategy (Stevenson, 2019). Industrious entrepreneurs in large cities have begun offering their own "Instagram tours" that take visitors to the most picturesque vistas and suggest which poses would best complement them, remapping their localities according to Instagrammability in the process.

These rich examples alone suggest that future research should attend to the patterns and practices of studiotization, interrogating their impact on how we experience space and design our world. Indeed, studiotization seems to have created a world full of alluring visual spaces which exist more to be captured than they do to be exhibited or admired, begging a new variation on a classic Shakespearean line for this new age: "All the world's a [studio]…" After all, why settle for a stage when you could have whole studio?

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Selfie Studios & Selfie Museums in the United States

(as of January 2022)

ALABAMA

Cool Shots Selfie Museum
Orange Beach

The Pixel Room
Leeds

ALASKA

Selfie WRLD Alaska
Anchorage

ARIZONA

Selfie WRLD Arizona
Scottsdale

Pixypros Selfie Museum
Tempe

Youniverse Self-Serve Photography Studio
Tucson

Scottsdale Selfie
Scottsdale

ARKANSAS

Selfish House of Selfies
Little Rock

Love Your Selfie Arkansas
Perryville

Love Your Selfie
Conway

CALIFORNIA

Selfie WRLD Los Angeles
Glendale

Museum of Selfies Los Angeles
Los Angeles

The Selfie Studio 661
Bakersfield

CALIFORNIA (continued)

Musiquairum @ The Selfie Market †
San Francisco

Reminisce Selfie Studio
San Diego

FunBox Bounce Park & Selfie Museum
Arcadia

Obscura ★
Bakersfield

COLORADO

Selfie WRLD Denver †
Westminster

Original Selfie Museum Denver
Denver

Earth Illuminated
Denver

CONNECTICUT

Selfie Dreams
Hamden

DELAWARE

Selfie Experience
Dover

FLORIDA

Selfie WRLD Boca Raton
Boca Raton

Selfie WRLD Jacksonville
Jacksonville

Selfie WRLD Orlando
Orlando

Selfie WRLD Tampa
Tampa

"★" denotes a selfie studio that is about to open | "†" denotes a selfie studio that has recently closed

Selfie Studios & Selfie Museums in the United States

(as of January 2022)

FLORIDA (continued)

Original Selfie Museum Naples ★
Naples

Original Selfie Museum Miami
Miami

The Social Hub Miami
Miami

Selfie Life Miami
Miami

Selfie Spot PCB
Panama City Beach

Original Selfie Museum Miami
Miami

The Selfie Showroom
Jacksonville

The Social Warehouse ★
St. Petersburg

GEORGIA

Selfie WRLD Atlanta
Buford

Selfie WRLD Savannah
Pooler

Gurl Mobb Museum
Atlanta

Original Selfie Museum Alpharetta
Alpharetta

Original Selfie Museum Atlanda
Atlanta

Original Selfie Museum Miami
Miami

Explore Your Selfie
Statesboro

The Selfie Xperience
McDonough

GEORGIA (continued)

South Georgia Selfie Museum
Valdosta

The Dub Selfie Spot
Dublin

MugShotz: A Selfie Museum
Gainsville

Child Care / Hole in the Wall Selfie Museum
Acworth

Selfie Paradise
Douglasville

Candytopia Atlanta
Atlanta

IDAHO

Pix
Idaho Falls

ILLINOIS

Selfie WRLD Schaumburg
Schaumburg

The Content Factory
Loves Park

Selfie Express (Walking Visions Photography)
Bloomington

Selfie Studio A
Columbia

INDIANA

Selfie WRLD Indy ★
Indianapolis

Green Queens Selfie Studio
Elkhart

NOFLTR Selfie Studio
Fort Wayne

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Selfie Studios & Selfie Museums in the United States

(as of January 2022)

INDIANA (continued)

S@y Cheese Selfie Studio
Fort Wayne

IOWA

Selfie WRLD Iowa
Des Moines

The Selfie Vault
Davenport

KANSAS

Selfie WRLD Kansas City
Leawood

KENTUCKY

Pose Selfie Museum
Owensboro

The Photoshoot
Lexington

LOUISIANA

ARTmazing Studios
New Orleans

Art Buzz Studios
Baton Rouge

JAMNOLA
New Orleans

FaceFront Selfie Studio
Alexandria

Seaux Selfie Museum †
Lake Charles

MAINE

Selfie Space
Brewer

MARYLAND

Take A Shot
Baltimore

Lemonade Selfie Museum ★
Baltimore

The Muse Box
Oxon Hill

LCA Selfie & Content Studio
Gambrills

Selfie Space at Mondawmin
Baltimore

MASSACHUSETTS

Selfie WRLD Boston
Somerville

Go Pixel Yourself
Cambridge

Take2wo
New Bedford

MICHIGAN

Selfie WRLD Grand Rapids
Byron Center

The POSE Experience
Southfield

Detroit Selfie Museum by Snap Station
Novi

LCA Selfie & Content Studio
Gambrills

The Selfie Museum of Detroit
Detroit

Good Day Selfie Museum
Ferndale

Band-Ayd Selfie Shop
Madison Heights

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Selfie Studios & Selfie Museums in the United States

(as of January 2022)

MICHIGAN (continued)

SnapShots Selfie Studio
Clinton Township

CannaPose
Detroit

Let's Say Cheese
Okemos

Love Your Selfie Factory
Lansing

MINNESOTA

Selfie Studio
Roseville

MISSISSIPPI

Me Myselfie & I
Ridgeland

Love Your Selfie Tupelo
Tupelo

Can't Stop My Selfie
Gulfport

MISSOURI

Selfie WRLD St. Louis
Chesterfield

The Selfie Room
St. Louis

Selfie Studio KC
Independence

The Selfie Studio
Festus

NEBRASKA

Selfie WRLD Omaha †
Papillon

NEBRASKA (continued)

The Selfie Spot Omaha
Omaha

NEVADA

Selfie WRLD Las Vegas
Las Vegas

Museum of Selfies Las Vegas
Las Vegas

Selfie Sesh
Sparks

NEW JERSEY

POP! at Bridgewater Commons
Bridgewater Township

Be YourSelfie Experience
Harrison

Selfie Stations NJ
Westfield

NEW MEXICO

Click! Selfie Center
Albuquerque

NEW YORK

Selfie WRLD Buffalo
Amherst

Selfie WRLD New York ★
Lake Grove

The Vault Selfie Museum
Syracuse

716 Selfie Museum
Buffalo

PopUp Speakeasy
Ronkonkoma

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Selfie Studios & Selfie Museums in the United States

(as of January 2022)

NEW YORK (continued)

Jellio World ★
West Nyack

Museum of Ice Cream SoHo
New York City

Color Factory New York
New York City

NORTH CAROLINA

Selfie WRLD Fayetteville
Fayetteville

Original Selfie Museum Raleigh ★
Raleigh

Rich Girls Museum
Greensboro

Icy Rich Girls Museum
Greensboro

The Selfie Spot GSO
Greensboro

Selfie Symposium
Durham

Candid: The Selfie Museum
Mount Holly

Kapture Selfie Lounge
Charlotte

You Love Selfies
Raleigh

Bull City Selfie Museum
Durham

The Vibe Selfie Studio
Greenville

Pose Selfie Studio
Raleigh

Home of the 90s
Concord

NORTH CAROLINA (continued)

DREAM Selfie Museum †
Charlotte

NORTH DAKOTA

Selfie WRLD Fargo ★
Fargo

OHIO

Viral Columbus Selfie Museum
Columbus

AList Selfie Experience Museum
Toledo

Selfie Town 614
Columbus

Cleveland Selfie Studio
Strongsville

The Shutterbox of Warren
Warren

The Shutterbox of Niles
Niles

OH SNAP Photo Lab
Akron

The Selfie Space
Youngstown

BestFriendz Selfie Lounge ★
Streetsboro

OKLAHOMA

Tulsa Selfie Studio and Creative Lab
Tulsa

Oh Snap! Studio
Clinton

Yo Selfie Factory
Shawnee

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Selfie Studios & Selfie Museums in the United States

(as of January 2022)

OREGON

Selfie WRLD PDX †
Tigrand

PENNSYLVANIA

Selfie WRLD Philly
King of Prussia

Selfie Studio Scranton
Dickson City

Say Cheese Photo Museum Co.
Scranton

Social Studio PGH
Pittsburgh

The Selfie Content Room Museum
Philadelphia

Selfie City Museum
Paxtonia

SOUTH CAROLINA

Selfie WRLD Myrtle Beach
Myrtle Beach

Selfie Mania SC
Columbia

Suge Show Selfie Museum
Charleston

Setting Standards
Gaffney

Hub City Smiles Selfie Studio
Spartanburg

The Pixel Experience
Greenville

SOUTH DAKOTA

Selfie WRLD Sioux Falls †
Sioux Falls

TENNESSEE

Selfie Hangout
Pigeon Forge

Chattanooga Selfie Museum
Chattanooga

Perfect Pose Selfie Museum
Dyersburg

Selfie Utopia
Memphis

Nik Dunavant Selfie Studio / The Selfie Studio
Manchester

Pose 901 Selfie Studio
Memphis

Selfish
Knoxville

Lucky Fox Studios
Memphis

TEXAS

Selfie WRLD Houston
Houston

Original Selfie Museum San Antonio
San Antonio

Original Selfie Museum Austin ★
Austin

Kinda Candid
College Station

Picture Perfect Selfie Studio
Killeen

Selfie Portal Austin †
Cedar Park

Say Selfie LBK ★
Lubbock

Southeast Texas Selfie Museum
Beaumont

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Selfie Studios & Selfie Museums in the United States

(as of January 2022)

TEXAS (continued)

Selfie45 Houston
Houston

Take A Selfie Studio
Brownsville

Focus Selfie Studio
Fort Worth

The Selfie Box
San Antonio

Selfie Spot PCB
Panama City Beach

Wonderland Waco
Waco

Museum of Memories †
Dallas

Dwalls Studio
Amarillo

Selfie Escape
Houston

Selfie Factory Fort Worth
Fort Worth

Museum of Ice Cream Austin
Austin

Color Factory Houston
Houston

Candytopia Houston
Houston

The FOMO Factory
Houston

UTAH

Photo Pop STG
St. George

VIRGINIA

Lost Planet Selfie Adventure & Mirror Maze
Virginia Beach

Selfie WRLD NOVA/DC
Tysons

Selfie WRLD Virginia Beach
Virginia Beach

Planet Selfie
Leesburg

VA Selfie Museum
Carollton

F Stop Selfie Lounge †
Henrico

Flick Factory
Henrico

Vybe Selfie Museum
Woodbridge

Love Your Selfie
Winchester

WerkItRVA Selfie Museum
Richmond

It's Your Day Selfie Studio
Occoquan

Say Cheezz Selfie Studio ★
Newport News

WASHINGTON

Original Selfie Museum Seattle
Seattle

Stuntin' Selfie Studio
Vancouver

Glow Selfie Museum
Tacoma

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Selfie Studios & Selfie Museums in the United States

(as of January 2022)

WISCONSIN

Selfie WRLD MKE †
Brookfield

Selfie Hop
Milwaukee

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Personnel Interview Questions

Introductory questions:

- How long have you been working at [selfie studio]?
- What is your role there? Are you a full-time employee?
- What is your professional background? What other kinds of jobs have you had?
- In your role, who do you work most closely with – both at your location and in the community?

For owners:

- What inspired you to open this kind of business?
- When did your location open? What steps did you have to take before opening?
- What kind of support did you get? What kind of networking have you done?

For employees:

- Had you visited this location or another like it before working there? What was it like?
- How would you describe the workplace culture of your location?

For everyone:

- What does a typical day look like for you in this role?
- In your role, how frequently do you interact with customers? What do these interactions look like?
- What kind of partnerships does your location have with other businesses and community groups?
- How does your location use social media to engage potential customers?
- How has this business changed since you began working here? Have your responsibilities changed too?
- How have your services/hours/rules changed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What makes your location unique?
- What can a typical customer expect from their experience at your location?

Ending questions:

- What is your favorite part of working at [selfie studio]? What is the most challenging part?
- Where do you think your location will be in a year? Where do you think the industry itself is headed?

Customer Interview Questions

Introductory questions:

- Which social media platforms are you currently active on?
- Which platform or platform(s) are your favorite? Why?
- How often do you take selfies? What do you do with them?
- Do you remember the name of the selfie studio/museum you went to? When did you visit? Who with?

Middle questions:

- How did you hear about [selfie studio]? Whose idea was it to actually visit [selfie studio]?
- How did you prepare to go to [selfie studio]? Did you dress a certain way?
- If you don't mind sharing, do you remember how much you paid for this experience?
- What stuck out to you most about this experience?
- How were the people around you acting?
- Can you describe some of the backdrops/set-ups they had for me? Which was your favorite?
- What kinds of content were you creating while you were there?
- What did you do with the content you generated after your visit?
- Were you satisfied with how these turned out? How did your followers react?

Ending questions:

- Why do you think this kind of place is appealing for people?
- What did it feel like to be at [selfie studio]?
- Do you feel like you show different sides of yourself on different social media platforms? How so?
- Which social media platform do you feel the most like yourself on? Why?
- Would you visit [selfie studio again]? Would you recommend it? Would you go to a similar location?

Interviewee Bios

Selfie Studio Personnel

Alisha is a trained photographer who now runs a selfie studio in Oklahoma. She had wanted to get back into the photography industry for some time, so she opened a selfie studio in 2021. Her studio is located inside a shopping mall, and her husband and young children assist her in the management of this business.

Deidre and **Jerry** are a married couple who recently opened a selfie studio together in Arkansas. Deidre is a hair stylist by trade and owned a salon for many years. Jerry is a musician with a background in graphic design. The isolation and uncertainty of the pandemic inspired them to open a new selfie studio, which located in an outlet mall.

Rachel runs a social media marketing agency in Pennsylvania which converted a portion of its office space into a selfie studio for their clients to use. She got the idea to open a selfie studio after visiting a selfie studio in Arizona and decided to adapt the model to fit the unique needs of her business.

Taylor is a nurse who runs a selfie studio in Louisiana. Her studio is located in a shopping mall in a small city and is staffed by her parents, who were former photographers. After visiting a selfie studio in Virginia, she decided to open her own to bring some fun to her town.

Selfie Studio Customers

Belinda is a young professional living in Northern Virginia. She visited a selfie studio with several friends to celebrate the birthday of one of her sorority sisters.

Chrissy is a graduate student and higher education professional in Virginia. She and her boyfriend decided to visit a selfie studio on an impulse while spending a day at the mall.

Daisy is an American expatriate living in the Netherlands who works in the fashion industry. She went to a selfie museum while a friend was visiting from the United States.

David is a college student in Virginia who visited a selfie museum in New York City while on a spring break trip with some friends.

Jessie works in the publishing industry and lives in New York City. She and a friend visited a selfie museum in SoHo while exploring the neighborhood.

Kiara is a college student in North Carolina who visited a selfie studio on a date.

Micah is a human resources professional living in New York City who visited a selfie museum in Maryland with her cousins.

Miranda works in marketing and currently lives in Virginia but visited several selfie museums and pop-ups while living in New York City. She has even made a few return trips!

Rebecca is an American expatriate working as a professional athlete in Germany. Before moving, she visited a selfie studio in Virginia with a professional photographer in order to get photos to announce her move.

Ricky is a college student in Virginia who visited a selfie studio on a date.

Ryan is a freelance commercial photographer living in New York City. He attended a pop-up selfie museum event in Brooklyn with a group of friends.

Will is a marketing professional living in Virginia. He visited a selfie studio as an organized teambuilding experience with his coworkers, and also visited an immersive art installation in Chicago with a group of friends.