Narrative Images: Women's Selfies, History, and Storytelling

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Noor Butt, 2021, *Repetition*, Karachi, Pakistan, Digital Photograph

The first selfie I ever took was at the age of 11 with a Sony Ericsson flip phone with a front camera. This was before the release of the first iPhone, when the maximum phone storage capacity used to be 16MBs, and several years before the word "selfie" was officially included in the Oxford dictionary.[1] At 19, I owned my first smartphone with a selfie camera just as photo-sharing platforms like Instagram and Snapchat started gaining popularity worldwide. Word-of-mouth and peer pressure coerced me into participating in this new form of communication as the selfie trend began to plant its roots in visual culture. Today, Snapchat and Instagram have amassed 493.7 million and 1.452 billion worldwide users respectively, 93 million selfies are taken every single day, and my own archive of digital images includes thousands of selfies.[2]

For the average millennial who grew up creating visual archives of herself in cyberspace, selfie-taking is now an ordinary, almost instinctive, act where the tropes, patterns, and trends associated with this form of digital image-making are almost passively consumed and adopted.

This essay locates the selfie in the history of visual culture and photography, positioned in the continuum of the snapshot, memory, and consumerist impulse. It examines how the participation of women — the key demographic engaging in this trend[3] — speaks to feminist discourses of female representation and the male gaze. It also explores how social media has paved the way for history-making and archiving through the medium of the selfie.

The starting point of this enquiry was an investigation of my own digital archive of selfies. I then proceeded to examine the selfies of people I knew, so as to query their connections with my own archive. Finally, I compared these to selfie trends among photographs posted by Instagram users. However, conducting primary research on Instagram had its limitations: language, choice of privacy settings, and social media literacy filtered the kind of audiences and demographics that I could reach.

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Capturing the Mundane

Selfies can be located somewhere between personal and documentary photography. Kozinets, Gretzel, and Dinhopl aptly describe the practice of self-representational photographs: "Selfie taking is complex and multidimensional, a cultural and social act, a call for connection, an act of mimicry, and part of people's ever-incomplete identity projects."[4] Microblogs of daily snaps can be read as commodified inner monologues, created to be consumed and disseminated. Whether

Top Left: Saman Imtiaz, 2021, *Shopping*, Karachi, Pakistan, Digital Photograph. Source: Snapchat

Top Right: Ishita Gupta, 2022, *Getting a Haircut*, United Kingdom, Digital Photograph.

Bottom Left: Sakina Ali, 2022, *On the Plane, travelling from Australia to Pakistan*, Digital Photograph. Source: Snapchat

Bottom Right: Ashba Riaz, 2020, *Recovering from Appendix Surgery*, Georgia, Digital Photograph. Source: Snapchat

one is out shopping, getting a haircut, travelling on a plane, or even recovering in the hospital, one must take and share a selfie. Considered collectively, these selfies begin to merge into a single imitative model that is replicated by so many of us. The idea that the camera is readily available, mixed with a compelling need to self-document, suggests that people take selfies simply because they can. In search of the perfect selfie, we find ourselves snapping dozens of photographs at a time, each one being repetitive and monotonous, almost completely identical to the one before. What can we learn about ourselves through the images we curate, put on display, or hide away?

I argue that for all its banality, the selfie is deeply personal and documentative, an in-between space where fleeting moments are captured. While studying abroad, I took selfies of my mundane day-to-day activities as a daily ritual. Often, I would only get a chance to take a picture during the few moments of pause in the elevator of my student dorm. I thus accumulated a large number of 'elevator selfies' through which I had inadvertently mapped and recorded crucial aspects of my daily life. They turned into a digital journal of sorts that was never posted or displayed anywhere, but I can recall a separate story for each one of them: when I was heading to the laundrette in the basement, picking up mail from the front desk, or heading out to buy groceries. Although completely ordinary instances, they became significant with the onset of Covid-19 as some of them were taken in the last days of normalcy before the abrupt shift to lockdown life.

Artists also use selfies to delve into their personal histories, blending mass-culture aesthetics with private space in their work. British artist Tracey Emin, for example, created an entire body of work using selfies sporadically captured in bed: close-ups of her face, narrating her issues with insomnia, showing the scars from her cancer treatment.[5] Deeply raw and vulnerable, her selfies acted as documentation of the turbulent times she faced in a specific period in her life. Through these selfies, she subverted the conventional 'picturesque' Instagram imagery and chose to display a narrative that was completely unglamorous and unfiltered. Although the images may seem imitative and needlessly repetitive, each selfie has a distinct backstory.

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Origins of the Snapshot

One way to understand the sameness and repetitiveness of the selfie is to trace its roots in the capitalist history of the photographic medium. The Eastman Kodak Company is credited with

Noor Butt, 2020, *Elevator Selfies*, London, United Kingdom, Digital Photograph

Top Left: Noor Butt, 2020, *Tourist Bucket List,* London, United Kingdom, Digital Photograph

Top Right: Gul Butt, 2016, *Class trip to Interior Sindh,* Pakistan, Digital Photograph

Bottom Left: Yamuna Mahendra, 2022, *Maldives Photo Dump,* Maldives, Digital Photograph.
Source: Instagram @yooossshhhiii

Bottom Right: Anum Sohail, 2017, *Big Ben Tower,* London, United Kingdom, Digital Photograph

the introduction of the "point and shoot" camera in the American and then global markets, enabling any user to take a snapshot. Kodak's strategic advertising campaigns exhorted the consumer to continuously make images and preserve memories through photographs. They particularly targeted women as the "memory keepers" of the family.[6] As Kamal Munir notes: "Kodak's ad campaigns emphasised how — if women were to appear as responsible and caring wives and mothers — they were morally obliged to keep a meticulous record of their family's history. They could do this by preserving those Kodak moments."[7]

A print advertisement from 1914 for 'The Kodak Girl' campaign depicted a young woman holding a Kodak camera while outdoors. Beneath the image, a blurb stated: "The city girl's trip to the country, the country girl's trip to the city, any girl's trip to the seashore or the mountains — in all of these are picture stories of the interesting places and the still more interesting people."[8] Several versions of this campaign marketed the importance of documenting memories and moments, the easy accessibility of the camera, and the necessity of owning one as a woman.

The selfie, then, is yet another version of the snapshot. Contemporary photo-sharing platforms like Instagram and Snapchat do not deviate much from Kodak's marketing strategy. Instagram's corporate slogan is "Capture and Share the World's Moments",[9] while Snapchat's mission statement reads: "... our camera will play a transformative role in how people experience the world around them."[10] The selfie camera stays true to being "in every home, every vacation trip" today. For the average consumer now, birthdays, graduations, weddings, vacations, everything needs to be documented. Otherwise, where is the proof that it happened? Or worse, how would they remember that it happened if it did not exist in pictorial form?

The selfie is not just the result of a technological advancement from a hand-held camera to a smartphone selfie camera, but also a shift in the cultural paradigm of how image-making garnered value for its consumer. I had not noticed the coercive powers of platforms like Snapchat and Instagram until, after years of accumulating digital images and posting them online, I realised that features like augmented reality (AR) and photo-editing filters are designed to prompt consumers to continuously use the product, and mimic effects used by others. For instance, the Snapchat "streak" records the number of daily snaps users send to each other.[11] The streak offers no tangible value, but users still find themselves religiously opening the app every day to send a snap to their friends to not break their streak. The longest streak I managed to keep on Snapchat was for over 800 days, until I concluded that mindlessly taking selfies on a daily basis just to maintain a fictional, purposeless streak was negatively impacting my mental and emotional health. There would be an itch at the back of my mind to pick up my phone and use the app, teased by the hourglass symbol prompting me that my streak was about to break. Most of the selfies taken during this time were random and recorded nothing of substance, which is when I realised that one reason I felt compelled to continuously take selfies was that corporations like Snapchat, much like Kodak, made me think it was necessary.

The Tourist Selfie, Simulacra, and the Photographic Ritual

According to Susan Sontag, "Needing to have reality confirmed and experience enhanced by photographs is an aesthetic consumerism to which everyone is now addicted. Industrial societies turn their citizens into image-junkies; it is the most irresistible form of mental pollution."[12] A relevant selfie genre to test Sontag's claim is the tourist selfie. The 'Instagram-worthy' selfie validates the idea that the reality and experience of visiting a travel destination are confirmed and enhanced by posting them on social media. Countries where tourism contributes significantly to the national economy tactfully focus digital image marketing on recognisable landmarks and monuments. A tourist in London would, therefore, make sure to pose next to the city's plethora of landmarks, like Big Ben or Westminster Abbey, to announce to all their social media following: 'Look, I was here.'

Selfies posed with tourist landmarks, re-enacted infinitely, are classic simulacra. They have been copied so many times that there is no evidence left of a definitive original. Jean Baudrillard claimed that society depended on easily distinguishable symbols and templates, performing imitative and repetitive actions.[13] This holds true in the digital age, as each sub-genre of the selfie follows a set of aesthetic conventions that result in images taken by different individuals looking the same. An active Instagram user usually becomes acquainted with the conventions of selfie-taking not just through their friends and followers on the platform, but also through the barrage of social media influencers and celebrities that commodify their images online. With enough exposure to such images, it becomes easier to identify the many tropes associated with the genre of the selfie. If one has ever found themselves making a 'duck face', sticking out their tongue, or making a peace sign with their hands while posing for a selfie, that is not something they invented, but in fact, borrowed from elsewhere as a ritual performative gesture. The fact that many tropes and conventions of selfie-taking are mimicked and repeated by different audiences points to the possibility that there are deeper connections between the camera, the self, and the gaze.

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Courting the Gaze

The popularity of the selfie relies significantly on contemporary mass media. The 2014 song '#SELFIE' by the Chainsmokers largely popularised the phrase "But first, let me take a selfie", possibly also amplifying this trend amongst the youth — the primary demographic that

Top Left: Zara Ijaz, 2022, *One of my favourite selfies from 2019 that never made it to Instagram*, Pakistan, Digital Photograph. Source: Instagram @zara_i.k

Top Right: Angie, 2021, *#graduationselfie*, United States of America, Digital Photograph. Source: Instagram @gotangie

Bottom Left: Tomas Fabianski, 2021, *#graduation*, Czechia, Digital Photograph. Source: Instagram @selfie_nut

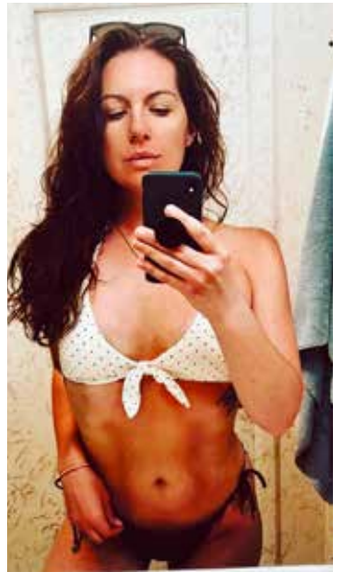
Bottom Right: Noor Butt, 2021, *Online Graduation*, Karachi, Pakistan, Digital Photograph.

Top Left: Sakina Ali, 2021, *Aus*, Sydney, Australia, Digital Photograph

Top Right: Kriti Naidu, 2022, *I do a thing called what I want,* India, Digital Photograph. Source: Instagram @__whyusername__

Bottom Left: Fareha Hassan, 2022, *Don't know what I was thinking wearing low rise with that muffin,* Karachi, Pakistan, Digital Photograph. Source: Instagram

Bottom Right: Elizabeth Paul, 2021, *We love a mirror selfie,* United States of America, Digital Photograph. Source: Instagram @scientist_liz



participates in the practice.[14] Although the song's music video includes selfies of men as well, the primary narration of the popular phrase is done by a woman, further buttressing the notion that women are more concerned with taking selfies than men.

In *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Roland Barthes broadly explored the relationship between the camera and the spectator. The act of being in front of a camera, he says, provokes a "photographic ritual" to take place: "Now once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of 'posing', I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image."[15] As a contemporary mode of self-portraiture where an individual operates their smartphone camera themselves, fully aware of how they appear on camera even before the image is taken, the selfie takes Barthes' "transformation of the self into an image" to another level. For a generation that grew up in the digital age of social media, the effect of the camera and spectatorship often appears unconscious and covert. Interestingly, it also continues to see these enactments as individualistic.

Barthes also said: "I want you to know that I am posing, but ... this additional message must in no way alter the precious essence of my individuality..."[16] It would be accurate to say that every spectator is aware that a selfie is staged and posed, but somehow also individualistic. Take the graduation selfie as an example, where the graduation cap instantly symbolises the individual and also the collective story of a graduating student. This kind of digital image is probably one of the most imitative and recognisable models of the selfie, adopted on a global scale. It is ritualistic and universal. In the case of my graduation selfie — a photographic ritual in which I consciously wanted to participate — I was fully aware of the simulacra associated with it, but still wanted to create a digital image as everlasting proof that I actually did graduate. This desire for proof was fuelled by the fact that all in-person graduation ceremonies had been cancelled due to the pandemic. Taking a selfie with a makeshift paper cap at home, I attempted to individualise and concretise an intangible experience by using the identifiable symbol of the graduation cap, in obvious imitation of the thousands of graduation selfies posted online.

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Subverting the Gaze

Feminist discourses surrounding the relationship between self-imagery and the commodification of selfies oscillate between criticism and praise. On the one hand, selfies of women are found to regurgitate the same "narrowly defined beauty ideal" of female representation catering to the

male gaze.[17] On the other, selfies are an act of "empowerment" since the women taking these pictures are in autonomous control of how they represent their own bodies and femininity.[18]

The mirror selfie that encompasses a full-body shot instead of the regular headshot is popular amongst women, particularly when following Instagram trends like "Outfit of the Day."[19] The mirror has served as a symbol of vanity and narcissism since ancient times, and some argue that women's display of their bodies in mirror selfies originates from a deeper, voyeuristic need to see and be seen through the male gaze. However, recent feminist scholarship finds this assumption to be derisible and inaccurate, as women occupying space on social media as the primary demographic of selfie-takers pull at another strand in the paradigm: historically, women's bodies have been fetishised and objectified by male image-makers but with the selfie, women have the opportunity to subvert that gaze and redefine it as their own.[20]

It is useful to reflect that even before the advent of the selfie, photographers like Cindy Sherman deconstructed clichés associated with female representation in Hollywood films. Sherman's cinematic self-portraits took ownership of her femininity, ultimately becoming a satire about the voyeuristic nature of female representation. According to feminist theorist Laura Mulvey, Sherman's photographs acted as a parody to voyeurism, thereby "de-fetishising" the female body.[21]

The discourse surrounding gendered power dynamics in self-imagery remains relevant in the digital age. Placing the selfie in post-feminist discourses, Derek Conrad Murray states that women in recent years have utilised selfie culture as a "radical act of political empowerment: as a means to resist the male-dominated media culture's obsession with an oppressive hold over their lives and bodies."[22] Pop singer Britney Spears' nude selfies on Instagram recently caused a stir as several media outlets and online users deemed the images "concerning."[23] Documentaries like *Britney vs. Spears* (2021) took a closer look at how Spears, as a female performer, had been sexualised by the media since she was a minor and controlled by her father under his court-appointed conservatorship. It was considered acceptable for magazines like *Rolling Stone* to publish images of Spears in lingerie as a teenager, but somehow Spears posting nude selfies now as a fully autonomous adult woman was deemed shocking.[24] Some followers contested that her provocative selfies allowed her to rebel against the hypocrisy of the same male-dominated media that controlled her bodily autonomy and profited from objectifying her image.[25]

Spears' case serves as an interesting parallel to Qandeel Baloch's in the Pakistani context. The 2015 "honour killing" of the social media personality by her brother, based on her provocative selfies and online persona, highlights the lack of bodily autonomy that women are granted in patriarchal societies where even their selfies are strictly policed.[26] Social media was flooded with opinions about Baloch's murder, some condemning her brutal killing but the majority seemingly in favour of her death, deeming it "punishment" for how she conducted herself online.[27] Pakistani religious cleric Maulana Fazlur Rehman commented: "Shamelessness and exhibitionism are a scourge in our society, spread through women like her."[28] Mufti Abdul Qavi, with whom Baloch had taken selfies, also claimed that her death was "a sign of God's displeasure – and a message to others."[29] Qandeel Baloch had created content that she knew would spark controversy, yet she could not have anticipated the posthumous fame she received as a feminist icon due to her non-conformity with religious and cultural strictures about female respectability and body autonomy.[30] Her selfies with male Pakistani Islamic clerics also exposed the hypocrisy of the state and society's conservative laws and values.[31]

Not all women use selfies towards rebellion or empowerment. Celebrities like the Kardashians, for example, have been routinely criticised for promoting problematic tropes of self-indulgence and self-objectification through their selfies, undeniably profiting from exploiting the insecurities of consumers (mostly women).[32] However, the notion that women take selfies purely out of vanity or narcissism is contestable, as the selfie in many instances acts as a tool to subvert gender politics in image-making and viewing.

Navigating her relationship with Instagram and selfie-taking as a woman, sociologist Sneha Annavarapu states: "Most women are told that 'wanting to be looked at' is wrong … In the virtual streets, we are still figuring out our presence, our participation, on our own terms."[33] Growing up in a conservative society where modesty for women was preached since childhood, I too find it difficult to position my selfies within the frame of self-objectification and self-expression. My selfie-taking practices as a woman have to be carefully curated to not invite judgement from peers, colleagues, or family. I have also known women who posted and then quickly deleted selfies out of fear of showing the slightest bit of cleavage or inviting any kind of attention to their bodies online. The idea of selfies being scopophilic or voyeuristic is, however, an issue that only women seem to be subjected to most of the time. Annavarapu states that since "women are constantly surveilled, evaluated, assessed through the eyes of men", then we, as women, should not feel ashamed for "seeking validation" through our selfies and unapologetically "being seen the way we want to be seen."[34]

The cases of Spears, Baloch, and the Kardashians highlight very different approaches to selfie-taking, but also bring forth nuanced discourses surrounding female representation. I argue that such selfies ultimately act as social commentary, becoming multifaceted artefacts that shine a light on society as it exists today. It also begs the question: if documentary photography can be seen as historical material, why not selfies?

Top Left: Robin Zabiegalski, 2018, *#protestselfie #womensmarch,* United States of America, Digital Photograph. Source: Instagram @body.lib. robinhood

Top Right: Tomas Fabianski, 2022, *#PrideMonth,* Czechia, Digital Photograph. Source: Instagram @selfie_nut

Bottom Left: Usman Pasha, 2022, *Aurat March 2022,* Karachi, Pakistan, Digital Photograph

Bottom Right: Maha Minhaj, 2021, *Protest for Palestine,* Karachi, Pakistan, Digital Photograph

Selfies as Social History

Pierre Bourdieu believed that the practice of photography and interpretation of the photographic image could be a useful sociological method for understanding cultural meaning.[35] Allan Sekula posed the question: "How is historical and social memory preserved, transformed, restricted and obliterated by photographs?"[36] In recent years, selfies taken at political rallies against military intervention, and at protests such as those against abortion laws or for LGBTQ rights, have generated powerful imagery that documents not just personal experiences but also the larger political and cultural climate. Big, passionate crowds, identifiable flags or banners, and peace signs are some recognisable symbols in such selfies. True to the nature of selfie-taking, these images are also imitative but employ a kind of storytelling that places them within individual and collective narratives of contemporary social history. Selfies taken by protestors capture the essence of the experience that being in a revolutionary space provides, in a way that photographs taken by the press and other external observers of crowds cannot. They become evidence of historical moments and movements through the perspective of the people living them first-hand.

Some of these socio-political selfies present a radical account of women reclaiming their presence in the public and virtual space. The current wave of feminist activism in Pakistan, particularly in the form of the Aurat [Women's] March, has been heavily criticised by the religious and conservative majority of the country which deems it "Western propaganda."[37] The Aurat March emerged at a time when Pakistan's female youth began to utilise social media to record their emancipation from strict cultural and religious regulations against their autonomy, boldly marching, chanting, and recording their revolution through protest slogans and selfies, while also claiming solidarity with and drawing inspiration from protests happening worldwide.

So much of human history has been discovered and preserved through creative artefacts left behind by our ancestors, at times even providing a glimpse into the inner thoughts, feelings, and behaviours of people living in earlier eras. Contemporary scholarship recognises that women's lives have often been excluded or erased from such narratives, as history is arguably remembered through a male lens.[38] The images and selfies created by women can now become valuable archival material for society at large. These selfies not only act as historical documents but also provide more nuanced perspectives of women's existence that urgently need to be inserted into historical as well as contemporary visual narratives.

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Selfies as Soliloquy

This essay was an attempt to understand how I found myself becoming part of the selfie phenomenon. After a decade of taking selfies and making observations about this mode of communication, I can recognise that selfies, much like the early days of the snapshot, were a trend harnessed by corporations that eventually manifested within different parts of culture. I am indeed guilty of snapping mundane, touristy, and mirror selfies, all stemming from a need to preserve memories, recreate experiences, make connections, and identify with myself. Much like the first-ever selfie I took at the age of 11, I will most likely forget taking the thousands of selfies that followed, being lost in the overabundance of imagery I have accumulated over time.[39]

As I get older, I already find myself snapping fewer selfies than I used to. Distancing myself from Instagram and Snapchat also drastically altered my need to continuously take selfies or share them online. This simple act of self-awareness acutely displays the correlation between selfies and consumerism, and how corporations manage to capitalise on consumers' sentimentality and need to document. The practice of taking selfies may just be another form of self-representation that will eventually become outdated. The history of social media obsolescence also reminds us that these current platforms will most likely either be completely out of use or replaced over time. Millennials approaching the age of 30 and above may feel as though they have outgrown the practice of taking selfies, which then appears juvenile or simply not needed anymore. In that case, selfies might no longer serve the same purpose they do now.

Interacting through images is a very contemporary mode of communication, where selfies have become a new, globally intelligible form of language. Although this practice was internalised, repeated, and practised due to the evolution of image-making in the digital age, I find it intriguing how my selfies may act as reminders of my youth and everyday experiences when I am older. Whether considered kitsch, mundane, or narcissistic, the billions of selfies we leave behind can nevertheless narrate how we as human beings in the 21st century communicated with each other, identified with ourselves, and preserved fragments of our collective histories. This archive is a visual soliloquy of its time that recounts the lives and experiences of an entire generation.

Notes

1. Mirzoeff, *How to See the World*, 29.
2. Charney, *The 12-Hour Art Expert*, 129.
3. Mirzoeff, *How to See the World*, 63.
4. Kozinets, Gretzel and Dinhopl, "Self in Art/Self as Art," 731.
5. Emin, interview.
6. Toronto Metropolitan University, "The Kodak Girl."
7. Munir, "The Demise of Kodak."
8. Duke University Libraries Repository Collections and Archives, "The Kodak Girl."
9. Instagram, "About Us."
10. Snapchat, "About."
11. Bhatt, *The Attention Deficit*, 64.
12. Sontag, *On Photography*, 24.
13. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 146.
14. Rettberg, *Seeing Ourselves Through Technology*, 17.
15. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 10.
16. Ibid, 11.
17. Rogan, *Digital Femininities*, 48.
18. Dobson, *Postfeminist Digital Cultures*, 12.
19. Huang and Copeland, "Gen Z, Instagram Influencers."
20. Dobson, *Postfeminist Digital Cultures*, 13.
21. Mulvey, "A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body," 141.
22. Murray, "Notes to Self," 490.
23. Stolworthy, "Britney Spears Supported by Fans."
24. "Britney Spears: The Rolling Stone Covers."
25. Ryu, "Britney Spears' Nude Instagrams."
26. Maher, *A Woman Like Her*, 7-9.
27. Ibid, 8.
28. Ibid, 9.
29. Boone, "She Feared No One."
30. Ibid.
31. Chaudhry and Ajmal, "Qandeel Selfie."
32. Rogan, *Digital Femininities*, 131.
33. Annavarapu, "Main Apni Sabse Favourite Hoon."
34. Ibid.
35. Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-brow Art*, 1.
36. Wells, *The Photography Reader*, 444.
37. Saigol and Chaudhary, *Contradictions and Ambiguities of Feminism in Pakistan*, 40.
38. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," 1054.
39. Brock, "Instagram is Dead (It Just Doesn't Know it Yet)."

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