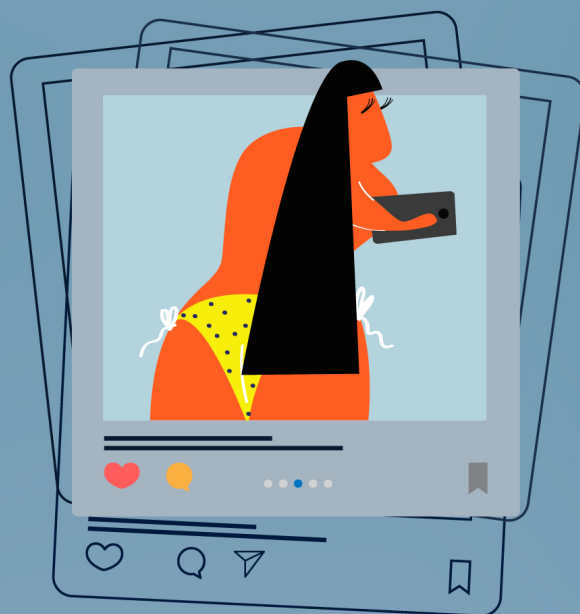


SUMMARY

Selfie

WILL STORR



Summary of «Selfie» by Will Storr

Written by Lea Schullery

An informational guide to the history of the idealized perfect self and the rise of a narcissistic generation obsessed with selfies and personal brands.

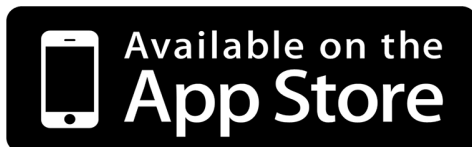


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Introduction

When you look at your Instagram page, what types of photos do you post? The ones where your eyes are closed, or you just aren't quite looking your best? Or do you post your highlight reel where your life looks amazing, your outfit looks trendy, and people may wish they had your lifestyle? While not everyone falls into the category of the latter, we are certainly seeing a rise in people posting their ideal self online. A self that is super fit, wears only trendy clothes and only eats at photogenic brunches. Social media has become a place where we try to present our best selves to our peers whether it's authentic or not.

Will Storr explores the idea of the perfect self as he discusses the history of our ideal selves being traced as far back as Ancient Greece. From those perfectly chiseled Greek Gods to the 19th-century obsession with self-improvement, our modern idea of the perfect self isn't much different from 2,000 years ago. Additionally, Storr explores the rise in selfies, in which society takes over 100 billion per year! But how did we get here? Storr discusses exactly how we got here throughout his book *Selfie*.

The Tribal Self

When scrolling through social media sites like Instagram, what do you see? Well, you're likely to see perfectly curated pictures of people's lives. The perfect brunch, the perfect body, the perfect outfit. People share the highlight reel of their life with edited photos aimed to portray an idealistic lifestyle. With the rise in social media, it seems the idea of the "ideal self" has become more and more unrealistic, but that's not true. In fact, our ideal selves have roots as far back as Ancient Greece.

Celebrities, Instagram influencers, even contestants on reality shows like *The Bachelor*, all feature drop-dead gorgeous people with hard bodies. We see these men with bulging muscles and washboard abs, and we describe them as having the bodies of a Greek God. Think about the Greek Gods that you know of, Hercules, Adonis, Zeus, Poseidon. Every single one has the so-called "ideal body" with chiseled muscles as if they were sculpted from ancient marble. Therefore, our ideas of the perfect body are being shaped by the thoughts and beliefs of people living over 2,000 years ago. In fact, the beliefs of Ancient Greece changed the way the Western world viewed its ideal self. Storr even states that "It's odd, and hard to accept, that a great deal of who we so intimately feel we are is the product of the thoughts and experiences of long-dead people."

But where did it all begin? Storr explores the idea of our "tribal self," or our innate social nature. He quotes psychologist Robert Hagan that in our evolutionary past we "wanted to get along with others, by making a good reputation, and then use that good reputation to get ahead. But how did we know how to get that good reputation in the first place? How did we learn what qualities our tribe valorized and what it hated?" Essentially, Storr is questioning how we learned which qualities were idolized by society and which were rejected. He answers this by explaining how our participation in "tribal gossip," and listening to these moral outrage-making tales are how we found out who we had to be if we wanted to be successful.

In other words, listening to tales of larger-than-life figures has influenced the way the Western world views success and beauty. A sleek physique is typically seen as the ideal body-type; however, it's not that way in every country. Take a look at Tanzania in East Africa where fat is valued as a symbol of high-status which is far different from the views of the people in the West. Therefore, the way we view the world is largely influenced by the culture and society in which we live.

The Paris Hilton Effect

Let's take another look at social media. It used to be that when we wanted to find out more about a celebrity's life, we would have to skim the pages of magazines and watch the television programs that focus on celebrity gossip. Now, we get an inside look at the lives of celebrities through Instagram stories, Snapchat, and even reality shows, all of which reveal how the other half lives. We see their massive mansions, their expensive cars, their closets the size of our apartments! But how do we feel when we see this wealth? Do we find it ostentatious or do we see it as a symbol of success?

Whether you want to admit it or not, when we see that flashy car and gigantic house, we subconsciously see it as an indicator of success. When society sees billionaire CEOs like Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk, society as a whole will take on similar characteristics to mimic those that are seen as successful. Essentially, influential individuals not only mold the culture they live in, but they also shape the ideas of what kind of people we want to be. While this may seem largely unbelievable, let's take a look at our hunter-gatherer ancestors. These ancestors donned jewelry made of animal teeth and wore clothing from the hides of the animals they killed. Jewelry and clothing quickly became a symbol of success, and we largely still hold these same views today.

To further prove this theory, research shows how we as a society often start imitating the pitch and sound of the most dominant person's voice in social situations. There's even proof that we begin to copy the actions of competent people when we are as young as 14 months old! This pattern continues later into adulthood as our ideas of competency and success change which is why we subconsciously see those giant mansions, fancy cars, and expensive wardrobes as a symbol of success. This pattern becomes known as the "Paris Hilton effect" in which we give our attention to those that seek it. As more attention is garnered around those we see as "newsworthy" then we inherently think of that person as newsworthy.

Additionally, our culture emphasizes what Storr considers our “perfectible self.” As a society, we place an emphasis on our youth. Research suggests that when you ask someone about their life, they tend to talk about what they did in their twenties. Likewise, when asking people in their teens, they will answer with what they plan to do in their twenties. As a society, we seem to think our twenties are the best of times. During this time of your life, you’re an adult but there are endless possibilities that can potentially change the trajectory of your life. The perfectible self becomes influenced by our cultural and societal norms, so we begin mimicking successful people because we believe that is what we need to do to live a fulfilled, successful life.

Changing the Perfect Self

Of course, the “perfect self” has changed over time. What you see as your perfect self is vastly different from what people centuries ago deemed as perfect. We place more emphasis on our looks and materialistic items, but when did this begin? Well, Storr believes our version of the modern perfect self began as far back as the early 19th century.

Before modern technology and advancements, society largely depended on their environment to survive. Our fates were simply determined by the physical world as we relied on the earth to provide for ourselves and our families. Without modern transportation, people had little opportunity to change their environments which made the idea of the perfect self vastly different from our ideas today. So when society began to make massive technical strides, our ideas of the perfect self began to evolve.

With the introduction of steam power, railroads, and electricity came more opportunities for social mobility as people were no longer confined to one area and dependent on the land to survive. Advancement in technology led to an advancement in the ideal self. No longer were people forced to work as hard to survive, now they could do more with their time. The world opened up possibilities no one had ever imagined before, people were now in control of their futures and could create a path that led to their idea of success.

The evolution of the “perfect self” created a new genre of books that had never been seen before. In Britain, the first book of its kind was simply titled “Self Help.” The idea of self-improvement came to the forefront of society and the book argued that individuals could better themselves by taking advantage of the endless opportunities that were opening up in the new, modern society. We see this today with the rise of the internet, right? With new technology constantly emerging, the idea of the perfect self continues to evolve as people unleash their potential through the powers of the internet. Allowing people to make money in new ways and capitalize on their ideas,

the advancements of today aren't so different from the advancements seen in the 19th century.

The Rise of Narcissism

We live in a world where competition among children is dwindling. Some might say that competition has become entirely obsolete due to the increase in participation trophies and accolades like 14th place ribbons. Parents and coaches want children to develop high self-esteem so they preach about having fun so that everyone wins! Everyone nowadays believes that high self-esteem correlates to higher success, but Storr introduces the idea that this is widely untrue. In fact, the self-esteem movement that began in the 1980s was based on little evidence and gained traction due to the notoriety it received from higher public institutions. What's worse, the effects of this movement are still seen over 30 years later as teenagers and young adults are becoming largely more selfish and narcissistic.

You see, back in 1986 California politician John "Vasco" Vasconcellos persuaded the state governor to fund a three-year task force to explore the value of self-esteem. Vasco was convinced that low self-esteem attributed to just about every social issue, including drug addiction, unemployment, educational failure, violence, and teenage pregnancy. He believed that inflating the self-esteem and egos of society would act as a social "vaccine" that would cure people of their problems and save the state billions of dollars. Sounds too good to be true, right?

After experiencing an identity crisis, Vasco became studying under Carl Rogers who believed that at their core, he thought, humans weren't bad; they were good. And in order to thrive, people needed to be treated with "unconditional positive regard." He then became a follower of the human potential movement based on the idea that all you need to do to live well is to discover your authentic inner self. So, in 1986, the state of California approved The Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility. The response was terrible. Other politicians saw the project as a joke and took every opportunity to tear Vasco and his ideas down, calling it "naive" and "absurd."

But the response wasn't all bad. In fact, the response from the people of California began to take off as the country interviewed thousands of people who gave their testimony on how self-esteem was contributing to better or worse behavior. Stories including school resource officers telling kids "You are special" to reduce drug use, members of the Crips who blamed their violent activity on low self-esteem, and a school principal seeking to increase the student's self-importance by doing evaluations on their teachers. The movement was working and people were quickly hopping on board.

By the 1990s the self-esteem movement was all over the country. People like Bill Clinton and Oprah Winfrey began endorsing Vasco's ideas and schools all over the country began adopting their own self-esteem programs. Children were receiving trophies for simply showing up, a Massachusetts school district even ordered children in gym classes to skip without actual ropes for fear their tripping would cause embarrassment and low self-esteem. But where was the research behind self-esteem and success? Well, with the movement gaining so much traction and attention, Vasco and his team knew their results would weigh heavily on people, and their reputations were on the line. When Vasco's task force met up to report their findings, they weren't good. In summary, "the association between self-esteem and its expected consequences are mixed, insignificant or absent."

Vasco and his team inflated the results and covered up their findings. They continued to push their self-esteem movement and it turns out that boosting self-esteem leads to a rise in self-superiority. Narcissism has skyrocketed in the past few decades and will only continue to get worse as we push this self-esteem agenda onto our schools and our children.

The Rise of Individualism

Take a look at your camera roll on your phone. As you're scrolling through the hundreds or even thousands of pictures, how many do you have the camera facing towards yourself? In other words, how many selfies? No matter your age, there are likely to be more than a few selfies hiding among the pictures of what you ate for lunch. With the introduction of the front-facing camera on the iPhone in 2010, there has been an increase in the number of selfies that people take. Storr states that in 2014 alone, 93 billion selfies were taken. Of course, the younger generations are more likely to suffer from this selfie epidemic, in fact, every third picture in the camera rolls of 18-24 year-olds is a selfie.

But taking selfies and posting them on Instagram is more than just harmless fun. With a rise in neoliberalism, our world is becoming more and more individualistic and competitive. We are constantly exposing our lives on the internet, so the competition to be better is more present than ever. Take celebrities like Kim Kardashian who posts curated pictures on her feed, not only does she make money for doing so, but she also focuses mainly on herself. Whether she's with her kids or eating a meal, her pictures showcase a wealthy, idealistic lifestyle that many aim to achieve. But as we've begun to commercialize our lives, now anyone can capitalize and market themselves to make money, you don't have to be Kim Kardashian. When you post a selfie on Instagram, you begin to build your personal brand, so when you begin to receive more likes and comments than other users, then your brand begins to outperform its competitors.

However, this concept isn't exactly new. Sure, it's gained traction since the introduction of social media, but Silicon Valley has been using the internet to make society and individuals more competitive since the internet began. Since the 2000s, Silicon Valley has supported the idea that the internet opens up endless possibilities for earning money outside of traditional jobs. Now platforms like Instagram and Facebook give every "I" a voice and a presence, and people can now capitalize and monetize on that "I."

Storr argues that the “self” has become currency as people market themselves and try to compete against one another to be the best and gain the most followers. We are becoming personal brands and transforming our world into an endless competition. The world is now becoming an online gig economy where our labor market is dominated by freelance work and short-term contracts. The more followers you have, the bigger your personal brand, the more money you can make. This competition is turning the world against each other as we become individualists and focus on monetizing our own self.

The Rise of Public-Shaming

With a rise in individualism and social media comes a rise in public-shaming. You've seen it before in celebrities who post something on sites like Twitter and spark an online debate that could potentially ruin their reputation. You've seen Roseanne Barr as she tweeted what she believed to be a funny post, only to be publicly ridiculed for being a racist and lost her spot on her television series on ABC. And while we see this in the lives of celebrities, we also see this in the lives of our children and teenagers as they navigate an online world with little knowledge or foresight of their consequences.

When it comes to celebrities, one single remark can garner thousands and even millions of comments filled with hate, anger, and outrage. Before long, every reputable news outlet begins to release reports of the celebrity's mistake. But why? Well, public shaming has become an incredibly lucrative business. Many companies that rely on advertising revenue will spin stories and create headlines now termed as "click-bait" to drive online clicks and traffic. People crave to read about stories that spark moral outrage, so companies capitalize on public shaming to make a quick buck. It's now become a part of our online culture, but what are the consequences?

As mentioned previously, celebrities aren't the only ones to fall victim to public shaming; teenagers and young adults find themselves becoming victims of this online viciousness as they navigate an online world. In fact, this idea of public shaming has become so ingrained in the minds of young teens that they fear making mistakes. As they increase their online presence, teens become more vulnerable to public shaming and online bullying that can become harmful to their mental health. For instance, the tragic case of a 16-year-old girl in Britain who shared a photo of herself with a group of friends. While the photograph was seemingly innocent, it found its way online as it was shared publicly on the internet. People who viewed the photo misconstrued the photo as racist and began to publicly shame the girl

for her apparent racism. Unfortunately, the young girl took the criticism hard and ended up taking her own life.

As our presence online begins to increase, we find ourselves not only becoming more individualistic but also becoming more subjected to online criticism. This increase in public outcry over photos and posts that have no prior context can be detrimental to people of all ages, but especially teens who lack the foresight to see how their actions become old news in a matter of days or even hours. Unfortunately, this has led to an increase in depression and suicide among teens.

Final Summary

While society has certainly changed over the past centuries, we've always had an idea of the perfect self even in the times of Ancient Greece. From the conception of the self-help book in the 19th century to the self-esteem movement in the 80s, our idealistic self has largely been influenced by our culture and surroundings. Nowadays our idea of the perfect self can be seen as you scroll through your Instagram feed to find photos of perfectly curated photos and selfies. With the rise of the online selfie, we have seen a rise in narcissism, individualism, and public shaming, all of which can have detrimental effects on both the individual and society. As we attempt to attract more likes, comments, and followers than our peers, we contribute to building our personal brand in the highly competitive online-world that we live in today.



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